

Counting the cost of choice in Special Education: What does the green paper mean for services?

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Education and related services for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities are estimated to cost in the region of £5.2bn a year from a total education budget of £30.4bn. In the current climate it is no surprise that the Government would seek to reduce costs.

In many ways the most significant proposal in the green paper is the decision to remove or redefine levels of need outlined in the SEN Code of Practice. This could, at a stroke, reduce the percentage of children and young people with SEN and disabilities from 21% of the school population to 8 to 10%, saving billions in the process. Unfortunately, it means those pupils no longer deemed to have SEN would then be supported by alternative sources of funding. However, with both local authority and school budgets being whittled down to such a degree it is difficult to envisage anything other than that the cutbacks will have a negative impact on the education of this group of learners. Even where schools are committed and willing, they may find it extremely difficult to use current delegated SEN funding and the new pupil premium in the way the Government hopes because of other resource imperatives.

The headline announcement is clearly the commitment to increased parent choice outlined in the paper. This encompasses both giving parents a greater say in the schools that their children attend and the introduction of individual budgets, albeit for a small number of children and young people with a statement of SEN or new 'single plan'.

Personal budgets are a potentially interesting development but they have not led to improvements in provision in the US, or in the Netherlands where similar schemes have been abandoned. The more significant issue is the large number of vulnerable children and families who will need support and guidance to use budgets to good effect. Without this they will find themselves 'purchasing' services that may not necessarily be appropriate or helpful.

A second major difficulty with this approach relates to the cost of provision. For example, it is not unusual for a residential educational placement for a child with complex autism spectrum related needs to cost £220,000 a year. Opening up the market and increasing choice is unlikely to bring about savings, and is more likely to do the opposite. A consequence of this, even if funding levels for individual children are limited or capped, is that parents may quickly become disaffected with Government policy and seek to challenge it in ways that become even more adversarial than they have been in recent years.

There is relatively little evidence to suggest that parents want individual budgets. Rather, families want good access to quality services backed with clear and easy assessment, identification and referral to effective provision.

Linked to this in the green paper is an envisaged enhanced role for the voluntary sector. From a policy perspective this seems to dovetail well with individual budgets but will it be effective?

The voluntary sector has a strong tradition in relation to SEN and disability, as lobbyists, advocates and service providers. It would be churlish not to acknowledge the work the voluntary groups do in assisting families of children with specific impairments (knowledge, support, leverage to improve services) and in supporting research and development work.

However, we should be concerned about Government passing responsibility to a sector that is cash strapped and where provision is often designed to support particular interest groups. In this regard, it is worth noting that two of the largest groups of children deemed to have special educational needs – pupils with learning difficulties (MLD/SLD) and pupils with social, emotional and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) – are less likely to be well supported by voluntary sector involvement, particularly when these needs are combined with social disadvantage and poverty.

Focusing on the voluntary sector also appears to involve a stripping away of some excellent SEN and disability services currently run by local authorities across the country. These include, for example, specialist teaching services to support pupils with physical and sensory impairments, and services targeted at pupils with learning or behavioural difficulties. This wastage makes no sense and it will be very difficult to reconstruct these services once they have been allowed to wither.

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