

# **Overview Document: ACET Independent Travel /Mobility Skills Training**

## **1. Strategic context**

Current Government policy on health and social services sets out several themes which are directly relevant to the development of education and training opportunities for disabled people. Three of the seven key areas identified in the Regional Strategy for Northern Ireland 1997-2002<sup>1</sup> are physical and sensory disability, learning disability and mental health. It is acknowledged that “people with disabilities increasingly seek greater control over their own lives”, and among the underlying principles to be applied to the successful implementation of the strategy is multi-agency co-ordination.

A specific objective of the strategy is that:

Boards should work with other agencies, in particular in the education and employment sectors, to ensure that young people aged 16-25 with [physical and sensory] disabilities have the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers to gain personal, social and economic independence in the community...<sup>2</sup>

A specific strategy objective for learning disability is to develop links, which promote inter-agency co-operation with agencies and organisations responsible for further education and training for, and support in, employment.<sup>3</sup>

One of the Department’s priorities for action to achieve its strategic aims is “developing innovative methods to secure the inclusion of people who, for whatever reason, would otherwise be marginalised”.<sup>4</sup> It is acknowledged that this will entail interaction and co-operation between education and providers in other sectors.

The Department of Education’s current strategic aims include:

- to nurture respect for diversity, the worth of every individual and appreciation of the value of co-ordination and team effort
- to motivate young people throughout the community to strive for and reach the highest levels of personal achievement
- to help people of all ages and abilities, and especially those disadvantaged by social need or physical disability, to develop the skills, competencies, and flexibility needed for their own working life
- to provide opportunities and encouragement for people, throughout their lives, to benefit from learning, culture and recreation, and to develop their own strengths, creativity and self-esteem<sup>5</sup>

The mission statement for further education is “to provide for all over age 16 education and training opportunities which match the needs of the economy and promote personal, social and community development”.<sup>6</sup> Further education is to enrich the quality of life and contribute to the vocational development of students with special needs.

In the field of training and employment, the Training and Employment Agency, through its Disablement Advisory Service, is committed to “work energetically to enhance its provision for people with disabilities”<sup>7</sup>, and to promote equality of opportunity and the concept of “ability first”<sup>8</sup>.

Most recently, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 has given people with disabilities new rights in education, training and employment. It is hoped that this legislation will make it easier for people with disabilities to enter and remain within the training and employment market, as well as increasing awareness of disability among employer and the general public.

It is in this context that ACET was formed in South and East Belfast to harness the combined resources of agencies, organisations, schools, colleges and employers to promote and create new opportunities for disabled people to access education, training and ultimately employment.

## **2. Education & Training for People with Disabilities: The Wider Context**

Public policy and society’s attitudes to disability have undergone profound changes in recent times. The Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 (which gave children with learning disabilities a legal right to education for the first time) and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 were progressive pieces of legislation in this field. The extensive reforms in health and social services in the 1990’s have elevated people from passive recipients of services to active consumers with a right to recourse.

The same changes have explicitly recognised the role of the voluntary and private sectors in the provision of services and have encouraged the development of partnerships with the statutory sector, of which ACET is a pioneering example.

Greater emphasis on vocational training, nationally recognised qualifications and ending discrimination further provides a dynamic context for ACET.

## **3. The Work of ACET and emerging Mobility Skills Training**

ACET’s first project, begun in 1992, was the Work of Life Skills Training Programme (WLS), an education and training programme, accredited by the

Open College Network, for people with severe learning disabilities, including work experience placements.

A.C.E.T. held a major conference in 1994 entitled – “Creating a Vision for 2000 and Beyond” which examined the legislative and policy context of inter-agency working and the experience of other European countries.

Subsequent projects have included Project Career, Project Transitions, Independent Travel Research Project and New Deal for the Disabled.

Project Career was a two year transnational European programme in partnership with projects in Finland, the Netherlands, the Republic of Ireland and Sweden. Its objective was to develop and test a model practice to promote the concept of career development for people with learning disabilities.

Project Transitions is an ongoing natural extension of Project Career examining ways in which the concept can be further developed for young people with a Learning Disability (14+).

In 1998 A.C.E.T. was awarded a franchise by the Government to deliver New Deal for the Disabled as a pilot project in South and East Belfast. This project is ongoing.

The importance of Independent Travel skills/ Mobility skills as a fundamental component in accessing further education and training for the person with severe Learning Disability, began to emerge through A.C.E.T. projects and in 1996. ACET commissioned research into the blocks and barriers preventing people with severe learning disabilities accessing public transport or travelling independently.

## **4.0 Independent Travel Training Research**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The research was commissioned by Agencies in Consortium for Education and Training (ACET) and was funded by the Department of the Environment (NI), Department of Education, Training and Employment Agency and the South and East Belfast Trust. The project was essentially inter-disciplinary by nature and required the formation on an inter-disciplinary research team whose members are staff in the University of Ulster at Jordanstown.

The Research Aims

- To audit and describe the present level of competence in the opportunities for independent travel among children and adults with severe learning disabilities particularly in South and East Belfast areas but with reference to at least one other rural area in the province.

- To describe current practice through the curriculum in schools / further education colleges, adult centres and Training and Employment Agencies for developing competence for independent travel.
- To identify the range of variables which promote or hinder the development of independent children and adults with severe learning disabilities.
- To action plan intervention, which may enhance opportunities to empower people with severe learning disabilities, through increased independence in travel.

### **4.3 Survey Methodology Overview.**

In order to achieve the aims of the project, various approaches were utilised, including:

- Individual interviews with service providers
- Focus group interviews with carers
- Individual interviews with clients

### **4.4 General Discussion**

Mobility is an essential component of our quality of life and independent travel should be considered to be a basic and fundamental skill requirement for every person who lives within a community and who wants to be an active member of that community. Quality of life enhancements for people with Learning Disability which were indicated by this study were:

- Improvements in social life
- More opportunities for employment
- Enhanced self esteem and subsequent psychology well being
- Increased integration and decreased marginalisation in society
- Optimisation of the scope of recreational activities
- Better chances to establish and maintain friendships
- Empowerment of people with learning disabilities by expanding their personal “choice” where and when to travel

### **4.5 Research Snapshots**

#### **Research Aim 1**

Despite the advantages of training clients in independent travel, relatively few of the total number of clients who received services from the providers did in fact travel independently – out of a total of 890 clients only 187 (21%) travelled independently.

#### **Research Aim 2**

The practices used to promote independent travel were found to be sound in the context of national and international practices. Service providers in South and East Belfast use similar techniques and there appears to be justification for a standardised training format. The research did find that promotion of independent travel was considered to be of high priority by all the respondents but that the actual numbers involved in programmes to promote travel is quite low.

### **Research Aim 3**

The main blocks and barriers were identified as:

- Client cognitive difficulties eg. recognising buses, signs, locations
- Client's health eg. physical mobility problems and medical problems such as epilepsy
- Client vulnerability eg. road safety awareness, openness to strangers
- Low motivation of clients
- Inability of some clients to react accordingly in emergency scenarios
- Client lack of confidence, eg. fear and anxiety in crowds
- Carers with-holding consent for travel training
- Client education not commenced at young enough age
- Organisation and professional attitudes to risk taking
- Inadequate resources to provide training programmes
- Lack of friendship with clients' peer groups
- Rowdy schoolchildren and problems of taunting and bullying
- Poor attitudes by, and lack of awareness of, the general public
- Lack of parental confidence in individual's ability
- Built environment problems eg. lack of pedestrian crossings
- Poor attitudes and lack of awareness of some transport staff
- Cost of travel
- Public transport diversions caused by the "troubles"
- The provision of school and Trust buses discouraging independent travel
- Public transport problems of signage, access, route information, and paying fares
- Desired destination too far from home
- Different and unfamiliar driver on public transport vehicles

### **Research Aim 4**

Many of the blocks and barriers identified in the report were already being addressed by the significant amount of travel training that was presently being carried out in South and East Belfast. The benefits to clients (and carers) who had received such training were also very significant in terms of increased skills for independent living. A very clear recommendation from the findings of this study was that independent travel for people with severe learning disabilities needs to be offered to more of these clients. In order to achieve this, two main areas were identified as needing to be addressed.

- Resources needed to be directed to this area to help teach more independent travel skills. Or alternatively, a re-allocation of existing resources should take place so that promotion of independent travel skills was given a more prominent position than is currently the case.
- The promotion of independent travel skill is of necessity within the remit of client teaching. However, it must have a much wider scope. In parallel with teaching of clients should be efforts to remove the other social and environmental blocks and barriers to independent travel which this study found to exist.

There seemed to be a general consensus that training should commence at an early age and that carers, schools and vocation agencies should have a more formal link in the provision of travel training. Thus, the first recommendation was that a **Travel Training Working Group** should be set up to standardise the training procedure within a Common Travel Training Scheme for all the units in South and East Belfast. There were experienced trainers in different schools and units successfully training clients to carry out independent travel and it was felt that much of the ongoing training techniques could be incorporated within the “**Common Training Package**”. However, some **pilot projects** could be carried out under the auspices of ACET or the Working Group to evaluate the potential of some training techniques used in other countries in the local context.

It was clear that many of the Blocks and Barriers to travel did not fall within the remit of “transport providers” but were inter-disciplinary and inter-agency in nature. Thus, it was recommended that an **Inter-Agency Working Group** be constituted to develop a synergistic and partnership approach to improving the travel environment for learning disabled people.

There were already close links between school staff and carers, which was evident in Focus Group discussions. It was also very evident in those discussions that carers whose children had received training very positively influenced carers who had doubts on the benefits of travel training. It was therefore recommended that:

- A Carers Travel Training Forum would be set up, to meet when appropriate, so that experiences could be exchanged and the benefits of independent travel explained to carers who had little or no previous knowledge of such benefits
- The Forum should also encourage families to travel on public transport to familiarise family members with public transport usage

Perhaps the final words in this summary should be left to the Carers and Clients.

**Carers:** Independent travel “*transforms their lives...they like to be independent*”, and *it opens up their horizons...enables them to experiment more with jobs and leave themselves open to getting employment...*”

**Client:** “*I don't like anyone doing something for me when I can do it myself*”

## **5. Why is independent Travel Training important?**

An ability to travel independently is of fundamental importance to all aspects of life, whether an individual has a disability or otherwise. One central skill in being able to access, utilise and embrace community participation is “travel”. Whether a young person with a learning disability wishes to avail of services for leisure and recreation, further education, training or employment, a lack of competency in Independent Travel will ultimately create one of the most significant barriers to their personal success and satisfaction. Travel is a prerequisite in contemporary society. Where an Individual does not have the ability to travel independently, a service should take steps to address this need.

While there are people with severe learning disabilities who may always require some degree of support when they travel, a service which embraces the ideals of “ordinary Life principles” will have structures in place which promote, as a human right, the development of each person’s optimum ability to travel independently. Such structures include identification and removal of blocks and barriers to independent travel, whether these exist in the environment or in the minds of people; education of clients to promote travel skills; and community education to alter negative attitudes which may exist. This pack endeavours to assist service staff whether they are teachers in schools or colleges, or social service personnel in day/housing/residential support services, to promote travel skills through education.

The Independent travel Research Project (1997) indicated that service providers who are involved in independent travel skill development are highly motivated and often successful in promoting travel skills in their clients. Carers also recognise the need to promote independent travel. Although they have many real concerns such as safety of their son or daughter, or financial considerations, there was a general willingness among these carers, when they perceived adequate support was available, to encourage participation in independent travel development in their son or daughter. In addition there was evidence that one of the most influential factors for those clients who were most successful in independent travel was support and education provided by parents.

## **6. An Introduction to the independent Travel Training Pack**

A.C.E.T. is currently developing an Independent Travel Training package, which we aim to publish in 2001, after piloting the pack in some local schools. The pack aims to provide students, parents, and teachers with a comprehensive, yet flexible, mobility skills training guide that:

- is clearly linked to the National curriculum;
- has clear definable learning modules;
- acts as a resource kit for teachers;

- involves parents;
- includes a student record of progress;
- attends to matters of personal safety and risk taking;
- has systems for monitoring and review;
- is accredited;
- provides a standard;
- is fully transferable between learning environments

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<sup>1</sup> *Health & Wellbeing: Into the Millennium* (DHSS 1996)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p.81

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p.86

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p.7

<sup>5</sup> *Strategic Plan for Education 1996-2000* (DENI 1996), pp.1-2

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p.18

<sup>7</sup> *Corporate Plan for Education 1995—1998* (T&EA 1995), p. 25

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p.26