

Phase 2 Green Paper Project: Support and aspiration

Study Programmes: How partners in Oxfordshire piloted independent living experience away from home and linked this to a 'Living Life' curriculum and to professional development



Key learning points

- Periods of independent living experience away from home can be an extremely valuable ingredient of a curriculum which really focuses on preparing for adulthood and achieving young people's end-goals.
- While such provision is expensive, it may be eligible for high needs funding and may offer longer term value for money through reduced adult social care costs (from acquisition of greater independence skills).
- Schools and colleges should stop seeing each other as competitors: for the new education, health and care plans and person centred planning to be effective, partnership is essential.
- In local authority areas which don't have their own residential provision, look beyond your borders for potential partners to provide independent living experience away from home.
- Building a partnership of trust, based on practical collaboration, provides assurance about other partners' quality of care and safeguarding even when your more vulnerable students are at arm's length.
- Plan for long lead-in times to enable students to prepare for the experience as part of their core curriculum and personal learning goals to be thoroughly discussed with them and their parents.
- It is important to engage families' support so they have confidence and realistic expectations about their children's experience and also enthusiasm about it which will ripple out to other families.
- Don't underestimate students' preparedness to grasp opportunities: in this instance, they would have been happy to stay away for the weekend, rather than going home between the two pilot weeks.

Who we are and what we did

The project was led by Abingdon and Witney College (at Principal level) and involved all of the Oxfordshire special schools (with a representative on our Core Partners Group), Oxford & Cherwell Valley College, MacIntyre Charitable Trust, Hereward College and Oxfordshire County Council.

The main purpose of the project was to pilot a model of independent living experience, away from home, and to make this an integral feature of the curriculum. Hereward College provided the independent living experience at its residential facility, Hereward Lodge, in Coventry.

In parallel with this pilot, Frank Wise Special School led the development of a joint professional development programme for staff in colleges and special schools across Oxfordshire.

Why we did it

We saw real experience of independent living as an essential part of preparation for adulthood, and of study programmes, for some students. We wanted this to mean staying away from home for significant periods and experiencing sharing accommodation, preparing meals and so on.

Our focus on independent living reflected Oxfordshire's commitment to in-county provision but this meant that it was more difficult to provide experience of independent living as there is a lack of residential facilities within the County.

This is where the partnership with Hereward College came in. Its recently launched Hereward Lodge provides disability accommodation, including specialist bathing facilities, hoists to support wheelchair users and kitchen areas with adjustable height work surfaces. It is available for business, educational and leisure purposes and also for short breaks and respite care. The pilot enabled Hereward College to test out a business model for offering flexible independent living experience packages to students at schools and colleges around the country.

How we did it

Independent living experience was piloted in June 2013 at Hereward College with 11 students from 2 colleges and 4 special schools in Oxfordshire. We were clear that the aspiration for living independently must come from parents as well as students and were encouraged by the fact that enthusiasm for taking part in the pilot was high, with 27 initial expressions of interest. The pilot followed a number of stages:

- Partnership building and planning through our Core Partners Group.
- Individual communications with parents.
- Parents' evening to explain programme in more detail and confirm students taking part.
- Open day at Hereward College for students and their parents to learn more what would be involved.
- The two weeks independent living experience, returning home at the weekend.
- Feedback from students, parents and staff.
- Evaluation by the Core Partners Group.

The independent living learning during the two week pilot included (with some different elements for different students):

- getting up and preparing for the day;
- meal preparation and washing up;
- healthy living;
- shopping and road safety;
- ICT for life;
- working in Hereward's shop;
- horse riding, care and mucking out;
- TV studio experience;
- games, team building activities and learner leadership;
- managing time and managing relationships;
- managing finances and budgeting;
- trips to Coventry attractions and meals out;
- ice skating and Karaoke;
- street performance;
- using washing machines;

- stripping beds and leaving bedrooms tidy.

The pilot was for two weeks, Monday – Friday, but cluster partners have longer periods of up to 6 months in mind for the permanent version, which we see as also including shorter independence study opportunities locally at a range of providers.

Professional development.

We began our new cross-County professional development programme by holding a half-day ‘training needs audit’ workshop: the first time that staff from colleges and special schools across the County had got together for such a purpose. The workshop identified the following training needs focused on independent living: roles of support staff; progression in enterprise; accreditations on offer from the different providers; skills required for supporting the post-16 group of students; information, advice and guidance (including personal budgets); work experience and job coaching; the wider picture on SEND developments; and use of data and tracking progress beyond school. These topics are being addressed through a series of further half day workshops which will continue after the project is over.

What our evaluations showed

We evaluated the pilot from the following perspectives:

Feedback from students

The students generally enjoyed the experience and also saw themselves as having got particular things out of the experience as the following comments illustrate:

- *"I enjoyed the experience."*
- *"I used shopping skills to look for the best offers and value for money."*
- *"I made new friends and hope to keep in touch."*
- *"Overall it was a good experience and I would recommend it."*
- *"I was able to cook more at Hereward than I do at home."*
- *"I was a little homesick during the first week but I am proud of the fact that I was able to cope and the second week was much better."*
- *"I enjoyed making new friends."*
- *"I loved all of the sports."*
- *"I now have some idea about how to use a washing machine."*
- *"I can't believe I washed up: we've got a dishwasher at home and Mum insists everything goes through it."*

However, we discovered that our use of the word ‘residential’ had led some of our students to have expectations more of outings and having fun, based on previous experiences, than a serious learning experience (a lesson for when we market future opportunities). Equally, we discovered that most of our students would have been happy to stay away for the weekend, rather than going home between the two pilot weeks: a lesson about not underestimating students’ preparedness to grasp opportunities. Another important learning point was that some students who do not use wheel-chairs found it challenging to be amongst some of the Hereward College students. This suggests that understanding diversity might be a theme to include in future experiences, in recognition that this is a potential issue for some young people.

Feedback from parents (at a parents’ evaluation evening)

Parents’ overall feedback was positive: all the parents attending the evaluation evening thought that the two week experience had been valuable. One of the parents reported that their son had not been away from home for over three years and the fact that he had happily managed two weeks and had increased his independence was very important – more so than the horse riding or night club experience! There were a lot of comments about Hereward College and how useful it had been to have the day visit beforehand and that parents had

confidence in the college's ability to support medical conditions effectively. There was a discussion about the middle weekend and the consensus was that coming back for the weekend had not been a good idea and that it might be better if the parents could visit and the students show them the skills they were developing and where they were living. The length of the experience was discussed and the parents of two students felt that two weeks had not been long enough as they needed longer than that to get into the routine. There was an issue about some parents' expectations about closeness of supervision in a situation where the purpose was to learn independence skills. This points to a need to spend more time on agreeing a shared understanding by students and their parents in advance of the experience about the level and extent of independence and supervision.

Our own observations and lessons for the future

Staff at Hereward College took the opportunity to talk to the students about their experiences and, from this and their own observations, produced summaries for each student. Examples of these summaries are as follows:

- **Student D** demonstrated that he is very capable of independent living. When focused on the task in hand Student D showed confidence in his abilities, but at times did need prompting to take part in daily living tasks, as he preferred to do some tasks more than others. Student D worked towards different daily living skills such as cooking, laundry, washing up, clearing away equipment, bus travel and shopping. Student D did need prompting to do most of the daily living tasks but showed a good understanding of how to complete them when shown by staff. Student D on the whole did interact well within the group but at times withdrew himself away from others when it all got a bit overwhelming for him. In group activities, if it was something he wasn't interested in, he would withdraw himself away from the group. For the activities that Student D did want take part in he did show enthusiasm, and got involved within the group, and showed good interaction and social skills. Student D mixed well with students from Hereward and actively took part in sports activities with them.
- **Student J** was on many occasions quite reluctant to take part in the group activities and other planned group sessions, but when he was reassured that he would enjoy himself if he took part, he then reluctantly got involved and started to enjoy himself. The daily living skills that Student J took part in were cooking and cleaning and bus travel. Student J was prompted to wash the dishes after the evening meal, and he did this very well. He worked well with one of his peers who was drying up, as they put away the utensils together. Student J would benefit immensely from more money management skills, as in the second week of his stay Student J ran out of money, which left him without money to buy his lunch. For these two occasions Student J was prompted to make his own lunch on the lodge and did this independently very well.

The summaries as a whole show both varying degrees of progress in learning by all the students (although "Every student told us that they had achieved things they hadn't done before" – Hereward Principal) and also the need for planning differentiated personal programmes which we intend to do in future by having longer planning and lead-in times. In sharing perceptions subsequently, our Core Partners Group has identified a number of lessons for the future including:

- Need for longer planning and preparation lead-in times.
- As part of this, need to spend longer on agreeing personal learning goals with students and their parents.
- Importance of preparing for the experience, and also reflecting on it subsequently, as part of the 'home' curriculum.

Feedback from staff attending the professional development sessions was very positive, reflected in a decision to keep meeting after the project was over.

How we plan to maintain progress after the end of the project

The pilot proved the value and tested the practicalities of including independent living experience in the curriculum and our project legacy plan includes a further, more differentiated pilot next year. The 2 week residential element was paid from the high needs funding block. Longer term, we are aiming for a permanent version paid for from a combination of high needs local authority funding and personal education budgets. Children's Services were strongly engaged through the project steering group but we see it as important also to

engage Adult Services as part of realising our long term vision. We therefore plan to work with senior managers at Oxfordshire County Council, and the NHS, to develop a longer term costing model which makes the programme sustainable and to provide a test bed for important elements of the integrated education, health and care planning process and the local offer.

Our broader aim is to co-design and deliver an integrated *Living Life curriculum* to be available through all Oxfordshire based providers and accessible by all those post-16 students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities for whom it is appropriate. Planning for this curriculum will start at year 9 in schools.

Our Core Partners Group intends to keep meeting as necessary to oversee next year's pilot and longer term developments and our new cross-County Practitioners Group plans to continue its collective professional development programme, to track the progress of the pilot group of students and to use the learning from the pilot to feed into curriculum development, utilising study programmes flexibilities and person centred planning.

To view a video clip about pilot experiences, please click on

<http://www.hereward.ac.uk/news/37-information/news/437-Isis> , and for further information contact:

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