

Communities and Local Government Select Committee Inquiry into the Government's Supporting People programme

Action for Children Submission

1. Executive summary

Action for Children¹ is pleased that the Communities and Local Government Select Committee is conducting an Inquiry into the Government's Supporting People programme. We see this as a timely inquiry and one that can assist in the development of the next phase of the Supporting People programme. Action for Children would like to see:

- the continuity of independent living services for disabled young people;
- assurances that the government will communicate to Local Authorities that meeting the needs of disabled young people must be a priority;
- provision for disabled young people when they move onto adult support services that recognises and promotes their independence skills at whatever level.

2. Action for Children services for disabled young people

Action for Children provides services for disabled young people across the UK, providing a variety of specialist services for young people in the process of transition 16 – 25 years old; this is delivered via residential short breaks, supported accommodation and independence skills development, transition key working and leaving care projects.

Action for Children services endeavour to remove the barriers that occur for disabled young people at transition by enabling young people to achieve their potential as confident, included and contributing adults. We provide services that:

- equip young people with the social and practical life skills for greater independence and self-confidence;
- promote a person-centred, collaborative and co-ordinated approach and support around a young person;
- deliver services across the traditional artificial/organisational boundaries established through legislation.

Action for Children works on the basis that the young person is at the centre of all we do. We are committed to participation, ensuring that the wishes of the disabled young people we work with (even where expressed non-verbally) are recognised and responded to. We work hard to ensure that young people have a say in their future and involve them in the decisions that affect their lives.

¹ Action for Children is one of the largest children's charities in the UK. We run nearly 450 services and work with nearly 170,000 children and young people across the UK, some of the most vulnerable in our society.

3. Responding to the select committee

In order to respond to the select committee on this issue, we have outlined our Kingfishers project within this response to show the positive impact that the Supporting People funding has made on the disabled young people we have been working with over the past 6 years and also our thoughts on how any futures changes may impact our work. Action for Children Kingfishers was recently evaluated by researchers at the Norah Fry Research Centre and we have used much of this independent analysis in this submission to further evidence our work.

4. Kingfishers – Background

Action for Children Kingfishers is a supported housing project in Stroud providing supported accommodation for seven learning disabled young people aged 18–25.

The service helps young people develop independence skills for an average of two years before they move on to their own tenancies, with floating support from the project.

The young people who live at Kingfishers have often been protected from taking risks, which has resulted in them not being able to make safe, informed choices for themselves and having limited confidence in their ability to do so.

The Kingfishers' approach to developing independence skills is led by the young person. If, for example, the young person has a desire to travel to a work placement or visit a nightclub, the approach is to work alongside the young person to fulfil their wishes as safely as possible. Staff will help the young person to consider the risks, enabling them to develop risk-assessing skills and incrementally withdraw their support as competence and confidence builds.

Here the approach is never to prevent an activity, rather to accept the free choice and to enable the young person to participate as safely as possible.

Kingfishers opened in December 2002, and since, it's inception, 23 young people have lived at Kingfishers – all of them wanted to become more independent and the majority wanted to live in their own accommodation by the end of the placement. Eleven of these young people have moved on to their own accommodation, receiving a few hours of floating support each week; five have increased their independence skills and have moved on to supported living settings for adults; seven are still living at Kingfishers and continue to develop their independence skills.

How is Kingfishers Funded? The Supporting People contract represents 75% of the total Project income, 10% comes from housing benefit and 15% from Community and Adult care for additional services.

5. Delivering on the commitments made in *Independence and Opportunity: Our Strategy for Supporting People*.

Kingfishers meeting the aims set out by Supporting People – this evidence is taken from the Norah Fry Research Centre evaluation

The broad aims set out by Supporting People are to;

- promote independence
- promote choice
- provide security
- encourage independent rather than institutional living

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- enable opportunities for communal and social contact.

Evidence of how Kingfishers meets these aims is set out below.

Promote independence

Young people reported significant gains in their independent living skills in a broad range of areas of their lives.

Every tenant that we interviewed spoke of their independent living skills having improved since being at Kingfishers. Some tenants referred directly to the good attitude of staff in their encouraging people to be independent:

“They want to get the best out of me, and I want to too.”

When asked to explain, tenants referred variously to being enabled to use public transport, as well as to shop and cook for themselves, learning to manage their money and to pay rent and bills and so forth, and more generally simply being encouraged to get out there and be a socially active adult:

“Kingfishers gave me the support I needed... I can go to Stroud on my own now. I can go to college, meet up with my friends... I do like the help I get, I get a lot more done than I did before.”

“That’s what’s a good thing about here, they teach you to pay things rather than live for free.”

“If I was at home I’d probably still cook, but just beans on toast!... Over here it’s nice, I’ve got my independence... over here it’s probably ten times nicer than at home; there, I wouldn’t be doing anything.”

Kingfishers is a supported housing project that works with individual young people to help them reach their full potential and raise their aspirations about how they can live their adult life. Our work promoting independence is much more than providing a safe place to live for the young people, it is about developing sustainable skills for future living arrangements. All young people who have spent time at Kingfishers have been assessed as needing a reduced amount of support by the end of their tenancy with us, justifying the need for carefully crafted individual support packages.

Promote choice

The range of daytime activities within the current group of tenants at Kingfishers indicates a high level of choice being offered, within the limits of what is available in the locality. Each tenant makes their own choices around their diets and routines and it is clear that these choices are informed and have been discussed with key workers.

Provide security

Kingfishers offers a secure environment: in that the rules are clear and boundaries are adhered to. Issues around risk taking and the safety of tenants are well documented and carried out in the best interests of the young people.

Encourage independent rather than institutional living

The young people feel that staff are ‘on their side’ which creates an atmosphere of trust and encouragement. Kingfishers encourages independent living in that it sees this as it’s goal for the young people, but a staffed facility with offices within it will always, to some extent, be institutional.

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The tenants' bedrooms are areas that the young people are encouraged to personalise and be responsible for. Each tenant can decorate their own room, and has ensuite facilities.

Enable opportunities for communal and social contact

The level of friendships between the tenant group seems to be good, with some tenants saying explicitly that they have expanded their friendship group since living there. Considering that we have seen that this can be a challenging area for people with learning disabilities, this speaks well of the ethos of Kingfishers. Former tenants are encouraged to keep in touch with current tenants and we saw evidence of continuing friendships. The communal living room and kitchen area is well used by the young people and the tenant group meets regularly as a whole.

Independence after Kingfishers

Action for Children feels that it is essential that the Select Committee is aware of our very real concern about what happens to Kingfisher tenants once they leave the service. We feel that the skills that the young people acquire at the project and their confidence can diminish when they move on to an adult service providers.

For example some young people at Kingfishers acquire the skill of catching the local bus which is a fantastic achievement for them, however when they leave the project we know anecdotally that new carers may feel that it is 'easier' to take the young person where they want to go in a car instead of enabling them catch the bus by supporting their learning of new bus routes etc. These new carers underestimate that being able to travel freely can be the key to the young person's independence, and having the skills and confidence to use public transport must be invested in.

In addition, we feel that some standardisation of what is referred to as 'support' for disabled young people would be very helpful in order to compare like for like support packages when young people move onto new services. There must also be more attention on the transition process from children's / early adult provisions to adult provisions.

6. Implications of removing ring fenced funding

There will be many implications of removing this ring fenced funding. The young people we work with are only a small part of the cohort that Supporting People currently aids. The Kingfishers project is an excellent example of how disabled young people can be supported to achieve positive outcomes. The removal of the ring fenced grant may throw its future into question..

Our experience indicates that young disabled people at Kingfishers are able to identify that living with peers at this point in their lives who have similar needs is beneficial. We have experienced frequent problems where young disabled people have been easily led by other young people before they have developed sufficiently sophisticated coping mechanisms. Developing these coping mechanisms in a safe environment leads to a greater level of robustness later on and can be regarded as real independence.

This is why we would like Kingfishers work to be recognised and when the ring fence is removed we want the Government to communicate to Local Authorities that Independent Living services for disabled young people are and should be a priority in their local area. We must remember that many of the young people making best use of these types of services are late developers and benefit from extended learning opportunities on their road to their own level of independence.

It must be remembered that the Kingfishers service is basically a short term intense programme that enables selected young people to succeed with a higher level of independence and a lower level of support.

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Supporting people in Gloucestershire has been very positive towards the Kingfishers service however it is surprising that considering the level of success achieved that there are not more similar initiatives elsewhere in the country.

7. What needs to be done to ensure that the successes of the programme so far are not lost, or services cut, following the change

Action for Children believes that the best practice examples such as Kingfishers must be shared across the country in order to highlight how disabled young people can be best supported to move onto adulthood with independence skills.

The evaluation of Kingfishers concluded that the following factors have made the service successful in supporting young people to become confident young adults with independence skills. Furthermore we feel that this information could be shared and learnt from to ensure more disabled young people access appropriate provisions like Kingfishers in their local area.

- Kingfishers adopt a holistic approach to progression, taking an interest in the tenants' employment, future accommodation and social lives, as well as developing practical skills.
- Kingfishers communicates exceptionally well with other agencies.
- Kingfishers works hard to maintain good relationships with families.
- Risk assessments are used positively to overcome barriers.
- The quality of the staff group is exceptionally high and is maintained through supervision, clear boundaries and good terms and conditions.
- Peer support is encouraged, which helps to develop the tenants' confidence and personalities.

If the Kingfisher service was cut or the ability to set up such a service was taken away, we know that young disabled people would be missing out on the opportunity to develop independence skills that they can take with them throughout their lives. Whilst we recognise that this service will not work for all, there are a significant number of disabled young people who will end up in high support level services because there has not been the opportunity to undertake the intensive and consistent work necessary to develop the wide range of coping skills required to live even a semi independent life.

8. What opportunities this change in the funding mechanism will offer for innovation and improvement in the delivery of housing-related support services.

We feel that there could be a potential opportunity with the Supporting People funding directed through its "area-based grant", as local authorities are able to spend the money however they see fit, according to their own local priorities.

Increasingly there will be competing priorities for funding over the coming months and years and with the pressing need for efficiency savings being demanded of local authorities the challenge will lie in how local priorities are set. With the introduction of this new funding mechanism it is essential that disabled young people are seen as a priority and that the independence skills developed are recognised and valued by local decision makers for services such as Kingfishers to flourish.

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Funding in the future:

We believe that making a commitment early in the transition from late childhood dependence to early adult independence requires targeted funding that is unlike the funding required across the disability supporting people brief. It is clear that providing additional support, including some that is short term around issues of personal care, does have considerable benefits for both the young person and future support funders.

Action for Children believes that one of the basic requirements attached to future funding is the need for the monitoring to be more effective and more sophisticated when evaluating outcomes for tenants. The outcomes could be similar to those identified within the Kingfishers evaluation which looked at the progression of young people on an individual basis. In this way those services that are providing effective support that has long term effects on young people will be able to distinguish themselves from those services based on repeat support solutions.

The success at Kingfishers indicates that individual packages of support are effective. Any loss of ability to respond in this way would seriously undermine the demonstrable success of our current programmes.

Kingfishers is looking forward to the time when young people can potentially access personal budgets through Community and Adult Care in Gloucestershire in order to truly customise their packages of support.

Finally, we believe Kingfishers is an example of how an innovative approach to emerging levels of independence can be successful, if given the financial support in the short term, leading to longer term gains.

For further information, please contact Samantha Windett, Action for Children Parliamentary and Public Affairs Officer on 020 7704 7155 or samantha.windett@actionforchildren.org.uk

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