

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Young people, visual impairment and preparing to live independently

Technical report of findings October 2014 to February 2015

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Glossary

NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
RNIB	Royal National Institute of Blind People
VI	Visual Impairment
VICTAR	Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research
Year 11 cohort	Participants were in school Year 11, aged 15-16 when recruitment commenced in summer 2010
Year 10 cohort	Participants were in school Year 10, aged 14-15 when recruitment commenced in summer 2010
Year 9 cohort	Participants were in school Year 9, aged 13-14 when recruitment commenced in summer 2010

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the research project: “A longitudinal study of blind and partially sighted young people in the UK”. The project has surveyed a sample of young people about their circumstances and views since 2010 when they were aged between 14 and 16 years old.

This report draws upon interviews with 61 young people. The interviews took place in autumn 2014 / spring 2015 when the young people were aged between 19 and 21 years old. The data presented here relates to these young people’s experiences and views of preparing to live independently, and specifically:

- Current living circumstances, including those already living independently;
- Transition to independent living;
- Preparation for specific tasks;
- Knowledge of adult services;
- Guide dogs.

Current living circumstances

Over half of participants interviewed (32) lived in their family home. Four of the participants have made the transition from living in their family home and moving into their own accommodation which they would describe as their permanent residence. A further 25 live away from home for part of the year. Many of these were at university either living in university halls of residence (13) or in a shared privately rented accommodation (9). Those students with the most severe visual impairments tended to stay in university accommodation, rather than move out into private accommodation. A further three were boarding at a specialist (visual impairment) college.

Participants living independently

Of the four participants who were living independently, three are registered as blind, and one as partially sighted. Another two participants were preparing to move into their own accommodation at the time of interview. For those participants who had responsibility for choosing their new homes, the primary considerations were affordability and location. Only two of the participants had assistive devices to help them with cooking and housework. The two who did not have assistive devices appear to have only received minimal (if any) independent living skills training, and describe themselves as having difficulty with such tasks. None of the four at the time of interview had drawn on adult support services for mobility support in learning to get around independently and

use the local transportation system, although one was waiting to receive such support, and another received mobility support through disabled student allowance. However, they felt more confident in dealing with banking and bills, being aware of modified formats, and were able to use online banking.

Transition to independent living

The majority of participants spoke of having aspirations to start living independently in the next few years, although they identified potential barriers to this, e.g. finding a suitable job and having the available money. More immediate barriers were also identified and these included having the necessary skills to live independently and restrictions from family members who they felt did not facilitate them in striving to become independent.

Half of the participants felt that their visual impairment would have an impact upon them in living independently. Unsurprisingly, those who have more severe visual impairments were more likely to conclude that their visual impairment would have an impact upon their independence. Suggested ways it would have an impact included: in using public transport; in getting around independently; in needing to choose an appropriate location to live (e.g. around good transport networks); in cooking; and in choosing a particular house that would be suitably accessible.

When considering the transition into independent living, a number of themes emerged, including: not feeling prepared for moving to independent living; the need for support; adjustments and preparations that would need to be made; and how living away from home whilst in higher education assisted as a stepping stone into independent living.

The young people were asked to consider how prepared they were for specific tasks associated with independent living. It was interesting to note that despite several of them describing themselves as being prepared for independent living, when they were posed with specific challenges they might face it became apparent that there were areas that they could potentially struggle with. This indicates that for at least some young people at this stage of their lives they have not fully considered the skills and adaptations which they will need in place to be able to live independently.

Preparation for specific tasks

There were mixed responses to how well prepared they would be for cooking and housework. There were some participants who had never received independent living skills training who felt they would struggle with these tasks. Others spoke confidently of how they would use their assistive aids and employ techniques that they had put in place over time. Online food shopping was highlighted as a helpful tool.

Whilst several participants felt they would be able to get about independently by using public transport and getting to know a new area, there were those who did not believe that they had the necessary skills to do this. This appears to be particularly true for those with more severe visual impairments who had attended schools in mainstream settings. The lack of sufficient mobility training is something which has been highlighted by participants on previous occasions – and in particular by those who had moved from mainstream school into a specialist residential school. It is also striking how few of the participants spoke of arranging mobility support, or using rail assistance when traveling by train. This corresponds with an ongoing theme of the young people having limited knowledge of the services which they could potentially draw upon. However, a number of the young people did identify ways in which they could make independent travel easier, such as by arranging mobility training, making preparations (for example reviewing maps of the area) and using apps on their phone.

The participants seemed most confident with the administration of bills and banking (especially those who were living away from home when in higher education), and in particular they benefitted from being able to manage their finances electronically. Several participants spoke of requesting copies of bills and bank statements in their preferred formats, although the responses of others demonstrated they were not aware of this possibility.

Knowledge of adult services

Only one third of the participants were aware of services that they might draw upon when making the transition into independent living. Services referred to included: national specialist charities; local authority adult services and local specialist support services. Of those who were unaware of such services, several were interested in knowing more about the types of services available, whilst others responded that they would prefer drawing on support from family and friends.

Guide Dogs

Seven of the participants at the time of interview had either been matched with a guide dog, or were going through the process. Those young people who had connected with Guide Dogs have spoken positively of both having a guide dog, and also the extra mobility training which they received in preparation for being matched with a guide dog. There have been some practical implications for those in higher education who have had to arrange larger living accommodation which would be able to accommodate a guide dog, even if just in anticipation that they may have been matched to a guide dog at some point during their rental contract period.

1 Introduction

The research project is entitled “A longitudinal study of blind and partially sighted young people in the UK”. This project was designed in 2009 by a team from RNIB and the Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR) at the University of Birmingham in response to the research brief prepared by RNIB.

The key objectives of the project were:

- To track the process of transition for blind and partially sighted young people from age 14 for [initially] five years;
- To identify the roles of professionals involved;
- To identify the factors that improve or reduce a young person’s chance of gaining employment.

Phase 1 of the study involved the recruitment of an original sample of approximately 80 young people to the longitudinal study and carrying out several surveys of their views and circumstances. This took place between autumn 2009 – March 2012 and was funded by RNIB. The phase of research resulted in a number of reports (e.g. Hewett and Douglas, 2011a; Hewett and Douglas, 2011b, Hewett, Douglas, Ramli, and Keil, 2012).

Phase 2 of the study has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, and centred on follow-up surveys of the sample of young people with visual impairment. By autumn 2014/spring 2015 there were 73 participants actively involved in the research, 61 of whom were available for interviews which are presented in this report.

This report focuses upon data collected between October 2014 and February 2015 through semi-structured telephone interviews (“autumn 2014 interviews”). A more comprehensive overview of the data collection of the study as a whole is presented in an accompanying report “Longitudinal Transitions Study of Young People with Visual Impairments: Methodology Summary, June 2015” (Hewett et al, 2015a). This wave of interviews aimed to: explore the concept of wellbeing; look at the young people’s friendship networks; investigate the young people’s perceptions of how well prepared they consider themselves to be for independent living; and ask some more questions around support for and information about their eye condition. The findings from these interviews are presented in a series of accompanying themed reports:

- Longitudinal transitions study of young people with visual impairments: methodology summary (Hewett et al, 2015a)

- The transition experiences of young people with visual impairments aged 17-21 (Hewett et al, 2015b)
- Wellbeing of young people with visual impairments (Hewett et al, 2015c)
- Support and information received by young people with visual impairments (Hewett et al, 2015d)
- Young people, visual impairment and preparing to live independently (this report)

These reports are part of a series of technical reports which present all findings in the project since 2010.

2 Independent Living

As the participants continue their transition to adulthood, one of the most significant steps for them will be the movement towards independent living. This is a part of their journey which we will continue to monitor as the study progresses, and in particular we will look to investigate into the participants experiences of drawing upon adult services, any barriers that they face, and ultimately how prepared they have felt. At the time of this interview, the majority of the participants were either still living at home, or had experienced some independence whilst living away at university. The focus at this time was therefore more on their aspirations for living independently and their how prepared they felt for such a move. Prior to this section of the interview, the following statement was read out to the participants:

“The purpose of this research has been to establish how well prepared you feel as a young person with a visual impairment for the transition into adulthood. One key aspect of this for many will be moving away from home and looking to set up home independently on your own, or at least away from family and close friends. We are interested to find out more from you at this stage about how prepared you would be for this type of transition.”

2.1 Current living circumstances

Table 1: Current living circumstances (majority of the time)

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Family home	32	52.5%
University halls	13	21.3%
Shared house at university	9	14.8%
Living independently	4	6.6%
Boarding at a specialist college	3	4.9%
Total	61	100.0%

We asked the young people to describe their current living circumstances. Their responses are summarised in the table above. Just over half (32) of the young people were living in their family home, 21 were living in university halls or a shared house at university (but would still return home during the summer holidays), three were boarding at a specialist college (and again would return home during the holidays), and four had already made the transition to living independently (i.e.

they had their own home which they would describe as their sole residence).

One of the participants who would return home from university during the holidays reflected that during this time her independence can be restricted. She lacks in confidence to do some activities on her own, and it has meant that she has had limited opportunity to build up her confidence:

“When I am not at uni I live with my [family members], which is ok, but I don’t get to do very much myself in that situation. Wherever I go, my Mum tends to go with me, which is ok, but it’s getting kind of annoying now, I want to try and do things on my own. It’s not a case of Mum not letting me, it’s me not feeling confident and that.”

It is interesting to note that of the 13 participants who were living in university halls of residence, five are in their second year, having stayed on in university accommodation. All five of these participants are registered blind, with only one of the participants registered blind having moved out of university accommodation for their second or third year. In contrast, all of the participants who are registered as partially sighted or without registration transitioned from university accommodation into off-site shared accommodation. We also note that all participants who are registered blind and at the time of interview in their first year were planning to remain in university accommodation for the second and third year. One of the young people who was in their first year at the time of interview spoke of an aspiration to move out of university accommodation, but identified barriers that she could potentially face:

“One of the difficulties of moving out, transport to and from lectures would be harder, maybe I would be ready for it by then, I don’t know”

Such potential barriers are something which we hope to investigate further with this group.

Two of the participants in university halls described having some challenges in living with their flatmates:

“It’s ok, it can be annoying at times, because although I have told them not to leave sharp objects around or hot things they still do it. So that can be really frustrating. It’s like I am talking to a brick wall”

2.2 Participants living independently

2.2.1 Overview of participants who are living independently

The four young people who were living on their own were all members of the older Year 11 cohort and had various living arrangements:

- Participant 1 is registered blind. He is living in a flat with another friend with visual impairment – both are long term NEET. The flat is very close by to the area in which he grew up, so he was already very familiar with the routes he would need
- Participant 2 is registered blind, and is a second year university student. She is living in a flat on her own having moved out of university accommodation for the second year of her degree.
- Participant 3 is registered partially sighted and is in voluntary work. She is living in a house on her own, but still lives very close by to family members.
- Participant 4 is registered blind. She is long term NEET, but had spent a period of time in voluntary work. She had recently moved into a house with her partner.

Two further participants were in the process of transitioning into independent living. One participant was preparing to move into rented accommodation during her gap year, during which she would be living entirely independently. Another of the participants at the time of interview was applying for a council house with her partner. On the application form there was the opportunity for her to note that she has a visual impairment:

“...there is questions on there, like do you have a visual impairment, or other disabilities and that”

2.2.2 Experiences of the participants in their transition to independent living

We asked the four participants who had already transitioned to living independently to reflect back on their experiences, to talk about services that they had drawn upon, and to evaluate how prepared they were for different aspects of independent living.

Choosing a home

When choosing a home, the main priorities for the participants appear to have been affordability and location:

“I found this property and I saw where it was, it was an ideal location in terms of transport links and stuff, you know, it’s five minutes from uni, five minutes from [city centre], it’s ideal”

Researcher: “Did you find that your visual impairment impacted you at all when you were looking to live independently?” Participant: “No, no, it was ok. Were you restricted in terms of where you could look because of bus routes and things?” Participant: “I did think of that occasionally, but the big factor was how much it was a month.”

There were however some considerations in relation to their visual impairment. For example, one of the young people is on the waiting list to receive a guide dog, and therefore she made the letting agency aware of that, whilst another when viewing their house discovered that as it was predominately open plan, they could benefit from there being a light of light.

“I mentioned to my letting agents during my viewing that I was looking to get a dog. And they were ok with that. So it wasn’t like I really had to look around or argue anything”

“It’s really good, because everything in the house is really light. There’s a massive windows in the place, so it really lights up the room, so it’s not dark and gloomy, I know where everything is, it’s just been me for so long, I learnt to put things where they are efficient and I know that they are, and I can grab them easily, so it’s pretty much all scoped out for my needs.”

For the participant who was at university, as she had already been living away from home for a year, she felt very confident in moving to live independently, describing how her main considerations were practical everyday ones, rather than ones specific to her visual impairment:

“To be honest I think because of the nature of the place I was living in in halls and stuff, I didn’t really...I don’t think I thought about anything that anybody else wouldn’t have done. It was like how my bills were going to be, and which company was going to be cheaper, who do I get internet with, and what colour shall I have my sofa. That was really how my thought processes went...I don’t think I thought of anything from a VI angle.”

It should be noted that whilst she reports not having through of anything from a visual impairment angle, in previous interviews she had spoken of location and transport being a large consideration.

For the participant who was living with a friend in his home town, the main objective for him was to regain his independence:

“I have found it really good. Lovely and quite, I don’t get any noise from the next door neighbours. I found it brilliant. I have got my independence back that I had when I was living away in [specialist college], yeah.”

The participant who moved in with her partner had less control over where she lived as he already had a house which she moved into. This meant moving to quite a busy area, which she did find difficult at first:

Researcher: “Have you found that your visual impairment has impacted you at all in where you are living that bit more independently?” Participant: “It did in the first place, because like crossing busy roads or whatever, but now I am alright.”

Cooking and housework

There were mixed responses from the participants when asked how prepared they had felt for cooking and housework, with two participants reporting not having experienced any difficulties, whilst the other two still felt unable to carry out these tasks independently:

Researcher: “How have you got on with things like cooking and housework?” Participant: “Now this is a problem, I don’t know how to, being honest, and I don’t do much housework because I can’t see it, so.”

Participant: “Housework really good. Cooking, never been my kind of thing, but occasionally if do something my partner is here and he’s watching me. I’m not a bad cook, but I could improve!”

Researcher: “Is that something that is affected by your visual impairment?” Participant: “Yes.” Researcher: “What in particular do you find difficult?” Participant: “Cutting, really difficult, because I am always afraid that I am going to chop the tops of my fingers off. Grating, if I am grating cheese, anything like that is really difficult for me again.”

“Yeah I can cook and clean. I have got a couple of aids, what is it, a level indicator, to save measuring something out, you put that on the thing and it will bleep when you get so far to the top. I have also got a boil alert thingy, stick that in the saucepan and that will let you know when it has boiled. But yeah, otherwise I think I can just about manage. Oh yeah, I do use my magnifiers for the washing machine and the dryer. I also attempt hovering... I think I do a good job anyway.”

Neither of the two participants who described themselves as lacking in confidence with cooking and housework had any assistive devices to help them in these activities. Additionally, one had only received limited independence living skills training, whilst the other had not had any at all. Instead she described how several family members had tried to show her how to cook over the years.

Researcher: “Have you got any kind of assistive aids for the kitchen, like level meters or anything like that?” Participant: “No, someone was meant to be coming in, but I don’t know where they were, I will get in contact with them again.” Researcher: “Is that someone from the social services, or something like that?” Participant: “Yeah”. Researcher: “So how long have you been waiting for them?” Participant: “Only about a couple of months.”

The participant who had not received any independent living skills training spoke of how she had adapted her oven herself to make it more accessible:

“It used to be seeing where the temperature was on the oven or the grill. So what I have done now is got little bits of selotape and rolled them into balls and stuck them where is 100, 200, 300, so when I turn it, if I feel where the selotape is, it’s like ‘right, that’s 100’.”

Using public transport

Again, there were mixed experiences for the participants in using public transport from their new homes. For two of the participants they were continuing to live in the local area in which they had grown up, so were already familiar with the public transport systems.

“With the public transport, I have been here for so long, I know where the buses are, and what times and everything they are, and even the trains I know all the times of those, where they go from

and where they stop, that I have pretty much trained my mind to know, so I know I am not going to get off at the wrong stop.”

One of these participants reflected that if he were to move to a new area, he would look to draw on mobility support:

“If I moved to a new area, I would probably get in touch with some kind of organisation that deals with visual impairment, mobility, yeah again mobility, get me up to scratch with different routes, different this, different that.”

The participant at university was able to have orientation with the mobility officer at university as part of her disabled student allowance. She still had some difficulties as her bus route is a long, straight road, and the bus drivers were not always reliable in saying when she had reached her stop. However, she had the confidence to ask for help from the general public if she had travelled too far, and was exploring new ways in which she could become more independent:

Participant: “We have awful bus drivers. So it’s a case of... Because it’s literally straight down the [name of road], so it’s one straight road. So I mean I am still a little bit hmmm... I will never sit down on that bus. I will make sure I am stood where they can see. I am trialling lots of apps to see which one is actually going to work best at finding bus stops. That’s something I am in the middle of.”
Researcher: “So at the minute are you reliant on them saying “you are at that stop”. Participant: “Yeah.” Researcher: “And how’s that worked out?” Participant: “When it’s sunny and warm and you don’t mind getting lost, it’s wonderful. When it’s pouring with rain they always get it wrong.” Researcher: “That’s helpful! So have you had a few times you have ended up further than you meant to.” Participant: “Yeah, because the only time that you can really tell that you have gone too far is when you get to a corner, and by that time, you are basically on the edge of town, and it’s like “oh brilliant, ok!” You have got to hail some lovely randomer to walk across the road. Having said that it means you meet some really interesting people.”

The participant who had moved in with her partner had not received any mobility support, but as she was waiting to be matched with a guide dog, knew that she would receive this training through the charity Guide Dogs. To get around independently in her new local area she had relied

on the support of others and was sticking to routes she was confident with.

Getting to know the local area

Again, in getting to know the local area, two of the participants had the advantage of having grown up in the area, so were confident in where the different facilities were. One of these participants would rely on family support to get the majority of her food shopping, but would be able to go and get small amounts independently, although at times she would find this difficult:

Participant: "If I ever want food, me and [partner] will always go out on a Sunday and meet his parents in Aldis just down the road from me and we will do the shopping altogether. Me and him will get what we like. Then his father very kindly brings me back up and drops me off outside the door and helps me bring all the shopping and everything back in." Researcher: "So if during the week if you needed anything are you able to get to Aldi on your own, are you able to..?" Participant: "Yeah, I am able to. The only thing that I am little bit, restrictive as such, is the prices, because the prices aren't exactly printed very large. That can be a little bit of trouble now and again."

The participant who had moved in with her partner had relied on him to enable her to become familiar with the local area. Since moving there she had had limited opportunity to get to know other people within the local community. She also had had some challenges at first, because she wanted to register for a work scheme to help her get into employment, but reports having being told she was not eligible as her partner earned too much money. This was something which her social worker helped negotiate.

The participant at university benefited from already having become familiar with the area during her first year in the city, and also she benefited from being able to draw on mobility support through disabled student allowance.

Researcher: How did you go around first of all, getting to know [local area]? Participant: Well I kind of knew what was there, just from having walked around it with other people. And then like once I moved into my house, actually before I moved into my house, I met up with [mobility officer] before I moved in, we had spare hours at the end of last year. I mean I signed my contract in

February. So we used those last couple of hours to do the bus route, so I had the routes and everything done before I moved in. So essentially as soon as I moved in, we said we haven't got a timetable we can't do anything else, let's do [local area]. All the useful stuff is in one block... You go down as far as the little café on the corner, opposite Tesco, and then go up past the pubs, and then go down as far as I don't know, [café's] and the letting agents, that's a really useful circuit isn't it."

She had a number of options she could draw upon to get food supplies:

"So what I tend to do to be honest, I tend to a lot of my shopping and stuff, if I do a big shop I tend to do it online, if I just want little things I go to Spar or down to [local area] and go to Tesco Ex', or they have got, I don't even know what that little everything shop is called, but they have got a little everything. ... So I tend to do a lot of it going down into [local area], rather than around my bit.

Bills and banking

The participants were also asked about their experiences of setting up bills and banking. This an area which they appeared to be particularly confident with, and had positive experiences, even though at first it was sometimes necessary to have support:

"Banking is the same as it's kind of always been. Bills it's just a case of ringing people up and saying, to begin with, I wasn't really sure who I should be with. When the bills first came through I got someone else to read them, and then it's a case of calling them up and saying "can you send me stuff in braille". Npower do it, Severn Trent do it. That's about it really."

"The majority of the bills were really, really easy. The TV license, water, rent and electric, that was done straight away without any trouble, and I told them about my visual impairment, and they were really understanding about that, and I got put onto a different list. Everything that gets sent out, like if there is a consumption form for the electricity, I always get it in large print, they do that really well."

"I would do it direct debit, over the phone, I would do it over the phone or internet."

Use of specialist services

Finally, we asked the participants about their use of specialist services. Only one of the participants had regular contact with social services. As discussed above, they had been helping her negotiate job seeking support through the local job centre:

Researcher: "What happened, did you have to have a meeting with them? Did they come out to you?" Participant: "They came out to me, we went for a coffee, it was quite laid back." Researcher: "What kind of things did they suggest to you?" Participant: "I meet with her quite regularly, she goes through jobs with me, things like that."

The participant at university had not made contact with social services at all, and at the time of interview she could not think of any purpose for doing so.

Participant: "No, there's nothing that I can particularly think of, but then it's not something that I have looked into." Researcher: "Do you think that's [Social Services] something that you would find beneficial?" Participant: "I am not sure now. It's probably something that I would have looked into when I moved."

On reflection she felt there would be more purpose in making contact with social services if she were to move to a new city:

Participant: "Yeah. Then I suppose, yeah I suppose I would definitely look into what was around and options, and see if things like, definitely mobility support, and things like... I was very lucky when I moved in that I could use my microwave, my oven all the hobs are raised up... but if that wasn't the case I guess possibly something there."

The participant who was sharing a house with a friend he had made at college had not felt he needed to contact social services as he was already familiar with the local area. He was aware of the support Social Services would offer, however, and his friend had benefited from their support.

Participant:...because the friend who has moved in with me, obviously he doesn't know the area, and [local] Social Services, they have got a team, and I am guess every other, well hopefully ever other council, they have got a disability team who help you

with whatever. Like he is having mobility now, yeah he's having mobility now around the area."

3 Transition to Independent Living

3.1 Aspirations to live independently

We asked those who were not living independently whether they had any aspirations to start living independently in the next few years. When reviewing these responses it is important to remember that our sample is made up of a range of ages and for the youngest cohort the thought of living home to live independently, other than at university, was something that they would be less likely to have considered when compared to their slightly older peers, as illustrated in the response by this young person:

“I am only 17, so I definitely don’t feel any sense of shame that I am still living at home...Certainly I think after my first year [at university] I would definitely look at doing it, by then I will be 19/20, and I would like to be living away from home then”

Table 2: Do you have any aspirations to start living independently in the next few years?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	49	81.7%
No	7	11.7%
N/A Already living independently	4	6.7%
Total	60	100.0%

The majority of participants spoke of having aspirations to start living independently in the next few years, with only seven saying that they did not. The seven gave various explanations for this, including:

- Being close to their family
- Having an aspirations to live independently eventually, but considering it to be a long way into the future
- Not being sure where life was going to take them
- Preferring to stay at home to save money
- Not having considered it as an option to date
- Not having a job to be able to afford to live independently

Three of the participants shared how they were looking forward to the opportunity to live independently:

“Yeah I can’t wait to live independently!”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to, I am an independent person, I like to do my own stuff”

However, for one of these young people, they felt restricted in their independence, believing that their family did not have confidence in their abilities to live independently when they return home from specialist school during the holidays:

“When I go home it’s kind of hard adjusting to not being in control of the house. It’s hard to explain”.

They were hoping to be able to move into halls at university, but were aware that their parents would prefer them to stay living at home.

Another young person who aspired to live independently spoke of how he was using the time with family to help develop the independent living skills that he would need:

“I hope to in the end, after university, I will get a place of my own. Until then I am still hoping to learn independence skills, in between now and then. Particularly this year... Things like cooking, probably the main one.”

Those participants who were living in shared private accommodation at university felt that in a sense they were already living independently, and that therefore the transition to move to a sole residency would not be a substantial one. A number of potential barriers, however, were identified by several of the participants which could restrict them with this. These centred round finding a job, and having the money needed to be able to afford to live independently:

“Yeah, I would like to, providing I can get a job to support myself, that’s what I would like to do”

“No there’s a lot of things that depends on. How quickly you get a job, if you are with someone, it’s quite unaffordable by yourself”

Other participants had specific timelines in mind, which tended to fit around the courses they were taking:

“No, there’s no point really. I am currently looking at moving out when I am 27/28, because until then I will still be in full time education, so I will rely on my parents.”

Finally, some of the participants were already formulating plans for moving to live independently. For example, one participant had arranged to move into a family home as a lodger, another participant was due to get married and hoping to be able to move out of the family home, whilst another participant was looking into getting a mortgage to buy a house. One participant who is registered blind was interested in a supported accommodation scheme that a friend of hers had joined:

“I would love to! I would love to do it now if I could. Because my friend I went to see in London recently, he’s living in a community of flats for visually impaired people. They get regular support if they need it. So that’s something that I would look to love into, another transition step from home and complete independence”

3.2 Perception of how visual impairment would have an impact upon living independently

Table 3: Do you think that your visual impairment would have an impact upon you at all if you were to look to live independently?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	30	50.0%
No (hesitant no)	7	11.7%
No (definite no)	23	38.3%
Total	60	100.0%

We also asked the participants if they thought that their visual impairment would have an impact upon them if they were to look to live independently. Half (30) said that they thought that it would affect them, twenty three said that it would definitely not, whilst seven were hesitant in saying that it would not.

Table 4: Do you think that your visual impairment would impact you at all if you were to look to live independently? By registration type

	Blind	Partially sighted	Registered, category unknown	Not registered/ Unknown	Total
Yes	15	9	1	5	30
No (hesitant no)	1	2	0	4	7
No (definite no)	4	9	1	9	23
Total	20	20	0	18	60

The table above shows the response to this question by registration type. A Pearson Correlation test shows a correlation between registration type and whether they young people thought that their visual impairment, and we observe that, as we would have anticipated, those who have more severe visual impairments were more likely to conclude that their visual impairment would impact them in living independently. What is particularly interesting, however, is that four of those registered blind felt that it would definitely not impact them. They gave varying explanations for this:

One of the participants anticipated being married before living independently, and therefore he would be able to receive support from his future (sighted) wife:

“Not really, no because I am thinking that if I live independently, I would hopefully be married, and then it would be a bit easier, because my other half would be sighted, so it would be a bit easier.”

Another participant who was living in halls at university concluded that she already had the skills necessary to live independently:

“Yeah, I mean absolutely fine, because only in terms of mobility, because I do cooking, blah blah blah, everything myself anyway. I basically live on own anyway, I just live with people.”

Whilst one participant who was already living independently felt that her visual impairment had not impacted on her as she had moved into accommodation on her own. A final participant when asked specific

questions about tasks around the home it became apparent that there were several areas of independent living which she was not prepared for. Therefore her initial response to this question would indicate that it was something she had not truly considered.

Another participant who is registered blind took a different stance to the four discussed above, in stating that it was inevitable that it would affect him in some ways:

“Hell yes! It can’t not, it physically can’t not, there will be differences, and I’d be a fool to deny that. But they aren’t very difficult to overcome”

When asked whether they thought their visual impairment would impact them in living independently, some of the participants spontaneously gave examples of which areas of their lives they thought it could particularly affect them.

Transport/Location/Getting around independently/Planning

Several of the participants spoke about transport considerations, and how they would be impacted through not being able to drive:

“Yeah because I don’t drive, so areas with transport and stuff”

“I think it’s just transport that would be an issue”

Very closely linked to this, some of the participants spoke of how their visual impairment would restrict their choice of where they would be able to live, because they would need to be able to have access to good transportation, or be able to walk to their workplace:

“The only area where it could potentially impact me is when I move to wherever I move to, it needs to be somewhere that has got good public transport, or an option of, or if I was going to be with someone who had got a car, so getting around. So I can’t really go and move to like the middle of the Welsh valley”

“I think it would in terms of looking at which areas to live in. I would prefer something close to say a place I worked, or something like that, so that it was in walking distance.”

It is worth noting that housing tends to be more expensive if is close to good transportation links, or in a central location. Therefore, as identified

by Blood (2015) finding suitable affordable accommodation for these young people could potentially be a challenge. This is something which we will investigate as more of the young people seek to move into independent accommodation.

Mobility challenges and getting orientated with the area were also barriers identified by the young people. Overcoming such challenges would require some forward planning and prior investment by the young person:

“If I moved to a new place that I didn’t know, I would find it hard to find shops and stuff like that”

“I think it would be ok, but it would take like a lot more planning. Say if I was moving into somewhere new, I would have to learn the local area and then learn my accommodation itself really well. I think it will just be like a more, like a bigger process, say if I didn’t have a visual impairment, because I could just move my stuff in and that would be it. But you kind of tailor everything around you, to make sure that you know your routes and stuff”

Cooking

For other participants, cooking independently was a concern:

“Cookers, magnifiers, kettles, rings, hobs, basically the general kitchen equipment, because the price of it is astronomical, I could not afford to buy the stuff I would need for my kitchen because it is too expensive, it’s literally outside my price range.”

“So for example with cooking, I couldn’t read the instructions on the packets”

Accessible house

Finally, two of the participants spoke of needing to ensure that they had accommodation which was accessible to them:

“Yeah, I mean, definitely, I would have to find a house that was accessible. I wouldn’t want something with narrow corridors, I would go for a wide house”

“If I was looking for a flat that’s off the ground and you have to go upstairs to get to it, and there is no lift or anything, I would have to

see if they have got yellow strips so that I can see where I am going...”

Prepared to meet challenges

Several of the participants who felt that their visual impairment would not impact them, identified inevitable challenges that they would face, but reported that they felt prepared to meet them:

“Yeah, I mean, I count myself as sort of living independently at university now, I am trying to live as independently as possible with getting my own food, reading my own post with technology and stuff. There are ways that sort of impacts on things, but there are ways around it, usually, so I guess it’s just a matter of trial and error, figuring how you are going to do something”

“I don’t think so, no. Because I have learnt quite a lot anyway as the years have gone by, I know how to cook with my visual impairment and everything like that”

“Yes it would. There would be initial differences, but I think it would be a case of using the general public and all the skills I’ve learned over the years, to just make it work. I think rather than being scared of it, I think it’s a case of embracing it, and see it as an adventure, which would be good”

3.3 Preparedness for the transition to independent living

The participants were presented with the following scenario:

“Imagine that you are in a situation where you are due to move to a new town or city to start a new job, and will be looking to move into accommodation on your own. Could you please share with me your initial thoughts on how well prepared you think you would be for a move like this?”

The responses from the participants were mixed from those who did not have any real concerns, to those who felt that they were not prepared at all.

Unprepared

Five participants described themselves as being unprepared for the transition into independent living, and felt that there were a number of skills that they still needed to develop:

Participant: "I don't know that I would be prepared at all".

Researcher: "How much of that would come down to your visual

impairment do you think?" Participant: "I think all of it really is to do with my visual impairment"

"I probably wouldn't...Because I have got to stay close to mum in case anything happens to me, so she knows what to do, so I wouldn't move far if I did move"

"At the moment I couldn't move at all. My Gran really is doing everything at the moment. I would have to be a lot more kind of, I have got to get the skills, that's what I am hoping to do between now and when I leave for university"

Support

Four of the participants spoke of the need to look into support that they could draw upon to help them through the transition, including through specific services, benefits, orientation support and family support:

"I am not really sure of the process of like housing benefit and actually finding accommodation, so I am not confident in that kind of area."

"I am prepared, I mean I think one thing which would happen, I am quite lucky because my parents they would help me in setting up in my new place"

"I would make sure I got in touch with guide dogs, because I have got [name of guide dog] obviously"

Necessary adjustments/preparations

Some of the participants felt that they were prepared, providing that some necessary adjustments or preparations could be made. These included having mobility support, learning transport routes and making their accommodation accessible to them:

"I would be relatively prepared, but I would have to make sure that the accommodation was properly adapted. So for example the hob

and things they would have to be prepared adapted, and then I would need stuff like orientation once I moved in”

“I think I would be pretty well prepared. I would start by getting to know the area, and finding out about bus routes and things like that”

Other participants felt less confident, and this seemed to be partly linked to them being unsure of how the preparations that they needed would be put in place:

“I don’t think I would be ready, but I would give it a go. And if I couldn’t get mobility support, I could get family who could help me familiarise myself with the surroundings”

“If I had the [adapted] equipment I would be fine, but when it comes to working the kitchen equipment, then not at all”

As noted in the previous section, this participant was concerned about how she could afford the accessible equipment that she would need in the kitchen.

Another participant was concerned about having enough time to receive orientation to learn to navigate new area. In this interview and previous interviews they have reported not having had a very positive experience of mobility training when younger, and therefore despite being in sixth form, they were still learning some of the basic techniques that they would need:

“It probably depends how much notice I have. Say I had like a town to prepare, I reckon I would be ok getting some training around that area, and finding out distances from my workplace and accommodation”

Similarly, another participant spoke of requiring time to be able to prepare before moving to a new city. However, there is a question of how realistic his timelines would be:

“I wouldn’t be prepared at this moment in time, but if I was to get the job I would make preparations in like months in advance. So I would have a look at the area, have a look at the place to live where it would be, just generally the area, where to go, transport,

accommodation, etc, everything basically. Everything would be planned well ahead.

It is also worth remembering that as well as needing to make some of the preparations described above, when moving to a new job it often necessary for people with visual impairments to ensure that adjustments are put in place prior to them starting a new job, for example through Access to Work. This provides an initial glimpse into the complexities of someone with a visual impairment moving to start a new job, and is something which we will continue to investigate as more of the participants move into the labour market.

Higher Education as a step towards independent living

Those participants who have been living away whilst in higher education spoke of the experience as a step towards independent living. They had had the opportunity to move away from home, and take responsibility for their shopping, cooking, cleaning, and laundry. This was particularly the case for those who had moved into private accommodation away from campus, although as previously noted, those with the most severe visual impairments had tended to stay on campus. For these young people in private accommodation it had meant they had had the opportunity to make the transition into independent living a more gradual one, as they had firstly moved into university accommodation where they had the security of university staff if required, and then into shared accommodation with friends, where they had added confidence from having people around them.

“I think I would be sort of well prepared, because I mean I have lived in a house at uni, which I have to look after, so I think I have got the experience there. I wouldn't be as prepared though, because it wouldn't be like in a house at uni where you still have everything at home. It would be like being at uni, but taking to the next level if that makes sense”

“I think I would be quite well prepared, because I would get a map of the area and living here it's given me experience of cooking for myself and washing and everything, so I think I would cope”

“I think I would be prepared, because obviously I have been living away for three years now. So I think it would be ok. Obviously it's a bit different because it would be a place of your own. But I think I would be able to cope.”

3.4 Preparation for specific tasks

We also asked the participants to consider how prepared they were for specific tasks associated with independent living, and also to describe some adjustments which they would make. Their responses to these questions are presented below. It was interesting to note that despite several of the young people describing themselves as being prepared for independent living, when they were posed with specific challenges they might face, it became apparent that there were areas that they could potentially struggle with. This indicates that for at least some, at this stage of their lives they have not fully considered the skills and adaptations which they will need in place to be able to live independently.

3.4.1 Cooking and housework

It is important to remember that for any young person leaving home for the first time, cooking and housework can pose a challenge, as acknowledged by this participant:

“I think I am pretty well prepared, I can cook, I mean I am not amazing, but I don’t think most students are, I know how to cook everything, I am just like urgh, but I think that’s pretty much a student problem, rather than a blind one”

However, for some of the participants, cooking and housework would pose a real challenge, specifically due to their visual impairment:

“I can do some things, but not everything. Chopping is difficult, it’s really difficult, especially onions. I mean it’s hard enough for someone without a visual impairment, but for someone with a visual impairment it’s even harder because my eyes are really sensitive”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be able to do that”

One of these participant’s reports never having receiving any independent living skills, and not being away of specialist equipment that she could use:

Researcher: “Have you ever had independence training in terms of cooking?” Participant: “No”. Researcher: “Have you ever been shown the devices that you can get, things like level indicators?” Participant: “No, nothing like that, I’ve never been told about that”

Other participants whilst feeling that they were not prepared were more confident that with some initial support or a period of practice, they would be able to carry out these tasks independently:

“I have never had to do cleaning before and things like that, so I am apprehensive about that. I think that’s something I will have to do with practice – just practice, practice, practice”

“I might have a bit of trouble with laundry due to the machines, but if I am shown a couple of times how different machines work, then it is usually fine”

Several of the participants felt that they would need more regular support around their home:

“Yeah, I can cook and make a cup of tea and stuff like that but I would probably just need a hand... Sometimes when you cook you can make a slight mess, so sometimes I would need a hand with clearing up afterwards. Because even if I tried cleaning, I could probably end up missing some bits, simply because I wouldn’t be able to see them”

“I am capable of doing housework. Doing it reliably so that I don’t miss pathways or something, I may need someone sighted to look over stuff, look over the surfaces and make sure that I haven’t been methodically missing any pieces.”

Two of the participants spoke of arranging more formal support to help them around the home:

“The house where my parents live at the moment they have to have cleaners because my mum doesn’t have time to clean it. I would have cleaners because I can’t see what I have cleaned and what I haven’t cleaned. So housework, I almost certainly would hire someone”

“Housework, I would do some, but I would also...have you heard of direct payments? I have that, so I would make use of it”

A particular challenge identified by the young people was being able to access small text, for example, on equipment or on packaging:

“Cooking will be a bigger problem, especially if it’s ready meals, because of being able to read the packaging, so that will be hard”

“It would mainly be when reading something, that’s probably it really”

Many of the participants spoke of adjustments that they would make, either in terms of equipment that they would use, or physical adjustments that they would make to ensure that equipment was accessible to them. These suggestions tended to come from those students who had had independent living skills whilst at a specialist school (but equally these students tended to be those who would most benefit from such adjustments):

“Cooking, I feel confident with cooking. I use things like liquid level indicators, and I use a penfriend, I think I showed it you, I use that to label my food with the expiration date and stuff.”

“I have got a couple of aids, what is it, a level indicator, to save measuring something out, you put that on the thing and it will bleep when you get so far to the top. I have also got a boil alert thingy, stick that in the saucepan and that will let you know when it has boiled”

Similarly, several of the participants spoke of benefiting from being organised around their living area:

“I tend to, I am quite a tidy person, the way that I do things on my own, I don’t know if it’s an eyesight thing, but everything is in order if that makes sense, like I have all my DVDs and CDs lined up and organised, so the kitchen would probably be the same”

“Well I know where everything is, and I just get on with it and be careful”

On a practical note, several of the participants in higher education in previous interviews have spoken of using online food shopping services as a more convenient way to shop for their groceries. These would be delivered to their room in their halls of residence or private accommodation.

3.4.2 Using public transport

As we would anticipate, due to the range of visual impairments, some of the participants would not have any difficulties in using public transport, whilst others would have a number of obstacles to overcome.

Three participants felt that they did not at present have the skills needed to use public transport independently, whilst others whilst they would travel independently, would not feel confident in doing so:

“I haven’t done that yet, I usually get taxis, but I haven’t done the train or the bus yet, but I am going to be doing that” (Registered blind, initially mainstream educated , now in specialist college)

“I find that really difficult, that is one thing that I really struggle with. Just because, I can’t see bus numbers on buses, so I don’t really know what to do there, and trains, I went to the train station the other day and I just couldn’t find the platform I needed to be on without help. I asked a couple of people, I found it eventually” (Registered partially sighted, mainstream educated)

“I would hate it.” (Registered blind, mainstream educated)

Many of those students who would struggle with public transportation are those who attended mainstream schools, and did not have mobility support built within the school curriculum. Whilst they may have received mobility support to learn to travel from home to their school, or around their local area, it would appear to have rarely covered the use of public transport. One participant who had been due to go into higher education that year, but instead had decided to stay on at college, was trying to arrange for additional mobility training:

“I am trying to arrange with the college to have a little bit of mobility, somebody there with me to, to go on some routes around the place. I am using public transport, it’s just I am not confident using it, just because of my eyesight” (Registered partially sighted, mainstream educated)

The first quote in this section comes from a participant who was initially in mainstream school, but fought for the opportunity to go to a specialist college as she felt that she was not receiving the skills she would need to live independently. In contrast, the majority of those students who attended specialist schools where they received regular mobility training appear more confident in using public transport. For some this has

meant pushing themselves to practice using the skills that they have been given, but nevertheless, on the whole they appear well prepared:

“I love trains. I travel on the trains all the time. Buses again, I am fine with, as long as I know the route from where I am going” (Registered blind, attended specialist school)

“Yeah, I feel I am a lot more confident with public transport now. I have been ok with trains for a few years. I used to have this big thing with buses, but I got work experience over the summer and part of that was, I sort of set myself a thing of getting over my aversion to buses. I did that over the summer, so I have got no issues with... I am lot happier on buses now” (Registered blind, attended specialist school)

This participant was not alone in preferring trains over using buses, with a number of the young people reporting that how confident they would be in using public transport would depend on the type of public transport that they would be using:

“It would probably, it depends on the kind of transport they have got. I am thinking if it was a bus it would be a bit more difficult. But if it was a tram system it would be easier...It’s just stuff like getting on to the tram it’s a bit easier than getting onto a bus, because the steps are a bit lower” (Registered blind, attended specialist school)

“I am ok on trains. Buses can be a bit more difficult” (Registered blind, attended specialist school)

Whilst many would be confident in using public transport, several reported that they would want some form of preparation first. This might include looking at the routes and timetable online first, getting a friend to go with them whilst they learned the route, or booking in rail assistance:

“I would get a friend to help me first on the buses so I would gain confidence in that area” (Registered blind, attended mainstream school)

“I’m capable of doing this if I know exactly what route I’m taking, and everything’s planned out” (Registered partially sighted, attended mainstream school)

“Probably do some prior research before I got there. Probably try and find where my nearest bus stop was. Say if I was in London, where my nearest underground station was, something like that”
(Registered partially sighted, attended mainstream school)

Four of the young people spoke of arranging mobility support to help them become familiar with the transport systems:

“Obviously I would need mobility to know where it all is”

Whilst one of these young people knew they would need initial mobility support, they were not sure of how to go about getting it:

Participant: “That would be less prepared, because it’s dependent on the route itself and the mobility training I will get, so that is less in my hands”
Researcher: “Would you know how to arrange mobility training if you needed it, if you were going to a new area?”
Participant: “No.”

It is striking how few of the participants spoke of arranging mobility support, or using rail assistance when traveling by train. This corresponds with an ongoing theme of the young people having limited knowledge of the services which they could potentially draw upon. We note that those students who were at specialist school, and tended to have the most severe challenges, are amongst those who are the most confident in using public transport, demonstrating an education effect. We would urge caution in interpreting this as evidence that a specialist school education is preferable for young people with visual impairments, and instead would suggest that it serves best as evidence of the importance of investing in the mobility skills of these young people whilst they are in education. It demonstrates how important is that as well as equipping the young people to get around their local area, they are also equipped with the mobility skills that they will need once they have left compulsory education.

Finally, three of the participants spoke of using their mobile phone to help them with using public transport. Again, this is a recurring theme in the research as the participants have spoken on a number of occasions of using their devices as assistive tools to help them overcome challenges associated with their visual impairment:

“What I will do is just use the GPS app for my phone as I normally do. What I do is I have my home marked in the GPS app, and I

know when I am certain distance away my bus stop is the next one after, then I just ask someone because the drivers are notoriously unreliable here, so I just say to someone “can you tell me when we are at the next stop”. That’s how I do it...Even if I get off at the wrong stop, I just use the GPS app to navigate home anyone, so it’s not a problem”

3.4.3 Getting to know the local area

We also asked the young people how they would go about getting to know the local area. As there is a very close association between this and the use of public transport, we asked them specifically how they would go about getting to know where the different shops, services and leisure facilities they would need were. Nevertheless, there was still a considerable overlap with the themes identified in the previous section, with the young people looking for support from friends, official mobility support and from the general public. There seemed more confidence from the young people in their ability to learn to navigate a new area.

Many of the young people spoke of needing time to get familiar with a new area, and for ongoing support from those around them:

“I would probably ask someone to show me the way around first a few times, and then after that I could probably attempt it on my own, but I would to be with someone first”

“I think I would be ok when I got used to it, but it would take me a while to get used to it, I would have to gain confidence”

“I think after time it would be fine, it would be initially finding the new areas I would struggle with”

One participant who spoke of drawing on mobility services acknowledged that the level of support available would depend on the region they were living in:

“That depends, because mobility tends to vary from place to place, how much assistance you get”

To help prepare for learning to navigate a new local area, several of the participants spoke of making preparations, such as looking at the local area on google maps first:

“You can find good resources online, and see what’s there in the local area without actually having to go out”

“Generally I would use google”

“If I were on my own I would research first (google maps) then go out and work out where everything is”

Similarly and in parallel with the previous section, several participants spoke of using apps on their mobile phone to assist them:

“...I used navigation apps as well like Blindsquare and Around Me and things, they are really really acute. So if I sort of had a corner shop that was about a minute away or something, I think I would feel ok like trying it, just with this app. But I wouldn’t like try and go into town or anything without having a clue where I was going”

“...but obviously I use directions on my phone and stuff like that”.

3.4.4 Bills/Banking

Finally, we asked the young people how prepared they felt they would be for the administration of bills and banking. The responses were mixed, with several of the participants not having had previous experience in arranging to pay their bills; however in general, the participants report being confident with these tasks, and in particular are able to benefit from being able to manage their finances electronically.

Those who would initially struggle spoke of looking to others for support:

“I would have to probably get my mum to help with it”

“I think I would struggle with that, I wouldn’t have a clue where to start...I have never done it before, but I do think my visual impairment would make it more difficult”

“I think I would find it difficult...Reading the bills. They never send them out in large print”

It is interesting to note one of the participants reporting struggling to the inaccessibility of the bills, as several of the other young people spoke of benefiting from modified bills, or requested modified bills:

“My information comes to me in braille, if they change their policies I get the booklets in braille”

“I get it in braille”

Similarly some of the participants spoke of using assistive technology to make the paperwork more accessible to them, if it did arrive in an inaccessible format:

““Yeah paper ones I could do because of my magnifying glasses, I could use those, I think I would be ok”

“If they couldn’t give them to me in braille then I would use the zoom-ex”

Several of the participants spoke of benefiting from using online banking for managing their finances, and also the benefits of being able to set up standing orders:

“But I can deal with bank statements electronically as well, so that should be ok”

“I try to do as much as possible online”

“I had a bank appointment and I set up online banking, because I couldn’t really see bank statements and stuff. But now I have got it all on my phone, and I can see all my bank statements electronically, and my balances and stuff”

In general it appears that the young people find online banking very beneficial, although the level of accessibility would vary from bank to bank:

“I am with the [name removed], and you know you get the little pin things, you get sent it and every time you login you press a button on this tiny little thing, and it generates a pin on the screen. Well they have one which is designed for people who are blind and visually impaired, and it’s bigger and it’s got like phone buttons and it talks”

“Quite difficult, I am with [name removed] and they aren’t really accessible. I need to change banks really”

3.4.5 Knowledge of adult services

We were also interested in the young people's knowledge of services, and asked the following question:

“Are you aware of any particular services that you could draw upon to help you make the transition to living independently?”

This question was aimed specifically at those young people who had identified that they would need some form of support when moving into independent accommodation.

Table 5: Are you aware of any particular services that you could draw upon to help you make the transition to living independently?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	9	33.3%
No	18	66.6%
Total	27	100.0%

Nine of the participants were either able to identify a type of support service they might draw upon, or had referred to such a service during the course of the interview. In contrast, eighteen of the participants were unaware of such services.

Several types of services were named by the participants, these included:

- Adult services
- RNIB
- Action for the Blind
- Guide dogs mobility support
- Local support service

“I think there's like this Action for Blind, but I can't remember, but there's these things, an assistive living if you need it”

“I know they have rehab officers who do mobility and independent living, but I don't know apart from that”

Of those who were unaware of such services, several were interested in knowing more about the types of services available, whilst others responded that they would prefer drawing on support from family and friends:

Researcher: “If there were services like that, is that something that you think you would look to make use of? Participant: Yeah, definitely.

“Probably not, because I have got my family who know enough to help me out, I think they would pretty much see me through.”

As the participants start moving into living independently, we will continue to monitor their use and experiences of such services.

4 Guide Dogs for the Blind

It is also worth noting that several of the participants at the time of interview had either been matched with a guide dog, or were going through the process.

Table 6: Does the participant have a guide dog?

	Total (N)
Yes, participant has been matched with a guide dog	5
No, but on the waiting list	2

As the table above shows, five of the participants had guide dogs, whilst two were on the waiting list to receive them. Of the five participants who already have guide dogs, two were in higher education, one on a gap year, one in FE course and one NEET. Both participants waiting for guide dogs were in higher education. Guide Dog ownership is something which we will investigate more in future interviews. However, we would emphasise that those young people who have connected with Guide Dogs have spoken positively of both having a guide dog, and also the extra mobility training which they received in preparation for being matched with a guide dog. There have been some complications for those in higher education in waiting for a guide dog. For example, two participants arranged to have more expensive accommodation to ensure that they would have a room of suitable size to accommodate a guide dog. The additional cost was funded through their disabled student allowance, but in both cases they were not matched with guide dogs, and so this extra expense was not required.

5 Conclusions

The process of tracking the experience of the participants as they move into independent living will be an ongoing one. As the participants start to make this transition, it will be interesting to track the reality of their experiences against their anticipated ones. In particular, it will be interesting to observe what support services are drawn upon by participants, and how effective these are.

We note that whilst many of the participants feel that in general they are equipped for this transition, several of them identified specific areas of independent living which they anticipate will be a challenge, whilst others shared that at present they do not believe they have the repertoire of skills they will need. In particular, we see examples of participants who are limited in their mobility and independent living skills, such as not being able to use public transport, or not being able to cook independently. Additionally, as we have identified in other areas of the research, there is a general lack of engagement with support services which are available to young people with visual impairments – examples being local authority adult services and rail assistance.

Many of the participants in higher education spoke of their experience of moving away from home for their studies as a stepping stone to independent living. This has enabled them to develop their independence, but with the confidence of having other people around them. However, we do note that those with more severe visual impairments tended to stay living in university owned accommodation. This is something which we will be investigating further in upcoming interviews.

The necessity to find employment, and have sufficient income to be able to afford to live independently, was identified as an additional challenge in making this transition. Whilst this will be true for many young people, we note that people with visual impairments who are reliant on public transport will require housing which is close to good transportation links, or in a central location, for example a city centre. Such housing tends to be more expensive, and therefore could be a further barrier to the young people as they look to find suitable accommodation.

6 Future Plans

This publication is part of a series of reports from the Longitudinal Transitions Study, which is following the transition experiences of over 80 young people with visual impairments. The project commenced in autumn 2009, and we have working alongside the young people since 2010. Funding has been received in two phases:

- Phase 1: 2009-2011 - Royal National Institute of Blind People
- Phase 2: 2012-2015 the Nuffield Foundation

We are pleased to report that funding has been secured through Thomas Pocklington Trust to continue the research into a third phase. This comes about as the participants continue their transitions into adulthood and employment, and look to start living more independent lives. Thomas Pocklington Trust's interest in the research came about following their own scoping study (Blood, 2015) which found that the likelihood of success for a young person with visual impairment making a positive transition into living independently was strongly linked to their employment status - thus concluding that a key way to help young people with visual impairments to be able to start living independently is to help equip them for work. Such findings also serve as a reminder that in looking to support a young person with visual impairment into employment, we need to think simply beyond the skills that they need in education, and instead look to the broader skills that they are going to need to live independently.

As the project continues, we intend to keep speaking to the participants at regular intervals to continue tracking their transition experiences and in particular their experiences as they try to enter the labour market.

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