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Good intentions, good enough?

A review of the experiences and outcomes of children and young people in residential special schools and colleges in England

When I was asked last year to carry out a review for ministers of residential special schools and colleges, I wanted to understand what life is like for the children and young people who live there. Together with Mark Geraghty, chief executive of the [Seashell Trust](#), an outstanding residential special school and college, we visited residential schools and colleges all over the country and talked to many young people and parents and carers. We looked at children's needs, at the route they took to a residential school placement, and at the opportunities they were offered and the outcomes they achieved.

Residential school placements cost an estimated £500m per year and typically cater for children and young people with the highest and most complex needs. Around 6,000 children and young people attend residential special schools and colleges in England. Many of these young people are autistic, with needs that include communication difficulties, severe anxiety and sensory differences.

These are some of the most vulnerable children in the country. They are caught in the middle of a complicated system that does not always serve them well. We were struck by the way that many of the children and young people we spoke to felt that they had failed in some way. In reality, the system has failed them. Many young people are placed in residential special schools as a last resort, and will have experienced multiple school failures before they get to this point.

We found a situation where some parents fight hard against reluctant local authorities to get a place for their child at a residential school – while other children are placed in residential schools far away from their homes, because nothing suitable is available for them locally.

A school of last resort

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Currently, families tend to look for a residential placement for their child when local schools have struggled to meet the child's needs, or when they have had negative experiences in local mainstream and day special schools, or when there has been a lack of joined-up support across education, health and care services.

When a child's needs go unmet in local schools, these needs often intensify. The search for more appropriate provision leads families to residential special schools and colleges, but local authorities may be reluctant to place children in these schools, for a variety of reasons. We found that some local authorities are reluctant to use residential provision even when they have no alternatives to offer – a situation that is generally the result of a local authority's failure to actively commission provision that meets the needs of all the children and young people in their area.

A lack of ambition

Turning to outcomes, we concluded that, while many residential schools and colleges are doing excellent work, there is too little focus in some schools on children's educational outcomes. A focus on children's wellbeing and on the therapeutic support they need is important, and should absolutely not be overlooked – but this shouldn't be at the expense of their educational progress. Some young people can be held back by a lack of ambition for what they can achieve, and preparation for adulthood can suffer as a result. Schools need to teach children that they can succeed.

This lack of ambition remains unchallenged due to inadequate monitoring of placements by some local authorities, with annual reviews regularly going unattended. There is a risk that children placed away from home are out of sight and out of mind. This situation has to change.

What needs to change?

In our report, '[Good intentions, good enough?](#)', we outline a vision for better meeting the needs and improving the experience of children and young people in residential schools and colleges. The fact that good practice exists is proof that this vision can be achieved, and it needs to be spread as widely as possible.

Two things in particular need to happen. First, there is an urgent need for more capacity in mainstream schools to meet the needs of autistic children. Second, local areas need to proactively develop a range of flexible provision, so that children can have their needs met as close to home as possible. An example that we highlight in the report is [Endeavour Academy](#) in Oxfordshire, which is a special school for autism that also offers extended day activities, short breaks and residential care.

We recommend that children and young people with SEND get the services and support they need in their local community as far as possible, whether in mainstream or special provision. While there is an important role for residential special schools, children should not go to them simply because the support that should exist in their local schools is not working properly.

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The system and the process for families – and for children and young people themselves – should be clearer and more transparent, so they can understand what is happening to them and why.

Part of the key to this is local planning. Local authorities need to be much better at collecting and gathering data to forecast demand for school places. They then need to use this data to work with local partners to develop and strategically commission a range of services to meet the range of needs in their area. This was also highlighted in the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism's recent [autism and education inquiry](#), to which I was pleased to contribute. I support the All Party Group's calls for a national autism and education strategy.

One professional I spoke to said, 'Local authorities don't commission residential schools, they shop for them.' This is an unsatisfactory situation: it offers neither good value for councils nor good outcomes for children.

We also make a number of recommendations for residential special schools themselves. We would like to see them being more open and flexible about their fees, working more collaboratively with local authorities on individual placements and future services, giving children's educational progress the same priority as their wellbeing, and sharing their expertise more widely.

Progress so far

The Department for Education has already agreed to our recommendation that there should be a national leadership board for children and young people with high needs, reporting to ministers, to oversee services and support collaborative working between local authorities, clinical care groups and education providers.

With their ability to provide an extended day curriculum and access to holistic therapeutic support, residential special schools and colleges have the potential to transform the lives of autistic children and young people whose needs cannot be fully met elsewhere. But children's experiences and outcomes are not always as good as they should be. The key to changing this is to expect the best for all children and to make it a reality by working collaboratively and planning ahead.