

Preparing for Adulthood

**Experiences of Young People with Special Educational Needs or
Disabilities Being Supported to Prepare for Adulthood and
Transition to Adult Services**

2025



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Introduction

Healthwatch Tower Hamlets is your **local, independent health and social care champion**. We help local people to voice their views and opinions about the services they use.



We **listen** to people and collect their feedback on health and social care services



We **report** key findings and make recommendations for improvement.



We **present** these reports to those involved in the planning and commissioning of the health and social care services.

Project Background

Based on feedback from residents and stakeholders on their priorities in health and social care, Healthwatch Tower Hamlets conducted a research project exploring the experiences of social care services supporting young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to prepare for adulthood and transition to adult services.

The questions we wanted to explore were based on the Tower Hamlets Special Educational Needs, Disabilities and Inclusion Strategy 2024–29¹, which has set out the following objectives to improve the opportunities and support for young people with special educational needs and disabilities:

- Planning for adulthood should start at the age of 14 for young people with SEND.
- More local education places for young people aged 16 and over with SEND.
- More options for vocational learning or part-time alternative provision for young people with SEND.
- Timely and well-planned transitions for our young people who will need support from adult social care and health services.
- Support for life skills such as travel training, welfare entitlements and wellbeing for young adults.

We wanted to hear from young people aged 14–25 with SEND about how well they are being supported to plan different aspects of their lives, such as education, employment, living arrangements, financial independence, and social interactions, to help inform improvements to services to ensure all young people are equipped to live as independently as possible and provided with same skills and opportunities.

Introduction

Methodology

Our project originally set out to speak with young people with hearing and visual impairments. However, despite our best efforts and the valued support and assistance from a few stakeholders, we struggled to connect with this target group. Firstly, we found very few community and voluntary organisations that work with young people with sensory impairments. Secondly, our in-person visits to the Ophthalmology Clinics at the Royal London resulted in only one response due to appointment cancellations and no-shows. In addition, our survey, including the Easy Read version, was not suitable for young people with complex needs.

As a result, we expanded our target audience to include all young people aged 14-25 with special educational needs and disabilities.

The feedback was collected through an online survey and in-person visits to services to speak to young people. The online survey ran between December 2024 and May 2025. However, most of the feedback was collected through face-to-face interviews with support from staff working with the young people.

We would like to thank all the organisations and services that supported our project by sharing and promoting the online survey and connecting us with their clients and networks. These include Tower Hamlets Local Offer, Tower Hamlets CVS, the Children and Youth Forum Coordinator, The Change Foundation, the Royal Association for Deaf People, Spotlight, Tower Project Job Enterprise and Training (JET) Service, Apasen, and the Ophthalmology team at the Royal London Hospital.

In total, we collected feedback from 21 young people: 10 of these young people reported having hearing or visual impairments. Additionally, we heard from six parents and carers of young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

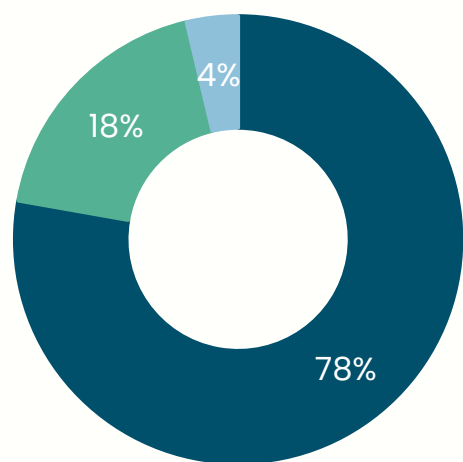
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**Young People and Parents and Carers
shared their feedback on services**



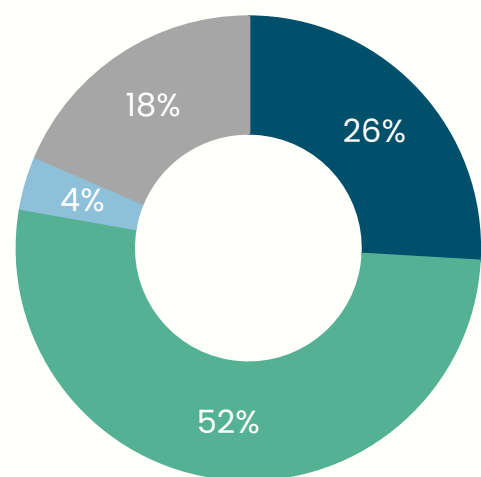
Who we spoke to

Are you –



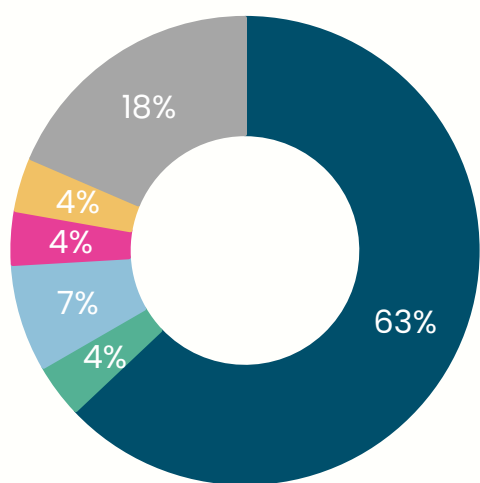
- A Young Person
- A Parent
- A Carer

Gender



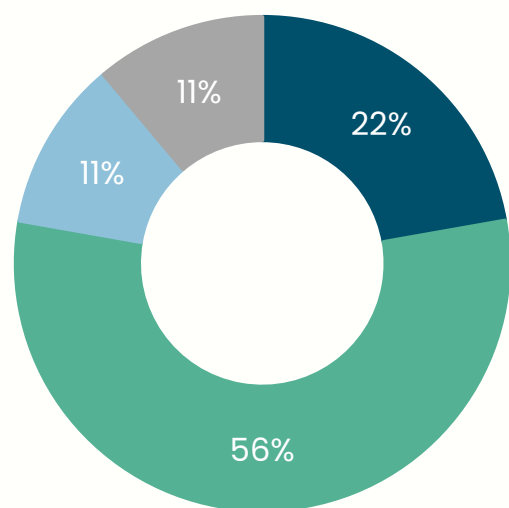
- A woman
- A man
- Non-binary
- Not specified

Ethnicity



- Asian or Asian British- Bangladeshi
- Asian or Asian British- Indian
- Black or Black British- Somali
- Mixed- Any other Mixed background
- White- British
- Not specified

Age



- 14-17
- 18-25
- 26+
- Not specified

Key Findings & Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Planning for adulthood should start earlier to allow detailed plans with achievable goals to be developed

When asked to recall the age at which planning for their future began, the average age mentioned by the respondents was 17, suggesting more work is needed to ensure the planning phase starts as early as possible, giving young people enough time to discuss their wishes, explore their options and set realistic goals and the steps needed to achieve them.

Recommendation 2: Young people should be provided with more practical support in securing apprenticeships, internships and employment

Only 19% of the young people we spoke with had a support plan in place to help secure employment. Through our discussions with young people, we learned that many of them find it challenging to secure employment, which makes it essential that they are provided with opportunities to learn skills in a supportive environment. We heard some good examples of the positive impact an internship and apprenticeships can offer, highlighting the need for more meaningful opportunities in various industries, giving them a chance to discover, learn new skills and pursue something they truly enjoy.

Recommendation 3: Young people with visual and hearing impairments should be provided with more opportunities to take part in activities and hobbies

The feedback from young people with hearing and visual impairments indicated that activities and hobbies were less often discussed compared to the feedback provided by all young people with SEND. Additionally, Healthwatch Tower Hamlets noted during our engagement phase of the project that there are very few organisations in Tower Hamlets that provide activities for young people with sensory impairments, or there is a lack of awareness of them.

Recommendation 4: Improve recruitment of social workers to ensure consistent, high-quality support for young people

Although the majority of the young people we spoke to rated their relationship with their social worker as positive, 42% rated it as neutral or negative, or they were unsure about it. Some young people reported negative experiences with their social workers or having multiple social workers, with some being “okay” and some not, which would no doubt have an impact on the continuity of the young person’s care. In addition, more than a third of the young people rated the communication with their social worker as either neutral or negative, while 30% reported that their social worker did not provide information about their support plans in a way that was easy for them to understand.

Full Findings



Information and Support

Start of Transition

Our survey began by exploring the timing of the start of the transition, the information and advice provided to young people and what support plans they had in place for the future.

The feedback regarding **the timing** of when planning for a young person's future begins indicates that this often occurs **close to when they turn 18**, which is far later than 14, the age recommended in the Tower Hamlets SEND and Inclusion Strategy.

17 was the average age at which the respondents had been told that planning for their adulthood would start

When asked to recall the age at which planning for their future began, the average age mentioned by the respondents was 17, with only four people reporting that it had started between the ages of 13 and 14. This was similar for young people with hearing and visual impairments, with the average age being just below 17.

This suggests that more work is needed to ensure the planning phase starts as early as possible, giving young people and their social workers enough time to discuss the wishes of the young person, explore their options and set realistic goals and the steps needed to achieve them.



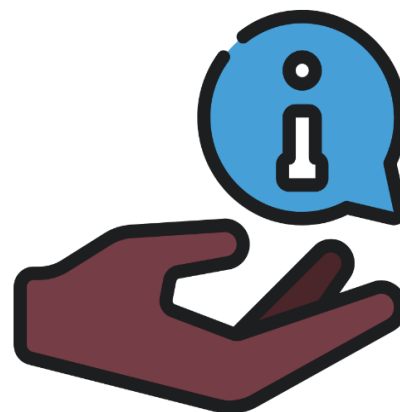
Information and Support

Information and Advice

We asked young people to tell us if their social worker had asked them or provided information and advice about various aspects of their lives, and what they would like to happen in the future. These included where they would like to live, attend college, work, socialise, manage money, and look after their health and wellbeing.

Based on the feedback collected, **the most talked about topics during transition are Health and Wellbeing, Activities and Hobbies, and Employment opportunities.** Most young people reported that they had discussed these topics with their social worker and that their social worker had provided information and advice on these areas of life.

However, fewer young people told us that **the following topics were less likely to be discussed** during transition: **Managing Money, Living Arrangements, and Apprenticeship and Internship opportunities**, which are all important parts of preparing for adulthood and independent living in a young person's life. It is worth noting that whether these areas of life are discussed may depend on the complexity of an individual's needs. However, this information should be provided unless the young person lacks the capacity to understand it, in which case this should be provided to their parent or carer.



The feedback from **young people with hearing and visual impairments** indicated that **College, Employment, and Health and Wellbeing** were generally discussed during the transition process. However, interestingly, **Activities and hobbies were less often discussed** compared to the feedback provided by all young people with SEND.

When attempting to approach local community organisations that work with young people with SEND, we noted that there are very few organisations available in Tower Hamlets that provide activities for young people with hearing and visual impairments, or there is a lack of awareness of these organisations.

Information and Support

Support Plans

Overall, the majority of young people we spoke with expressed **a positive attitude towards the support plans** in place for them. However, just under a quarter of them rated their feelings as neutral, and a small proportion reported feeling negative about the support plans.

The feedback collected identified gaps in the support plans implemented for young people during their transition to adulthood and independent living. While **most young people** we spoke to had a support plan in place to participate in **Activities and Hobbies, Education, and Mental Health support, fewer** had plans in place for **Socialising, Employment, Physical Health, and Living Arrangements**, things that provide a person with independence and the ability to look after themselves.

In the tables below, we have highlighted the percentage of young people who had discussed the topic with their support worker and the percentage of young people who had a support plan in place.

Information and advice	Yes
Health and wellbeing	75%
Activities/hobbies	63%
Employment	55%
College	45%
Adult health services	45%
Friendships	45%
Living arrangements	43%
Apprenticeship/Internship	38%
Finances	35%

Support plans in place	Yes
Activities and Hobbies	52%
Education	33%
Mental Health	33%
Physical Health	24%
Living Arrangement	24%
Socialising	19%
Employment	19%

Information and Support

Education and Activities Support

Many of those who shared details of the support plans in place mentioned having a plan for their Post-16 Education, such as which college to attend and what to study. Those who had a plan in place for activities and hobbies were supported in taking part in arts and crafts, joining a football team or a bike club.

However, we also heard from a young person who told us there were not many opportunities for young people who experience anxiety to participate in activities and that during their transition, they were not supported or directed to youth centres and after-school clubs.

Mental Health Support

The mental health support provided to young people included professional support, but mainly it consisted of social workers offering emotional support or providing information and advice on maintaining good mental health and wellbeing. Examples of support plans in place included a young person who had been supported by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) through one-to-one meetings, although the young person told us they would have benefited from family therapy. Other young people had been supported by their social workers. One young person was told to call their social worker if they needed support with their mental health; another young person had been told to exercise to look after their mental health, and a third was advised to stay in touch with friends and family.



Information and Support

Employment Support

In terms of employment, although this topic was often discussed with social workers, as mentioned in the previous section of the report, young people were less likely to have a support plan in place to secure employment, with only 19% telling us they had one. One young person told us that the support they had received for securing employment was “up and down”, while another had not received any support and had to find their own way to work placements and volunteering. We also heard from a young person who wanted to work as a barista at a coffee shop but had not been supported to access training.

Through our discussions with young people, we learned that many of them find it challenging to secure employment, which makes it essential that they are provided with opportunities to learn skills in a supportive environment. They should be provided with meaningful internship and apprenticeship opportunities in various industries to give them the chance to discover and pursue something they truly enjoy.

We heard some good examples of the positive impact an internship and apprenticeships can offer to young people. One such example was a young person who was interested in pursuing a career in the media industry after completing an internship there. Another young person mentioned that they were supported in working with computers to create video games, which is what they had wanted.



Social Workers

Relationship with social workers

The feedback from young people clearly indicates that improved recruitment and training for social workers is key to enhancing support and enabling them to make informed decisions about their future, planning it in a way that makes them feel heard and listened to.

The majority (58%) of the young people we spoke to rated their relationship with their social worker as positive. However, 42% rated it as neutral or negative, or they were unsure about it.



The positive attitude towards their relationship with their social worker was generally related to feeling listened to. Several young people reported dissatisfaction or negative experiences with their social workers. A young person mentioned that they rarely met with their social worker, and most young people told us that they would like to have met with their social worker more often. Another reported being reprimanded for an incident but not offered support to resolve the underlying issues that caused it, and a third young person told us that their social worker advised them to call NHS 111 if they had any issues. Some also mentioned having multiple social workers, with some being “okay” and others not, which would no doubt impact the continuity of the young person’s care.

Communication with social workers



We also heard from young people that, although social workers generally adapt their communication by using short, simple sentences when needed, they do not always explain things in a way that is easy to understand.

Just over a third of the young people rated the communication with their social worker as either neutral or negative, while 30% reported that their social worker did not provide information about their support plans in a way that was easy for them to understand.

The negative feelings about their relationship were often associated with poor communication with social workers. Most young people who rated their relationship with their social worker as neutral or negative also rated the communication with their social worker as neutral or negative. Those who felt positively about their relationship also felt positively about communication. This suggests that providing clear communication in ways that meet the young person’s needs is key to a good relationship between a young person and their social worker, and this should be taken into consideration when providing training to social workers.

Improvements

Improved support

The support offered to young people should be based on their individual circumstances and tailored to address their specific needs. This will only be possible if the young person is involved in making their own decisions about their future and the actions they need to take to achieve their goals.

56% of young people with hearing and visual impairments felt they were unable to make their own decisions about their future

The majority of young people we spoke to (55%) felt that they were able to make their own decisions about the future. However, a significant proportion (40%) of all young people with SEND reported feeling unable to make their own decisions, and more than half of young people with hearing and visual impairments (56%) told us they felt unable to make their own decisions.

Those who felt they were able to make their own decisions told us that their social worker listened to their choices and provided them with helpful suggestions on jobs and apprenticeships. One of them also mentioned that at the start of their meetings, the social worker would review the notes from the previous meeting. However, several young people mentioned that they did not feel supported by their social worker. A young person told us that when they had asked their social worker for help, they did not receive help. Another young person reported that their social worker had made promises that were not kept, and the support plans put in place were unrealistic and difficult to achieve.



We also heard from young people about other types of support they would have liked to receive during their transition. These included support for managing stress eating, advice to parents on avoiding overprotection, addressing bullying, continuation of support for school leavers, particularly for young people with hearing and visual impairments, and post-college support, as well as better partnership working between social workers and health services involved in the young person's care.

On the next page, we have included comments from young people regarding their experiences with social workers and how support could be improved. We have also included some feedback from a young person and a parent about the lack of support.

From Young People:

“What was good about my relationship with the social worker was that they listened to me well.”

“My social worker listened, was caring and attentive.”

“I feel listened to when I'm speaking. The social care worker gives small check-ups to see if I'm doing well.”

“We rarely meet. Just comes and goes, doing nothing.”

“Some felt okay, but sometimes worry me.”

“I was told off regarding an incident, but they didn't offer proper support, they didn't try and find out why I was acting the way I was and they didn't direct me to support services.”

From Young People:



“At first I'm greeted with a kind and formal approach which helps with easing into the conversation

The services are understanding when there are problems and quickly solvable.”

“She is so annoying. She always think I was contact NHS 111 service.”

“My social worker communicates with me in simple sentences.”

“I should have been able to directly contact them if something happened, in a case of emergency.”

“My sister does my communication for me.”



From Young People:



“Supporting me accordingly and helping me to understand.”

“Need activities.”

“More SEND Awareness and more training for professionals.”

“More support getting a paid job.”

“Find a job/activities.”

“More support with mental health.”

“Improve the support worker a little bit.”

“Support for work and help living in a home.”

“Occupational therapists don't relate, they don't listen, and we didn't agree on my care plan.”



Lack of Support



“I am not receiving any support, and I don't have a social worker. I would like to receive support in the future. My family wants a social worker to connect with us. I am going to daycare services where I am receiving lots of tasks to improve my life.”

From a young person who is non-verbal and has severe learning disabilities and autism

“Schools always say that they have enough support in place to help my daughter. I did apply for an EHCP plan, but she got rejected. Having an EHCP may help my daughter as she is struggling at the moment in sixth form with coping with the amount of work she needs to complete all the time and understanding the topics she is currently learning in different subjects.”



From a parent of a young person with autism

Feelings About My Future

We concluded our survey by asking young people to share their overall feelings about their future. **70% of all young people with SEND** told us they felt **Very Positive or Positive** about their future. This increased to **89% for young people with hearing and visual impairments**.

70% of the young people we spoke with felt positive about the future

However, **30% of all young people with SEND** rated their feelings about the future as either **Neutral or Negative**. When looking at their responses to questions about their support plans and relationships with social workers, we found that they often had neutral or negative feelings about either both or at least one of these factors, further highlighting the need for high-quality social workers and involving young people in planning for their adulthood.

Improvements to both these areas will help to ensure that young people with SEND have better opportunities in life. It is also essential that service providers and commissioners empower young people to share their experiences at regular intervals and provide opportunities to co-design support services to help them better meet their needs.



Appendix



Appendix

1. Feedback from all young people with SEND on areas discussed during the transition process

Information and advice	Yes	No	Not sure
Health and wellbeing	75%	15%	10%
Activities/hobbies	63%	21%	16%
Employment	55%	30%	15%
College	45%	35%	20%
Adult health services	45%	35%	20%
Friendships	45%	35%	20%
Living arrangements	43%	30%	25%
Apprenticeship/Internship	38%	33%	24%
Finances	35%	29%	33%

2. Feedback from young people with hearing and visual impairments on areas discussed during the transition process

Information and advice	Yes	No	Not sure
College	63%	25%	13%
Living arrangements	56%	33%	11%
Employment	56%	33%	11%
Health and wellbeing	56%	33%	11%
Activities/hobbies	50%	38%	13%
Finances	44%	33%	22%
Adult health services	44%	44%	11%
Friendships	33%	33%	33%
Apprenticeship/Internship	22%	33%	44%

Appendix

3. Feedback from all young people with SEND on support plans in place

Support plans	Yes	No	Not sure
Education	44%	33%	22%
Living Arrangement	44%	22%	33%
Physical Health	44%	44%	11%
Activities and Hobbies	44%	44%	11%
Mental Health	33%	44%	22%
Employment	22%	44%	33%
Socialising	22%	44%	33%

4. Feedback from young people with hearing and visual impairments on support plans in place

Support plans	Yes	No	Not sure
Activities and Hobbies	52%	29%	19%
Education	33%	38%	29%
Mental Health	33%	33%	33%
Physical Health	24%	48%	29%
Living Arrangement	24%	43%	33%
Socialising	19%	52%	29%
Employment	19%	48%	33%



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