

Preparing for adulthood

key challenges, best practice
and recommendations for
local and national change

IMPOWER

Contents

Foreword	04
A call to action	17
Context	08
Key challenges	12
What is working well? Case studies	20
What needs to change?	28
Three key alignments	29
How system leaders need to think differently	30
Our ask of the new government	32
Report contributors	34
About	35
Contact	36

Foreword



I am pleased to introduce this report from our recent ADASS roundtable on Preparing for Adulthood. This is an issue that is very close to me, both professionally and personally. We know from the lived experience of people that at times we fall short in delivering positive outcomes for young people as they move from children's services into adult social care. We can struggle to get it right and families tell us there is such a difference in the way we work the two systems that it can feel like a cliff edge. These transitions can be bumpy, and for some families, it can feel confusing, and frustrating.

The complexity is amplified across social care, health services and education. Our services often operate in silos, and the lack of coordination makes the process even more challenging. The young people we work with need support that is cohesive, coordinated, and responsive to their individual needs. Yet, we are operating in systems that don't align and have not been built with the young person at their heart.

I believe this is something we must and can improve. As a wider system, we have known many of these young people for most of their lives – why is it so difficult to provide them with the smooth, supported transitions they deserve?



MELANIE WILLIAMS

President of Adass
Director of Adult Social Care,
Nottinghamshire

I am pleased that the roundtable discussion focused on practical solutions to these long-standing issues. There are many issues that are outside of our direct control, but this is not just about rethinking policy; it's about reshaping the way we approach transitions together. Our discussions and insights must now translate into meaningful change, and we have a responsibility to act on the learnings from this work.

For me, this is about ensuring that every young person can move into adulthood with confidence, dignity, and the right support in place to help them thrive.

IMPOWER

At IMPOWER, we work alongside local authorities to unlock better outcomes for people and places, whilst making best use of the public sector pound. One of the most pressing challenges we see in local areas is how best to support young people as they prepare for adulthood. This report captures an important conversation hosted by ADASS, bringing together people with lived experience, sector leaders and practitioners to explore both the successes and the gaps in how we prepare young people – particularly those with complex needs – for adulthood.

The report highlights that the barriers to successful transitions are not just structural but often cultural. Too many young people experience fragmented services, where planning and coordination between children's and adult services remain disjointed. But we also see examples of positive change, where local systems are overcoming these challenges by adopting a more proactive, person-centred approach, focussed on people's needs and aspirations.

What stands out in these discussions is that many of the solutions are within reach.

Local authorities and their partners have the power to implement practical changes that could significantly improve outcomes for young people, particularly by fostering collaboration across sectors, embracing preventative measures, and aligning support around individuals' needs.

At IMPOWER, we are committed to continuing this work and supporting local systems to shift culture and practice, enabling young people to have positive experiences when moving into adulthood, with a focus on their needs and aspirations.



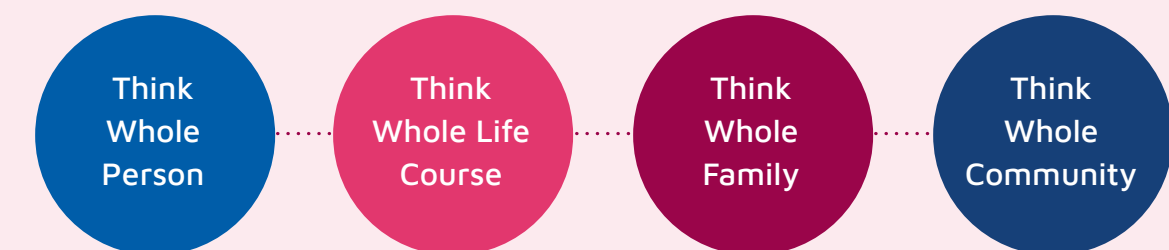
DEBORAH CROSSAN

Managing Director,
IMPOWER

A call to action

For meaningful change to occur, we need both system change and culture change.

This means leaders and services should:



At a system level, three key alignments are essential in local systems for ensuring smoother transitions and better outcomes for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND):

1 ALIGNING THE AGES	2 ALIGNING AREAS	3 ALIGNING CULTURES
Service alignment across age groups, particularly SEND, Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care services and health.	Creating a shared sense of "place," where all agencies involved in a young person's life operate within consistent geographical boundaries.	Each sector operates with distinct languages, aspirations, and practices. To improve outcomes, these sectors need to align their approaches, sharing common goals and using consistent, person-centred language.

Context

The transition from childhood to adulthood is a critical period for all young people, but for those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), a Learning Disability or mental health needs, it can present additional challenges. Nationally, there are approximately 150,000 people aged 16-25 with an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP)¹, and this number increased by 34% between 2020 and 2023. Whilst many of these young people receive additional support with their education, their outcomes often lag behind their peers.

Young people with EHCPs and their families may expect to receive some support from adult services; and requests for support are increasing. Since the pandemic, requests for support from Planned Entry into Adult Services have increased by around 10%, from 6,490 in 2021/22 to 7,160 in 2023/24. The number of people who go on to access formal care has increased by over 30%, from 2,075 in 2021/22 to 2,710 in 2023/24². The effects of this increase are only beginning to be felt; between 2020-21 and 2023-24 the number of adults aged 18-64 accessing council-funded care and support has increased by just 1%³. But what has already increased is the cost. In England,

councils spent £8.1bn on adults aged 18 - 64 with a Learning Disability in 2023-24; 28% higher than in 2020-21⁴. This underscores the urgency of addressing the systemic issues within transition planning and service provision.

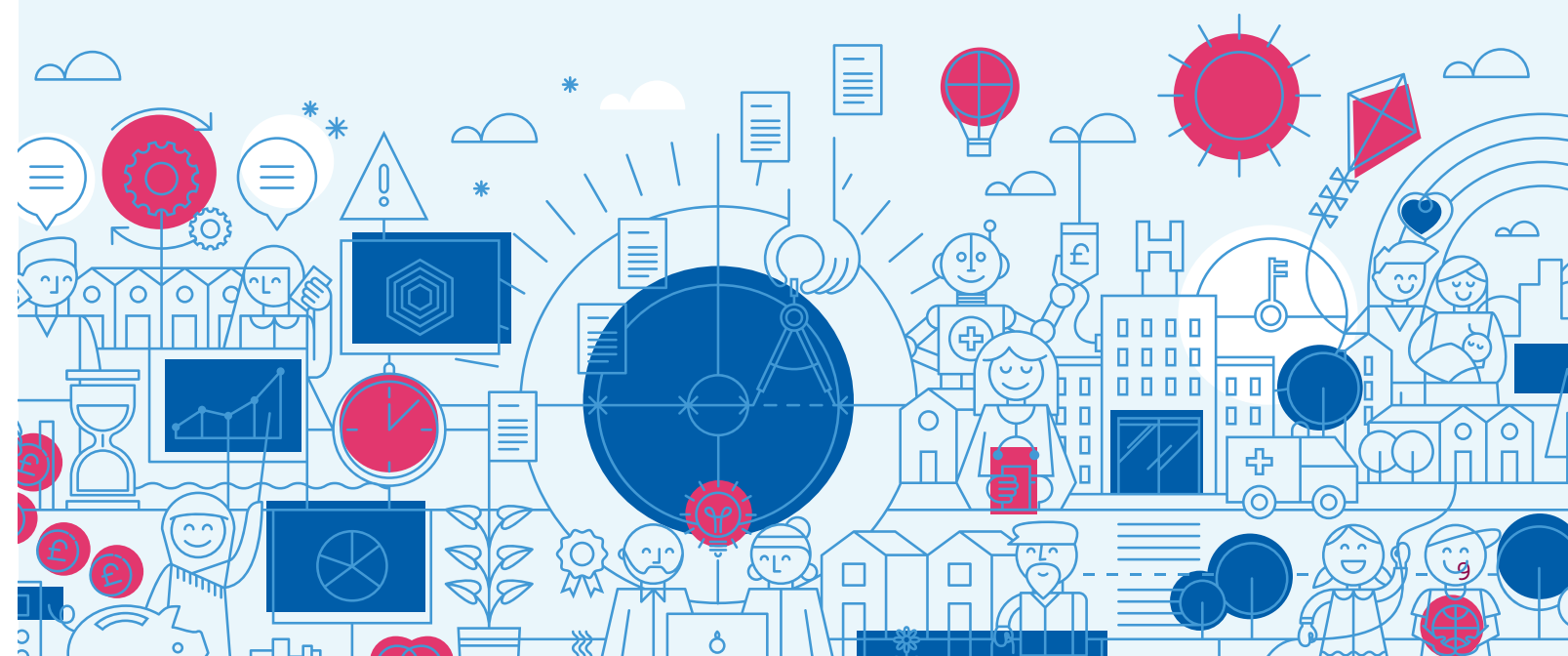
Local areas are aware of the challenges and the root causes, and the ADASS roundtable shone a light on many examples of good practice; but they also recognise that there is more to be done. The importance of effective preparation for adulthood is also highlighted in the current inspection frameworks from CQC and Ofsted; with recent reports showing recurring challenges as well as examples of exceptional practice.

1. Education, health and care plans, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK
2. Adult Social Care Activity and Finance Report - <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-social-care-activity-and-finance-report>
3. Adult Social Care Activity and Finance Report
4. Local authority revenue expenditure and financing - GOV.UK

Defining Preparing for Adulthood and Transitions

“Preparing for Adulthood” (PfA) refers to the holistic planning and support necessary for young people as they move into adulthood. This is a broader definition than ‘transitions’, encompassing not just the shift from one service to another, but the support required for young people to thrive in adulthood. This includes areas such as education, employment, health, independent living, and community participation. Our focus is on this wider cohort of young people and young adults – young autistic people, people with SEND, learning disabilities, and with mental health conditions.

Effective transitions should empower young people to become as independent as possible, supporting them to make their own decisions, access support that meets their needs, and contribute to society. However, the process must respond to each individual’s personal, social, and emotional development, ensuring they have the right networks of support to succeed.



Defining the challenge

Preparing for adulthood presents a unique set of challenges because it spans multiple departments and organisations, each with its own priorities, regulations, and funding streams.

Across children's social care, education, and adult social care, local authorities have for a number of years been operating in an environment marked by increasing demand, significant funding pressures, and systemic workforce challenges. Rising numbers of children and young people requiring support, especially those with complex needs or disabilities, have stretched services, while funding has not kept pace, leading to deficits and limiting capacity for early intervention.

The focus on crisis-driven responses has often trapped resources at the acute end, leaving preventive and community-based support under-resourced. Challenges around inclusivity in mainstream education and the availability of stable, local placements further add to the complexity.

Although the new government has made commitments towards reform, progress remains in its early stages, and many systemic issues persist. These conditions reflect a context where local authorities and their partners are navigating deeply entrenched challenges, that can make the transition to adulthood for young people with additional needs even more difficult.

Round table attendees identified five key challenges including:



This report seeks to highlight these challenges, along with the practical changes and cultural shifts required to support better transitions and improve outcomes for young people across England.

Key challenges

Fragmentation of services

One of the most significant challenges in preparing young people for adulthood is the fragmentation of services across children's and adult social care, health, and education. This often leads to disjointed support, with young people and their families left to navigate a confusing and inconsistent system.

This lack of coordination means that the transition process is often unpredictable, with young people “falling through the cracks” between departments and services. Even within the same organisation, there can be a lack of alignment, leading to poor outcomes for the young people involved. Many roundtable participants recognised the description of a “cliff edge,” with young people experiencing support being removed abruptly as they reach adulthood and Children's services hand over to adult social care services. Without proper coordination and planning, this shift can lead to young people and their families having poor and stressful experiences.

Fragmentation is further exacerbated by the fact that local authorities are responsible for social care and education, while health services are commissioned separately, largely by Integrated Care Boards (ICBs). This division can result in poor communication and a lack of shared responsibility for transition planning. As a result, young people frequently experience gaps in service provision, delayed interventions, or inconsistent support across different areas of their lives.

Additionally, funding mechanisms across local areas can be disjointed, with short-term pots of money available in one area and none in another. The lack of integrated, long-term funding streams means that transitions are frequently managed on an ad hoc basis, with little consistency or continuity.

The impact of fragmentation is far-reaching, contributing to poor outcomes in education, employment, and mental health for many young people.

“It can be quite surprising how fragmented the whole transitions process can be for people” Martin Samuels, Lincolnshire County Council

Planning for adulthood is variable

A critical issue raised during the ADASS roundtable were variabilities in planning for young people as they transition into adulthood. Despite having contact with many young people for most of their lives, services often fail to start planning early enough or with sufficient scope to ensure a smooth transition to adulthood. This results in disrupted transitions and missed opportunities for meaningful support. For example, IMPOWER's work with one local authority to explore their approach to preparation for adulthood identified that conversations with Adult Social Care began at the age of 17 ½ on average; and that there was a consistent lack of clarity on information such as the number of referrals made from children's services to adult social care; the number of assessments completed before the age of 18; and the total number of people supported by children's services who were deemed eligible for adult social care.

In particular, a tendency to focus on immediate needs rather than long-term outcomes means that transition planning begins too late. As a result, opportunities to foster independence and plan for future challenges — such as securing employment, housing, or further education — are frequently missed.

Planning for adulthood often lacks a holistic, person-centred focus, with services instead relying on predetermined pathways that fail to consider individual potential or personal goals. A focus on fulfilling statutory requirements, rather than fostering independence and planning for long-term outcomes, leaves many young people feeling unprepared for adult life. The result is often a reactive system, addressing crises as they arise rather than supporting young people proactively to thrive in adulthood.

“Too often, we're delivering poor outcomes for our older children and young adults as they move through our services. Even when there's a straight transition from social care to social care, we struggle to get it right.”
Melanie Williams, ADASS

Lack of preventative services

The lack of preventative services was a prominent theme during the ADASS roundtable, particularly for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) as they transition into adulthood. Preventative services, which focus on early intervention and proactive support, are crucial to avoiding crises and ensuring young people move into adulthood with confidence, independence, and stability. Following repeated years of restricted funding, many local authorities and their partners have been forced to reduce preventative services across both children's and adults. This means that these services are often underdeveloped or absent, leading to poor outcomes for young people and increased pressure on more reactive services.

A major impact of this lack of early intervention is in mental health. Many young people with complex needs face heightened challenges during

the transition phase. However, early mental health support, which could help them manage these difficulties before they escalate, is often lacking. As a result, they frequently reach adulthood without the coping mechanisms or resources needed to manage their mental health effectively, leading to crises that could have been avoided.

Preventative services are also vital in building practical life skills, such as independent living, work experience, and financial literacy. Delays or inconsistency in providing these services leave young people unprepared for adult life, creating additional pressures on adult services and families.

Early engagement with young people about their future needs, preferences, and aspirations could make transition planning more person-centred and effective. Yet such early intervention is frequently absent, with planning and support starting too late to make a meaningful difference.

“The system has not helped prepare young people for adulthood, and now young people's outcomes between 18 and 25 are significantly worse than they were. There's a lot that could be done around planning, coordination, and preventative support, but we're just not seeing it happen.” Andy Smith, Derby City Council

Cultural differences

Roundtable participants recognised that there is a significant cultural divide between children's and adult services. While both aim to provide care and support, their underlying philosophies and approaches often differ significantly, which can cause confusion during transitions. A shift in focus from managing risks in children's services to promoting independence in adult services can create a difficult transition for young people and their families.

Children's services often take a protective approach, focusing on safeguarding young people from harm. In contrast, adult services encourage autonomy and personal responsibility, assuming that young people are ready to navigate life with less direct intervention. This abrupt shift can leave young people unprepared for the new expectations,

especially those with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND).

These differences have developed over time and are driven by a range of different factors – not least the very different emphasis on how risk is treated between legislation for services supporting children and adults. But the disconnect between these two approaches can be unsettling for families, who often find themselves navigating a system that feels unfamiliar. To address this, there needs to be stronger collaboration and communication between children's and adult services, with more gradual and supportive transition planning. By bridging these cultural differences, local areas can create smoother, more effective transitions for young people entering adulthood.

“Notions of risk and resilience are so different under and over the age 18 barrier. I say risk to children's social workers, and they say management. I say risk to adult services, and they say enablement.”
Dez Holmes, Research in Practice

Exclusion from education

Exclusion from education remains a significant barrier for young people as they transition into adulthood. Many young people find themselves excluded from further education or training due to rigid entry requirements, such as the need to have qualifications in Maths and English. This exclusion leaves many young people with limited pathways to continue learning or developing essential life skills.

The impact of this exclusion is profound, affecting both education and employment opportunities. Without the necessary qualifications or alternative options, young people are often left without the support or resources needed to pursue meaningful careers or independent living. The system's rigid approach to education fails to recognise the diverse abilities and potential of young people with SEND, restricting access to further learning opportunities that could prepare them for adulthood.

Moreover, the lack of tailored educational support and alternative pathways leads to a cycle of exclusion, with young people falling further behind their peers. Addressing this issue requires more flexible, inclusive educational options that acknowledge individual strengths and needs, allowing all young people, regardless of their academic performance, to engage in education and develop the skills they need for their future.

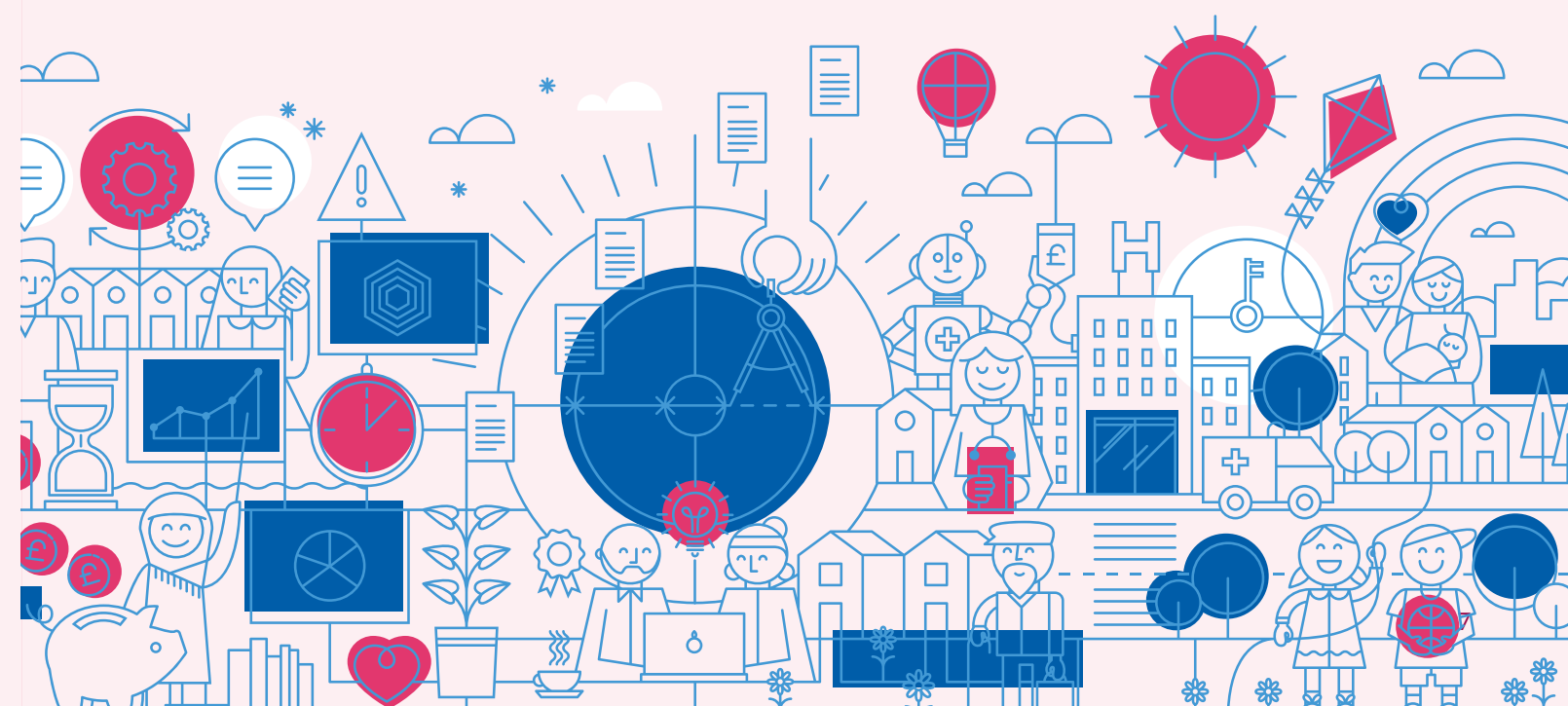
Support that surrounds education can be equally challenging. For example, increasing demand for more specialist education is requiring students to travel further and for longer to reach their place of education. Travel solutions identified by local authorities are often reliant on individual taxi services, reducing the opportunity for young people to learn to travel more independently as they prepare for adulthood. IMPOWER's work with one local area highlighted that 14% of young people with an EHCP could start independent travel training today; and that 23% of young people travelling by individual taxi could transition to a shared vehicle.

“They have to have Maths and English to access courses, and if they don't have those qualifications, they're excluded. So, what are they supposed to do if they can't get that?”
Jacqui Darlington, Lived Experience Expert

It is important to recognise that these challenges are not a natural phenomenon, but a consequence of how we have structured and defined services and people's interactions with them. Dez Holmes powerfully illustrated this point, saying, **“We often talk about the cliff edge at 18, but it's not a cliff; it's a trench that we've dug ourselves.”**

This emphasises that the difficulties young people face during transitions are the result of the systems we've built.

Because we have created these challenges, we also have the power to address and fix them. By rethinking the way services are designed, coordinated, and delivered, and by focusing on the needs of young people, we can create smoother, more supportive transitions into adulthood. The solutions are within our reach. They require collective action, cultural shifts, and a commitment to better collaboration across services to make lasting improvements.



Case Studies



What is working well?

While the challenges are significant, several local areas are already showing it is possible to address them through innovative projects and approaches. During the ADASS roundtable, participants shared examples of how their local authorities and partners are working to improve outcomes for young people transitioning into adulthood. These projects showcase practical, forward-thinking solutions that can offer learning for other areas. Below, we highlight some of these initiatives that are leading the way in overcoming the barriers to successful transitions.



Bradford: Hafsa's Story

Hafsa is a young woman with Cerebral Palsy and Spastic Diplegia, supported by the Preparation

for Adulthood (PfA) Team in Bradford. She is part of the "Into Employment" paid internship programme at the Bradford School of Rock and Media (SORM), where she has applied her passion for graphic design to create branding materials. Hafsa is also an expert by experience for Bradford Adult Social Care, contributing to interview panels.

A passionate advocate for the rights of disabled people, Hafsa has taken part in public speaking engagements for Bradford's "Promote the Vote"

campaign, focused on voting rights for adults with disabilities. Her confidence to engage in these activities has grown through the support of her college, SORM, and the PfA Team.

Hafsa first attended the vote count for the 2023 local elections, and the experience inspired her to participate again in 2024. **"My experiences started when I decided to join the vote count in 2023. I went to see the vote count at Sedbergh Sports Centre. I wanted to take part then I spoke to social worker Elaine James."**

In 2024, Hafsa applied and was interviewed for the vote count. She chose to join the postal count as it required fewer hours and would be easier for her. **"Before the main day my OT arranged for me to come and have a look at the accessibility and facilities at city hall."**

Reflecting on her experience, Hafsa shared, **"On the main vote count day, I really enjoyed it. I must separate the paper and check the numbers. People around me were very helpful and nice. [The] Facilitator showed me around. It was an interesting experience for my life. If I can, I would love to do it again."**

However, Hafsa also faced significant accessibility challenges. **"My bad experience started the day I went to check the accessibilities in city hall. First it was a mission to get in the lift. I have to take my footrest and bags off from my chair to fit in the lift. Then we went to check the toilet. It was quite small to fit my chair and hoist at the same time. The hoist did not have enough charge to complete the transfer."**

Hafsa highlighted the need for more inclusive planning:

"City hall should be more accessible. A little bit bigger lift and toilet would be helpful next time they should involve the disabled person to plan renovation."

Hafsa's story underscores the importance of support networks for young people with disabilities, helping them engage in meaningful employment and participate in civic life. Her experiences highlight the ongoing challenges around accessibility in public spaces, which need to be addressed to ensure full inclusion. Additionally, her story showcases the power of personal agency and self-advocacy in shaping one's future. Hafsa has not only created new opportunities for herself but also reminds us of the importance of empowering young people with disabilities as they transition into adulthood. Since this experience she has recently taken up employment.





Somerset: Elliot's Story

Kirstie Kerr,
the Special
Educational
Needs
Coordinator
(SENCo) at
Fiveways

School in Somerset, has been using the Valuing SEND approach (developed by IMPOWER in collaboration with local authorities) to better understand and support the needs of pupils with Severe, Profound, and Multiple Learning Disabilities (SPMLD). One such pupil, Elliot, is an autistic 11-year-old who has made remarkable progress at Fiveways. Using Valuing SEND, Kirstie and her team mapped Elliot's needs and challenged themselves to consider his future potential.

Valuing SEND enables schools to evaluate the match between a pupil's needs and the support available in their setting. In Elliot's case, the tool revealed that his academic potential would be better realised in a secondary school for children

with moderate learning difficulties (MLD), where he could be stretched academically.

Kirstie worked with Elliot's mother, Danielle, to discuss this significant transition. Danielle was initially resistant to the idea, feeling that Fiveways had been instrumental in Elliot's development, particularly in helping him learn to communicate after years of being non-verbal. However, after reflection and conversations with family and staff, she came to see the move as an opportunity for Elliot to achieve even more.

Danielle credits the school with giving Elliot the skills to thrive: **"I am sure that if he had attended a different school, he wouldn't be the child he is today. He learned how to be happy, calm, how to speak, and he made important relationships."**

Since moving to his new school, Elliot has excelled. He enjoys subjects like maths and geography, is learning French, and has formed strong friendships.



Derby: Transition 2

The **Transition 2** project in Derby is an innovative programme designed to support young

people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) as they move into adulthood. Led by Derby City Council, the programme aims to address some of the key challenges faced by young people during this critical period, particularly those related to employment, education, and independent living.

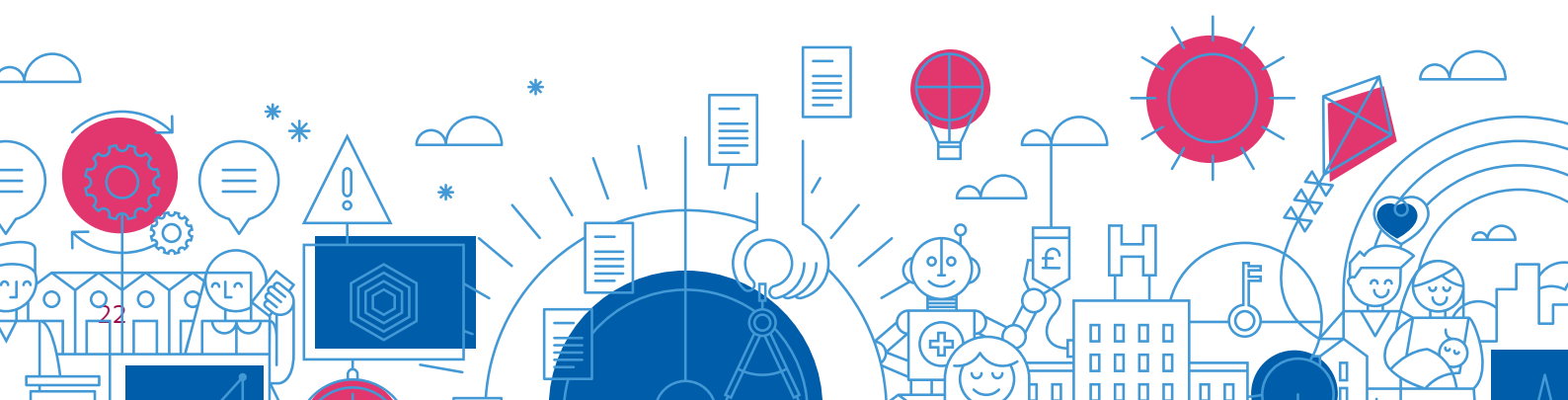
Andy Smith, Strategic Director of People at Derby City Council, described how the project works in close collaboration with local employers, educational institutions, and health and social care services to create tailored pathways for young people. Transition 2 focuses on preparing young people for employment. The project has built strong relationships with businesses and employers across the city, encouraging them to recognise the potential of young people with SEND and to create opportunities for them to gain meaningful work experience. This approach reflects a key commitment to providing

young people with the skills and confidence they need to succeed in the workplace.

The project also supports young people in developing practical life skills, such as independent living and financial management, which are essential for a successful transition to adulthood. Through a combination of classroom-based learning, hands-on experiences, and one-to-one support, Transition 2 helps young people build the skills they need to live independently and take control of their futures.

Andy Smith highlighted the positive impact of the programme, noting that **"we're beginning to see the emerging impacts ... It's about engaging the wider sector to see the potential in young people and create opportunities."** The early success of Transition 2 has provided a blueprint for how local authorities can work with partners to deliver better outcomes for young people with SEND.

By focusing on collaboration, person-centred planning, and real-world experience, the Transition 2 project demonstrates the potential for local innovation to create lasting change in how young people are supported during their transition into adulthood.





Lincolnshire: Better Lives

The **Better Lives approach**, (an adaptation of IMPOWER's Valuing Good Lives

approach), is becoming a cornerstone of Lincolnshire's efforts to improve outcomes for individuals across the care pathway. The approach focuses on building a more holistic understanding of people's strengths and support needs, and then tailoring support to them. As **Martin Samuels**, Executive Director for Adult Care and Community Well-being in Lincolnshire, described during the ADASS roundtable, Better Lives has helped practitioners and leaders to think ahead and make more proactive, evidence-based decisions.

Better Lives offers a practical, visual tool that is used by practitioners who know the individual well. This tool enables them to assess whether the support provided is appropriate or needs adjustment. This clear picture is helping to more clearly identify opportunities to change people's support and plan more proactively for the future. As Martin noted, **"Practitioners are saying we now have more hope that things can improve... we're thinking not just**

'is this person OK?', but 'what might happen over the next couple of years and how could we prepare for it?'" This shift in thinking marks a significant cultural change, with the focus moving from reactive to proactive care planning.

For young people preparing for adulthood, Better Lives can help practitioners to shape more personalised and community-based support that aligns more closely with people's aspirations. It helps identify whether individuals could benefit from different support arrangements, including independent living, and flags potential risks, allowing for timely intervention.

The aggregated data from the tool is now helping Lincolnshire to identify trends across districts and different cohorts, improving their ability to make informed, evidence-based commissioning decisions. This approach strengthens Lincolnshire's ability to promote independence and improve outcomes, including for young people in transition to adulthood.

By embedding the Better Lives tool into everyday practice, Lincolnshire is empowering its workforce to make more person-centred, evidence-based decisions, helping individuals live fuller, more independent lives as they transition into adulthood.

Out of Hours Club Rutland (OHCR) – a social and leisure group for young adults

During the ADASS roundtable, Jacqui Darlington, a parent and advocate for young adults with additional needs, shared the inspiring story of the social and leisure group she founded: Out of Hours Club Rutland (OHCR). This group started from a deep understanding of the challenges faced by young adults as they transition to life beyond formal education. As described on their webpage⁵, the club was born from the recognition that many young adults were left without meaningful activities and social connections once they aged out of structured support services.

The members themselves chose the name OHCR to reflect the unique nature of their gatherings, which take place outside the conventional 9am-4pm timeframe, mirroring the typical social activities of their peers. Jacqui spoke about how OHCR became a safe space where its members, many of whom have faced exclusion from mainstream social opportunities, could form genuine connections and support one another. "They support each other. They need each other," she shared, underscoring the importance of the relationships built within the group. These bonds have

given members a vital sense of community, helping to mitigate the isolation that often accompanies adulthood for individuals with additional needs.

OHCR is more than a social club; it's a place for growth and learning. The activities are designed not only for enjoyment but also to build practical life skills, bolster confidence, and encourage independence. The group's approach has proven especially effective in combating social isolation – a significant challenge faced by many young adults with additional needs, particularly during the post-education transition. OHCR offers a consistent, welcoming environment where members can express themselves freely and strengthen their social connections.

Jacqui's passion for the group is evident, and her journey illustrates the importance of community-driven efforts to support young adults with additional needs. OHCR not only addresses the immediate social and emotional needs of its members but also helps prepare them for adulthood, fostering independence and resilience. Its success stands as a testament to what can be achieved when local communities come together to support those who might otherwise be left without support.

5. Our Story – <https://www.outofhoursclubrutland.co.uk/our-story>

What needs to change?



What needs to change?

“We need to think through successful strategies that are currently being used and how we can scale them up. It’s about understanding what’s working and how we can build on that to support our most complex young people.” – Jacqui Old

A key theme emerging from the ADASS roundtable was the recognition that many of the barriers preventing successful transitions for young people are not natural or inevitable – they are artificial and of our own making. Participants reflected on how the current systems, structures, and processes often hinder rather than help young people as they move into adulthood. These barriers, whether stemming from rigid service boundaries, fragmented planning, or outdated mindsets, have been created by the way we define and deliver services.

Because of this though, these challenges are within our control to change. Participants emphasised that much of the necessary power is already “within the gift” of local systems.

Existing frameworks, such as the Care Act, are permissive and provide local authorities with the flexibility to act. Legislation is not the constraint; rather, it is the way systems operate and the culture in which decisions are made that require rethinking.

For meaningful change to occur, two areas must be addressed: system change and culture change. **“We need to think like a system and act like an entrepreneur,”** as Dez Holmes noted, referencing a report by the RSA⁶. System change means breaking down silos, improving coordination, and enabling services to work together more effectively. Culture change focuses on shifting attitudes toward more proactive, person-centred support. By adopting this mindset, local authorities and their partners can create the conditions needed for young people to experience smoother, more supportive transitions into adulthood.

6. From Design Thinking to Systems Change, RSA 2017: <https://www.thersa.org/reports/from-design-thinking-to-system-change>

Three key alignments

Three key alignments are essential in local systems for ensuring smoother transitions and better outcomes for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). By focusing on aligning ages, areas, and cultures, local authorities and their partners can create more coordinated and effective systems of support.

1 ALIGNING THE AGES

Different services, including health, education, and social care, consider age transitions at varying points. Children’s social care typically ends at 18, while educational support may extend to 25 for those with an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP). This lack of consistency leads to confusion, not only for young people and their families but also for professionals trying to coordinate care and support. Aligning the age thresholds across services would help streamline support and ensure that young people experience more continuity during the critical transition into adulthood. National alignment of these age transitions could also reduce the “cliff edge” effect many young people face when they turn 18 and feel that they suddenly lose access to support.

2 ALIGNING AREAS

Inconsistencies in how places are defined across different sectors pose another challenge. Local authority boundaries, areas defined by Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), and school catchments often don’t align, making it difficult to coordinate support. Creating a shared sense of “place,” where all agencies involved in a young person’s life operate within consistent geographical boundaries, would foster better collaboration and improve service delivery. When services are not working within the same geographic frameworks, gaps in care and communication arise, further complicating transitions.

3 ALIGNING CULTURES

Perhaps the most challenging alignment is cultural. Different sectors operate with distinct languages, aspirations, and practices. To improve outcomes, these sectors need to align their approaches, sharing common goals and using consistent, person-centred language. This cultural alignment would help break down silos and encourage collaborative working, ensuring that professionals across all services are focused on the same outcomes for young people.

By working together on these three alignments, local areas can create more coherent, supportive systems that better meet the needs of young people transitioning into adulthood.

How system leaders could think differently

To create lasting improvements in the way we support young people's transitions into adulthood, system leaders could adopt a more holistic approach. By thinking beyond the immediate and the individual, leaders can address the broader social, emotional, and relational needs that contribute to successful transitions. Below are four key shifts in thinking that are needed to drive meaningful change.

1 THINK WHOLE PERSON

Supporting young people into adulthood isn't just about equipping them with practical skills, like managing a budget or finding employment. Emotional, social, and relational elements are equally important. Many of the young people we work with rely on networks of love and support to thrive. Building emotional resilience and meaningful relationships are just as crucial as developing independent living skills. The transition process should take these factors into account, focusing on nurturing a young person's emotional well-being and providing them with a sense of belonging and connection. Leaders must ensure that support systems acknowledge the full spectrum of a young person's needs—emotional, practical, and relational.

2 THINK WHOLE LIFE COURSE

Transitions cannot be a short-term phase in a young person's life; system leaders must adopt a long-term, life course approach. Too often, services focus on immediate needs, overlooking the long-term outcomes that will define a young person's future. A "whole life course" approach ensures that the support offered at transition points prepares young people not just for the next few years, but for the rest of their lives. This involves planning for ongoing personal development, employment, health, and social relationships, as well as continuously adapting support as their needs evolve. Thinking long-term helps ensure that young people have the skills, networks, and resilience to navigate adult life successfully and independently, reducing the risk of crises later on.

3 THINK WHOLE FAMILY

Families play a critical role in supporting young people, but they are often exhausted and overwhelmed. Families may enter "battle mode," feeling that they must constantly advocate for services and fight to secure the right support for their child. This creates tension and fosters a sense of isolation. System leaders need to think in terms of the whole family unit, providing them with certainty, support, and a shared ambition that prevents burnout and trauma. A more collaborative approach, with families seen as equal partners in the transition process, would help reduce conflict and foster a shared sense of purpose. Leaders must ensure that systems are designed to relieve pressure on families, giving them the confidence that their child's needs will be met without a constant struggle.

By shifting to a holistic perspective that incorporates the whole person, life course, family, and community, system leaders can create more sustainable, collaborative, and effective support structures for young people transitioning into adulthood.

4 THINK WHOLE COMMUNITY

Supporting young people through transitions should not fall solely on formal services; it requires a community-wide effort. System leaders need to think beyond statutory services and involve the broader community in the support network, adopting a "village" approach. Families of young people accessing care and support often feel isolated, without the social or community ties that many others take for granted. By building stronger community connections through social groups, voluntary organisations, or local businesses, leaders can help create a more resilient and secure environment for young people and their families. Building a culture of inclusion and support at the community level can provide ongoing, informal networks that supplement the formal services young people receive.

Our ask of the new government

The new government has outlined commitments such as increased social care funding and steps towards creating a National Care Service. In the 2024 Autumn Budget, an additional £1 billion was allocated for SEND and alternative provision; although significant existing SEND deficits mean that it will be challenging to allocate this money to service improvements in many areas. While these measures represent encouraging initial steps, substantial unanswered questions remain about the comprehensive reforms needed to fulfil these promises and effectively support local authorities.

Whilst many of the roundtable participants focused on changes that could be made at the local level, there were also references to areas where central government support or legislative change would be beneficial. Areas identified for national support included:

1 ALIGNMENT OF AGE THRESHOLDS

The inconsistency in age thresholds across different services creates confusion and gaps in support for young people transitioning to adulthood. Central government could help by creating national alignment around age transitions, ensuring that services like health, education, and social care follow consistent thresholds to prevent young people from falling through the cracks.

2 FUNDING AND RESOURCES

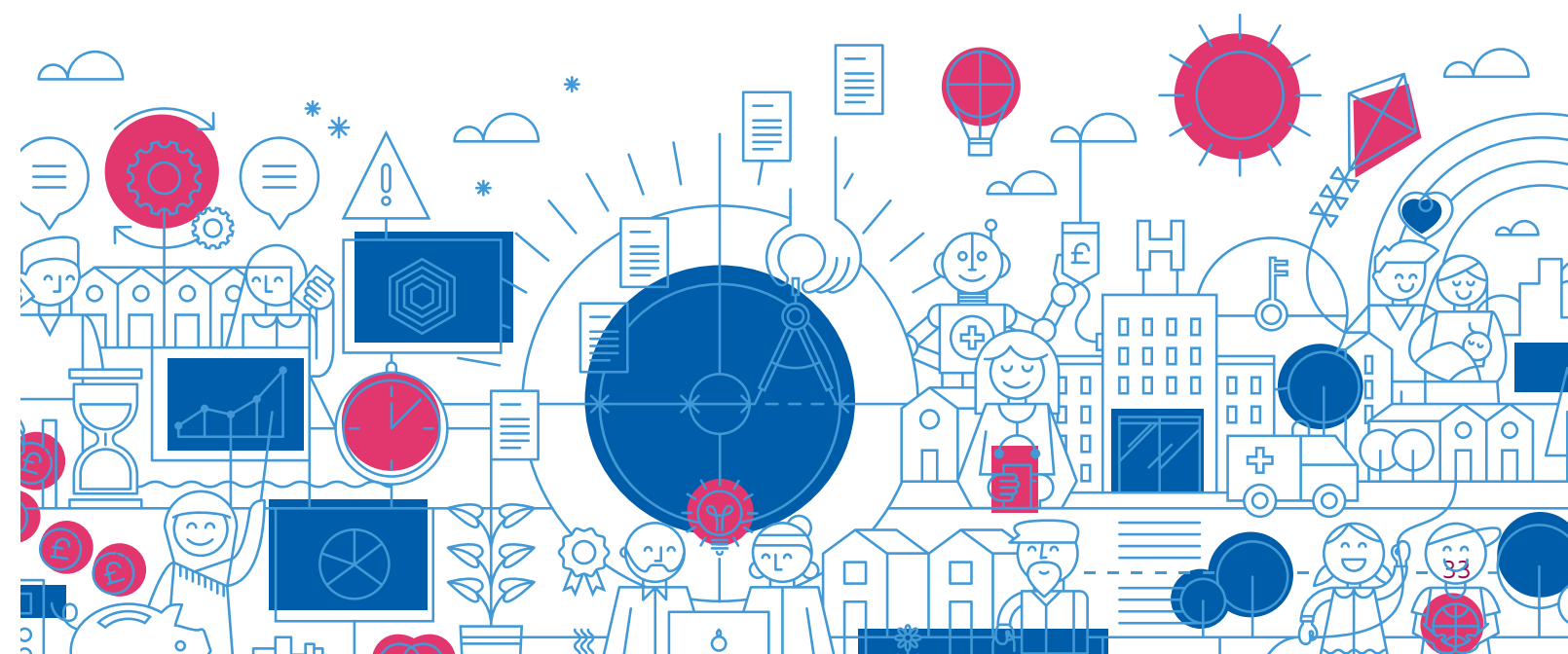
Several participants pointed to the need for more sustainable and integrated funding models. While much of the change required is

within the control of local systems, there was recognition that central government could play a role in providing more flexible, long-term funding to support preventative services and multi-agency collaboration. One proposal was the idea of establishing a funding scheme similar to the Better Care Fund. This initiative could pool resources from health, social care, and education to support young people transitioning to adulthood, particularly those with SEND. This could help break down silos and enable local areas to coordinate resources more effectively in accordance with a shared plan, ensuring long-term, person-centred outcomes.

1 LEGISLATIVE CLARIFICATION AND FLEXIBILITY

Although the Care Act is already permissive, there was recognition that the legislative environment creates a divide between services across children's social care, education, health and adult social care. Further clarification or flexibility in local implementation could support local authorities and their partners in adopting more person-centred and whole life-course approaches. central government could help by providing clearer guidance to ensure that local areas can more easily collaborate across services without facing barriers.

Overall, while the emphasis was on local action, there was a recognition that central government could support system change by addressing these structural and funding-related challenges. The government's stated focus on 'Mission-driven government' that cuts across departments could create an opportunity for a more common language across government – particularly in terms of what we mean by 'inclusion', and in building on what is working well in Preparation for Adulthood. Participants were hopeful that joined-up government thinking could help to set a clearer agenda for local areas to align around.



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About



IMPOWER holds a profound belief in the innate value of public services; a better public sector is the cornerstone of a better society. We believe that better outcomes cost less.

Founded in 2000, we have partnered with over 150 UK councils, improving performance, enriching lives, and strengthening public services and developing a deep understanding of the complexity of public services, recognising that a different kind of challenge needs a different type of approach. Our EDGEWORK® approach drives better outcomes across complex systems, radically improving performance and leaving our clients financially and operationally resilient in their most challenging areas. Delivering better outcomes is at the heart of what we do and is the key to large scale savings and long-term financial sustainability.

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ADASS The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services in England.

We are a membership organisation for those working in adult social care. As a charity we work with professionals, other organisations and people with lived experience to influence decision makers, policy and legislation – from the local to regional and national level. We raise awareness of the benefits social care can bring to individuals and communities and aim to ensure all of us who need care and support can live the lives we want regardless of age, ability and background.

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