

Introduction

Mencap welcomes and supports the cross cutting review of youth services and support for young people, as part of the comprehensive spending review.

Mencap is the leading UK charity working with people with a learning disability, their parents and carers. We aim to ensure that people with a learning disability have equal access to choice, opportunity and respect.

It is estimated that in England there are approximately 219,960 young people, aged 13-25 with a learning disability, which represents 2.8% of all young people. There are varying degrees of learning disability, from moderate learning disability and severe learning disability to profound and multiple learning disability. The needs of a young person will vary greatly depending upon their learning disability.

For young people with a learning disability there are many barriers that make it hard or even stop them accessing youth services. These are:

- unequal opportunities to train and work
- lack of trained staff
- bullying
- lack of information, advice and guidance
- lack of advocacy services
- poor transport

For young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) they face all these barriers plus additional ones including:

- poor transition planning
- lack of Changing Places toilets

This is also true for young people from the South Asian community, who face the additional barriers mentioned below:

- Lack of culturally sensitive services and information

Young People with a learning disability

1) Unequal opportunities to work and train

Young people with a learning disability are faced with unequal opportunities to work and train. The result of this is that they are twice as likely to be not in education, employment and training (NEET) (DfES 2004). This group of young people enters adulthood with an increased likelihood of becoming and remaining a workless household.

It is a governmental key priority to reduce the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People, 2005). In order to do this the government will need to address the number of young people with a learning disability who are in this category. This can be achieved by each local authority employing specialist access to work co-ordinators for young people with a learning disability.

The key issues around unequal opportunities to work and train

- young people with a learning disability face unequal opportunities to work and train
- young people with a learning disability are twice as likely to be not in education, employment and training

Recommendations

- each local authority to employ specialist access to work co-ordinators for young people with a learning disability

2) Lack of trained staff

"I think that out of school clubs need more training for staff so they can understand children's behaviour. The children would feel more confident if staff understood and it would help other children understand as well." (parent, Everybody Here, Contact a Family 2002)

In the majority of mainstream youth services, there is a lack of staff sufficiently trained in learning disability. The result of this is that mainstream services are often unsuitable for young people with a learning disability, because the staff do not understand the distinct needs of these young people. This stops a lot of young people with a learning disability attending mainstream youth services, 7 in every 10 children or young people with a disability, who attended a mainstream leisure service, were made to feel uncomfortable there. (Contact a Family, 2002)

Without a trained workforce, many young people with a learning disability will continue to be unable to access mainstream youth services.

The key issues around lack of trained staff

- staff working in mainstream youth services do not receive learning disability awareness training
- this stops young people with a learning disability access mainstream youth services

Recommendations

- for all staff working in youth services to attend an accredited learning disability awareness course

3) Bullying

“One of the girls has told me she hates me and will get me. If I say anything she will come to my house and kill my mum” (young person, ‘They wont believe me’, Mencap2005)

For young people with a learning disability bullying is a major problem. Most young people with a learning disability will be bullied. The experience of bullying has a significant impact on these young people and stops them from going to school, to sport clubs and other youth services. This has a significant impact on young people with a learning disability as it limits their opportunities to learn and take part in their community.

For young people with a learning disability it is essential that adults, such as youth workers and teachers, know how to spot when a young person with a learning disability is bullied and act to stop the bullying. Currently too many young people with a learning disability tell us that adults do not act to stop the bullying. (Amaze, 2005)

The key issues around bullying

- young people with a learning disability are bullied more than other young people
- bullying stops young people with a learning disability from enjoying and achieving and making a positive contribution
- adults do not help to stop the bullying of young people with a learning disability

Recommendations

- for parks and skate parks to have rangers to ensure they are areas free from bullying
- for staff, such as youth workers and teachers to be trained on how to spot when a young person with a learning disability is being bullied and how to act.

4) Information, advice and guidance

“I’d like to go skiing, but I don’t know where to do it” (young person)

Like all young people, young people with a learning disability need sufficient information to ensure they can make a choice about which school or college they go to, which evening activity they attend or which training course or work experience opportunity they choose. For many young people there is very little accessible information to help them make informed choices.

It has been evidenced that the connexions service is unable to cater for young people with a disability (Foundation for People with a Learning Disability, 2004) and there are very few specialist information advice and guidance services, supporting young people with a learning disability to make informed choices about their future.

In regards to issues such as benefits, sex education and drugs and alcohol the current information structures are not providing young people with a learning disability with the information they need.

For young people to make informed choices, there needs to be specialist information, advice and guidance services that are trained to work with young people with a learning disability.

The key issues around information, advice and guidance

- there is a lack of information, advice and guidance services that work effectively with young people with a learning disability
- this affects their ability to make informed choices about education, training, employment and other opportunities.
- young people with a learning disability need specialist IAG services in relation to issues such as benefits, sex education, drugs and alcohol

Recommendations

- local authorities need to ensure that there are sufficient number of information, advice and guidance services that provide accessible information for young people with a learning disability and that advisers are trained to work with young people with a learning disability
- every local authority to establish a service that provides a benefits health check for all young people with a learning disability

5) Advocacy

“If they listened to me I wouldn’t have to complain” (Young person, Listen Up, Mencap)

For some young people with a learning disability, they will have little or no verbal communication. For these young people, they will express their views and wishes around issues such as education, training and leisure activities in different ways. Often staff in youth services are not aware of different forms of communication and therefore these young people do not get to make their own choices and it is adults who make the decisions for these young people.

Young people with a learning disability have a right, like all other young people, to express their own views and make their own choices about their future and to complain when services are not working properly. To enable young people with a learning disability to do this, local authorities need to offer the option of having an advocate, to ensure their views are heard.

There are very few advocacy services across the country and it is essential that independent advocacy services are established across the country and are offered to young people with a learning disability.

The key issues around advocacy

- some young people with a learning disability need an advocate to ensure their views about their own life choices are listened to
- there are very few independent advocacy services across the country.

Recommendations

- for all local authorities to offer an advocacy service to young people with a learning disability

6) Transport

“Well I know I couldn’t do it... because sometime it’s quite hard and sometimes you can’t go on in case people steal money off people” (young person)

Public transport is a significant barrier for young people with a learning disability when trying to access youth services, for a number of reasons. For some young people with a learning disability public transport is not available at the times they need to use it.

Some young people with a learning disability do not feel safe and are afraid they will be bullied on public transport. Other young people with a learning disability have not received the appropriate travel training to use public transport or do not have the support to use it.

This means that young people with a learning disability are dependent on their parents to take them to youth services, and this means that in many cases they do not go at all.

The impact of this is significant as it restricts the opportunities for young people with a learning disability to enjoy and achieve and to make a positive contribution.

The key issues around transport

- many young people with a learning disability do not use public transport, because they don’t feel safe, don’t have the right support, or it’s not available
- this means young people are dependent on their parents to take them to youth services or they do not go at all

Recommendations

- additional funding for local education authorities to fund flexible school transport, to enable young people with a learning disability to go to after school activities and clubs

1) Transition planning

“Matthew needs something that will occupy his mind and give him a sense of achievement when he’s older, but what that will be, I don’t know. I’m frightened that the outcome of his future will be down to me but I would like him to make up his own mind about what he would like to do.” (parent of Trans-active participant)

For young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) effective transition planning needs to take place between 13-25 and for some young people up to the age of 30.

Effective transition means that young people with PMLD are fully involved throughout transition planning and that consideration is given to actively accessing mainstream services as well as specialist services.

Mencap is currently rolling out a national project called Trans-active. The project enables young people to produce multimedia online passports, expressing what they like and want – both now, and for the future. Young people with and without disability work together, giving them opportunities to learn to work together and explore their similarities as well as differences. Using their passport as a reminder, they can easily show people what is important to them now and in the future, and can greatly assist the transition process.

The key issues around transition planning

- there needs to be effective transition planning for young people with PMLD
- young people with PMLD need to be fully involved in their transition planning

Recommendations

- roll out of Trans-active in all local authorities

2) Changing Places toilets

"If there is not a toilet that meets my needs unfortunately we cannot go to that place. It is very difficult and very restricting. Most of the time we have to 'make do', but it is extremely difficult, very uncomfortable for myself and to be quite honest a bit undignified." Matthew, 16

For young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities there is a real lack of changing places toilets, which is a toilet which has a changing bench, hoist and sufficient space for two carers. The lack of changing places toilets means that many young people with a profound and multiple learning disability are unable to access the youth services that they wish to go to.

The key issues around Changing Places toilets

- there is a lack of changing places toilets
- this stops young people with PMLD accessing a variety of youth services

Recommendations

- for Changing places toilets to be installed in large public venues

Young people from the South Asian community

The rate of learning disability is exceptionally high in this population (Mukherjee et al) and access to both mainstream and specialist youth services are typically low. There is a need to ensure that both mainstream and specialist services and information about local services is developed and delivered to meet the needs of South Asian families with a young person with a learning disability.

The key issues around the South Asian Community

- there is a lack of culturally sensitive mainstream and specialist services for young people with a learning disability from the South Asian community

Recommendations

- for regional BME/Disability advisers to support local agencies in developing culturally sensitive services and information