An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

FORTIA INSIGHT
an RSK company

RSM

Evaluation of the Transition Pilot
Phase 1 Final Report

7 November 2025

Research Report No. 34

This research was commissioned and funded by the National Council for Special Education and undertaken by Fortia Insight an RSK company. Responsibility for the research, including any errors or omissions, remains with the authors. The views and the opinions contained in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions on the Council.

National Council for Special Education
1-2 Mill Street
Trim
Co. Meath
C15 P2KC

T: 01 603 3346

www.ncse.ie

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Statement on Language

This report refers to 'students with disabilities' and 'disabled students'. Many people in Ireland's disability rights movement prefer the term 'disabled people' because it reflects the idea that people with an impairment are disabled by barriers in society and the environment. Others prefer the wording used in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 'persons with disabilities', because it emphasises human rights by putting 'persons' or 'people' first. We understand that people with intellectual disabilities, mental health challenges or psychosocial disabilities often prefer person-first language. Some individuals may not identify with either term (National Disability Authority (NDA), 2023a).

We also refer to 'special educational needs' ('SEN') as defined by the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004). We acknowledge that some people find this term patronising. It may also separate students, which goes against the goal of inclusive education promoted by the UNCRPD. However, as there is no widely accepted alternative in education to the word 'special', and because it appears in legal documents like the EPSEN Act, it is used when necessary (NDA, 2022).

Glossary and Acronyms

Glossary

Term	Definition	Source
Disability	A constraint in a person's ability to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment. In respect of education: a constraint in a person's ability to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition that results in a person learning differently.	Government of Ireland (2005). Disability Act 2005 – Part 2. Dublin: Government Publications Office. Government of Ireland (2004). Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act. Dublin: Government Publications Office.
Education	Formal and informal learning and learning that may or may not be accredited and which supports individuals in reaching their potential.	Adapted from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition.
Inclusive Education	Inclusive education is defined as education that provides learners with access to meaningful, high-quality education and learning opportunities in their local community, alongside their disabled and non-disabled peers.	Adapted from European Agency for Special Education Needs and Inclusive Education. Available at: https://www.european-agency.org/about-us/who-we-are/agency-position-inclusive-education-systems
Individual Education Plan (IEP)	An individual (education) plan is a written document prepared for a named person that specifies the learning goals to be achieved by the person over a set period and the (teaching) strategies, resources and supports necessary to achieve these goals. Goals should be based on a persons' abilities, aspirations and capacity.	NCSE (2006). *Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process*. Dublin. Stationary Office. Available at: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/final_report.pdf
Special Educational Need (SEN)	In relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition that results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.	Government of Ireland (2004). Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act. Dublin: Government Publications Office

List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Term
AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability
ALN	Additional Learning Needs
ASN	Additional Support Needs
AT	Assistive Technology
BITCI	Business in the Community Ireland
CES	Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CRC	Central Remedial Clinic
CV	Curriculum vitae
CYP	Children and Young People
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EHCP	Education Health and Care Plan
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
EU-SILC	European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
FEI	Further Education Institutions
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HSE	Health Service Executive
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individual Education Plan
JCPA	Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement
LA	Local Authority
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority

Acronym	Full Term
NEET	Not Currently in Employment, Education or Training
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NLN	National Learning Network
OCED	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
RACE	Reasonable Accommodations at Certificate Examinations
RQ	Research Question
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special Education Needs and Disabilities
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SILC	Survey on Income and Living Conditions
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Skills Service
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UK	United Kingdom
US	United Stated
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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Foreword

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) is a cross-governmental framework that supports employment opportunities for people with disabilities. As a response to Action 1.5 of the CES, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) launched a new and innovative Transition Pilot. The CES Transition Pilot supports the transitions of young people with disabilities through their post-school options. The NCSE is very pleased to publish this commissioned report that evaluates the CES Transition Pilot.

Two cohorts of students are the focus of the CES Transition Pilot: phase one of the Pilot began in the 2022-23 school year involving mainstream and special schools; phase two of the Pilot involved only special schools and began in the 2024-25 school year. This report contains the findings for the evaluation of phase one. The evaluation collects data from a range of participants who are involved in the Pilot, including students who are leaving school, their parents, school staff and other relevant stakeholders. Mixed-methods data collection tools were used. Data collection took place at different timepoints including when students were still attending school and following up with them after they had left school.

The evaluation finds that the Pilot generated positive impacts at multiple levels including the student level, the school level and the post-school settings and other stakeholders who were involved. Students reported receiving strong in-school support that increased their awareness of the post-school options available to them. Equally, early engagement with external organisations was reported as beneficial. As a result, the students indicated that they felt better prepared for further education or work.

Schools reported that they believed the Pilot enhanced teachers' knowledge about transition planning. The data revealed that some schools noted how the Pilot was also beneficial for other students who were not participating in the Pilot and, in some cases, entire classes.

The data demonstrates positive impacts occurring amongst post-school settings and other stakeholders involved in the Pilot. There are examples of strong collaboration amongst schools, agencies (like the HSE), Business in the Community Ireland, the National Learning Network (NLN) and local colleges. Some of the special schools specifically highlighted that the pilot enhanced their profile in the community. Parents also spoke of increased engagement with schools and local organisations as a direct result of the Pilot.

The evaluation also spotlights some areas that need to be improved. For example, the consistency of implementing the Pilot was impacted by difficulties with some operational elements. Amongst them are staff shortages in schools along with an increased administrative burden on school staff. There were challenges securing employers to facilitate work placements along with issues with transport and funding trips. Embedding transition planning varied amongst the schools and those with stable personnel and clear routines had the ability to habitually build practices into their routines. The data collected illustrated that in some schools' awareness of the pilot was confined to participating staff. These are important points for staff involved in the Pilot to consider as the second phase continues.

This evaluation provides critical evidence about the NCSE Transition Pilot and concludes that without the Pilot, many participating students may have experienced fragmented and reactive, rather than proactive or non-existent transition support. I would like to thank the research team at Fortia Insight along with the students, parents, school staff and other stakeholders that participated in this important study. We look forward to the next report detailing the evaluation of phase two.

John Kearney
Chief Executive Officer

NCSE

Executive Summary

Evaluation Overview and Aims

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was set up under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004). One of its key roles is to carry out research that helps to improve the delivery of special education and the development of policies.

In response to Action 1.5 of the Government's ten-year strategy, *The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) 2015–2024* (Government of Ireland, 2015), the NCSE asked RSM (now Fortia Insight) to evaluate a new initiative called the CES Transition Pilot ('the Pilot'). The CES is a cross-governmental plan to help people with disabilities to access employment opportunities.

The Pilot was officially launched in November 2022. Phase 1 ran from September 2023 to June 2024 in 20 schools across North Dublin and Galway. These schools were selected to reflect a mix of school types and student needs. Each school received funding to provide 12 extra hours of teacher time per week to support the Pilot.

Staff at participating schools identified students whom they thought could benefit from additional transition support. They helped them to plan for life after school and provided one-on-one and group support. A project coordinator was seconded to NCSE to help schools to deliver the Pilot. This included organising staff training, sharing resources online (via Padlet), and hosting shared learning days to encourage collaboration. Schools were also encouraged to involve parents and connect with employers and training providers to raise awareness of different pathways.

Around 90 students took part, with each school selecting between two and nine students. The goal was to help these students to build important life and employment skills and make informed choices about their future. This included consideration of a range of options, such as further or higher education, employment, apprenticeships and adult day services.

The Pilot aimed to improve how schools plan transitions and ensure that students have access to a wide range of opportunities. Activities varied but often included life skills development, work experience and career guidance. It also aimed to fill gaps in current support systems and align with national strategies such as the EPSEN Act 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004), CES (Government of Ireland, 2015), New Directions (Health Service Executive (HSE), 2012) and the National Access Plan for Higher Education (Higher Education Authority, 2022).

The evaluation looked at how well the Pilot worked, what impact it had and implications for any future expansion of support. The findings will help to shape a national approach to supporting students with disabilities as they move on from school. The evaluation focused on three main areas: (1) how the Pilot was delivered and embedded in schools; (2) its impact; and (3) its potential to be scaled up. It also reviewed evidence from Ireland and abroad, mapped current transition pathways, and explored what worked well to guide future planning.

Literature Review

A wide-ranging review of national and international research was carried out to better understand how students with disabilities are supported when preparing to leave school. The findings clearly show that good transition planning makes a big difference. When schools and families help students to plan, those students are more likely to do well in education, find jobs and build strong social connections (Test *et al*., 2009; Carter, Austin and Trainor, 2014).

The research points to several key factors for successful transitions: starting early, focusing on the individual student's needs and goals, and making sure that the student is actively involved in the planning process (Daly and Cahill, 2018). When students are part of a structured plan, they tend to move on to further education, training or supported employment with more confidence and a clearer sense of direction. On the other hand, when students do not get enough support, they often face delays or disruptions in their plans. This can lead to lower levels of education, fewer job opportunities and feelings of isolation. These challenges can also affect their emotional well-being and ability to make decisions for themselves (McCoy, Ye and Carroll, 2025).

The review also shows that involving parents and taking a whole-school approach, where everyone in the school works together, can make transition support much more effective (Mazzotti *et al*., 2021; McConkey *et al*., 2017). Long-term studies back this up, showing that the kind of support students get in school can shape their lives for years after they leave (McConkey *et al*., 2017).

Ireland has laws that recognise the importance of person-centred planning, such as the EPSEN Act (2004), the Disability Act (2005) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). However, the review found some gaps. For example, special schools are not required to have guidance counsellors, and schools in general do not have to create or track transition plans. This means that support can vary from one school to another, especially when compared to countries like the United States (UK) and the United Kingdom (UK), where transition planning is a legal requirement (Connolly, 2023). Overall, the review supports the need for the Pilot. It shows that it has the potential to fill these gaps and help students with disabilities to have better experiences and outcomes as they move on from school.

Method and Data Collection

This evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to understand how the Pilot performed and what difference it made. This involved a literature review, surveys, interviews and workshops. A summary of the data collection approach is given in Table 1 overleaf.

Descriptive analysis of the survey data was conducted using Microsoft Excel. Frequency counts were applied to describe the students involved and to identify patterns in their responses. Due to the relatively small number of students participating in the Pilot and the lack of a comparable control group, findings are indicative only. Responses to open-ended questions provided further context behind numerical responses. Qualitative data from surveys, interviews, focus groups and what-works workshops was analysed to identify key themes. To make sure that the findings were reliable, double coding was implemented, meaning that multiple researchers reviewed the data. Thematic grids were then used to compare the experiences of different groups. Finally, key findings were mapped against research questions and compared across all data sources to identify any differences, for example, between staff from mainstream and special schools. These insights were then considered against the findings from the literature to help shape the recommendations.

It should be noted that the evaluation faced several challenges. For example, relatively few parents took part, and some students stopped responding over time, especially after they left school. Staff were often busy, which made it difficult for them to support post-school follow up. In addition, some students may have felt pressured to give positive answers. These issues may have influenced how consistent and detailed the findings are and should be considered when reading this report.

Table 1 – Data Collection Overview

Method	Description
Student Surveys: Survey 1 (n=73) Survey 2 (n=57) Survey 3 (n=22)	Conducted at three time points using SenseMaker. These surveys captured students' experiences, perceptions of support and post-school aspirations. Longitudinal analysis with 20 students completing both pre- and post-transition surveys.
Parent/Guardian Surveys Survey 1 (n=37) Survey 2 (n=26)	Administered using SenseMaker at two timepoints. These surveys gathered insights into parents' perceptions of their child's support needs, readiness for transition and satisfaction with post-school pathways.
School Staff Interviews (n=20)	In-depth interviews with principals, teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) in participating schools to understand implementation, challenges and perceived impacts.
Stakeholder Interviews (n=19)	Interviews with representatives from other organisations involved in implementation (for example, HSE and Business in the Community Ireland (BITCI)) and post-school settings. These gathered broader perspectives on the Pilot's alignment with national policy and its impact on transition support, experiences and outcomes.
What-works Workshops (n=5)	Provided a forum for teachers to share effective strategies and identify areas for improvement in transition support.
Parent Focus Groups (n=2) **Parent Interview** (n=1)	Additional qualitative data collection was undertaken with parents to supplement survey findings. Participation was limited due to recruitment challenges (two groups and one telephone interview held with five parents in total). However, these provided qualitative insights into barriers to participation and reflections on transition experiences.

Summary of Findings

The Pilot demonstrated notable positive impacts on participating students, schools and school staff. However, embedding and scaling the Pilot presents various challenges.

Implementation and Embeddedness

Phase 1 of the Pilot was largely implemented as intended. Schools effectively utilised the flexible support time to deliver tailored transition activities. These activities included profiling students' needs and aspirations, life-skills workshops, work placements and planning sessions with different professionals. Factors underpinning effective delivery included having staff dedicated to the Pilot, strong support from school leaders, proactive coordination by the NCSE and opportunities for schools to learn from each other. The shared learning days and regional workshops, coordinated by the NCSE and the project lead, enabled schools to plan activities, engage with stakeholders and access resources.

However, the consistency of implementation was affected by several operational challenges. These included staffing shortages within schools, considerable administrative burdens placed on staff, challenges getting employers to take work placements and practical constraints related to transport and funding for transition trips.

The embeddedness of transition planning within schools varied. Some schools, with stable personnel and clear routines, were already starting to build these practices into their regular work. In other schools, awareness of the Pilot was limited to direct participants, and staff expressed concern that improvements to transition support would be lost if dedicated support hours were withdrawn. Stakeholders emphasised that embedding transition support requires strong leadership, dedicated personnel and sustained resources.

Impact

The Pilot generated positive impacts at multiple levels:

1. **Student-level impact:** participating students reported experiencing strong in-school support, increased awareness of post-school options and early engagement with external organisations. The Pilot was perceived to be beneficial in improving students' readiness for further education or work, enhancing their independent living skills and potentially improving employment outcomes. Over time, the data showed that the Pilot helped to keep students engaged and connected to school, thereby reducing the likelihood of dropout and fostering their inclusion in education and employment.

2. **School-level impact:** the Pilot considerably enhanced teachers' knowledge regarding transition planning. There was evidence that some schools had disseminated this knowledge to other school staff. This improved their capacity to identify students requiring additional support. In some schools, the Pilot also produced benefits for other students. This included students with disabilities who were not participating in the Pilot and, in some cases, entire classes. There is potential for greater collaboration, stronger external links and more embedded, year-round transition planning post-Pilot. This could foster a cultural shift towards viewing transitions as a shared responsibility within schools and across post-school settings.

3. **Impact on post-school settings and other stakeholders:** the Pilot was considered to have fostered strong collaboration among schools, statutory agencies (like the HSE), BITCI, the National Learning Network (NLN) and local colleges. It also encouraged more active engagement from some local employers with students with disabilities. For some special schools, the Pilot raised the school's profile within their local community. Parents also reported increased engagement with schools and local organisations because of the Pilot. Together, these changes could contribute to more collaborative local systems that better support students with disabilities. This, in turn, could potentially reduce pressure on adult disability services over time.

The evaluation concluded that without the Pilot, many participating students would possibly have faced fragmented, reactive rather than proactive or non-existent transition support.

Scalability of the Pilot

The evaluation also explored the potential for, and conditions necessary to, scale up the Pilot nationally. Most interviewees across all groups viewed a national rollout as both feasible and necessary. They pointed to the need for continued support for students with disabilities beyond post-primary education, as well as the successes observed in participating schools. However, substantial concerns were raised about the feasibility of widespread implementation, in its current form, across diverse geographical and contextual settings. Key challenges identified for scaling included:

- Workforce capacity and administrative constraints: staffing shortages, limited timetabling flexibility in mainstream schools, and existing pressures on schools pose considerable challenges to scaling up the Pilot's intensive support model.
- Funding gaps: insufficient funding for essential activities such as transport and trip-related costs limits the ability to provide meaningful transition experiences for all students.
- Variation in school commitment: concerns were raised that successful national rollout might depend heavily on the willingness of individual schools to prioritise and commit to inclusive transition support, which currently varies.

- Standardised time allocation models: a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to transition support may not adequately account for the diverse needs of students or the varying capacities of schools.
- Weak inter-agency coordination: limited awareness of available post-school options and weaknesses in coordination between various agencies (for example, education, health, social care, employment, BITCI) may hinder the Pilot's ability to support truly meaningful transitions.
- Scalability of shared learning activities: suggestions were made to replace national shared learning days with more manageable county or regional support networks to accommodate a larger number of participating schools.

Despite these challenges, there was strong endorsement for national expansion, with a consensus that meaningful implementation requires adequate investment and systemic capacity.

Implications for Future Phases and Scale-up

The findings from Phase 1 of the Pilot offer implications for its future development, refinement and potential national scale-up. To ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the transition support system, several conditions must be met, focusing on structural, cultural and practical enhancements.

- Protected staff time and designated roles: these were seen as essential for successful embedding and scaling. The current reliance on individual enthusiasm and flexible hours needs to transition into a formalised structure to ensure consistency and continuity. The project coordinator model was highly praised, but future scale-up will require a shift towards building internal capacity within schools, with external support gradually tapered to encourage school ownership.
- Earlier engagement and comprehensive planning: effective transition planning necessitates early engagement with students, parents and external organisations. This includes initiating discussions and planning processes well in advance of a student's exit from school and before their final year, so that all stakeholders are well-informed and actively involved.
- Robust infrastructure and resources: practical coordination tools, readily accessible shared resources and clear national guidance are fundamental to supporting effective transition delivery. This infrastructure should facilitate information exchange and reduce administrative burdens on schools.

- Enhanced inter-agency collaboration: strengthening inter-agency collaboration requires aligning timelines for support provision and consistent approaches to transition preparation across various organisations in education, health, social care and employment. This will help to address fragmented service delivery and ensure a more seamless transition experience for students. Efforts to foster collaboration beyond individual schools and reduce barriers between different sectors were seen as crucial.
- System-level changes: addressing systemic issues is crucial for sustainable change. This includes tackling siloed service structures, misaligned timelines between different support agencies and inconsistent preparation across settings. It is also important to challenge cultural assumptions and stigmas around disabilities.
- Addressing workforce and funding gaps: to scale the Pilot effectively, it is imperative to address the underlying challenges of staff shortage, school staff capacity and administrative constraints within schools, alongside funding gaps for essential activities like transportation. Investment in these areas is crucial for meaningful implementation.
- Localised support networks: replacing national shared learning days with more localised county or regional support networks could potentially enhance scalability and manageability as the Pilot expands.

Finally, the Pilot aligns strongly with national goals for inclusive education, independent living and employment for students with disabilities. By bridging existing disconnects between schools and post-school settings and by contributing to the evidence base on effective transition planning, the Pilot has laid crucial groundwork. Its continued development and scaled implementation, guided by the lessons learnt from Phase 1, hold considerable promise for ensuring that all students with disabilities are equipped for meaningful and fulfilling post-school pathways.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Background to the Evaluation

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is an independent body created under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004. Its statutory remit includes conducting research to provide an evidence base to inform good practice and provide evidence-based policy advice.

In 2022, the Minister for Education and Minister of State for Special Education announced a new Transition Pilot programme (henceforth, the 'Pilot'). The Pilot was designed to help young people with disabilities to prepare for life after school. It was a direct response to Action 1.5 of the *Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) 2015–2024*, which called for a practical demonstration of how to improve access to post-school options for students with disabilities. The Pilot was funded by the Department of Education[1] and delivered by the NCSE in partnership with schools and other stakeholders.

Phase 1 of the Pilot ran from September 2023 to June 2024. It involved 20 schools in North Dublin and Galway and around 90 students. The schools were chosen to represent a diverse range of school types and student needs. Each school was allocated 12 extra teacher hours per week for the duration of the Pilot. This time was used to support identification of participating students, development of structured student profiles, transition planning and delivery of tailored transition activities (described below). The Pilot was organised centrally by a project coordinator. Partners like Business in the Community Ireland (BITCI), the Education and Training Board (ETB), the National Learning Network (NLN) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) offered guidance on potential pathways and work experience opportunities. The Pilot sought to empower students with disabilities to build essential skills for life after school and make informed choices about their futures. It also aimed to shape more effective transition practices by fostering better transition planning within schools, enhancing staff capacity and creating stronger links between education, health, social care and employers.

RSM Ireland Business Advisory Limited was appointed by the NCSE in July 2023 to independently evaluate the Pilot. This evaluation, conducted alongside delivery of the Pilot, focused on measuring its impact and informing national transition policy for students with disabilities. RSM and RSK agreed to transfer the RSM specialist Strategy, Economics and Policy Consulting team to RSK with effect from 31 October 2025. The new trading name for the team is Fortia Insight.

1 Now the Department of Education and Youth.

1.2 Transition Planning and Post-school Options: Context and Rationale

1.2.1 National landscape for post-school transitions

Educational provision for students with special educational needs (SEN) in Ireland ranges from additional support in mainstream schools to support in special schools. Most students attend mainstream schools, where they receive additional support as needed. Special classes in mainstream schools provide support for students with more complex needs within an inclusive mainstream environment. Special schools support students with the greatest level and/or complex needs in cases where a full-time mainstream placement is not in the student's best interest. Recent research by Indecon (2020) highlighted the role of guidance counsellors in supporting students' career choices, along with other teachers, work experience and family and friends. While this is a useful resource for students in mainstream schools, special schools do not typically have dedicated guidance counsellors. The Indecon review recommended enhanced access to career guidance supports and training for teachers in special schools

Students with disabilities in Ireland follow a wide range of post-school pathways. These are shaped by their needs and interests and the availability of local services. Such pathways include further education and training (for example, ETB courses, Post Leaving Certificates (PLCs) and the NLN programmes), higher education (often supported by the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme), employment, apprenticeships and adult day services. Good practice exists, such as the School Leavers' Ability Programme, which supports young people with disabilities in transitioning from school to adult life. The Reasonable Accommodations at Certificate Examinations (RACE) scheme also provides exam supports for students with SEN, but overall support remains uneven. Students with intellectual disabilities remain underrepresented in further and higher education, and families report confusion over entitlements and fear of financial loss when pursuing alternative post-school pathways (Connolly, 2023). For many students, particularly those attending special schools, day services are valued for their proximity, structure and perceived security (McCoy, Ye and Carroll, 2025). However, some students do not immediately access any provision after leaving school due to gaps in service availability, regional disparities or lack of clarity about entitlements and options.

Ireland's legislative and policy framework recognises the importance of early, person-centred planning to support post-school transition. The EPSEN Act (2004) requires that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) include transition goals. However, this aspect of the Act was never commenced. The Disability Act (2005), the National Disability Strategy and Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) all promote equal opportunities and access to resources, cross-sector collaboration and personal autonomy in transition processes. New Directions (HSE, 2012), a policy for adult day services, encourages transitions to be local, personalised and responsive to individual goals. In contrast to countries such as the United States (US) or the United Kingdom (UK) (see Section 2.4), there is no statutory requirement for schools to develop and monitor transition plans, and guidance for students with disabilities is uneven. The Indecon review of career guidance (2020) recommended establishing a support organisation, strengthening digital tools and prioritising learners most in need. However, the National Disability Authority (NDA) later noted that the review paid limited attention to learners with disabilities and called for strengths-based, person-centred guidance (Indecon, 2020; NDA, 2023b; 2023c).

Recent policy initiatives signal a renewed focus on transition planning. *The National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance 2024–2030* emphasises a unified guidance system and inclusive access and proposes that guidance be provided in special schools (Department of Education,[2] 2023). The draft Programme for Government 2025 commits to raising the employment rate for people with disabilities to the European Union (EU) average and developing a code of practice for employers (Government of Ireland, 2025). The book *Special Education in an Independent Ireland 1922–2022: Insights from a Journey through the Century* charts the evolution of special education over a century and highlights a shift from segregated provision towards inclusive practices and the recognition of students' rights (Ring *et al*., 2024). This historical perspective underlines the need to continue reforming transition supports so that students with disabilities can pursue their chosen paths.

1.2.2 Overview of the Pilot

The Pilot was officially announced by the Minister for Education and Minister of State for Special Education at the NCSE annual research conference on 10 November 2022. It was delivered by the NCSE in collaboration with schools and stakeholders including HSE and BITCI. Phase 1 began with planning and resource development in late 2022 and moved to school-based delivery from September 2023 to June 2024. Participating schools were chosen to represent a diverse range of school types and student needs. In total, 20 schools were selected in North Dublin and Galway. These included a mix of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and non-DEIS, rural and urban, Gaeltacht, mainstream and special schools. The Pilot targeted students aged 16 in special schools and fifth-year students in mainstream schools. However, participating staff in each school were given the freedom to choose participating students provided those students attended the school in the previous school year.[3] Approximately 90 students were selected to take part in the Pilot. These students were considered to have the greatest need for transition support.

Inputs

The Department of Education allocated funding for extra teacher hours and a project coordinator role. Evaluation and associated staffing costs were funded from the NCSE core budget. While each school was allocated 12 additional teaching hours per week, they did not draw down all this funding. This is because some schools struggled to recruit additional teachers and had to deliver the support within their existing staff.

2 Now the Department of Education and Youth.

3 It should be acknowledged that the absence of further selection criteria or guidance on which students might be most vulnerable at times of transition may have introduced some limitations. For example, staff may have failed to select students perceived as more difficult to engage or more challenging in terms of finding suitable post-school options.

A post-primary teacher was seconded to NCSE as project coordinator, who organised training for participating school staff, curated resources via a Padlet platform and facilitated shared learning days. BITCI and other partners provided employer engagement and up-to-date information (for example, ETBs, adult day services, higher education providers, HSE and local employers).

Activities

Transition activities varied across schools according to the needs of participating students. The main categories of support delivered were:

- Student and family engagement, whereby schools consulted participating students and families about their aspirations and needs. Student voice informed individual transition plans as well as the design of units of learning (see below). Schools hosted information sessions for parents and encouraged visits to post-school providers.
- Life skills development, such as personal care, travel training, money management and communication. Students progressed from basic tasks (for example, using buses, shopping) to more complex independent activities and community participation.
- Work-related learning, including work experience placements organised by schools and BITCI, employer visits, career fairs, skills workshops, guest speakers and 'Try a Trade' days exposed students to different occupations.
- Career guidance and planning, whereby teachers helped students to explore options, prepare curriculum vitae (CVs) and practice interviews. Visits to further education providers and adult day services broadened students' knowledge of available pathways.

The Pilot was coordinated centrally by the project coordinator, who held fortnightly check-ins with participating school staff and organised shared learning and professional development. They also curated an online resource platform (Padlet), that provided consistent and quality-assured resources and information for school staff. Regional clusters and shared-learning days allowed staff to discuss resources and strategies, as well as facilitating the exchange of knowledge and ideas.

The Pilot facilitated the development of Units of Learning. These were an innovation within the Pilot. Developed collaboratively by teachers and the project coordinator, each Unit consisted of a series of lessons focused on a particular theme (for example, travel training, money management, social communication, personal safety, work experience preparation or self-advocacy). The Units mapped learning outcomes to activities and assessment tasks. They provided conversation-starter questions to help staff elicit student aspirations and strengths. Teachers used them flexibly: some delivered short modules over six to eight weeks, while others integrated activities into existing curricula. The Units drew on guidance from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and were designed to be adapted for different school types. Through creating a shared vocabulary and structure, they helped schools articulate what transition skills look like in practice and supported consistency across the Pilot.

Outputs and intended outcomes

The Pilot produced several outputs: co-developed Units of Learning and transition-planning templates; the formation of a community of practice; professional development for participating staff; enhanced student engagement in life skills and work-related activities; and strengthened partnerships between schools and external agencies (for example, BITCI, HSE, training providers and local employers). These outputs created a body of evidence that can be used to inform any future guidance and transition initiatives.

The intended outcomes of the Pilot were that:

- students would make informed choices and develop practical skills for a successful transition.
- schools would embed transition planning into their culture.
- collaboration across sectors would improve.

1.2.3 Policy alignment and rationale for the Pilot

The Pilot was aligned to national commitments to support young people with disabilities. It responded to the ambitions of the CES (Government of Ireland, 2015), EPSEN Act 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004), New Directions (HSE, 2012), the National Access Plan (Higher Education Authority, 2022), the Indecon review (2020) and subsequent NDA advice (2023b and 2023c). It was also aligned with examples of good practice (see Chapter 2 for details). It sought to address recognised gaps in transition planning by:

- Providing tailored support. By allocating 12 additional teacher hours per week, the Pilot enabled schools to deliver person centred interventions and involve families, directly addressing gaps identified in the Indecon review (2020).
- Building capacity and resources. Teachers accessed training and shared learning events; they co-developed Units of Learning and planning templates that mapped skills to outcomes and could be adapted to different contexts.
- Strengthening collaboration. BITCI and other partners (ETBs, HSE, higher education providers) supported work experience placements and provided up-to-date information on further and higher education, thereby aligning with CES priorities.
- Informing policy. This evaluation sought to capture evidence of what works for guiding implementation of the lifelong guidance strategy and wider reforms.

1.3 Evaluation Objectives and Questions

The evaluation addressed the following objectives (detailed in full in Appendix A) to:

- Review national and international evidence on transition practices for young people with disabilities (Chapter 2).
- Map the current landscape of transition pathways (Chapter 1 and Chapter 2).
- Understand the impact and perceived impact of the Pilot on participating schools and staff (Chapter 5).
- Identify the impact of the Pilot on the transition experiences and outcomes of participating students (Chapter 5).
- Report any perceived impact noted by post-school settings (Chapter 5).
- Explore what worked, for whom, and how, to inform future scaling (Chapter 4 and Chapter 6).

The evaluation aimed to assess the effectiveness, impact and scalability of the Pilot. It did so by considering the experiences and outcomes of students, the role of schools and stakeholders in supporting transitions and the potential for wider implementation. The research questions set out below in Table 2 were inferred from the Evaluation Requirements.[4] They were structured around three key areas of interest: (1) implementation and embeddedness; (2) impact; and (3) scalability.

Table 2 – Research Questions

Area	Main Research Question (RQ)
Implementation and Embeddedness	RQ1. 'How was the Pilot implemented across the 20 participating schools?'
Impact	RQ2. 'What impact has the Pilot had on students with disabilities and their post-school pathways?'
	RQ3. 'What impact has the Pilot had on schools, and is there any perceived impact on post-school settings?'
Scalability	RQ4. 'What lessons can be drawn from the Pilot to inform future provision and scale-up?'

4 See Appendix A for the full Evaluation Requirements.

1.4 Report Structure

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2: Literature review
- Chapter 3: Methodology
- Chapter 4: Implementation and Embeddedness of Transition Support
- Chapter 5: Impacts from the Pilot
- Chapter 6: Scalability of the Pilot
- Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews national and international evidence on transitions for students with SEN and/or disabilities. It addresses Evaluation Requirement 3 by examining the policies, programmes and factors that support or hinder effective post-school transitions. It also supports Evaluation Requirement 6 by contextualising the outcomes that the CES Transition Pilot seeks to influence.

The literature review was conducted through a search of electronic databases and web searches to locate peer-reviewed studies and identify relevant policies, guidelines and standards. Peer-reviewed publications, published in English, were identified through electronic databases: Science Direct, Scopus and ProQuest. Web searches were also undertaken using Google Scholar. The approach to identifying evidence involved a purposive approach to searching key terms[5] in journals and across research papers, as well as previous reports from the NCSE. The evaluation team reviewed literature covering the last 25 years. Duplicate records were then removed and studies prioritised for relevance and robustness. The literature reviewed explores 'what works' in helping students with disabilities move into further education, training, employment and community participation. It draws both on academic and grey literature, covering transition planning, policy developments, student and family experiences, programme models and systemic enablers and barriers. Particular attention was given to evidence from Ireland, with reference to comparative systems in the UK and beyond.

Findings are structured thematically to reflect major influences on transition outcomes. These include:

- Importance of early, person-centred and collaborative transition planning.
- National policy developments and gaps in the Irish context.
- Outcome inequalities and transition challenges experienced by students with disabilities.
- International examples of good practice in transition programmes.
- Key factors that shape successful transitions, including student involvement, family engagement and school-led planning.

5 Key terms included: 'transition', 'planning' and 'post-school' with terms such as 'special needs' and 'additional needs'.

2.2 Overview of the Irish Education System

Ireland's education system is structured into several key phases, starting with early childhood education and continuing through to post-primary schooling. Many children attend the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme (Department of Education and Youth, 2025). ECCE provides up to two years of free early learning care for children in an early-years setting[6] before they start primary school (Citizens Information, 2022). Children usually start their formal education in primary school at the age of five, although education is only compulsory from six (Department of Education and Youth, 2025). Primary education is an eight-year cycle, starting with Junior Infants and Senior Infants, followed by First Class through to Sixth Class. Primary schools may be denominational, multi-denominational, Irish-medium (Gaelscoileanna), special schools or private institutions.

At around age 12, students transition to post-primary education, which includes the Junior Cycle (three years) and the Senior Cycle (two or three years).[7] The Junior Cycle concludes with the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA). The Senior Cycle may begin with an optional Transition Year, focusing on personal development and work experience, followed by two years leading to one of three Leaving Certificate programmes (Department of Education and Youth, 2025):

1. Leaving Certificate Established: a two-year programme that aims to provide a broad, balanced education while also offering the chance to specialise towards higher education and career options.
2. Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP): students take six or seven Leaving Certificate subjects and two additional Link Modules: Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education.
3. Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA): a pre-vocational programme made up of a range of courses structured around three elements: Vocational Preparation, Vocational Education and General Education.

Post-primary schools can be voluntary secondary schools, community schools, community colleges, comprehensive schools and private secondary schools.

Special education is integrated throughout the system, with support provided in mainstream classes, special classes or dedicated special schools (see Section 1.2.1). It is coordinated by the NCSE, and the curriculum is child centred across all phases.

6 Generally, private, community and voluntary organisations such as crèches, nurseries, playgroups or naíonraí (Irish-language pre-schools).

7 Depending on whether the optional transition year is taken between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle.

2.3 Importance of Transition Planning

Transitioning from school to post-school life is a major milestone. For students with disabilities, this process can be particularly complex and requires careful planning (Daly and Cahill, 2018; Newman, Madaus and Javitz, 2016; Newman *et al*., 2011; Baer *et al*., 2011). The research summarised in this chapter consistently shows that early, person-centred and collaborative transition planning can lead to better outcomes for all students in education, employment and independent living.

In many countries, the completion of schooling marks an important transition with a clear step from childhood into adulthood. It is accompanied by expectations that students become more independent, self-directed and responsible for their future, regardless of which pathway they choose (Billett and Johnson, 2012).

Schlossberg's transition theory (1984) defines a transition as any event or non-event that leads to a change in an individual's circumstances and that requires adaptation. Transitions can be both internal and external, varying in intensity, duration and impact. Furthermore, they require individuals to reassess their roles, expectations and behaviours as they adjust to new situations. Schlossberg stresses that various factors influence transitions, including the individual's perception of the event, their support systems and their coping mechanisms. While transitions may range from momentous life events to more routine occurrences, the perception of what constitutes a momentous event is ultimately subjective (Schlossberg, 1984). Educational transitions typically occur in three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out. The way an individual navigates these phases is influenced by their available resources, resilience and coping strategies, with effective preparation serving as a crucial support during this process (Daly and Cahill, 2018; Dubois, Guay and St-Pierre, 2023; Billett and Johnson, 2012).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1992) suggests that an individual's development is shaped by multiple levels of influence, from the immediate microsystem to broader societal structures and macrosystems. Bronfenbrenner (1992) says that educational transitions are complicated and affected by many things, including the person's microsystem, which embraces their family, friends and teachers; exosystemic factors, such as school policies, practices and curriculum; and the person's mesosystem, which involves their relationship with their home and school. All these things can help or hinder positive transitions (Long, Zucca and Sweeting, 2021; Perron, 2017). Similarly, Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe's Life Course Theory (2003) and Lent, Brown and Hackett's Social Cognitive Career Theory (1994) equally affirm that transitions from school to post-school settings are pivotal in a student's life and influenced by a myriad of varying factors around them (for example, their relationships, background and learning experiences).

The transition from post-primary school to post-school pathways can be a challenging and overwhelming experience for any student. For students with disabilities, such a transition can bring additional challenges and uncertainty as they progress into adulthood (Daly and Cahill, 2018). Students with disabilities typically experience a lower rate or quality of post-school outcomes than students without a disability. Research shows clear gaps in employment, post-school education and independent living (Newman, Madaus and Javitz, 2016; Newman *et al*., 2011; Baer *et al*., 2011).

Systematic reviews suggest that identifying in-school predictors of post-school success, such as transition support could reduce this inequality (Mazzotti *et al*., 2021). Test *et al*. (2009) found that students who engage in transition programmes experience greater access to post-school opportunities. Similarly, Carter, Austin and Trainor (2014) found that students who received transition support had higher enrolment rates in post-school settings than those who did not receive support. Moreover, studies by Benz, Lindstrom and Yovanoff (2000) and Repetto *et al*. (2002) highlighted a strong correlation between participation in transition programmes and improved educational and post-school outcomes.

Census 2022 recorded over 1.1 million people (22% of Ireland's population) as experiencing at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2023). According to the CSO (2024), people with a disability are more likely to experience poverty and/or depend on social welfare. Because students with disabilities face extra barriers to getting and keeping jobs, policymakers must learn what helps them to find work. Academic research has highlighted the challenges faced by students with SEN (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). This includes insufficient resources and specialised support and poorer transition outcomes from school to post-school settings (Husni and Min, 2024). Effective post-school transitions are an important milestone in that journey (Mihut, McCoy and Maître, 2022).

2.4 National Evidence: Ireland

2.4.1 Policy and practice

The development and delivery of special education in Ireland is underpinned and influenced by trends of Western countries (O'Brien *et al*., 2009). It follows the rights-based principles inherent in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED) reports, treaties and declarations. These developments, which have been conceptualised in legalisation such as the EPSEN Act 2004, fundamentally promote the rights of people with special education needs in the educational setting.

The Education Act (1998) stipulates that schools are obliged to make sure that 'students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choice'. In doing so, the policy framework for post-primary schools is based on a whole-school approach. The Department indicates that a 'whole-school approach' should outline the school's 'approach to guidance generally and how students can be supported and assisted in making choices and successful transitions in the personal and social, education and career areas' (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). The *Whole School Guidance Framework* (2017) adopts a continuum of support model, already being employed in schools to support students' learning and development (National Centre for Guidance in Education, 2017). It has a similar philosophy to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model that is being rolled out across further and higher education in the Republic of Ireland (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), 2017; Quirke and McCarthy, 2020).

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) of the Department of Education and Youth provides detailed guidelines for establishing student support teams that are intended to encompass a range of supports catering for the learning, social, emotional and behavioural needs of students (Department of Education and NEPS, 2021). This emphasises an equity-focused approach to student supports and includes a multidisciplinary team, comprising a SEN coordinator, a guidance counsellor and a year-head and/or a principal/deputy. The 2020 Indecon review of career guidance also argued that technology-enabled guidance services should be improved by strengthening digital tools, creating a support organisation to coordinate them and developing specific modules for teachers in special schools. It also recommended prioritising resources for learners with the greatest needs (Indecon, 2020).

Such developments and evolving landscapes are not stagnant. Policies and legalisation have, and continue to be, shaped by a move towards a rights-based approach to education and employment for people with disabilities. A key turning point was the ratification of UNCRPD (2006), in Ireland in 2018. With this pivotal move, Ireland's policies began to be re-envisioned. International commitments spurred action plans aimed at promoting the rights of individuals with disabilities, especially concerning transitions to higher education and employment (Banks, Aston and Shevlin, 2022). This is an important step towards ensuring equal access to inclusive, quality education. However, Connolly (2023) argues that the full implementation of the EPSEN Act has been slow, with key provisions such as the legal requirement for IEPs still not fully enacted.

Building on these commitments, the *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance 2024–2030* (Department of Education, 2023) proposes that guidance across all 130 special schools should:

- Be delivered by appropriately trained professionals.
- Introduce short courses for Transition Year students.
- Expand workshadowing and work experience placements for people with disabilities.
- Articulate four pillars, (1) visibility and awareness; (2) standards and quality; (3) access and inclusion; (4) and career management skills, to build a unified guidance system.

Similarly, a literature review by the NDA found that effective career guidance must adopt person-centred, strengths-based approaches and ensure that all students with disabilities are aware of post-school pathways (NDA, 2023c). NDA's independent advice highlights the need for coordination between education, health and employment services and stresses that guidance must be person centred and strengths based to overcome structural barriers (NDA, 2023b). In higher education, the transition for students with disabilities has also seen gradual improvements since the 1990s, with reports such as *Charting Our Education Future* (1995) advocating for support measures. The establishment of the Fund for Students with Disabilities in 1994 provided substantial assistance (Higher Education Authority, 2017). However, the Fund remains inaccessible to students with intellectual disabilities due to restrictive eligibility criteria, limited inclusive programme availability, financial and bureaucratic barriers and a lack of pedagogical and institutional support tailored to their needs (Daly and Cahill, 2018). Guidelines released by the Department in 2017 on the organisation and deployment of special education teachers highlighted the importance of transition planning to support students with

SEN entering higher education (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). More recently, the PATH 4 funding initiative has begun to address these gaps by supporting the development of inclusive programmes, promoting UDL through staff training and curriculum reform, improving campus accessibility and reducing financial and structural barriers through targeted investment (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2023). This included the Inclusive Environment Fund, a €2.8 million investment aimed at fostering inclusive learning environments and a sense of belonging for underrepresented groups, particularly students with disabilities and ethnic minorities. The Fund supported the adoption of the ALTITUDE Charter, a national framework for embedding inclusive practices and Universal Design principles across teaching, assessment and campus culture in higher education. It also funded sensory mapping for autistic learners and anti-racism initiatives, aligning with the goals of the National Access Plan to enhance equity and participation across higher education institutions (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2025).

While Ireland has progressed in the implementation of inclusive education legislation and policy, gaps remain in the execution of a fully inclusive education system, particularly for those with SEN. Despite Ireland's international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and the UNCRPD, the country's education system remains largely segregated, characterised by lack of appropriate guidance in special schools and role ambiguity. Furthermore, research has suggested that once students are placed in a special setting, their placements are rarely reviewed and post-school outcomes are not tracked (Connolly, 2023). The review of the EPSEN Act is expected to align Irish law more closely with international commitments, particularly the UNCRPD, to address these gaps (Connolly, 2023).

A shortage of spaces in special settings has led to long waiting lists and an oversubscription in special schools (Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2022). The Department of Education has responded to this increased demand by creating special education centres as a temporary measure. In 2022, further legislative changes were introduced to expedite the opening of special classes in mainstream schools. The Ombudsman for Children also recommended the removal of clauses that allow for exceptions to inclusive education, urging the revision of existing legislation to ensure that it is rights based and inclusive (Connolly, 2023). Ultimately, while a recognition exists for inclusive education, policies have not been fully implemented and inadequate planning has resulted in the educational system remaining fragmented with insufficient resources and systems for those with SEN.

The book on special education in Ireland by Ring *et al*. (2024) traces the journey from segregated provision to inclusive practices. It underscores the importance of continuing to develop rights-based reforms.

Policy commitments, such as the draft Programme for Government 2025, aim to narrow the gap by raising employment rates for people with disabilities towards the EU average and introducing a code of practice on inclusive hiring. In so doing, they point to a whole-of-government approach to implementing the UNCRPD (Government of Ireland, 2025).

2.4.2 Outcomes and challenges

In the Irish context, research has pointed to the challenges faced by students with disabilities as early as primary school. Cosgrove *et al*. (2014) found that students with disabilities experienced lower educational outcomes, including engagement and academic performance. This was based on data on over 8,500 nine-year-old children and their families from The Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study. Key recommendations from this study included offering transition support for students with disabilities moving from primary to post-primary education, as well as implementing more personalised and detailed IEPs (Cosgrove *et al*., 2014).

However, there are some limitations in the way that GUI measures disability. Definitions and classifications of disability have varied across different waves and cohorts of the study, making it difficult to compare trends over time (ESRI, 2024). Much of the data relies on parental reporting, which can be influenced by awareness, stigma or access to diagnosis. GUI data also does not include direct clinical assessments, which may result in under- or over-reporting of certain conditions, especially behavioural or emotional difficulties (Whelan *et al*., 2021). Furthermore, GUI reports a higher prevalence of disability compared to national sources like the Census, probably due to broader definitions and survey methods (ESRI, 2024).

Using longitudinal data on more than 7,000 young people from GUI, McCoy, Shevlin and Rose (2020), found that students with disabilities were three times more likely to have a negative transition from primary to post-primary education than students with no disability. This shows the need for better transition supports, especially before the transition. Mihut, McCoy and Maître's (2022) study using GUI data determined that students with disabilities achieved lower academic scores and made less academic progress from as early as nine years old. In second-level education, students with disabilities achieved lower Junior Certificate average scores than students without disabilities, except for students with physical impairments. Interestingly throughout their education, students with disabilities were found to be less likely to seek support in the educational context than students with no disability (Mihut, McCoy and Maître, 2022).

Kelly and Maître (2021) examined differences in post-primary outcomes for students with disabilities when compared to the general population. They used data from the *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (SILC), the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the Census of Population and the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). Where the data permitted, disability was measured by type, severity level and everyday functional difficulties (for example, difficulty in dressing). The findings showed that students with disabilities had lower levels of educational attainment compared to the general population. They also encountered barriers to access vocational training and further education and experienced much lower employment and income rates. This research revealed that students with disabilities generally pursue different post-school pathways from those with no disability. Students with disabilities were less likely to pursue higher education, instead attending services specifically designed for disabled people. Those who entered the workforce were generally employed in lower-paid and less-secure jobs (Kelly and Maître, 2021).

These findings are supported by the quantitative longitudinal study of McConkey *et al*. (2017), which tracked 126 students with intellectual disabilities over a ten-year period from 2004 to 2014. Using structured data collection methods, the study examined participants' post-school trajectories, including their engagement with services, training, care centres and employment. It found that five years after leaving school, most young adults were either in training or care centres. After ten years, most were placed in care centres. Nearly half of the young adults were no longer known to the services after ten years and few were in paid work or working towards it.

The evidence presented above shows that students with disabilities experienced more challenging school transitions compared to students without disabilities. They often experienced heightened stress and anxiety with difficulty in social integration and adjusting to new social dynamics. Furthermore, Doyle (2016, cited in Daly and Cahill, 2018) acknowledged that students with disabilities often had trouble with self-advocacy or feared that disclosing their disability might have negative consequences, confirming that this added to feelings of stress and anxiety during a transition period (Doyle, 2016, cited in Daly and Cahill, 2018).

Research commissioned by the NCSE (McCoy, Ye and Carroll, 2025) tracked the experiences of students with SEN or disabilities from second-level education through the transition into subsequent pathways. The key findings were as follows:

- Students with disabilities reported a high level of positive engagement and reflections on school experiences, although students with multiple conditions fared less well. Students reported liking the social aspects of school, the feeling of belonging to a community and enjoyment of specific subjects.
- Transition preparation at school was generally perceived positively, especially among students who attended special schools and their parents. However, the results suggested that schools were doing less well in preparing students for adult life, independent living and career decisions.
- Most students surveyed either planned to continue their education or progress to work after leaving school. Family background played a role in the likelihood of applying for post-school courses, with students from more highly educated families most likely to apply.
- Across special schools, a collaborative approach to transition preparation was evident, with active parental engagement. Students and parents generally appreciated the HSE system for assessing the needs and interests of school leavers. However, concerns were raised about access, site visits and comprehensive support. There was also a desire for increased work placement opportunities, but schools reported growing barriers to organising and supporting student work experience and placements.
- While many special school leavers successfully progressed to education and training programmes or services, others experienced delayed or disrupted transitions.

2.5 International Evidence

In many parts of the world, inclusive rights for people with disabilities can be traced back to the 1970s. The international publication of the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975) by the United Nations encouraged its Member States to follow a rights-based approach to inclusive education. This was further enshrined in country-level legislation, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1975) in the US and the Education Act 1981 in the UK. Building on the above, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) stipulated that schools must accommodate all children regardless of the presence or type of Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and that a move towards inclusive schools was required. It specifically stated that the allocation of a placement for a child on a permanent basis to a special class or special school would be an exception rather than the norm and only where a mainstream placement had been unsuccessful.

2.5.1 Outcomes and challenges

The disparity in outcomes and the challenges noted above are not unique to the Irish context. International research has shown that academic challenges are prevalent among students with disabilities when progressing to post-school settings. Hornby (2014) noted a gap between the academic performance of students with disabilities in school and the expectations in post-school settings, highlighting how both teacher and parental expectations can influence preparedness and outcomes. This finding was mirrored by Cortiella and Horowitz (2014) and Li *et al*. (2024), who reported that students with disabilities were often less prepared for the rigour of post-school settings. They identified challenges in time management, comprehension and exam performance (Cortiella and Horowitz, 2014, and Li *et al*., 2024). There is also evidence that the social and emotional adjustments required for transition can present considerable obstacles for students with disabilities. Lipka *et al*. (2020) found that many students with disabilities reported feeling isolated, lacking the social skills to form relationships in their new environments. These studies, and more, concluded that students with disabilities were often less prepared for post-school settings. They argued for appropriate early transition planning to meet the needs of the student's preferred destination (Test *et al*., 2009; Test, Fowler and Wood, 2011).

Halpern (1992, p.203), as cited in Test *et al*. (2009), noted that the transition from school to post-school settings for any student could be defined as 'a period of floundering that occurs for at least the first several years after leaving school as adolescents attempt to assume a variety of adult roles in their communities'. However, Test *et al*. (2009) pointed out that the period of 'floundering' can be years for students with disabilities, therefore the impact of effective transition programmes for this cohort should not be underestimated.

Recent research continues to support Halpern's (1994) observation that the transition from school to adulthood can be marked by a prolonged period of uncertainty and adjustment, particularly for students with disabilities. A systematic review by Mazzotti *et al*. (2021) indicated that many young people with disabilities experienced extended challenges in securing employment, accessing further education and achieving independent living. The review suggested that targeted transition programmes, especially those incorporating career awareness, self-determination and interagency collaboration, could substantially improve post-school outcomes (Mazzotti *et al*., 2021).

2.6 Factors Influencing Successful Transitions

Research by Test *et al*. (2009) identified 16 predictors of successful transitions, including student support, career awareness, social skills and transition programmes. Building on this work, Harber *et al*. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis to assess the relative strength of these predictors. They found that predictors relating to social inclusion, work experience and inclusion were particularly important. Similarly, the systematic review conducted by Mazzotti *et al*. (2021) identified 17 predictors of how school experiences affect life outcomes for young people with disabilities. These were classified as evidence-based, research-based or promising, depending on the quality, consistency and quantity of supporting research.

Overall, this body of research provides strong evidence that participation in transition programmes predicts post-school education and employment. Additional themes that emerge from this body of research as contributing to positive transition outcomes are (Test *et al*., 2009, Harber *et al*., 2016 and Mazzotti *et al*., 2021):

- Student involvement in setting goals and making decisions.
- Parental engagement in planning and advocacy.
- Structured programmes that include work placements and life skills training.

2.6.1 Student involvement

Daly and Cahill (2018) acknowledged that transition planning should be early and person-centred. Many studies recommend a person-centred approach that is individualised and specific to each student. This is based on findings whereby students who are involved in setting their goals and making decisions about their future are more likely to achieve positive outcomes (Baer *et al*., 2011; Carter, Austin and Trainor, 2014; Banks, Aston and Shevlin, 2022). The involvement of students in their transition plans helps them to develop self-determination and self-advocacy skills, further yielding successful post-school outcomes (Carter, Austin and Trainor, 2012; Daly and Cahill, 2018). Dubois, Guay and St-Pierre (2023) specifically looked at the role of motivation and autonomy support, which suggested that students with disabilities had improved transition outcomes when provided with autonomy in their decision-making.

2.6.2 Parental engagement

In addition to individual student and school variables, the role of parents, care givers and the collective family cannot be dismissed. Mazzotti *et al*. (2021) highlighted parental involvement as an important aspect of transitioning planning. This was supported by the longitudinal study of McConkey *et al*. (2017), which demonstrated that families played a key role in students' decisions about post-school options. Test *et al*. (2009) further acknowledged the importance of family involvement in advocating for students with disabilities, supporting students and helping them to make choices that aligned with their interests and needs. In the Irish context, McCoy, Shevlin and Rose (2020) noted that families may not always feel equipped to navigate the transition process due to lack of knowledge and resources, a sentiment also mirrored by McConkey *et al*. (2017). Families that are unfamiliar with the process may struggle in

instances where information is not easily accessible or where services are fragmented, leading to suboptimal post-school outcomes (Test *et al*., 2009; Newman, Madaus and Javitz, 2016). Although research findings vary on how family involvement is addressed, there is consistent recognition of the importance of parents and care-givers, as well as the wider family in supporting students with disabilities during their transition process.

2.6.3 Structured programmes

The OCED (2011) noted the critical role of post-primary schools in preparing students with disabilities for progressing into adulthood. More specifically, Daly and Cahill (2018) recommended evidence-based transition programmes for post-primary students. These should ensure that students are explicitly aware of existing programmes, subjects and project work that may support their preparation for post-school settings .However, the study also emphasised that lack of preparation and inadequate support systems in many schools can create a barrier to successful transition. Gillan and Coughlan (2010) mirror this sentiment, highlighting that early intervention planning by teachers and expert school professionals is a major determining factor in student success, particularly in areas such as vocational training and life skills. While highlighting the benefits of school support in transition planning, many studies have noted that the lack of school-wide support and coordinated efforts can be barriers to post-school transitions for students with disabilities (Benz, Lindstrom and Yovanoff, 2000; Carter, Austin and Trainor, 2014; Banks, Aston and Shevlin, 2022).

2.7 Summary

The evidence shows that transition support is essential for students with disabilities. When done well, it leads to better educational, employment and social outcomes (for example, Test *et al*., 2009; Carter, Austin and Trainor, 2014). Transition programmes that begin early, are person centred and involve students in planning are strongly associated with better post-school outcomes. Students engaged in structured transition planning are not only more likely to progress into further education, training or supported employment, but they do so with greater confidence and clarity (Daly and Cahill, 2018).

Research also shows that without these supports, students with disabilities often face delayed or disrupted transitions, lower educational attainment, reduced employment prospects and increased social isolation (McCoy, Ye and Carroll, 2025). Emotional well-being and self-determination are often negatively affected when students are not adequately supported through this period of change. In contrast, students report more positive post-school experiences when involved in programmes that focus on self-advocacy, decision-making and building practical life skills (Carter, Austin and Trainor, 2012; Daly and Cahill, 2018).

Parental involvement and whole-school approaches further enhance the impact of transition support. Families play a key role in shaping students' expectations and decisions, while school-led, collaborative planning increases the likelihood of a smoother, more successful transition. Longitudinal studies (such as McConkey *et al*., 2017) also show that the presence or absence of transition supports can influence student outcomes, and this influence lasts five to ten years after leaving school (McConkey *et al*., 2017).

In summary, the literature affirms the need for, and benefits of, transition support. It is a key factor in determining whether students with disabilities leave school equipped to engage in meaningful and fulfilling post-school pathways. These findings directly reinforce the importance of the Pilot and its potential to close gaps in outcomes for students with disabilities.

Achieving a successful transition requires a holistic,[8] collaborative approach to planning and profiling, comprehensive career guidance and a focus on person-centred strategies. Students should be empowered to self-advocate, make decisions and socially interact to prepare them for life in a post-school setting. Addressing these factors effectively will enhance the post-school experiences of students with disabilities.

8 A holistic approach emphasises the interconnectedness of various aspects of the student's development, including physical, emotional and social well-being.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

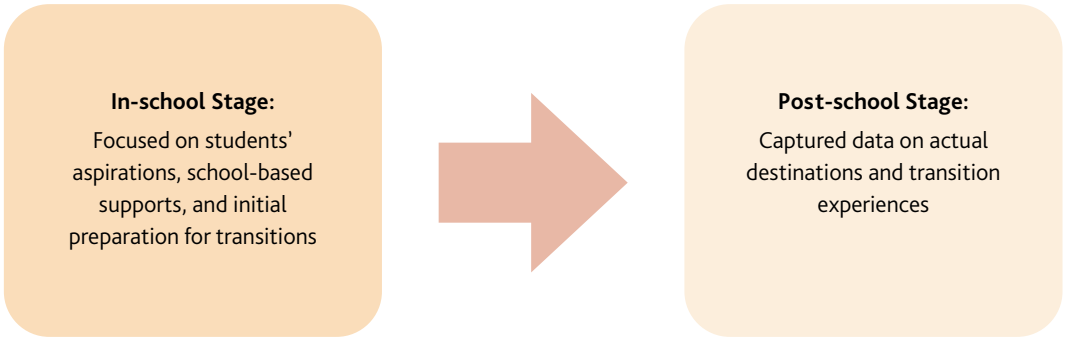
This chapter presents an overview of the study design for the evaluation. It employed a mixed-methods approach using both primary and secondary data sources and followed a realist evaluation approach (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Realist evaluation explores how, why and for whom an intervention works, acknowledging that outcomes are shaped by individual contexts and the mechanisms triggered within them. This approach was considered particularly appropriate given the diversity of student needs,[9] school contexts and transition pathways represented in the CES Transition Pilot. It also allowed for flexible adaptation to any challenges encountered during fieldwork.

The mixed-methods approach used surveys, interviews, focus groups, workshops and document review. This enabled triangulation of different perspectives and tracking student journeys over time.

An initial project inception meeting was held between RSM and the NCSE in August 2023 to agree the final methodology, evaluation questions and data collection strategy. This was followed by two in-person workshops with participating schools (Galway Education Centre, 12 September 2023; Drumcondra Education Centre, 14 September 2023). These events formally introduced RSM as the evaluation partner. They were also used to gather feedback from school staff about how best to collect data from the students and parents in their schools. This feedback was used to make sure that the data collection would better meet the needs of individual students. The evaluation team also received training on the Padlet tool used for internal project coordination.

The evaluation was conducted in two stages, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Evaluation Stages

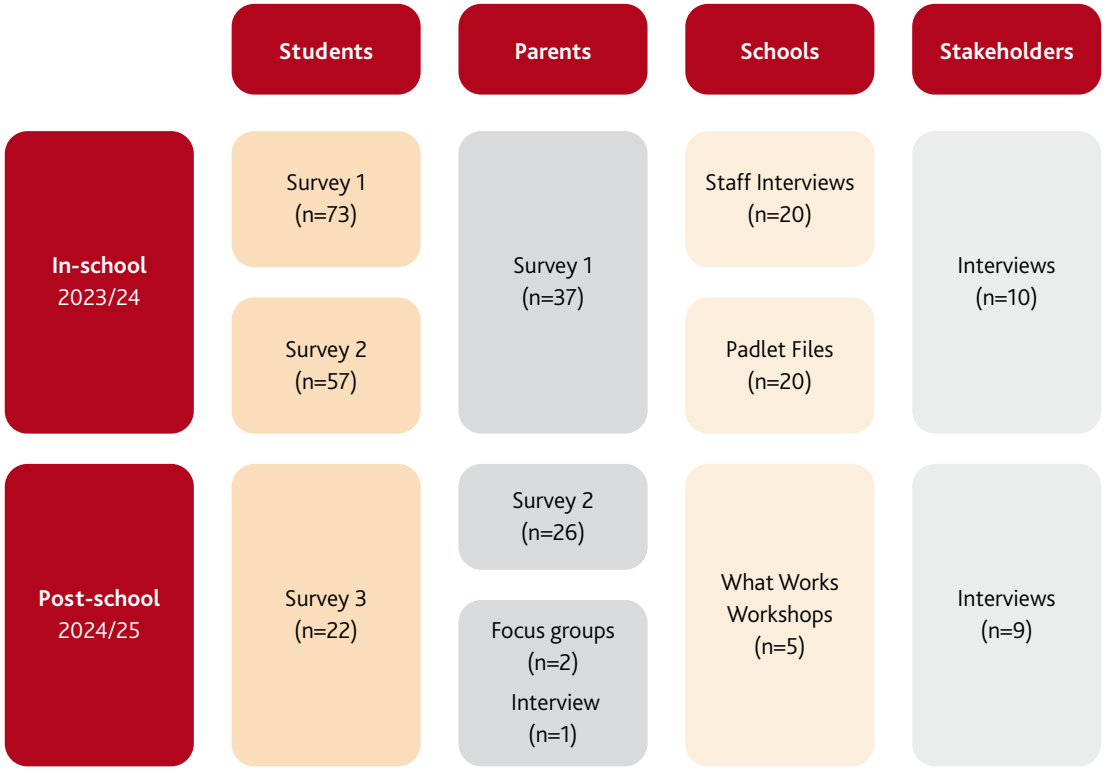


9 Participating students had a diverse range of needs including intellectual, physical, social and emotional needs. These are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Figure 2 provides an overview of the data collection methods used in the evaluation.

Figure 2 – Overview of Data Collection in Both In-school and Post-school Stages



3.2.1 Student surveys

Three student surveys were conducted at different time points. The target population for each survey was all students who participated in the Pilot. The surveys were hosted on the SenseMaker platform. A paper version was also made available to ensure accessibility. The questionnaires were developed to address the evaluation aims and refined with the input of experts from the NCSE on specific subjects. Further input on the use of plain language was sought from the HSE. Survey questions were tested for readability with a young person with additional needs who had just left school. They were also reviewed by a SNA working in a special school that was not part of the Pilot. The first draft of the survey was then piloted with three participating schools to ensure accessibility and understanding. Adjustments were made at each stage of the testing process. The final survey questionnaires can be found from Appendix F to Appendix H.

During the inception stage, it was anticipated that 100 students would participate in the Pilot from September 2023 to June 2024. However, some students dropped out and others were added at various points. This meant that there were between 86 and 89 active participants when each of the surveys was live. Appendix D describes the profile of survey respondents.

Survey 1 (December 2023 – February 2024)

The first student survey was administered pre-transition. It was open in December 2023 of their final year of school. The survey explored students' preparedness for leaving school, their awareness of available options and their perceptions of support received through the Pilot. The Pilot's activities for students were already underway at this time point for 19 of the 20 Pilot schools (see Appendix D). This means that Survey 1 captured the experiences of students pre-transition but post-initiation of the Pilot.

The survey was administered in-person through school visits. All schools were contacted in advance by telephone and email to arrange a date. Teachers received an overview of the evaluation and the survey questions to familiarise themselves and assist students as needed. Each visit was conducted by two members of the evaluation team, typically lasting one to two hours. During the visit, the team introduced the evaluation, engaged with staff and supported students in completing the survey.

There were 73 student responses to the first student survey from 19 schools. This is equivalent to 82% of the 89 students who were participating at the time. These students had a range of needs.[10] Eighty-four per cent attended mainstream schools, with the remaining 16% attending special schools. Most students were 17-18 years old (83%). A minority were 19 years old (11%) or 16 years old (7%). About six in ten (57%) students surveyed were boys, 39% were girls and 4% identified themselves as non-binary or other. This is in line with national and international research (Van der Veen, Smeets and Derriks, 2010; McCoy Banks and Shevlin, 2016; McCoy, Ye and Carroll, 2025), which finds a higher prevalence of SEN among boys. A slightly higher proportion of student responses was received from schools in Galway (58%) compared to students from schools in Dublin (42%).

Survey 2 (March – May 2024)

The second student survey was administered in the spring of the students' final year of school. It captured their post-school plans, emotional readiness and reflections on the Pilot. To reduce disruption during exam season and minimise absenteeism, schools were given the option to administer the survey independently and in advance.

In mainstream schools, links were sent to staff to facilitate completion during a convenient class time. In special schools, the evaluation team supported survey completion directly during scheduled site visits. Visits were conducted by two-person teams, with 18 of the 20 schools visited. Where visits were not possible, follow-up support was provided remotely. During visits, the team also met with students to explain next steps and collect contact details for the post-school research activities.

10 While the survey did not capture data on student need, the profile of participating students is covered in Chapter 4: Implementation and Embeddedness of Transition Support.

Survey 2 received 57 student responses from 18 schools (66% of the 86 participating students at that time). This was a lower percentage than the first survey indicating some degree of survey fatigue. The students who responded were more evenly split between Galway (53%) and Dublin (47%) schools. As with the first survey, 82% of responses were from students from mainstream schools (see Appendix D).

Survey 3 (January – March 2025)

The third survey occurred after students had transitioned out of school. It focused on post-school destinations, the levels of support received and satisfaction with their transition from school. Students were grouped based on the type of contact information available.

- Group 1 – Students for whom there were no direct contact details and who had received the survey link independently.
- Group 2 – Students who required support to complete the survey were contacted via their parents, where they had consented to be contacted. They were offered the option of online, paper-based or assisted survey completion.
- Group 3 – Students for whom there were no contact details were approached through their former school.

Responses were received from 22 students (25% of the 89 participating students, see Appendix D). This low response rate was a result of considerable challenges in administering the survey. The main issue was that the evaluation team was no longer able contact a substantial proportion of participating students once they had left school. Many students did not provide their contact details or give permission to be recontacted in the first two surveys. While this was partially mitigated by contacting their old school and/or the offices of their post-school destinations, the success of this approach was limited by data protection regulations. Natural research attrition and survey fatigue may also have contributed to the lower response rate, as many students has already answered two surveys.

In total, 12 students responded to all three surveys and 20 students responded to at least one pre-transition survey (Survey 1 or 2) and the post-transition survey (Survey 3).

The evaluation team made considerable effort to maximise response rates across all three surveys. This included regular monitoring of response rates and targeted follow-up. Its members were able to identify students who had not completed the survey and teachers were asked to encourage the remaining students to complete it. This was done at least once for every non-respondent. One final email reminder was then sent to every school with the links to the student survey, with a Word document copy of the survey questionnaire attached.

3.2.2 Parent surveys

Two parent surveys were administered to the parents of participating students at different timepoints. The purpose was to gather additional insight from their perspective and explore how engaged they felt in the Pilot. It also offered another avenue for student representation. To accommodate diverse preferences and requirements, parents were presented with multiple ways to complete the survey. In addition to the online version, a paper-based version of the survey was given to the schools for dissemination.

The evaluation team participated in a parent information evening, facilitated by the NCSE project team, to tell parents about the evaluation and encourage participation. However, due to GDPR schools were unable to share parent contact details with the evaluation team.

Survey 1 (March – May 2024)

The first parent survey was administered during the in-school stage. Schools disseminated the survey on behalf of the evaluation team. The survey explored parents' experiences of the Pilot and gathered their views about their child's readiness and the level of support received.

Responses were received from 37 parents. They represented 43% of all participating students. The vast majority (81%) were the mother or female guardian. Furthermore, 73% of the sample were from Galway and 81% had children in mainstream schools. Just under half of respondents were employed full time and 32% were caregivers. For most respondents (71%), the participating student was not their first child to leave post-primary school. This gave them some basis for comparing alternative transition support.

The evaluation team made a concerted effort to stimulate a high response rate. This involved proactive engagement strategies, as follows:

- On 10 April 2024, a reminder email containing the survey link and a Word version of the survey was issued to all schools. Paper copies of the survey questionnaire were also sent to schools in cases where the teachers thought parents would prefer it.
- On 30 April 2024, a second email reminder was issued to the 13 schools where parent/guardian responses were outstanding.
- A final reminder was issued to all the Pilot schools when contacting them to schedule the second school visit.
- During the school visits, the evaluation team reiterated to teachers the importance of encouraging parents to participate in the evaluation by responding to the survey.
- Teachers who attended the Shared Learning Day in Athlone on 15 May 2024 were also encouraged to ask parents to complete the survey or to allow their contact details to be passed on.
- The evaluation team discussed alternative approaches with participating staff in schools with low response rates. Specifically, they discussed the possibility of holding focus groups with parents in an attempt to maximise parental engagement (see Section 3.2.6).

Survey 2 (January – March 2025)

The second parent survey was administered after the students had transitioned out of school. Multiple engagement approaches were used to reach parents. This included follow-up with schools to notify parents, promotion of the survey during site visits and reminders at the Shared Learning Day in May 2024. The second survey collected reflections on how the Pilot was implemented, how this impacted the students' transition and what outcomes were achieved, as well as current challenges and unmet needs.

Responses were received from 26 parents. They represented 28% of all participating students. The second parent survey was more geographically balanced than Survey 1, with 54% of respondents from Galway. However, it was more skewed to mothers or other female guardians, who made up 88% of responses.

The evaluation team used the following proactive engagement strategies to maximise response rates:

- On 12 February 2025, the evaluation team requested that NCSE contact participating schools, where applicable, and remind them of the survey and the requirement to complete.
- On 28 February 2025, an email reminder was issued to the parents where responses were outstanding.
- On 10 March 2025, a second email reminder was issued to the parents where responses were outstanding.
- On 12 March 2025, the evaluation team made telephone calls to the parents for whom they had contact information, reminded them of the survey that was issued to them and requested that they complete the survey.

The evaluation team contacted everyone for whom it had contact details. Some parents did not opt into the research, while others did not consent to being recontacted during the post-school stage. Informally, the evaluation team also asked schools to remind parents about the evaluation if they were still in contact with the school, for example if they had another child there. The ethical cut-off was three contacts per person. Each participant was sent two emails followed by one telephone call (leaving a message or text where possible).

Survey questionnaires for both stages can be found in the Appendix I and Appendix J. A complete breakdown of responses received per school and (student and parent) survey wave can be found in Appendix D.

3.2.3 School staff interviews

Interviews were conducted with 35 staff members from the 20 participating schools. Participants included principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, home-school liaison teachers and SNAs. Interviews explored school-level implementation of the Pilot, perceived outcomes and transition-planning processes. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. The following approach was used to indicate the strength of responses when presenting the findings:

- all – interviewees from all 20 participating schools
- most/the majority – interviewees from 11 to 19 participating schools
- half – interviewees from ten participating schools
- a minority – interviewees from fewer than ten participating schools.

3.2.4 Stakeholder interviews

Stakeholder interviews were carried out during the in-school and post-school stages. During the in-school stage they involved stakeholders who were engaged in the delivery of the Pilot. During the post-school stage they involved representatives of some of the post-school destinations into which participating students transitioned. The interviews explored system-level enablers, barriers and perceived outcomes of the Pilot. A mix of face-to-face and online interviews was conducted. Each interview took place with at least two members of the evaluation team.

During the in-school stage ten interviews were held with stakeholders from seven national and regional organisations, including the Department of Education, HSE, BITCI, Oide, NCSE and NLN. These interviews focused on the Pilot's design, early implementation and inter-agency coordination.

Relevant stakeholders were identified in collaboration with the NCSE, and the evaluation team contacted individuals and organisations using a combination of direct email, telephone follow-up and referrals from participating schools or the NCSE project team. Where possible, invitations were tailored to reflect each stakeholder's role in the Pilot, and flexibility was offered in terms of interview mode and scheduling to encourage participation.

In the post-school stage, a further nine (one-on-one and/or dyadic) interviews were conducted with a total of 13 stakeholders from nine different post-school destinations or agencies. These included disability support services, employers, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Further Education Institutions (FEIs) and education and training support services. These interviews explored students' preparedness for transition, the availability of support and systemic challenges in sustaining post-school outcomes.

The evaluation team relied on students or parents to provide information about the actual post-school destination achieved. Where this information was unavailable, data from Survey 2 on where the students said they wanted to go was used. Schools were also asked if they had any updated information. Unfortunately, in many cases schools no longer had contact with these students. Their focus on the cohorts still within their school limited the amount of time they could devote to follow this up.

There were 25 confirmed post-school destinations, including some with more than one student who had participated in the Pilot. Each of these post-school organisations was contacted at least twice by email or telephone depending on the contact details available. Named individuals were also approached, where students had provided specific names.

The following approach was used to indicate the strength of responses when presenting the findings:

- all – all 19 interviews
- most/the majority – 10-18 interviews
- a minority – 1-9 interviews.

3.2.5 Teacher 'what works' workshops

Five workshops were delivered online in November 2024 with a total of 16 teachers (see Table 3 for a breakdown of participant numbers across workshops). The workshops explored strengths and limitations of the Pilot, resource requirements and implications for scaling. Workshops were recorded with participant consent and notes were synthesised for thematic analysis.

Table 3 – Breakdown of Participant Number per Workshop

Workshop	Date	Participants
Workshop 1	12 November 2024	3
Workshop 2	14 November 2024	2
Workshop 3	18 November 2024	5
Workshop 4	20 November 2024	3
Workshop 5	20 November 2024	3
Total		**16**

3.2.6 Parent focus groups and interview

An additional ten parent focus groups were planned with schools identified as having low parent/guardian response rates to Survey 1. Another two participating schools were also identified in agreement with the NCSE. Despite multiple follow-up attempts, only two focus groups and one telephone interview were successfully arranged (involving five parents in total) in October and November 2024. Discussions focused on barriers to participation, support needs and reflections on students' transition experiences.

3.3 Analysis Approach

3.3.1 Survey analysis

Survey responses were exported from SenseMaker then anonymised, cleaned and prepared using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive analysis was conducted, including frequency counts and proportions for closed-ended questions. From this, an overview of the student sample's characteristics was produced. This included:

- location (Galway or Dublin)
- gender
- age
- school type (mainstream or special, DEIS or non-DEIS)
- planned post-school destination.

Then, descriptive analysis of close-ended questions was produced to gauge perceived levels of preparedness, support and sentiment across different characteristic groups. Similar analysis was carried out on both the parent surveys to explore perceptions of readiness, support needed and satisfaction with post-school transitions.

No formal statistical testing was conducted. This was largely because the total number of participants involved in the Pilot was relatively low (89). Therefore, the total survey response was also low. As a result, the sizes of subgroups within the sample were too small for significance testing. Therefore, reported differences are indicative only and should be interpreted with caution.

Free text survey responses were then analysed and summarised. These richer data points were used to explain survey results and provide context to the findings. This was particularly important for the student surveys, which gave primary beneficiaries an opportunity to feedback thoughts, feelings, experiences and opinions.

Where possible, longitudinal analysis was conducted to identify patterns in outcomes, changing sentiments and perceived impact of the Pilot. Twenty students responded to at least one in-school survey (Student Survey 1 or Student Survey 2) and the post-school survey (Student Survey 3).

3.3.2 Qualitative analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted using an Excel-based analytical framework, developed through a hybrid (inductive and deductive) approach. First, a coding framework was developed based on the evaluation objectives and key themes emerging from early interviews. Data from interviews, focus groups, open-ended survey responses and workshops were coded by linking verbatim extracts to relevant themes and subtopics. Researchers worked collaboratively to ensure consistency and transparency in coding decisions. A subset of transcripts was double coded by two researchers to enhance reliability and reduce bias. An internal analysis meeting was held to refine the thematic framework and validate emerging findings against the evaluation questions.

Thematic matrices were then developed to compare experiences and perceptions across student groups, school types and stakeholder categories.

Quotations have been included throughout the report to illustrate common and interesting themes. The evaluation team deliberately selected quotes from a range of sources. Care was taken not to over-rely on evidence from any one source.

3.3.3 Synthesis and triangulation

Evidence from all data sources was mapped against the research questions. Triangulation was used to compare findings across students, parents, school staff and other stakeholders. Particular attention was given to areas of divergence, for example where staff and students described different experiences of support or where student aspirations differed from parental perceptions. The literature review was used to situate findings in the wider context of transition research and practice. Chapter 7 presents the discussion and conclusions arising from this research.

3.4 Challenges, Limitations and Contributions

The evaluation faced the following challenges:

1. The methodology had to be flexible to ensure equal participation as the students had a wide range and varying complexity of needs. Where students were unable to complete the surveys independently, they were supported by familiar staff or adapted methods (see 3.5. Ethical Considerations). This was often the case for students in special schools. While this support was necessary to ensure inclusion, it may have introduced some bias into the responses. For example, students might have been influenced by how questions were explained or by the presence of staff, leading them to give answers they felt were expected rather than their true views. Additionally, not all students received the same level of support, which could affect the consistency of responses across the group. In other cases, staff advised that it was not appropriate to include some students because they were unable to provide informed consent.
2. Parental engagement was limited in several schools. This stemmed from competing demands on their time such as work or caring responsibilities. The necessity of using school staff as gatekeepers, due to GDPR constraints, also limited the evaluation team's ability to contact parents directly. Parents were offered a range of formats for survey completion as well as alternative approaches such as focus groups to encourage participation. Multiple attempts were made to tell parents about the benefits of the research and encourage participation (see 3.5. Ethical Considerations).
3. Respondent attrition over time created challenges to longitudinal tracking. While 91% of students completed Survey 1, this dropped to 25% for the post-school survey, when they were no longer directly involved in Pilot activities. Factors included lack of contact details and/or permission, reduced school involvement post-transition and the voluntary nature of participation.

4. Staff time pressures and competing priorities in schools (for example, multiple studies taking place in the same school) affected the timing and depth of engagement and caused research fatigue, particularly in the post-school stage.
5. Data collection relied on schools for distribution of materials to parents due to GDPR constraints, which introduced variation in how consistently surveys reached families.
6. In some cases, transition outcomes were difficult to verify independently, as schools often lost contact with students after they left. This is to be expected as the schools were no longer responsible for these students, and the students were not obliged to keep their school informed of their whereabouts once they had left school. However, it is a practical issue that should be considered in future iterations of the Pilot to make sure that student journeys are tracked and that accurate outcome data is recorded.
7. Acquiescence bias is a commonly observed limitation when conducting primary research. Participants may tend to select positive responses without considering their 'true' preference (Borowska-Beszta, 2017, and Heal and Sigelman, 1995). This was of particular concern in relation to capturing the students' experiences. An attempt to reduce acquiescence bias in the student surveys was done by:
    - Assuring participants that their responses were anonymous.
    - Using Likert scales and more open-ended question formats instead of binary yes/no questions (Heal and Sigelman, 1995).
    - Redressing the power dynamics between the researcher and participant (see 3.5 Ethical Considerations).
    - Adapting the survey mode to the student's needs (see 3.5 Ethical Considerations).
    - Testing and triangulating the results of the student surveys with other data sources (namely, findings from the parent surveys and interviews with school staff and wider stakeholders).

Nonetheless, the evaluation generated a rich longitudinal dataset that captures diverse experiences. The challenges experienced also reflect broader systemic constraints and provide useful learning for scaling transition support in a sustainable way. The study makes three key contributions:

1. It centres student voice through longitudinal data collected at multiple time points, offering a rare insight into the lived experience of transition from both school and post-school perspectives.
2. It highlights the resources, coordination and relationships required to support meaningful transitions and the challenges of scaling these practices equitably.
3. It exposes gaps in awareness, information-sharing and post-school support that shape young people's options and outcomes.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical research conduct was central to the evaluation. RSM adhered to GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018 to safeguard data confidentiality, privacy and integrity. The evaluation team adopted a rights-based approach that prioritised participants' dignity, autonomy and equal participation. The methodology ensured the research benefited its participants, protected vulnerable individuals and allowed them to share their experiences of the Pilot. For instance, a familiar teacher or SNA often accompanied the researchers during school visits to safeguard participants and redress power dynamics. Measures were put in place to ensure that discussions with students and parents were inclusive and took place in settings familiar to them, at a time that suited them. The researchers built a rapport with participating students and school staff and encouraged them to lead the conversations. This approach included:

- Informed consent: clearly explaining the evaluation's purpose, procedures, duration, potential risks and benefits, and how confidentiality would be maintained. Participants were explicitly told that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.
- Accessibility: using simple, accessible language suited to the participant's background to ensure they fully understood the information before consenting. Working with school staff to make sure that students had any Assistive Technology (AT), visual aids, interpreters or other communication support they would need for equal participation. The student surveys were administered using mixed modes to accommodate varying preferences and needs. This included accessing the SenseMaker survey platform through a school computer or whiteboard or through the researcher's laptop. A paper-based version of the survey questionnaires was also made available. Where required, participation was supported by familiar staff or adapted methods (for example, the researcher reading the survey questions aloud and recording their spoken responses in the survey tool).
- Willingness: ensuring that participation was free from pressure or coercion. The researcher also continually checked for signs of assent and dissent during the research process. If the researcher sensed that any participant was not happy to continue, they ceased data collection.
- Documentation: using an appropriately adapted consent form, summarising all key points and ensuring that the process was properly recorded.
- Security: secure data storage, access controls and encryption.
- Anonymity: assuring that no individuals or schools would be identifiable in the reporting of findings.

CHAPTER 4

Implementation and Embeddedness of Transition Support

4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses RQ1: 'How was the Pilot implemented across the 20 schools?' It starts with an introduction (Section 4.1) and then profiles the CES Transition Pilot cohort and school contexts (Section 4.2). It then examines the delivery model and implementation at school level (Section 4.3), covering activities and perceived level of support, teacher hours, strategic partnerships and monitoring mechanisms. Next it analyses enablers (Section 4.4) and barriers to effective delivery (Section 4.5), before assessing early signs of embeddedness from school-staff and wider stakeholder perspectives (Section 4.6). It closes with a summary of findings in the above areas (Section 4.7).

This chapter draws on qualitative interviews, focus groups and workshops with school staff, parents and wider stakeholders, and quantitative data from the student and parent surveys. To further illustrate the themes and findings, student vignettes are incorporated to reflect students' voices and provide examples of their transition experiences. The student vignettes were developed by synthesising information on a particular student from various sources including their survey responses, interviews with school staff, their parents and other stakeholders, as well as the evaluation team's interactions with them during school visits and data collection activities. The students were selected to illustrate key themes and outcomes emerging from the Pilot.

4.2 Student Profiles and School Context

The Pilot's mixed-cohort design aimed to foster inclusion, shared learning and a broader reach. The Department of Education felt that mixing mainstream and special schools would create:

> *Opportunities for teachers on both sides, mainstream and special schools, to learn from each other [and] create synergies between mainstream and specialist provision (Policy representative, WS02).*

Most representatives from education and training support services confirmed this. They noted that through the Pilot, mainstream schools had learnt to navigate HSE referrals, while special schools gained insight into established mainstream interventions. They also suggested a mixed cohort ensured that transition planning reached 'every school [with] students with learning difficulties or support needs' (Education and training support representative, WS09). One disability support service representative reported mainstream referrals rising from 'two or three' to 'five or six' out of a class of 30 (Disability support representative, WS11).

The 20 participating schools were evenly split between north County Dublin and Galway City. Of the 20 schools that took part, 70% were mainstream, with some of those having special classes embedded within them. The remaining 30% were special schools – proportionally more than there are across all schools in Ireland. Furthermore, 45% of the Pilot schools fell under the DEIS initiative. This is also higher than the national proportion (32%)[11] and demonstrates that the Pilot targeted schools that serve communities with higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Schools in the Pilot also range in terms of size, rurality and language. The median number of participants per school was five, although there was notable variable between schools. In some, there were only two participants, while in others there were up to nine.

Table 4 – Overview of the Pilot Schools

School	Location	Type	DEIS Status	Rural/ Urban	No. of Students in Pilot	No. of Students Enrolled
1	Galway	Special	Non-DEIS	Urban	6	18
2	Galway	Mainstream	DEIS	Rural	4	430
3	Dublin	Mainstream	DEIS	Urban	3	276
4	Dublin	Mainstream	DEIS	Urban	4	564
5	Dublin	Mainstream	Non-DEIS	Urban	6	1,045
6	Galway	Mainstream	Non-DEIS	Rural	5	330
7	Galway	Mainstream	Non-DEIS	Rural	5	987
8	Galway	Mainstream	Non-DEIS	Rural	5	705
9	Galway	Special	Non-DEIS	Rural	4	64
10	Dublin	Mainstream	DEIS	Urban	3	440
11	Galway	Mainstream	DEIS	Urban	9	729
12	Galway	Mainstream	Non-DEIS	Rural	6	1,100
13	Galway	Mainstream	DEIS	Rural	2	400
14	Galway	Special	Non-DEIS	Rural	2	16
15	Dublin	Mainstream	DEIS	Urban	7	656
16	Dublin	Mainstream	DEIS	Urban	5	623
17	Dublin	Special	Non-DEIS	Urban	2	52
18	Dublin	Special	Non-DEIS	Urban	4	52
19	Dublin	Special	Non-DEIS	Urban	6	30
20	Dublin	Mainstream	DEIS	Urban	5	500
Total	**50%:50%**	**70% Mainstream 30% Special**	**45% DEIS**	**40% Rural 60% Urban**	**93 Students in the Pilot**	**9,017 Students Enrolled**

Source: Information provided to the research team by NCSE. For further details on school profiles see Appendix B

11 Calculated using mainstream school data provided to RSM by NCSE.

Participating students presented a wide range of needs across intellectual, physical, social and emotional domains. Many required supports with emotional regulation, including managing anxiety, building self-esteem and coping with behavioural challenges. Social development was a key focus, with many students needing help to improve communication, understand social cues and form relationships. Students' intellectual needs included literacy and numeracy support, memory and comprehension strategies, and assistance with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and general learning difficulties. Students' physical needs ranged from mobility support and coordination issues to fine and gross motor-skill development. Developing independence skills, such as using public transport, managing money and personal care were also central to the transitional support plans.

Around 90 students participated in the Pilot.[12] Schools from Galway tended to have more students from rural backgrounds, whereas those from Dublin had urban backgrounds. There was a mix of socio-economic backgrounds across both regions particularly within the mainstream schools.

While the Pilot targeted students aged 16 in special schools and fifth-year students in mainstream schools, a policy representative said that some schools used their allocated hours from age 13 to build foundational skills early:[13]

> *Some schools are already using these hours to support younger students, preparing them from the age of 13 or 14 to work towards these kinds of opportunities. They're building skills early on (Policy representative, WS05).*

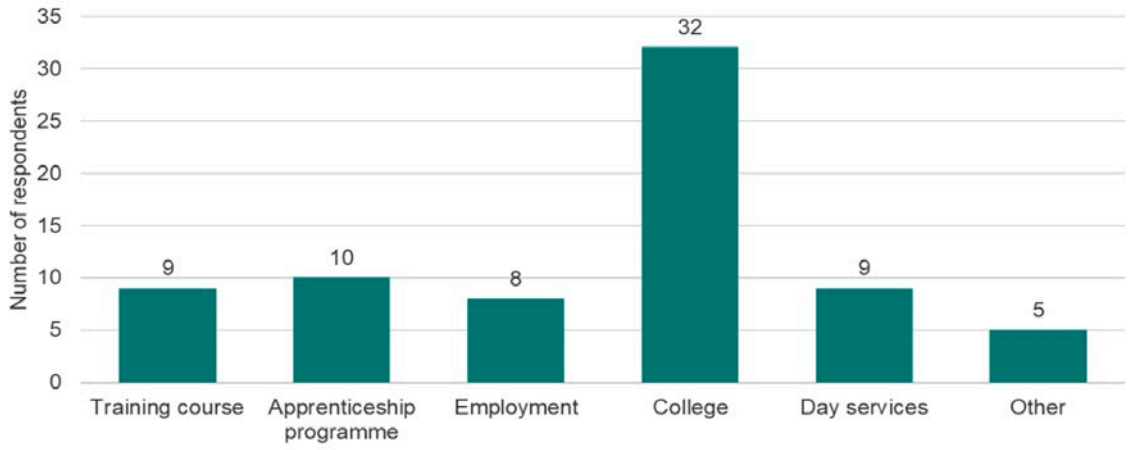
Survey data shows that participating students had varied post-school aspirations (Figure 3). Almost half of respondents to the first student survey planned to go to college (32 of 73 respondents). The rest of the sample was evenly split between alternative post-school destinations. Only eight planned to go directly into employment, making up 11% of the sample. At least 59 (81%) of the sample planned to enter either training, education or employment. Galway students were more likely to choose apprenticeships or training, whereas Dublin students more often planned immediate employment. Male students favoured training or apprenticeships; female students more often sought employment or higher-education routes. Nearly all students (8 of 9) planning day-services came from special schools.

Students had varying degrees of certainty about their post-school plans. Those planning to do a training course, do an apprenticeship programme or go to college were more certain about their plans. On the other hand, those planning to get a job or go to day services were less certain.

12 The total number of participating students varied over time as some had left school and transition support time was then redirected to support other students.

13 Participating staff in each school were given the freedom to choose participating students provided those students had attended the school in the previous school year.

Figure 3 – Post-school Aspirations of the Pilot Students



Source: The Pilot Student Survey 1, Q8 (Base: n=73)

4.3 Delivery Model and School-level Implementation

The interviews with participating staff indicated that schools entered the Pilot with varying levels of experience in supporting the transition of students with a disability. Some schools had well-established inclusive practices, while others were just starting to develop structured approaches. As two staff members from mainstream schools reflected:

> *It [the Pilot] confirmed that we're doing a lot of the stuff already and we're doing it really well and we have those practices embedded already (School staff member, M04, at an urban, mainstream school).*

> *Sixty per cent of the work was already happening, but it was hidden. Now there is a recognition for the need of the programme (School staff member, M08, at an urban, mainstream school).*

In general, most interviewees felt that the Pilot was being implemented as intended. The approach to delivery and number of school staff involved in the Pilot differed across both special and mainstream schools. It was felt that smaller teams benefited from in-depth knowledge but relied heavily on a single individual; larger teams enabled broader ownership but required more coordination. The size of delivery team also depended on how many participating students there were and the number of different classes they spanned.

However, capacity to implement the Pilot varied. While some schools had a dedicated teacher in place from the outset, others could only engage someone part time, and a few struggled to recruit a suitable staff member despite repeated efforts (see Section 4.3.2). This includes both mainstream and special schools. In such cases, existing staff took on these additional transition responsibilities, without additional payment, to support delivery of the Pilot. In addition, special schools often lacked a formal guidance function resulting in a steeper learning curve for participating staff, who were unable to draw on that wider expertise within their school.

4.3.1 Activities

This section examines the flexible mix of school- and community-based activities delivered through the Pilot and how students experienced support in planning their next steps. It shows which activities were most common, how schools and partners tailored provision to individual needs, and students'/parents' perceptions of the support they received.

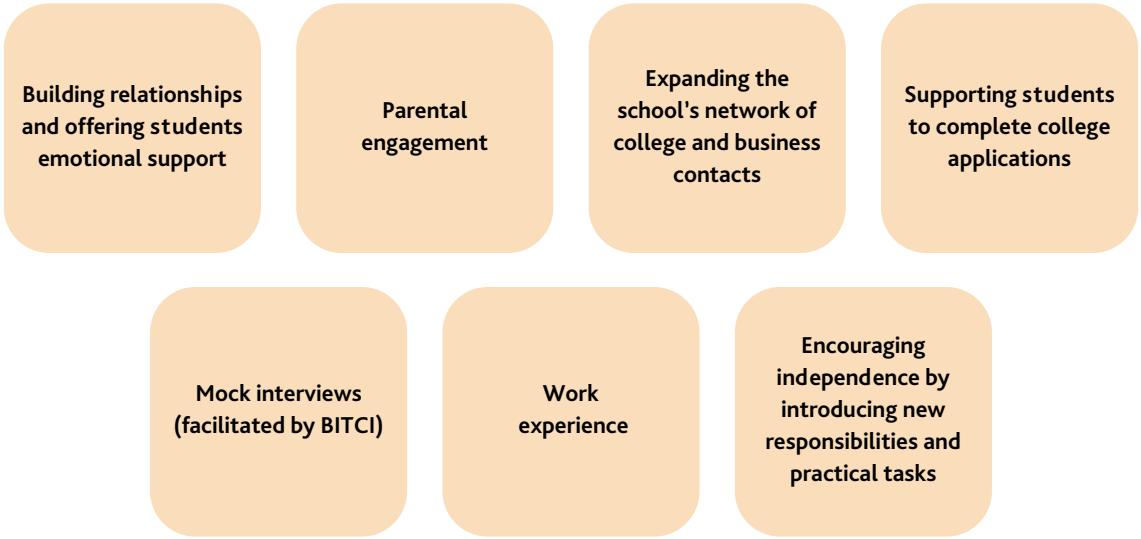
The Pilot was designed to be flexible. As a result, schools implemented wide-ranging combinations of in-school and community-based activities. These included: one-to-one and small-group meetings; visits to training centres; mock interviews; budgeting exercises; public-transport training; and collaborative planning with HSE officers. Mainstream schools often involved their career guidance staff. These activities tended to vary by school and were tailored to the students' needs:

> *We started from the student and worked out[wards] (School staff member, M07, at an urban, mainstream school).*

> *[The Pilot provided] a chance for the student to talk and be listened to about their future… support they wouldn't get elsewhere (School staff member, M11, at a rural, mainstream school).*

BITCI supported mock interviews, Safe Pass and road-safety training, CV feedback, Try-a-Trade days, career fairs and art exhibitions. Schools accessed these employer links via the NCSE-managed Padlet and direct liaison with BITCI. Examples of the types of activities delivered in the programme are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 – Activities Delivered through the Programme



Some schools also allowed other students, outside the Pilot, to join activities that were designed for participating students.

Most participating mainstream schools integrated LCA modules such as 'Preparation for the World of Work' with real-world placements:

> *Students rotated through three employers, each for a week, and reflected on their skills (School staff member, M11, at a rural, mainstream school).*

The following student vignette illustrates how the Pilot created one special school's first structured work-experience opportunity for Student A.

Student A (Urban Special School)

First Work Experience in a Special School

The evaluation team met Student A twice during school visits. They completed the student survey using the whiteboard with support from their teacher. They engaged well with the activities and demonstrated a willingness to participate in group tasks. Although they occasionally became distracted, they responded positively to encouragement and structure. They told the Evaluation Team, 'I really like to have some control over choices in my day.'

In the classroom, Student A showed a clear preference for routine and repetitive tasks. They were regularly given responsibilities such as shredding paper or delivering messages. They took these tasks seriously and completed them to a high standard once familiar with the process. According to school staff, these tasks helped build their confidence and sense of belonging. When asked about these jobs, Student A said, 'I like helping. It makes me feel like I'm doing something important.'

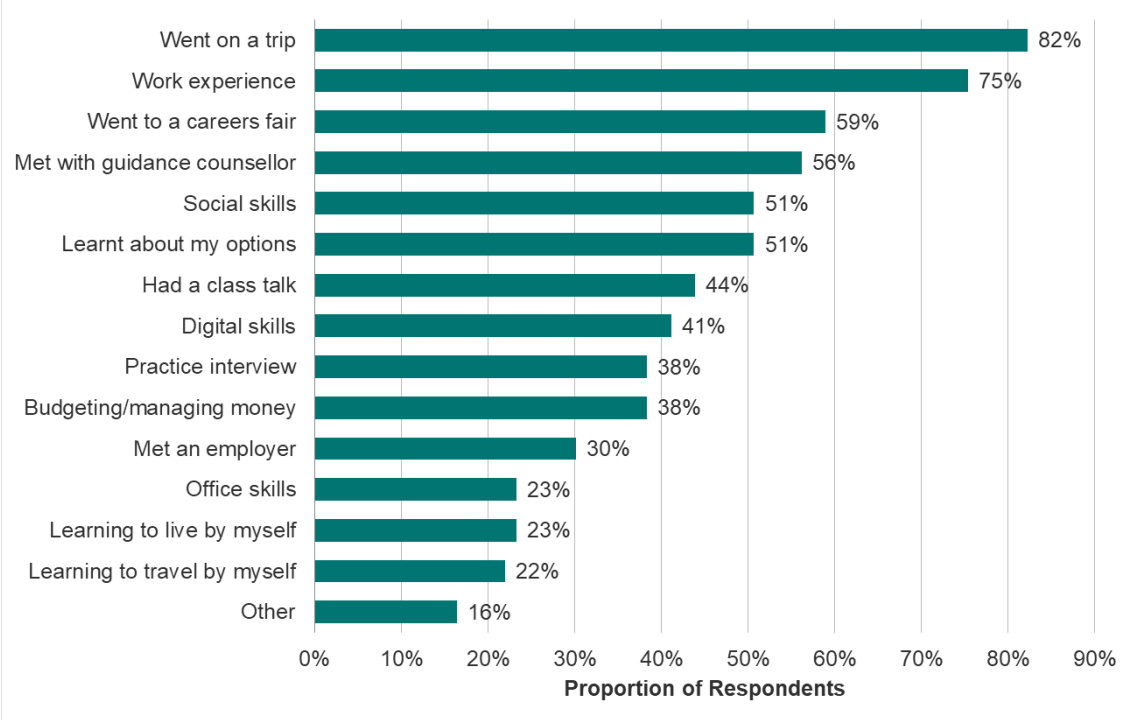
Through the Pilot, they undertook their first work experience at a shop. This involved the entire class (six to seven students), a teacher and one to two SNAs. Student A engaged in cleaning tasks for two to three hours while peers learnt about budgeting and café routines next door. This was an imperfect but necessary arrangement that would not have been possible without the Pilot. The experience offered Student A a valuable opportunity to engage in real-world tasks. They learnt to follow hygiene procedures, handle delicate items and maintain focus over an extended period. Staff noted that Student A was noticeably calmer and more focused in the work setting than in the classroom. One teacher commented, 'They really took pride in the job. It was the most settled we've seen them.'

Student A's school attendance was sporadic, often disrupted when they disliked specific lessons. Staff worked hard to re-establish routines, but unforeseen circumstances late in the year halted all engagement. This lack of routine persisted after school, and although the family hoped they would attend local day services, this could not be confirmed.

Figure 5 shows the proportion of students who took part in key Pilot activities. Trips and work-experience placements were most prevalent, followed by careers-fair visits, guidance-counsellor meetings, social-skills workshops and option-awareness sessions. Financial literacy, digital skills and office-based competencies were also common. One parent described how their child's strengths were revealed through digital skill-building, stating:

> *The school's focus on providing practical skills, such as using Excel, really highlighted [my child's strengths (Parent focus group interviewee, PFG01).*

Figure 5 – Proportion of Students Taking Part in the Pilot Activities



Source: The Pilot Student Survey 1, Q7 (Base: n=73)

All the parents interviewed knew that their child was in the Pilot, although some initially lacked clarity on its scope. They reported consistent communication about trips, placements and follow-up checks.

> *The school communicated well throughout. They were regularly in touch and kept me informed about my child's transition plan (PFG01).*

Overall, it was found that implementation combined structured profiling, curriculum integration, a flexible programme of activities and external partnerships. It was noted that school capacity and variability in staffing influenced the extent and consistency of delivery.

4.3.2 Teacher hours

Each school received 12 additional teacher hours per week from September 2023 to June 2024. All the school staff who were interviewed welcomed this resource. They felt it was crucial for introducing and embedding transition support. Most schools delivered the 12 hours by recruiting new teachers or extending part-time contracts. Staff in mainstream schools with an established inclusive ethos felt they probably needed fewer hours than staff in schools without such an ethos. They said this was because they had already begun to establish external links to help improve the transition experience for disabled students before taking part in the Pilot.

A minority of interviewees from schools that committed more than 12 hours (both mainstream and special schools) said that staff were motivated to do so because they felt it was worthwhile, but acknowledged that this relied on goodwill of teaching staff:

> *I've got my team of SNAs in my own classroom, and running the programme has really, really relied on a lot of goodwill. I have occasionally had to rely on my paired teacher because I needed to step away from the classroom and I needed to have an extra teacher to take over duty of care (School staff member, S06, at an urban, special school).*

One mainstream school that committed more than 12 hours used school extension hours funding to actively involve additional staff in the Pilot:

> *School extension hours are paying the additional hours that [ASD Class Coordinators] are doing. They are doing an additional 2 hours 40 minutes additional a week (School staff member, M05, at an urban, mainstream school).*

These staff were in frequent contact with the parents of participating students at their school. A previous inspection had identified parental engagement as an area for development for that school. The interviewees felt that the Pilot helped improve their connection with the parents of participating students. This demonstrates the flexibility of the model. However, given the number of schools involved in the Pilot it is not possible to determine the overall impact that this had on outcomes.

In contrast, interviewees from around a third of participating schools said they had been unable to free up 12 hours of teaching time due to recruitment issues. In Dublin, recruitment was hampered by high living costs and a shortage of substitute teachers:

> *In Ireland there's not enough teachers and we're having such issues with subbing and getting teachers to cover our classes. There are times that we've been told 'there is just no cover', you can't go to it but that is because of the state of teaching here in Ireland, There's just no subs at the moment (School staff member, M02, at an urban, mainstream school).*

Schools in Galway also experienced challenges in recruiting staff. This was linked to lower availability of qualified individuals, particularly for special schools, rather than cost of living challenges:

> *The post has been advertised numerous times (School staff member, S09, at an urban, special school).*

To minimise disruption to core subjects in mainstream settings, a few schools used flexible rather than fixed timetable slots. One teacher noted:

> *It is not perfect, but it works better than fixed timetabled hours, which affects the student's subject learning, particularly if they are being taken out of a foundational subject on a weekly basis (School staff member, M01, at an urban, mainstream school).*

One participating school did not draw down any support hours because they were unable to recruit or free up a teacher for 12 hours. Staff from this school shared that they tried to implement a whole-school approach instead. This involved staff from across the school collaborating to support students involved in the Pilot (for example, guidance, LCA coordinator, year heads, vocational prep teachers):

> *We didn't have any hours allocated. But we were able to demonstrate some kind of whole-school approach within the school about what we would normally do and then how we'd enhance it (School staff member, WWW03).*

Overall, the allocation of teacher hours emerged as both a vital enabler and, in some contexts, a challenge. This shows the importance of flexible staffing strategies and sustained commitment to ensure effective programme delivery. While there is insufficient evidence to evaluate the impact of different staffing models on overall delivery and student outcomes, it does raise concerns about the scalability and sustainability of the model (see Chapter 7).

4.3.3 Strategic partnerships

Findings from the external stakeholder interviews showed that they valued the monthly steering-group meetings. Attendees included HSE occupational guidance officers, BITCI employer-engagement leads, service-provider representatives, SENOs, NCSE advisors and Department of Education coordinators. These regular meetings were used to troubleshoot issues, align expectations and share information about local services and individual student needs. Several interviewees highlighted these meetings as an enabler of inter-agency communication and a positive aspect of the Pilot:

> *Attending the Pilot meetings where different stakeholders spoke about what options were available was useful from my perspective (Health and social care representative, WS04).*

Schools were invited to participate in regular online and in-person engagements facilitated by the project coordinator (see Figure 6). Typically, sessions were grouped by region (Dublin/Galway), with some joint events held throughout the Pilot. NCSE staff also conducted termly school visits. Engagement activities included workshops with inputs from HSE, An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Skills Service (SOLAS), Oide, ETBs, NLN and the National Tertiary Office. Disability support service representatives reported having good relationships with participant schools.

A BITCI representative praised its employer partnerships. One employer delivered a Try a Trade event[14] specifically for students with special needs and hosted student art exhibitions in spaces that were open to the public:

> *[The employers] were strong advocates of the programme. They provided transport, trains, for the Galway schools to attend our Try a Trade day, and they also supported the Dublin schools in attending. Additionally, they facilitated one of our students in Galway in holding an art exhibition (BITCI, WS03).*

4.3.4 Implementation-monitoring mechanisms and shared-learning initiatives

Implementation monitoring combined formal tools with peer-learning initiatives to track progress and embed improvements. Participating schools were required to use an Excel-based template to record time spent on support activities as well as students' transition activities and outcomes. While some schools integrated them into regular routines, others found them too complex, duplicative or dependent on staff confidence in using data. Skill gaps and time pressure were also cited as factors limiting their completion. This suggests that without sufficient training or simplification the templates could become a burden rather than a support.

> *That Excel document – I wanted to fire it up the wall. I was writing my planning and doing my notes, and then I was kind of writing it all again in the Excel. It drove me insane (School staff member, WWW01).*

> *You really have to stay on top of the admin stuff (School staff member, M13, at a rural, mainstream school).*

> *If you have the skills, it's fine […] Something that should take five minutes can take half an hour if you're not Excel-savvy (School staff member, WWW02).*

A minority expressed more positive feelings, relying on the Pilot coordinator's support:

> *We met [with the Pilot coordinator] every fortnight and updated it together… that worked well for us (School staff member, WWW04).*

Overall, most teachers found the Excel tracking tool difficult and time-consuming.

A **dedicated project coordinator** provided critical oversight and encouragement. Regular, fortnightly check-ins prompted schools to maintain their records (as the previous quote illustrates) and helped to address emerging challenges. Staff described this support as 'timely, accessible and encouraging' (School staff member, WWW05). One Policy representative indicated:

> *[The Project Coordinator] is the best in the world…, I'd just ring him up and ask, 'What have you got on this?' You know he'll do it, and it'll be done to the highest standard (Policy representative, WS02).*

14 The purpose of the event was that students from schools across the country should attend, get to use tools and try out different pieces of equipment. The main apprenticeships offered were in electrical work, fitting, mechanics and a modern apprenticeship in engineering technology.

A **Padlet repository** served as a central information hub. It was regularly updated to include: planning templates and workflow diaries; learning outcomes and Units of Learning; directories of local resources and supports; live calendar of events and Continual Professional Development (CPD) opportunities.

> *It became my first port of call… other schools opened up their resources. A real sharing of information (School staff member, WWW05).*

A BITCI representative also highlighted that the **Padlet** was 'a great resource' for uploading apprenticeship information and videos that guidance counsellors and teachers accessed very often. A criticism related to the Padlet raised by an external stakeholder was that it sometimes duplicated existing guides and lacked succinct summaries:

> *Making informed decisions requires accurate, succinct information. It can't just be a collection of website links (Education and training support representative, WS06).*

This suggests that, while the Padlet successfully brought together a comprehensive set of diverse materials and connected schools, its design could be improved to support quicker decision-making.

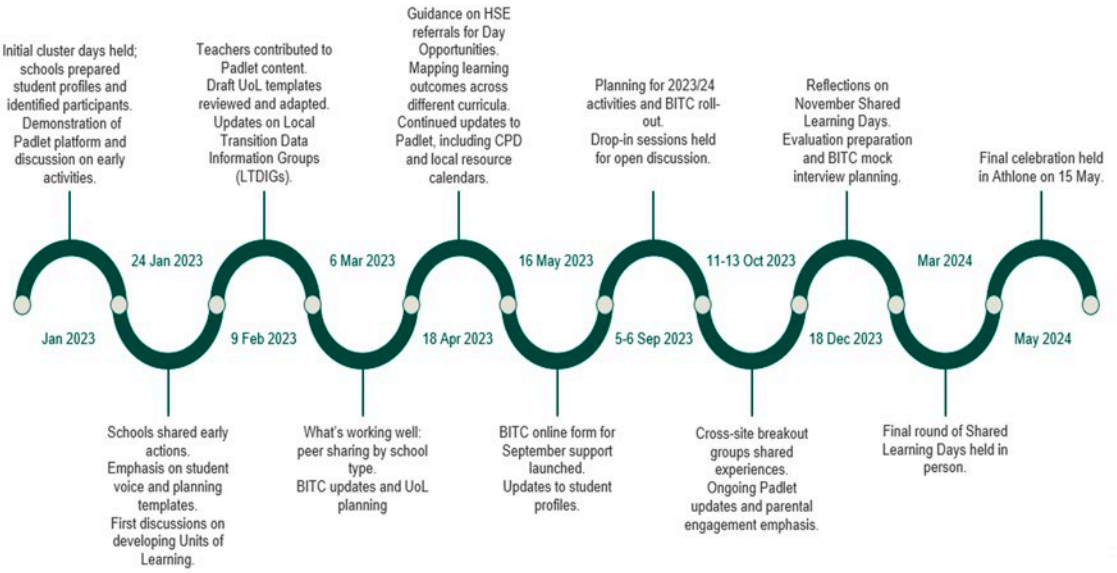
Finally, shared-learning days and a Dublin/Galway cluster model enabled cross-school exchange of information. Most school staff described these days as 'brilliant' and 'eye-opening', expanding awareness of options beyond their own settings. Grouping schools in Dublin and Galway created communities of practice where teachers exchanged planning templates, case studies and problem-solving strategies. A policy representative highlighted that grouping schools within existing networks encouraged informal conversations and collaborative problem-solving:

> *The idea behind the two clusters was simply to create groups where people might already know each other and could share ideas… Bringing schools together to talk about what they're doing, how they're doing it, and so on (Policy representative, WS02).*

While the shared-learning days were widely praised, a minority of external stakeholders expressed concerns, describing them as 'information-heavy' and resembling a cascade model rather than fostering genuine exchange. Despite these critiques, most feedback indicated that the days were effective. For instance, only one school reported administrative challenges when attending cluster days – a view that was not broadly shared.

Several teachers noted that the geographic clustering approach offered considerable advantages. It not only promoted peer collaboration but also reduced travel-time barriers, enabling coordinators to attend more meetings within a shorter distance.

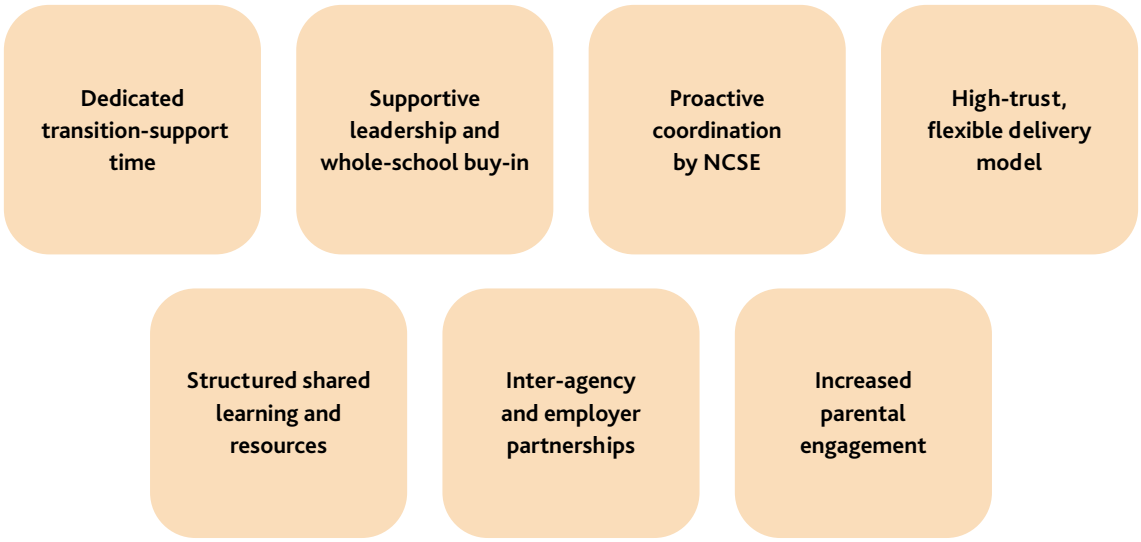
Figure 6 – Implementation Timeline (Shared-learning Days)



4.4 Enablers of Effective Implementation

This section addresses the factors that supported effective implementation of the Pilot across participating schools. It identifies seven key enablers that shaped delivery (see Figure 7). These enablers relate to how time and resources were used, the role of leadership and external support, and how inter-agency collaboration and planning tools contributed to implementation. Together, they created the conditions needed to provide consistent, student-centred transition support.

Figure 7 – Conditions Required to Provide Transition Support



There was consensus across participating schools and wider stakeholders that the single most important enabler was the **dedicated transition-support time**. Each school was allocated an extra 12 teaching hours that they could use flexibility to deliver the Pilot within their school. School staff across mainstream and special settings emphasised that the 12 flexible hours protected time for meaningful engagement with students, families and external partners. Two school staff participating in a What-works Workshop reflected:

> *Having that 12 hours… it wasn't just a matter of meeting them in the corridor. You had time to sit down for 40 minutes, go through stuff, bring them to events (School staff member, WWW04).*

> *We were very lucky. We were able to recruit a teacher for those hours for both years (School staff member, WWW04).*

A health and social care agency representative agreed, noting that in schools where the Pilot 'worked really well', the assigned staff member was readily available to arrange family meetings and coordinate profiling. They observed:

> *I knew they had the time and dedicated hours, which made it easier to set up meetings with families if we needed to work things out (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

Close behind in prevalence was **supportive leadership and whole-school buy-in**. Several participating teachers and staff reported that their school leadership team gave the Pilot the support it needed to be regarded as a priority in the school. This was demonstrated when the school leadership teams willingly released staff for off-site visits, workshops and cluster days:

> *Management [was] 100% behind us… at the end of the year they asked us to give a presentation to the staff (School staff member, WWW04).*

> *I'm a deputy principal, and the principal was still very much involved… there was real buy-in (School staff member, WWW04).*

> *The principal has been very supportive and gives the programme priority (School staff member, M01, at an urban, mainstream school).*

It was also widely reported by the school staff and wider stakeholders that the **proactive coordination by NCSE** underpinned smooth delivery. Specifically, schools praised the full-time project coordinator who managed the Padlet repository, issued reminders and modelled best practice. They felt supported throughout the Pilot:

> *They were brilliant… a phone call away. I'd ask, 'Am I doing this right?' and they'd say, 'Yes—keep going!' (School staff member, WWW05).*

> *[The coordinator] kept in regular contact with us and met with me and my colleague a couple of times to go through where things were at and what needed to be done (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

Furthermore, many stakeholders felt that the Pilot's high-trust, flexible delivery model fostered ownership and innovation. It was noted that the Department of Education refrained from prescribing or mandating activities. Instead, it provided a broad framework, enabling schools to tailor supports locally:

> *We're not going to dictate what they should do. We're providing the resource, an overarching framework, and the people to engage with (Policy representative WS02).*

This flexibility was seen as critical to encouraging creative programmes that resonated with individual school contexts. Teachers emphasised that they could adapt sessions quickly if new opportunities arose:

> *The big thing was flexibility… what you might start off with this month, you could change quickly depending on what came up (School staff member, WWW05).*

> *It provides a very useful overview. It's very practical and easy to use (School staff member, M19, at a rural, mainstream school).*

As noted earlier, the structured shared-learning forums, networking opportunities and transition resources were also seen as facilitating effective implementation in the following ways:

- Networking opportunities were provided through the Pilot, particularly with other participating schools but also building more links with local colleges and NLN.
- The Dublin–Galway cluster model and learning days brought local schools together to exchange templates, case studies and problem-solving strategies. School staff noted that they had helped to share ideas and build relationships. Some school staff felt it was motivational to see the bigger picture outside their own school. However, one interviewee said that while the shared learning days were valuable, 'in person days are becoming more repetitive and less useful over time' (School staff member, M04, at an urban, mainstream school).
- Transition-planning resources such as the Padlet repository were also cited among different stakeholders as enablers. They contained contact numbers and support agencies as well as information about events that inspired or facilitated many of the trips and visits described above.
- Some members of school staff also referred to the value of the live planning tool that helped to track activity, identify gaps and support a whole-school approach. It enabled teachers to build on what the other teachers were doing with students.

Inter-agency and employer partnerships were also widely valued. Regular steering-group meetings included HSE occupational guidance officers, BITCI leads and service-provider representatives, who resolved issues like unreliable employer listings. A disability support service manager reported:

> *They (the schools) are excellent. It's always a pleasure to go in. They're very welcoming, and afterwards they're great with follow-up. If we need paperwork or documents, they're quick to provide them. We have a good relationship with them (Disability support representative, WS11).*

BITCI credited its existing relationships with mainstream schools for easing employer engagement. They already worked with 'nearly half' the schools and felt comfortable organising job fairs and Try a Trade events. Employers' willingness to adapt to students' needs, such as smaller group sizes and bespoke activity stations, was also cited as crucial.

BITCI support in facilitating mock interviews and work experience was seen by school staff as an important factor. Specifically, where communication was good and employers were ready to receive students, this was a real enabler. However, the challenges with this support are outlined in the next section.

Finally, increased parental engagement was noted by teachers as an enabler, particularly in mainstream schools. It was felt that increased engagement with parents of participating students helped to align expectations, with one interviewee commenting:

> *There is a disconnect currently between the school and the parents of the students. An inspection revealed that the school should work on the connection between parents and students. The Pilot programme has helped improve the connection with the parents of the students involved in the programme (School staff member, M05, at an urban, mainstream school).*

This was echoed by staff in the further education sector, where one interviewee noted:

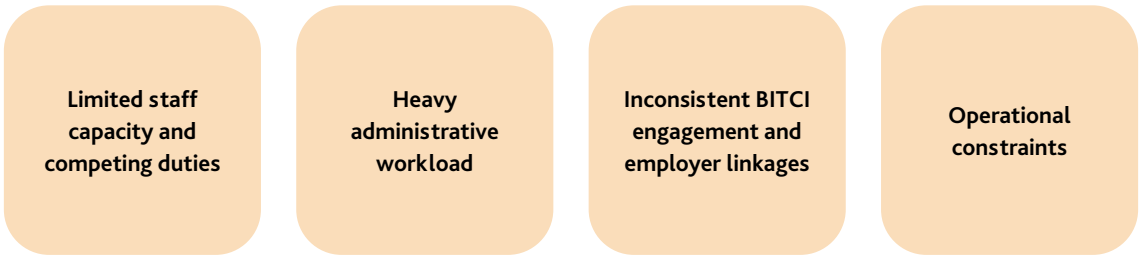
> *Parental support is a huge impact – students with high parental support do well (FEI representative, WS18).*

The parents themselves also reported increased engagement. Most respondents to the parent survey (77%, n=20) felt involved in their child's participation in the Pilot (see Section 5.4.1). They said that tailored communication was important. They valued regular updates, visits to new placements and consistent follow-up after transition, which helped to reduce anxiety and promote familiarity with new environments. Ongoing communication from school staff was seen as particularly effective during this process. Overall, these enablers combined to create the conditions necessary for schools to deliver meaningful, student-centred transition support.

4.5 Barriers to Effective Implementation

A range of factors limited teachers' capacity to deliver transition support as intended. Most schools faced capacity issues, heavy administrative duties and operational constraints that reduced available hours. At the same time, employer-engagement delays and inconsistent partnership models meant some key activities were slower to launch. The main barriers identified through the evaluation are presented in Figure 8 and described in detail below.

Figure 8 – Barriers to Implementation



It was felt by most participants that limited staff capacity and competing duties severely constrained implementation. Wider stakeholders reported that some schools 'struggled to allocate the 12 hours. As noted by one:

> *Even getting them to sit in on profiling meetings was difficult... All we really had time for was the profiling meeting (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

Interviews with school staff confirmed the existing demands of teaching, and SNA rosters often left little time for transition work. At a Dublin-based special school, the absence of a dedicated teacher forced one coordinator to complete all planning 'after hours', while juggling risk-assessment requirements that demanded two SNAs per outing:

> *I was doing my 9 to 3, and then all the admin and planning after hours just to make the programme happen. To get my student out even once, I had to jump through hoops – find extra staff, juggle ratios. And we have a risk assessment policy that means one student has to be accompanied by two SNAs. So, if I took one out, I had to release two SNAs, which disrupted everything (School staff member, WWW01).*

Securing staff cover for teaching duties and SNA support for off-site visits was equally problematic amid nationwide shortages. Teachers noted:

> *There's a teacher shortage at the moment. We're not getting a huge number of hours, so that's kind of constraining us in terms of what we're actually able to achieve (School staff member, M04, at an urban, mainstream school).*

The heavy administrative workload discussed in Section 4.3.4 was seen to compound these capacity issues. Documenting support and tracking progress proved so time-consuming that one teacher quipped:

> *You'd need a PA, to be honest (School staff member, M08, at an urban, mainstream school).*

Staff often reported completing admin outside school hours and recommended prioritising work diaries and progress reports over less-critical tasks to maximise face-to-face time with students. Similarly, interviewees from further and higher educational institutes cited a lack of staff capacity when discussing support gaps for students:

> *Students often struggle with not having very direct support [for example,] not [getting] the same guidance they received from SNA in second level (HEI representative, WS16).*

School staff reported inconsistent BITCI engagement and employer linkages. While there were some positive examples, a minority of school staff reported multiple, interrelated issues with BITCI support. This was felt to undermine the Pilot's employer-engagement strand.

Interviewees felt that while BITCI brought valuable expertise, and already had relationships with nearly half of the mainstream schools, their engagement felt too slow and limited in scope during Year 1. The lead teacher from a DEIS mainstream school explained:

> *We were promised a visit in March. We didn't get that until a Zoom call in May (School staff, WW05).*

When employer listings were shared, the reliability of some was questioned. Schools found that some employers advertised on the Padlet did not actually accept students with disabilities:

> *[One employer] was on the website but said no – sent me to head office in Dublin. There just aren't enough employers in Galway for students with needs (School staff, WW05).*

Some Galway-based schools felt marginalised by a Dublin-centric focus and would have welcomed a local BITCI contact to navigate regional opportunities.

Once BITCI appointed a dedicated liaison, some school staff members felt that engagement improved substantially. However, most believed that the delayed start limited the impact in that Pilot year and described the BITCI input as lower than expected. From their perspective BITCI noted that the lead-in time was challenging. This meant they had to 'set up ways of working, define parameters, get people on board and explain what's involved' all within an academic year:

> *The programme was announced and started, but as with any new initiative, there's a period where you're setting up ways of working… The lead-in time was short (BITCI, WS03).*

Practical obstacles were also seen to further hamper work-experience arrangements: Garda vetting processes stalled placements in childcare settings, and the need to free an SNA for one-hour shifts strained already scarce capacity:

> *[Due to a student's specific needs] an SNA has to be freed up to do that hour of work experience. We don't have the manpower at the moment (School staff member, M04, at an urban, mainstream school).*

Timing also proved challenging. One teacher noted that organising placements close to Easter or early summer conflicted with exam preparation in mainstream schools and school events in both mainstream and special schools:

> *From a school's point of view, starting work experience close to Easter or early Summer… you prefer to do [it] after the October midterm and before Easter, if possible (School staff member, S16, at a rural, special school).*

These combined issues – slow engagement, unreliable listings, lack of local coordination and practical constraints – meant that despite BITCI's strengths and existing relationships, the employer-engagement strand did not reach its full potential in Year 1. Year 2 could offer more conclusive evidence as partnerships mature and processes streamline.

School staff identified several operational constraints that reduced time for transition support. Planning transition activities before the academic year was crucial, especially for students sitting the Leaving Certificate:

> *It's challenging to tell them; you need to leave that subject now and come up and do something with me in the other room (School staff member, S16, at a rural, special school).*

Coordinating teachers' own timetables with those of participating students also proved difficult, with some mainstream staff noting that guaranteeing the full 12 hours would be a challenge because subject commitments often took precedence.

Furthermore, irregular student attendance, particularly among those from deprived areas, undermined consistency of support and required teachers to adapt rapidly when pupils missed sessions.

Finally, the lack of a dedicated budget for trips and events created access inequalities. In rural or low-income settings, schools absorbed transport and venue costs or asked parents to contribute:

> *I feel bad asking parents for money (School staff member, S15, at a rural, special school).*

Although these issues were not barriers inherent to the Pilot's design, they placed additional operational demands on staff and limited the time available for direct transition work. It is in this context that they are discussed in this chapter. Despite the challenges noted here, schools continued to find ways to adapt and deliver core activities. The next section explores early evidence of how, where conditions allow, the Pilot has started to become embedded in everyday school practice.

4.6 Programme Embeddedness

In the first year of the Pilot, evidence on whether transition support became routine in schools was mixed. Most school staff members and wider stakeholders engaged in this evaluation agreed that embedding transition support requires strong leadership and dedicated personnel and resources. However, they warned that variability in staffing levels, reliance on key individuals and the impending loss or reduction of dedicated hours threatened lasting change.

Approximately half of participating schools described active efforts to share lessons across their staff, suggesting that transition support was becoming more embedded. One coordinator explained plans to debrief the entire faculty once the Pilot concluded:

> *Hopefully at the end of the year, once the Pilot is finished for us, we'll get a chance to feedback to the whole staff… on what we've done and what has worked, and share some of the things that we've learnt with the whole staff; and then approaches throughout the school would start to change (School staff member, M14, at a rural, mainstream school).*

These schools reported that teaching teams outside the transition cohort were starting to adapt their practice. They said transition support was routine for staff involved in Pilot and that awareness had been raised among the wider staff. One interviewee from a rural, special school explained how other staff, not involved in the Pilot, gave advice about participating students in terms of what support might benefit them.

> *It's very much part of the schedule for the students now that they go to [the] home economics teacher and they look at the recipes that are coming up and discuss the ingredients. So, there's a real process there that [students] are getting more experienced on and that's just part of life at school now (School staff member, S16, at a rural, special school).*

Several schools, particularly those with a dedicated transition teacher, supportive leadership and long-standing local relationships, described the scheme as fully embedded. For example, a teacher at a Dublin-based special school said they had *'upped our game in transitions – the students are getting out more, we're engaging with the community'* (School staff member, WWW01). Similarly, at a Galway-based mainstream school, the transition team said they continued to use employer links and planned annual careers fairs for incoming cohorts. A teacher from a smaller special school reported that the Pilot had reshaped their routines:

> *We're doing more focused sessions on what life will be like after school. Giving students more say and planning trips out using timetables, managing themselves, picking a café… (School staff member, WWW02).*

Even in a large mainstream school that delivered the Pilot to six students, a teacher noted that although funding for his additional hours ended, the awareness he gained had changed his wider practice:

> *You get to know the kids, see the anxieties they hide in a mainstream class. I'd definitely be more aware now (School staff member, WWW02).*

Wider stakeholders pointed to a geographic divide in embeddedness. In Galway, it was felt that consistent staffing and early involvement have made the scheme part of everyday practice; in Dublin, more transient teams risk losing continuity. Relatedly, education and training support staff suggested the Pilot remains a 'slow grower', but they have seen increasing teacher outreach since school visits and cluster days.

In contrast, some schools saw awareness confined to the direct Pilot participants. As one teacher in an urban, special school observed:

> *To be honest, I think a lot of the staff will kind of be oblivious to it [especially if they] aren't working in the graduation class... We have two separate ends…We have junior and senior ends, so the senior end would probably know a bit more about it…. We all have challenges in classrooms and so I think everyone just has enough on their own plate, dealing with their classes… A lot of our classrooms have kids with challenging behaviour, lots of other issues (School staff member, S09, at an urban, special school).*

This limited awareness meant that students outside the Pilot cohort and colleagues in other departments often failed to benefit from shared learning or early identification of needs. Moreover, **when dedicated hours were withdrawn from mainstream schools at the end of the Pilot, embedding was perceived to falter**.[15] A Pilot coordinator from a special school lamented the abrupt drop-in support:

> *It's gone from 100% support to 0. […] LCA students this year are coming to me for help… and I just can't give it the same level of support (School staff member, WWW05).*

This sudden reduction in capacity was seen as risking setting students and wider staff back to pre-Pilot levels of engagement and understanding. The following vignette reveals gaps in post-school planning when a student did not achieve their preferred pathway.

Relatedly, disability support service representatives warned that any embedding beyond annual HSE referrals remains 'quite limited', calling for stronger inter-agency pathways to sustain engagement. In this regard, policy representatives acknowledged that it was too early for full habitual uptake of transition support but felt that momentum was building. They observed that teachers 'now know where to look' for transition resources and, with continued use of Padlet, will find 'much more information this year, next year, and beyond' (Policy representative, WS05).

Overall, evidence from Phase 1 shows that where schools combined dedicated transition-support hours, supportive leadership and proactive resource sharing, the Pilot has taken root. Yet, variations in personnel continuity, clarity of roles and post-Pilot resourcing make embedding uneven. This suggests that to secure lasting change, schools will need clear plans for sustaining dedicated staffing, expanding shared learning and formalising transition routines at the whole-school level.

15 The Pilot, by design, provided additional teaching hours for a limited time. Although Phase 2 of the Pilot began in September 2024, it focused on special schools only. A total of 40 special schools were selected to participate in Phase 2, including five special schools that also participated in Phase 1. The total number of support hours per week was reduced from 12 hours in Phase 1 to 6 hours in Phase 2. For further details on Phase 2 see Chapter 7: Discussions and Conclusions.

Student B (Urban Mainstream School)

Transition gaps after Leaving Certificate

Student B completed the traditional Leaving Certificate. Both school staff and family encouraged them to consider the LCA, feeling it could support broader skill development and more flexible post-school options. However, Student B viewed the LCA as less prestigious and were determined to pursue the traditional route.

They were highly motivated and had a clear goal of studying a university course. They visited the campus, met with access officers and were deeply invested in this pathway. Unfortunately, they did not achieve the points required for this highly competitive course.

Although they performed well academically, missing out on their chosen course left them without a clear alternative. According to their parent, the student now spends most days at home without structure or routine. They feel their child has regressed and remains undecided about next steps.

4.7 Summary

Findings from Phase 1 of the evaluation show that the Pilot was largely implemented as intended. Schools deployed 12 flexible transition-support hours to deliver tailored profiling, life-skills workshops, work placements and multidisciplinary planning. Dedicated staffing, strong leadership buy-in, proactive NCSE coordination and structured shared-learning forums underpinned effective delivery. However, staffing shortages, administrative burdens, uneven employer engagement and transport and funding constraints limited consistency. Embedding of transition planning varied. In well-resourced schools with stable personnel and clear routines, practices became habitual. In other schools, awareness remained confined to participating staff, and withdrawal of dedicated support hours risked the reversal of early gains. The insights in this chapter matter because they identify the conditions required for sustainable, school-wide transition support and highlight areas (coordination roles, inter-agency collaboration and resourcing) that must be addressed to successfully scale transition support. These issues will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6. The next chapter examines the impact of the Pilot.

CHAPTER 5

Impacts of the Pilot

5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the effects of the CES Transition Pilot across multiple levels. It draws on quantitative parent and student survey data and qualitative data from in-depth interviews, focus groups and workshops with school staff and wider stakeholders to present a range of perspectives. Analysis of the impact of the Pilot considers student outcomes, school practices and perceived impact on post-school settings as well as broader implications for communities and services. To further illustrate the student outcomes and the drivers that contributed to their realisation, the chapter incorporates student vignettes.

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

- RQ2. 'What impact has the Pilot had on students with disabilities and their post-school pathways?'
- RQ3. 'What impact has the Pilot had on schools, and is there any perceived impact on post-school settings?'

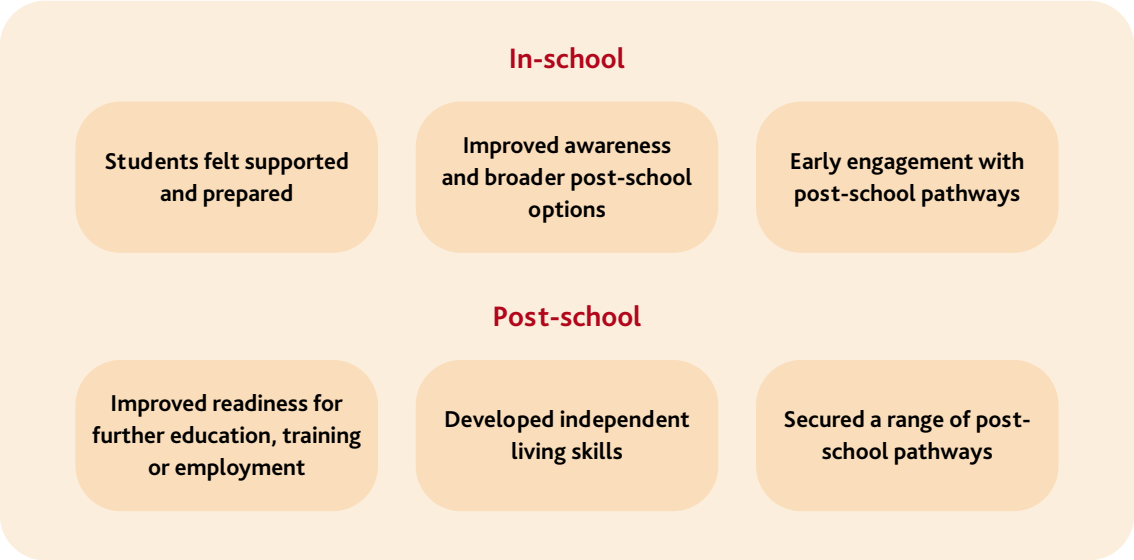
It starts with this overview of the chapter structure (Section 5.1) and then explores the Pilot's impact on participating students, including their personal development, future planning and access to opportunities (Section 5.2). Next, it examines how the Pilot influenced school-level practices, including staff knowledge, confidence and planning processes (Section 5.3). It then considers the perceived impact on other stakeholders, including post-school settings and parents (Section 5.4). Section 5.5 considers what might have happened in the absence of the Pilot and the risks it may have helped reduce. The chapter closes with a summary of key findings (Section 5.6).

5.2 Impact on Students

This section explores the in-school and post-school impact of the Pilot on participating students. In-school impact refers to early effects seen while the students were still at school, such as their preparedness for life after school. Post-school impact focuses on what participating students did in the six to nine months after leaving school.

The figure below summarises the impact of the Pilot on students. Each area is described in more detail in the remainder of the section. Overall, students, parents, teachers and school staff involved in this evaluation felt very positive about the impact of the Pilot on participating students.

Figure 9 – Impact on Students



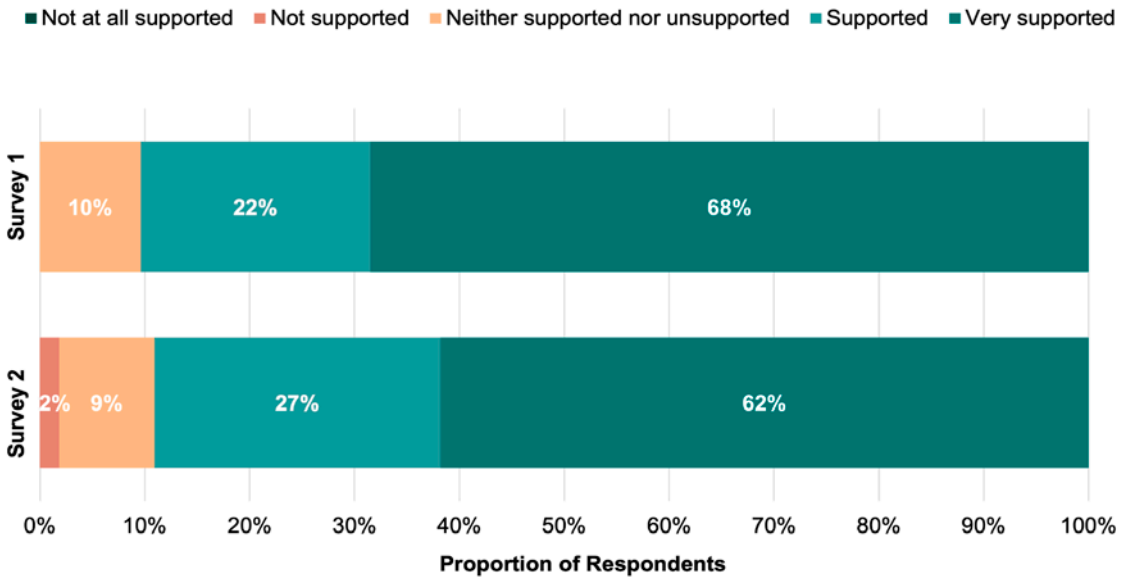
5.2.1 In-school impact

As defined above, in-school impact refers to changes that took place while the students were still at school. This includes greater awareness of transition options and more work experience organised by schools.

5.2.1.1 Perceived level of support and preparedness

Analysis of the survey responses indicates a consistently high level of perceived support among students about their transition from school.

Figure 10 – Are You Being Supported to Think about Moving on from School?



Source: The Pilot Student Survey 1, Q5 (Base: n=73), The Pilot Student Survey 2, Q17 (Base: n=55)

As Figure 10 shows, 90% (n=66) of respondents felt 'supported' or 'very supported', with only 10% (n=7) indicating they felt 'neither supported nor unsupported'. No students felt unsupported. By Survey 2, which was conducted later in the school year, overall perception of support remained high, with 89% (n=49) of respondents feeling supported or very supported. These results were backed up by findings from the parent surveys. Most parents felt that their child was receiving 'a lot' or 'a very high level' of support (77% or n=27). These results suggest that students had the necessary levels of support to plan their transition from school.

Parents reported that the Pilot activities were valuable in boosting their child's confidence and providing clarity about future pathways. Many noted the practical support these activities offered, helping students to feel prepared and less anxious about the next stage of their lives. These insights suggest that the Pilot played a crucial role in empowering students and offering tailored guidance during a pivotal time.

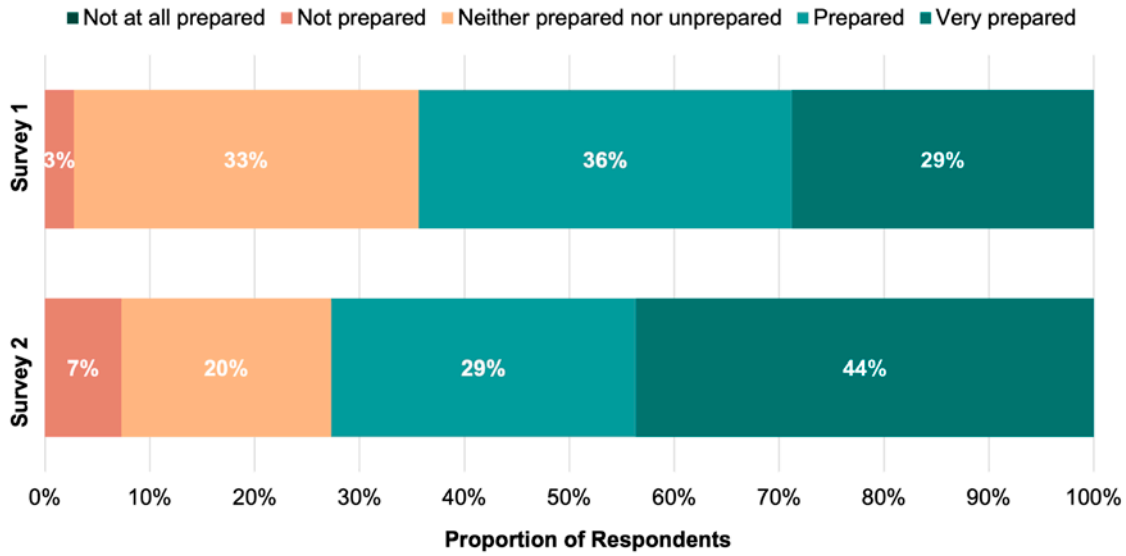
> *They gave [my child] some awareness of the world after secondary school. They gave [them] the ability to question the different options open to [them], made [them] aware of what [they] [thought they] might be able for and helped [them to] discuss the various options that interest[ed] [them] (Parent survey respondent, PS1.5).*

> *The interviews skills and work experience were particularly helpful. [My child] learnt a lot about how to present [themselves] in an interview, how to make eye contact, etc… The work experience was fantastic… it gave [them] another perspective on what [they] [could] do with [their] qualifications when finished third level. [They] had been very focused on a particular work path but now realise[d] there [were] other options too (Parent survey respondent, PS1.15).*

Student perceptions of the level of support they received did not vary depending on their planned post-school destinations. However, students who selected 'other' for their post-school plans were more likely to feel less supported and less prepared. This suggests that students with unique or undecided post-school aspirations may have felt less positive about the support received, although the sample size (six students in Survey 2) is too small to draw definitive conclusions. Additionally, there was no difference in the level of perceived support based on the type of school (mainstream or special school) or location (Dublin or Galway). Overall, these findings indicate that, despite varying school capacity, the Pilot activities effectively empowered students to explore and plan their post-school options.

Survey responses showed a slight improvement in how prepared students felt to leave school as their final year progressed (Figure 11). In Survey 1, only 29% (n=21) of students felt very prepared. By Survey 2, the proportion of students who felt very prepared rose to 44% (n=24). Overall, students were more likely to report feeling prepared or very prepared in Survey 2 compared to Survey 1. These shifts suggest that the Pilot may have had a positive impact on some students' readiness for transition. Student perceptions of their preparedness did not differ across respondent groups (post-school destination, school type, location, etc.).

Figure 11 – How Prepared Do You Feel to Move on from School?



Source: The Pilot Student Survey 1, Q6 (Base: n=73), The Pilot Student Survey 2, Q15 (Base: n=55). Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

However, a substantial number still felt neither prepared nor unprepared – 33% (n=24) in Survey 1 and 20% (n=11) in Survey 2. Furthermore, the number of students who reported feeling not prepared increased from 3% (n=2) to 7% (n=4). This result bears weak explanatory power given the small sample size. Perhaps naturally, these results indicate that a minority was more concerned about leaving school as the end of their final year approached. In one case, these concerns came with the acknowledgement that they were being supported through the Pilot:

> *I'm worried about being able to get a job, despite doing work experience and having a CV. I'm worried there might not be room for me in a working environment (Student, SS2.17).*

This suggests that beyond the Pilot, deeper uncertainties, such as perceived stigma or labour-market competition, continue to influence students' confidence in their transition.

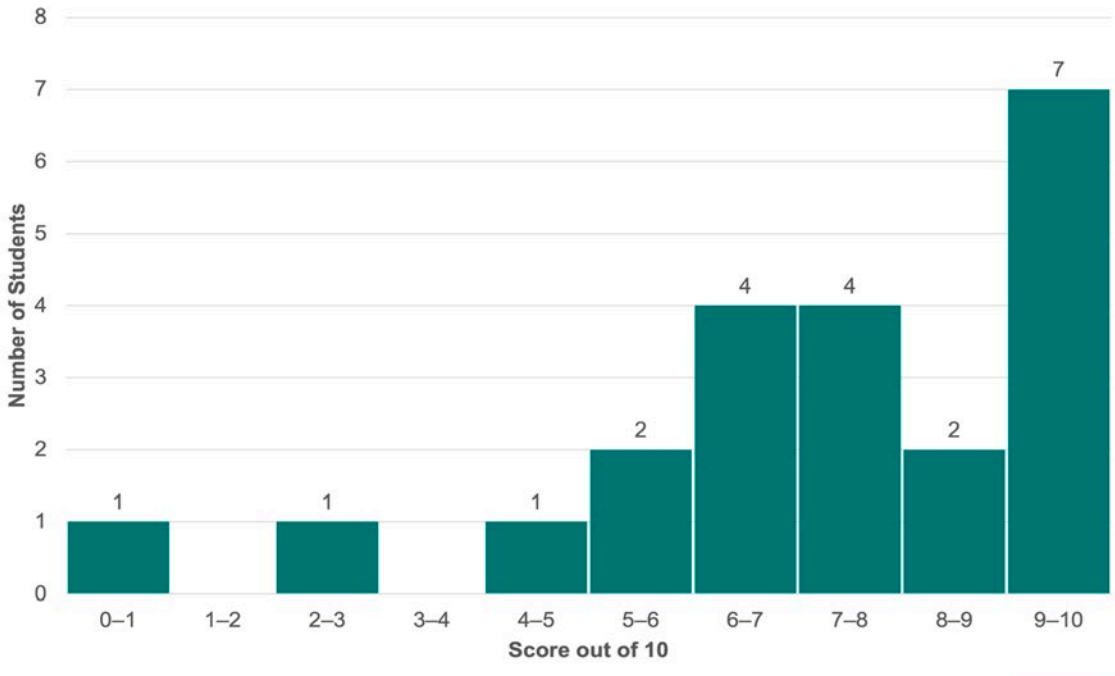
The parent survey corroborates these findings. Most respondents (75%, n=27) felt that their child was at least moderately prepared. In contrast, 25% (n=9) of parents felt that their child was 'not very' or 'not at all prepared to leave school. When asked what supports they would like to help prepare their child further, a wide range of activities was stated. They included developing life skills, work experience, information on college enrolment and familiarisation with new day service.

> *I think this programme has done as much as possible for [my child] and ourselves. We are grateful for all they have tried to do (Parent survey respondent, PS1.8).*

Positive perceptions were also reported in the post-transition survey. Looking back to the Pilot, **most students rated the support they received highly**. As Figure 12 shows, the mean score on a scale from one to ten was 7.3. Furthermore, the most frequent score was between nine and ten. This demonstrates that a substantial cohort of primary beneficiaries felt that the Pilot had helped them prepare to transition. Again, these results are not representative of all students who participated in the Pilot, as only 25% of participating students responded to Survey 3 (22 out of 89). Furthermore, a minority of students gave low ratings to the support they received. One individual scored their support a zero out of ten. While they did acknowledge interview preparation they received as helpful, they did not feel like the Pilot made a tangible difference to their transition:

> *There was barely any communication, and [I] didn't feel like anything was actually happening (Student, SS3.1).*

Figure 12 – Students' Perceptions of Pilot Support, on a Scale from 1 to 10



Source: The Pilot Student Survey 3, Q20 (Base: n=22)

Student C's vignette powerfully illustrates the emotional dimension of transition support. It shows how some students experience fear and nervousness about leaving school alongside joy and optimism and underlines the importance of emotional support as an explicit component of transition planning.

Student C (Urban Mainstream School)

Emotional support and day service visits

Student C, who has Down syndrome, was anxious about leaving school. To prepare Student C for the move, the school arranged several visits to the day centre they would be attending. These visits allowed Student C to become familiar with the building, meet staff and reconnect with peers already attending the centre. Their family expressed deep appreciation for the school's efforts. The student said:

> *I have some friends at [the day service], where I want to go. I have visited three times (Student C).*

> *Trips to next establishment has been useful. Reconnecting with others already there (Parent of Student C).*

The school also facilitated work experience opportunities, which helped boost Student C's self-confidence and gave them a sense of independence. Their parent noted:

> *[The] chance to meet staff and people at the next place and become familiar with the building. Work experience [provided by their school] was great for [their] self-confidence (Parent of Student C).*

Student C spoke positively about the activities available at the day centre:

> *I get to do cooking. I do science. My friend goes there (Student C).*

Despite these encouraging developments, Student C continues to miss school, particularly their SNA, with whom they had a close and supportive relationship. They often express a desire to return:

> *I would like more time with … my SNA (Student C).*

Maintaining contact with the school has been a source of comfort. Staff have invited Student C back for visits, which have helped them feel remembered and supported:

> *The staff at [their old school] have remained in contact with us and have invited [them] back to visit several times. This has meant so much to [my child] as [they] really missed them all. I also think the visits helped [my child] to settle in at the new place, by [them] being able to chat about it with all the [school] staff who knew [them] so well (Parent of Student C).*

Although the transition has been emotionally challenging, Student C is beginning to form new friendships at the day centre, which is helping them adjust. The school's commitment to a well-supported transition has made a meaningful difference to both Student C and their family:

> *I go to town, visit shops. I like baking, swimming, going to the gym, library and work experience. I have made new friends (Student C).*

Students' emotions towards their transition were mixed but mostly positive (Table 5). In both surveys, joy (27%, n=41) was the most frequently reported emotion. Interest (17%, n=25) and optimism (15%, n=22) were also commonly expressed. There was a 7-percentage point decrease in students feeling joy about their move when comparing Survey 2 to Survey 1. However, this was partly counteracted by a 4-percentage point increase in students feeling optimistic. Nervousness and fear were the most common negative emotions among survey respondents. The frequency with which they were selected did not change from Survey 1 to Survey 2. Sadness did become notably more frequent, rising from 3% (n=5) of responses to 9% (n=12) in the second survey. When considering this alongside the decrease in students feeling joy, the results suggest that overall sentiment became slightly more negative as they approached the end of their final year. This is likely to relate to students feeling sad about many of their long-standing relationships coming to an end, the nervousness associated with a soon-to-occur change in routine and uncertainty. That said, over half the emotions reported by respondents remained positive in Survey 2. This reflects how moving on from school represented considerable change that brought with it a range of emotions. It is important to note that transitioning from school to post-school life is a major milestone for all students, not just those with disabilities (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe, 2003 and Lent, Brown and Hackett, 1994).

Table 5 – Students' Emotions about Moving on from School (Proportion of Responses)

Emotion	Survey 1	Survey 2	Percentage Point Change
Joy	27%	20%	-7
Interest	17%	16%	-1
Nervousness	15%	15%	0
Optimism	13%	17%	+4
Fear	7%	7%	0
Anticipation	5%	6%	+1
Trust	5%	3%	-1*
Boredom	5%	2%	-2*
Sadness	3%	9%	+6
Concentration	3%	2%	-1
Distraction	1%	0%	-1
Anger	0%	2%	+2

Source: The Pilot Student Survey 1, Q4 (Base: n=73), The Pilot Student Survey 2, Q10 (Base: n=55). Students could pick up to three emotions

** Totals do not sum due to rounding*

5.2.1.2 Improved awareness and broadened post-school options

Most stakeholder interviewees were confident that participating students were now more aware of the range of options available to them. They said that the Pilot enabled individual students to make more informed decisions about what they wanted to do after school. The range of opportunities to develop employability skills that was offered to students was said to be an important factor in broadening their aspirations. This was supported by parent survey results: 80% (n=26) of parents felt that the Pilot had helped their child learn about a range of options.

> *Children are definitely getting opportunities they wouldn't have been aware of otherwise, and their parents are also being made aware of options they might not have known about (Policy representative, WS05).*

> *It has helped me find a college and a course (Student, SS2.6).*

> *It has helped me learn about many different trades (Student, SS2.24).*

Other stakeholder and school staff interviewees noted that profiling students' needs[16] and interests, teacher engagement and transition **planning enabled students to explore a wider set of post-school options**, many of which they or their families had not previously considered. It was felt that the Pilot fostered a shift from passive reliance on traditional adult disability services towards active exploration of diverse, post-school options, including further education, work experience and apprenticeships. These transition options also included the students' choice to stay within the education system and continue with their school education rather than leaving to begin work. These changes were enabled by school-based guidance and early communication with families. A minority of school staff interviewees also noted that attendance rates and retention amongst participating students improved while they were in the Pilot:

> *The job fairs took a lot of time and energy to organise, but they were absolutely worth it. The exposure students received helped them see what's possible. Some didn't believe they could go to third level if they were doing the LCA, but they can, through a PLC course, for example. Sometimes they just need to be told and shown (BITCI, WS03).*

> *What we're saying is: explore all the options. Make sure every available option has been considered (Policy representative, WS02).*

> *They knew what they wanted but not how to get there. The Pilot opened that up (School staff member, WWW05).*

The quotes above indicate the importance of embedding structured transition planning as a formal part of in-school support, ensuring that all students with disabilities have access to early, tailored conversations about their goals.

16 To understand their aspirations and what transition support was needed.

A minority of stakeholder interviewees observed that involving parents in structured planning helped to reduce parental anxiety and clarified options for families. This, in turn, supported students' understanding and access to more appropriate destinations:

> *Students began creating profiles with parents, and as far as we know, all students who were profiled or put forward for referral were done by Christmas. That removed a lot of anxiety for parents. They knew they might not have a place yet, but the process had started. They also knew how and when it was happening (Education and training support representative, WS06).*

A minority of stakeholder and school staff interviewees noted that the Pilot created alternatives to default transitions into adult day services. The use of deferral[17] allowed students to trial mainstream options, helping to reduce unnecessary reliance on disability supports. When families and students were shown practical mainstream pathways, and day services were framed as optional rather than inevitable, independence felt more achievable:

> *Deferring is a great option we've had in recent years. It allows people to try a mainstream option and see how they get on (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

> *That experience might help young people, and their parents realise that they don't have to automatically move into disability services (Policy representative, WS02).*

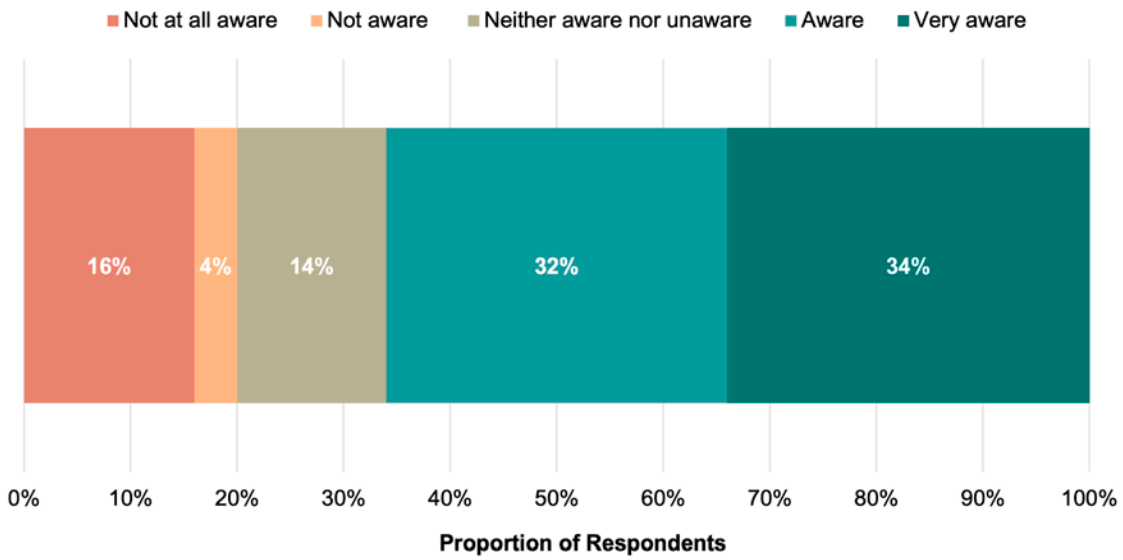
> *If they'd gone straight to [a FEI or HEI], they'd have dropped out. But now they're building independence step by step (School staff member, WWW05).*

However, students' own understanding of support available outside school varied. As Figure 13 shows, 66% (n=36) felt 'aware' or 'very aware', while 34% (n=19) felt 'neutral', 'not aware' or 'not at all aware'. This positive trend still indicates that a sizable portion of students were unclear about external support options. Given survey biases discussed in Chapter 3, actual awareness might be lower.

The fact that the survey took place in their final year suggests that many leavers lacked clarity on external assistance precisely when they most needed it. Without this knowledge, students may have struggled to navigate post-school pathways or sustain the gains from school-based transition activities. The absence of any requests for more information in the follow-up survey could reflect either a false sense of confidence or a gap in how the question was framed. Relatedly, a minority of interviewees also acknowledged that uneven access to placements and tailored teaching risked students reverting to lower-engagement pathways without consistent, cross-service support. This was due to staffing and resourcing limits, as outlined in Section 4.5.

17 'The deferral process allows school leavers an opportunity to access mainstream options, such as further education and training or employment, with the knowledge that they can still avail of a HSE funded place in a disability day service within a five year period of leaving school or Rehabilitative Training' (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2024).

Figure 13 – Students' Awareness of Support outside School



Source: The Pilot Student Survey 2, Q11 (Base: n=50). Examples of support given in the survey question were a disability access officer, AHEAD, the HSE and SOLAS

5.2.1.3 Early engagement with external organisations

Most interviewees across all stakeholder groups pointed out that the Pilot facilitated smoother transitions for students by enabling early engagement with external organisations. They highlighted that successful engagement with services like BITCI, NLN and local colleges helped to personalise student pathways, reduced adjustment anxiety and thus made transitions more successful. This level of external coordination was not standard in participating schools before the Pilot:

> *You don't know what supports you need until someone gives you support (Parent focus group interviewee, PFG02).*
>
> *This was the first time any of their students had tried work experience… It didn't result in anything long term, but it opened up the possibility that this could be something students do in the future (Health and social care representative, WS01).*
>
> *BITCI opened doors for us, and we were very thankful (Parent interviewee, PFG03).*
>
> *[One student]'s accountancy apprenticeship – they found it at an apprenticeship day we took them to. They wouldn't have found it otherwise (School staff member, WWW04).*

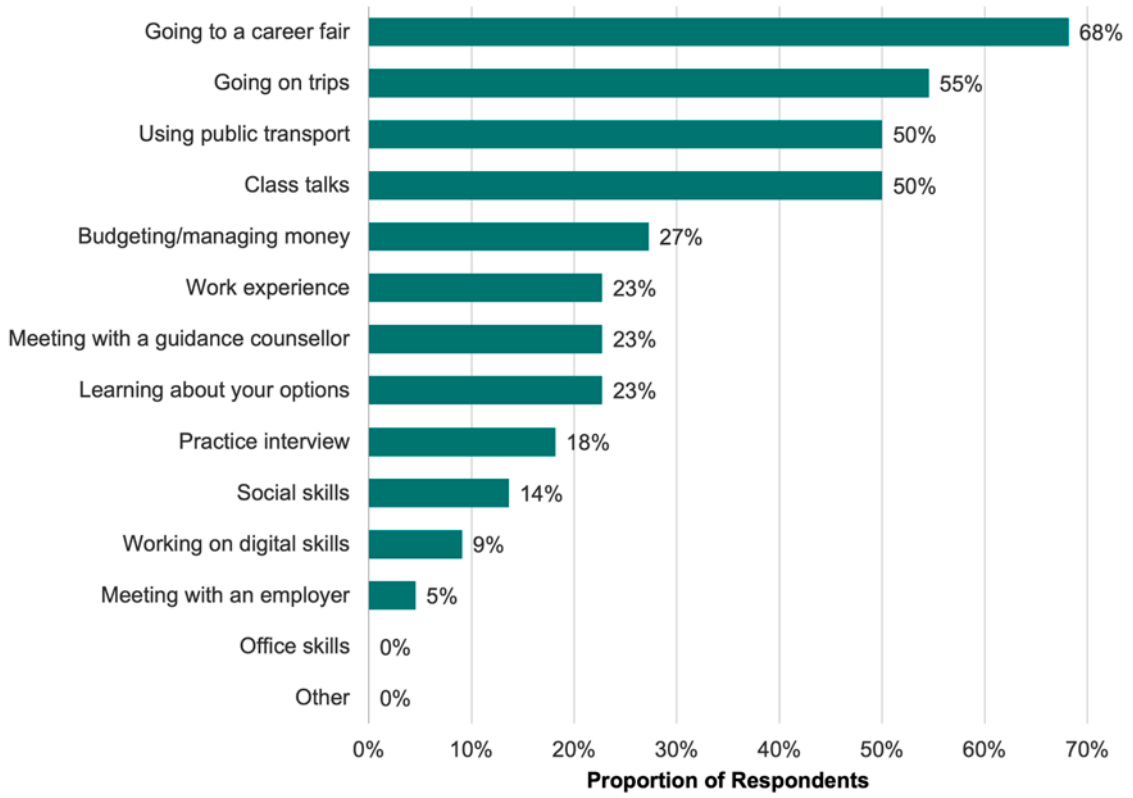
5.2.2 Post-school impact

As defined above, post-school impact refers to the outcomes for participating students after leaving school. This includes their pathways or destinations, such as further education or work placement. It also covers developing the necessary skills for living independently.

5.2.2.1 Contributing activities

The third student survey was conducted after students had left school. Students were asked what activities they found to be helpful when transitioning out of school. They were asked to choose from a list based on the activities provided by participating schools. As shown in Figure 14, activities that required leaving the school grounds were found to be the most helpful, including going on trips, like careers fairs, and using public transport. Half of respondents also found class talks to be helpful.

Figure 14 – Most Helpful Activities in Transitioning out of School



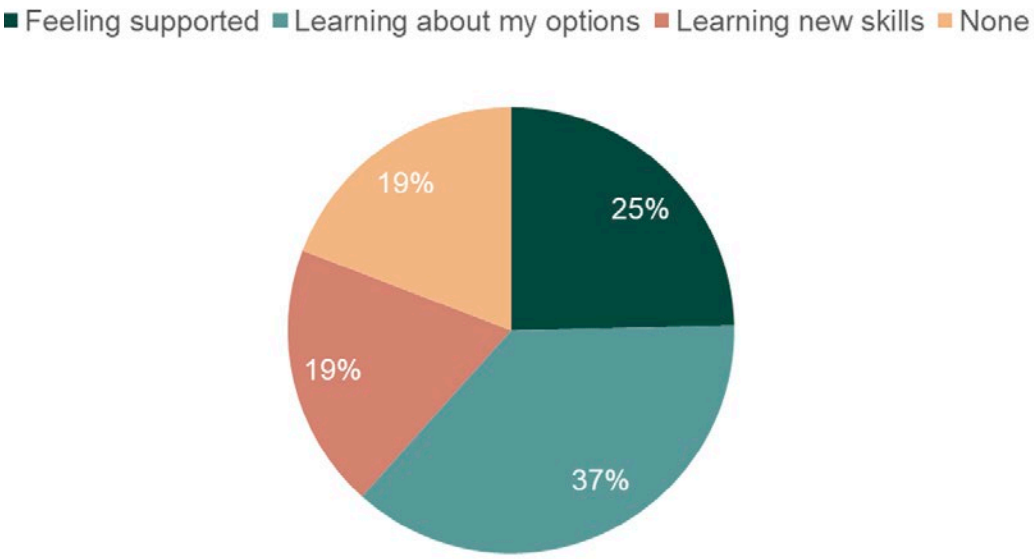
Source: The Pilot Student Survey 3, Q13 (Base: n=22)

Figure 15 shows that in terms of broader categories, the most helpful type of support reported by respondents was learning about their options (37%, n=27). This shows that many students found the informative activities such as career fairs, class talks and counsel guidance, to be most useful in assessing the full range of options available to them. For a quarter of respondents (25%, n=18), simply feeling supported was the most helpful thing, which indicates the importance of students feeling emotionally supported. This aspect of the Pilot helped students to reduce worry and to think ahead with a positive mindset. However, feedback from one student highlighted how informative and practical help can sometimes be overwhelming:

> *I'm stressing myself out so much that I don't know what I want to do any more. I feel as though people are pushing their ideas on what I should do with my life (Student, SS2.28).*

This demonstrates the need for support to be receptive to individual needs, balancing practical advice with emotional support. Learning new skills was the most helpful aspect for 19% (n=14) of students, showing that personal development activities were also valued.

Figure 15 – What Has Helped the Most when Thinking about Leaving School



Source: The Pilot Student Survey 1, Q10 (Base: n=73)

A minority of school staff interviewees said it was too early to point to any specific long-term impacts on students. However, they were generally positive about the impact that the Pilot would have on disabled students' post-school transitions.

5.2.2.2 Improved readiness for further education, training or employment

Most school staff interviewees consistently highlighted growth in students' confidence, personal development and emotional maturity. They said the Pilot helped to create a safe space for career or post-school options to be discussed and heard, exercising their student voice. Furthermore, 73% (n=19) of parents felt that the Pilot was 'slightly', 'very' or 'extremely' helpful in improving their children's employability skills.

A minority of school staff interviewees reported that students were more likely to ask for help and talk to others. Emotional support and relationship building with staff helped students to 'open up'. They also noted that students were more engaged, with reduced anxiety.

> *I feel our students are gaining a lot and they will continue to gain throughout the Pilot (School staff member, S16, at a rural, special school).*

> *The Pilot was extremely helpful to me as it got me lots of work experience…. [which] was very enlightening as it taught me about money and showed me a glimpse of what the world of work is like (Student, SS2.16).*

Personal development was further supported by students building friendships. One school staff interviewee reported that students who were previously isolated became more comfortable engaging with their peers from other cohorts. This, in turn, supported their social development. A minority of stakeholder interviewees noted that in addition to fewer behavioural issues, there was improved self-regulation and tolerance, more focus, and better behaviour in class and on trips.

> *I have gotten better at speaking to others, and I feel that will help me meet people when I leave school (Student, SS2.53).*

Ultimately, interviewees responded that the Pilot was responsible for improving the participating students' confidence, self-esteem and attitude about their future, with one school staff interviewee commenting that:

> *The students will know where they are going and will be familiar with it before they leave us. We will facilitate that. I can compare that to previous years where we have failed maybe to do that for students who had similar issues and abilities... They were not always ready on time. Even though we might have had a placement for them, they were not given the necessary time to adjust and make that change (School staff member, M19, at a rural, mainstream school).*

Increased confidence was also noted by respondents to the parent survey. Eighty-four per cent (n=22) of surveyed parents felt that the Pilot was 'moderately', 'very' or 'extremely' helpful for building their child's confidence. A minority of students also mentioned increased confidence:

> *The Pilot helped me build confidence and decision-making skills, making sure I felt ready for the responsibilities and challenges of life after school (Student, SS3.4).*

The following vignettes provide insight into the experiences of two students who took part in the Pilot and achieved major milestones in their academic aspirations. With targeted support, both individuals navigated their post-school pathways and developed skills that helped them move towards greater independence and confidence in pursuing their goals beyond school.

Student D (Urban Mainstream School)

From summer school to competitive foundation course

Student D completed the LCA at a large community school. The school offered strong pastoral support, particularly through the home school liaison teacher and the chaplain, both of whom were actively involved in the Pilot and played a key role in supporting Student D's journey beyond school.

Although Student D was reserved, they were articulate when prompted. As part of their transition activities, they attended a university summer school. This experience helped them to imagine life beyond school, build new friendships and feel more confident in a new environment. It was a turning point that led them to apply for a competitive university foundation course with 'very interesting modules, [and] work experience' (Student D).

The application process involved a written submission and an interview. The school provided extensive preparation, including practical skills such as independent travel on the urban rail network and using a banking app to make everyday purchases. These activities helped Student D to develop greater independence and self-assurance.

Student D's family was fully engaged and supportive throughout the process. When the student was accepted onto the foundation course, it was a proud moment for everyone involved:

> *We were so proud when they got in. The school really helped them believe they could do it (Parent of Student D).*

Since starting the course, Student D has returned to their former school to share their progress and achievements, which has been a source of encouragement for staff and students alike.

Student D rated the post-school support they received as ten out of ten. Their studies are going well, and they are now planning further work experience with the hope of securing paid employment soon.

Student E (Urban Mainstream School)

Accessible pathways: rethinking course choice

Student E completed the LCA at a mainstream school. They have additional needs and use a wheelchair due to a physical disability, making transport and accessibility key considerations in their transition planning.

Student E had originally hoped to pursue a creative course at college. However, after visiting their local college several times, they encountered significant access-related barriers. The animation course was located on the third floor, and the lift was too small to accommodate their wheelchair. In addition, there were no accessible toilet facilities on that floor.

> *We realised the lift just wouldn't work for them, and there was no suitable toilet nearby. It wasn't going to be manageable (Parent of Student E).*

Faced with these challenges, Student E decided to change their course choice, at the same college. The location was fully accessible and on the ground floor, thus allowing them to continue their education in a more inclusive environment.

> *I was disappointed at first, but I'm happy now. I like the course (Student E).*

Their parent shared that Student E had settled in well and was coping positively with the demands of the course. Although transport remains a challenge, the family is learning to navigate it together, and Student E is gradually gaining independence in this area.

5.2.2.3 Development of independent living skills

A minority of stakeholder interviewees noted the development of independent living skills as another positive outcome of the Pilot. They said that students potentially developed increased confidence in everyday tasks such as using public transport, managing money and going shopping independently:

> *Maybe they'll never use [public transport], but at least it will have been tried properly, and they'll have been taught the skills (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

Furthermore, 81% (n=21) of parent survey respondents felt that the Pilot was 'moderately, 'very' or 'extremely' helpful for their child's independent living skills.

These independent living skills and increased independence were developed through experiences embedded in the Pilot such as the transition trips. One school staff member described how a student who had been unable to leave home alone was now able to go to the shop by themselves:

> *The parents wouldn't let [student] leave the house by [themselves], and now [they're] allowed to walk down to the local shopping centre, and we built up that trust through the Pilot, through things we've done in class, through experiences with [the student] going out (School staff member, M05, at an urban, mainstream school).*

These seemingly small steps were described as crucial in promoting greater autonomy, mobility and life confidence:

> *The benefits of independent living skills and life skills are significant (Policy representative, WS02).*

> *They planned trips using public transport, managed their money… all those small steps matter (School staff member, WWW02).*

Student F's journey in the vignette below highlights how the Pilot fostered participant's confidence, presentation skills and artistic self-expression.

Student F (Rural Mainstream School)

Student F attended a rural mainstream school, which did not offer the LCA. Staff used the 12 hours teaching time to craft a personalised programme of alternative modules and off-site activities tailored to Student F's strengths and interests.

One standout moment came when Student F was invited to exhibit their work publicly. With support from school staff, Student F prepared an exhibit. Staff ensured that the student felt comfortable being photographed alongside their work, celebrating their creativity and individuality. Reflecting on the exhibition, Student F said: 'I am proud of myself and my [work]. I hope people see it and understand me better.'

The school proudly describes Student F as a true success story of the Pilot. They have since transitioned to a regional ETB course, which is aligned with their interest:

> *[Student F's] creativity, resilience, and growth throughout the Pilot have been extraordinary (School staff member from Student F's school).*

5.2.2.4 Post-school destinations

Twenty students responded to at least one pre-transition survey (Survey 1 or Survey 2) and the post-transition survey (Survey 3). Of those students, 19 gave information on their planned destinations and actual outcome. Over half of these respondents went onto a training course (53%, n=10). Around a quarter (26%, n=5) went to college or university. Two (11%) went to adult day services. One individual (5%) went onto an apprenticeship programme and another (5%) went into employment. Figure 16 visualises the transitions taken by these 19 students, showing that just over half achieved their planned post-school pathway (53%, n=10). Over a third (37%, n=7) of students transitioned to a different form of education, training or employment from the one that they had originally planned. Two students (11%) who had planned to go on to education or training pathways ended up going to adult day services.

There are several reasons for the high proportion of students (47%, n=9) who had different outcomes from their plans. As identified in the teacher, parent and student feedback, the Pilot helped students to explore different pathways. Learning about new options may have led to students changing their plans during their final year. Failure to secure a place at their first-choice option, dropping out, or a natural change in preference were also reasons for different post-school destinations:

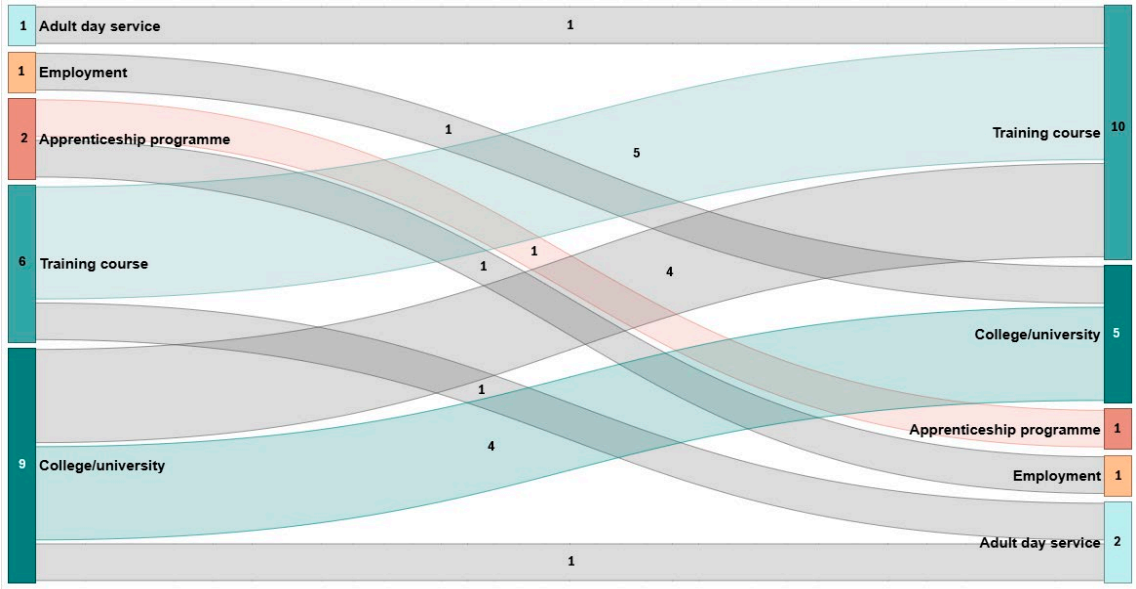
> *At first, I wanted to become a maths teacher, but after going to [an FEI] opening day in fifth year, I got interested in the accounting technician apprenticeship programme (Student, SS3.21).*

> *I would have liked to stay at college, but it was too much (Student, SS3.8).*

While planned versus actual post-school destination analysis is useful for understanding transitions, it is worth noting that this is a small, non-representative sample of participating students. Therefore, results should be taken as indicative.

Most respondents to the final student survey were satisfied with their post-school destination. When asked 'Would you have liked to do something else when you left school?' 86% (n=19) of respondents said no. This result is only indicative and does not represent the full cohort of students who participated in the Pilot. Furthermore, it is unclear whether this result was caused by participation in the Pilot, as the programme did not include a comparison group. Nevertheless, the result is positive and suggests that students who participated in the Pilot were happy with their outcome. This was further supported by other results from the post-transition survey – 86% (n=19) of respondents felt happy or very happy about what they ended up doing (see Figure 17). Furthermore, 85% (n=22) of parent survey respondents reported that their children achieved their first preference.

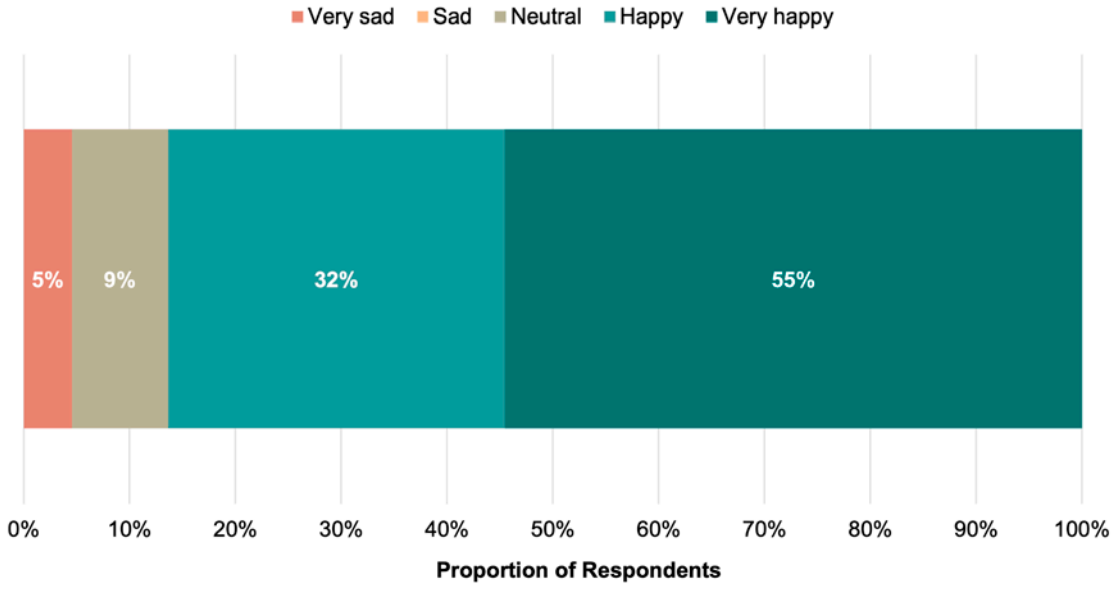
Figure 16 – Planned Destination of Students and Outcome Destination



Source: Students who responded to Survey 1 (Q8) or Survey 2 (Q3) and Survey 3 (Q4) (Base: n=19). Pathways are highlighted where the planned and actual destination match

Guidance on reading Figure 16: the Figure shows that one student planned to go to an adult day centre and ended up doing a training course and one student planned to go into employment and ended up at college or university, etc.

Figure 17 – Student Satisfaction Levels with Post-school Destination



Source: The Pilot Student Survey 3, Q15 (Base: n=22). Totals do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Interviews further explored how the Pilot enabled students to move towards their post-school destination. Improved employability skills were widely praised by participating staff in mainstream schools. Most school staff and stakeholder interviewees described improvements in students' ability to compose a CV, use basic IT tools and write emails. These skills were often gained through activities such as work experience and mock interviews:

> *Doing mock interviews, being exposed to different careers, and hearing from businesses really opened [their] eyes to new possibilities (BITCI, WS03).*

> *This week we had a student who secured an apprenticeship. This time last year, they didn't even know those apprenticeships existed. There was no plan for the student, and no one knew what route they might take. Now, that student has an apprenticeship.... We have other students who had never engaged in work experience and whose CVs were effectively empty. They've now completed online courses, created CVs, and done mock interviews. One student wanted to go on to a PLC course but had never sat an interview. They've now done one, said it went well, and believe they've secured a place (Education and training support representative, WS06).*

> *I would have loved to have even been able to capture the moment yesterday when each of those students came out from those mock interviews. To see the difference in their behaviour, their body language, their confidence, the positivity that was given to them, the feedback from the interviews. They were actually beaming, and it was the first time we [teachers] actually felt wow, this has actually been really effective (School staff member, M12, at a rural, mainstream school).*

Most stakeholder interviewees also shared instances of students transitioning into meaningful employment, including apprenticeships and tailored job roles. In some cases, this marked important turning points in the students' life. This was because they could access sustainable employment opportunities aligned with their strengths and interests due to the personalised support and effective job-matching through the Pilot:

> *[A student], who did the art exhibition, would be one. [Their] life changed in a way. [They] got work experience in a nursing home where [they] created portraits of the residents. Another student just got [their] Safe Pass and started work experience with [a construction company] … If [they do] well, I think they'll offer [them] a job (BITCI, WS03).*

> *We always try to find a job that suits the person. For example, there's a [student] about to start in a factory across the road from where [they live] ... The manager is taking [them] on permanently (Education and training support representative, WS07).*

The impact of successfully securing an apprenticeship and how this translated into student satisfaction with their post-school destination is aptly demonstrated through Student G's vignette.

Student G (Rural Mainstream School)

Breaking barriers through apprenticeships

Student G is from an underrepresented community. They initially wanted to be a teacher until they discovered apprenticeships during a college open day. They were determined to succeed and pursued an employer-sponsored apprenticeship. They secured a place with a large organisation and off-job training at a technological institute. Student G explained:

> *I chose this course because I have an interest in [this subject], as I am studying it as one of my Leaving Certificate subjects.*

They participated fully in surveys and reported that the Pilot substantially boosted their confidence and career decision-making:

> *The Pilot programme made me more confident. It helped me a lot. It helped me in deciding what I wanted to do as a career, as before I joined, I had no idea what I wanted to do for my career choice.*

Their school celebrates their success in securing this apprenticeship.

However, a small number of school staff interviewees pointed to the risk of positive momentum being lost if support stopped at the end of the school year. They mentioned that some students who did not have continued support after they left school struggled in their post-school destinations. Sustained support into early adulthood was seen as key to consolidating success. The conditions required for sustainability of positive outcomes are discussed in Chapter 6.

> *(A student) has been back three or four times for help. I spent my lunch today trying to sort out [their] college work experience. One student was ready for PLC but couldn't cope without the support. [Their parent] rang the school in tears (School staff member, WWW03).*

5.3 Impact on Schools

This section explores how the Pilot influenced school practices, planning approaches and their engagement with other stakeholders. It examines during-Pilot and post-Pilot effects on schools. During-Pilot impact captures changes that took place while the Pilot was underway, while post-Pilot impact refers to changes that were likely to continue after the Pilot ended. Table 6 below summarises these impacts.

Table 6 – Impact on Schools

During-Pilot Impacts	• Improved teachers' knowledge about post-school options and how to support students. • Shared knowledge informally and formally with other school staff not involved in the Pilot. • Improved capacity within schools for structured transition planning. • Improved identification of students in need of additional transition support and enabled earlier intervention. • Increased visibility of schools in the local community.
Post-Pilot Impacts	• Greater collaboration between mainstream and special schools. • Enhanced links between schools and external organisations. • A shift towards more formalised, year-round and embedded transition planning. • A cultural shift towards treating transitions as a shared, school-wide responsibility across mainstream and special schools.

5.3.1 During-Pilot impact

Most school staff and stakeholder interviewees said that the Pilot had enabled teachers to build knowledge about post-school options and how to support students through those processes. Staff delivering the Pilot became more aware of range of transition options. One interviewee from an urban, mainstream school commented that:

> *It has had a huge impact. Beforehand, I would never have looked into where students with additional needs go post-school life and now it has opened my eyes and the school's eyes on some of the possible locations these students can go [to] (School staff member, M03, at an urban, mainstream school).*

This learning occurred through internal CPD and informal peer sharing. It equipped staff in both mainstream and special schools with the tools and confidence to provide earlier guidance to students and families.

> *Teachers are sharing their practice across the school… They've been asked to present at whole-staff meetings to explain what transitions are and how they apply (Education and training support representative, WS06).*

As noted in Section 4.6, some school staff also described how the learnings taken by the staff directly involved in the Pilot spread to other school staff. The interviewee in this case noted that they were involved in conversations with other teachers not involved in the Pilot on the support they were providing for students with disabilities. They were hopeful that the legacy of the Pilot would continue in the school once the Pilot itself had ended.

The majority of stakeholder and school staff interviewees reported that the Pilot improved the capacity for schools to conduct structured transition planning. Staff were better able to define responsibilities, plan ahead and support students with practical steps like course applications and open-day visits. Dedicated transition hours allowed for more intentional, informed and student-centred preparation. Staff with a trusted, long-standing relationship with students were more likely to deliver effective transition planning, thereby enabling successful transitions.

> *We learnt a lot about PLC courses – what's involved, how to apply, even filling in application forms was a challenge for some. Now we know exactly how to support that process, step by step (School staff member, WWW01).*

> *The teacher's relationship or the relationship with a trusted adult is as important as anything else in the Pilot… If it's a teacher they've known since they were five or ten years old, they'll listen (Policy representative, WS08).*

Furthermore, a stakeholder interviewee noted that with improved capacity, the Pilot helped teachers better identify students in need of additional transition support and allowed for earlier intervention. Having dedicated transition time helped schools to move beyond reactive responses towards more proactive planning for vulnerable students:

> *Teachers didn't realise how much work needed to be done… Once they were given those extra 12 hours, they saw the difference it made. Now they're identifying students throughout the school who need extra support (Education and training support representative, WS09).*

A minority of school staff interviewees also felt that the Pilot had increased the visibility of the school in the local community. For special schools it increased the community's awareness of the school itself, as well as the challenges that disabled students encountered during the post-school transition. The Pilot also gave these students an increased sense of belonging in the wider community:

> *We are out and about more… We are in our local shop here every other week and they are starting to recognise us and recognise that there is a skills-learning aspect as well (School staff member, S16, at a rural, special school).*

5.3.2 Post-Pilot impact

As defined above, post-Pilot impact describes changes that may continue or emerge after the Pilot has ended. A minority of stakeholder interviewees reported that in mainstream and special schools the Pilot potentially helped to raise expectations for students' futures, fostering a more integrated approach to post-school planning. It also prompted greater collaboration between mainstream and special schools, helping to reduce silos and encourage knowledge sharing. A minority of school staff and stakeholder interviewees noted the emergence of peer networks (akin to communities of practice) among schools because of the Pilot. These were often facilitated by informal introductions, cluster meetings and shared resources, as listed in Chapter 4. Peer-to-peer connections helped schools to exchange ideas, co-develop activities and improve communication, including across mainstream and specialist settings:

Schools now know each other… Some schools are visiting each other, some are emailing or calling for ideas. Others are planning joint activities for next year (Education and training support representative, WS06).

Most school staff and stakeholder interviewees described how the Pilot enhanced links between schools and external organisations, including the HSE, employers, training providers and day services. This included knowledge within the schools on how to reach out to and engage with those external support agencies. One interviewee from a rural, mainstream school said that the Pilot had helped them reach out to a traveller organisation:

We depend on people out in the ITM [Irish Traveller Movement] for example to break down barriers for some of our students. That is the benefit of the project, it gives a voice for students, and it helps us to learn from people in external groups who are more knowledgeable (School staff member, M12, at a rural, mainstream school).

As noted in Section 4.6, a minority of school staff and stakeholder interviewees illustrated that the Pilot prompted a potential shift towards more formalised, year-round and embedded transition planning in participating schools. Some mainstream schools established cross-departmental guidance teams and introduced shared tools or practices that could outlive the Pilot. The following quotes illuminate this cultural shift:

We've started a whole-school guidance team now… I've mentioned what we did in transitions and how we might apply that across the whole school. It's definitely sparked new thinking (School staff member, WWW01).

Some of the teachers in our Pilot are guidance counsellors, and they now have access to this information. They can also share the link across their schools if their own guidance counsellor doesn't already have it (Education and training support representative, WS06).

A minority of school staff and stakeholder interviewees noted a cultural shift towards treating transitions as a shared, school-wide responsibility due to the Pilot. This included greater awareness among staff, a stronger student voice and more proactive collaboration across departments:

We're now talking in leadership meetings about how we prepare students with supports—not just for now, but for after they leave (School staff member, WWW03).

One impact is that it has brought transitions to the fore. It has shown schools, or perhaps illuminated for them, the importance of transitions (Policy representative, WS08).

5.4 Impact on Post-school Settings and Other Stakeholders

This section explores how the Pilot influenced other stakeholders, including local employers, training providers, public services and community-based organisations. It draws on qualitative data from interviews and workshops with teachers and other stakeholders to examine during-Pilot and post-Pilot effects. The main findings are summarised in 7.

Table 7 – Impact on Other Stakeholders

During-Pilot Impacts	• Strengthened collaboration between schools and other organisations. • Active engagement between local employers and students with disabilities. • Spillover effects on other students Increased parental engagement.
Post-Pilot Impacts	• Shift towards collaborative local ecosystems that could support improved long-term transition outcomes for students with disabilities. • Potential to alleviate pressure on adult disability services.

5.4.1 During-Pilot impact

Most school staff and stakeholder interviewees noted that the Pilot strengthened collaboration between participating schools, statutory agencies and other organisations. Relationships between schools and other services such as the HSE, NCSE and mental health services were enhanced through regular meetings, cross-sector gatherings and ongoing communication. This collaboration supported more informed transition planning and reduced duplication across health, education, training and social care services:

> *We had the HSE, AONTAS, and the National [Learning] Network in the same room, talking about the same schools they were going to support (Education and training support representative, WS06).*

> *We've developed a more concise relationship with schools since the Pilot. We're quite unusual in that our funders are also our competitors. On the vocational side, the ETB funds us, but they also provide the same training we do. So, sometimes students who might traditionally come to us may go to the ETB instead (Education and training support representative, WS09).*

> *New relationships built with BITCI, Irish Traveller Movement, employers, training centres and community sport/recreation organisations (School staff member, WWW04).*

> *Mental health services are now starting to link with us for referrals… It's still in the early stages, but I'm hopeful it will grow (Disability support representative, WS13).*

A minority of stakeholder interviewees also described how coordination was reinforced through local engagement activities initiated as part of the Pilot. These Pilot-led local activities increased awareness of post-school options, enhanced local partnerships and promoted a shared understanding of roles within the transition system. Over time, this has contributed to greater visibility and accessibility of transition pathways for students and their families:

> *We invite all relevant stakeholders – schools, SENOs, and others – to give them an idea of progression options… It's a big event for us (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

> *I think people saw that we're all in it together in the cluster days that [the Pilot coordinator] organised (Education and training support representative, WS09).*

Most school staff and stakeholder interviewees reported that the Pilot had encouraged local employers to engage more actively with students with disabilities. Through formal partnerships and informal outreach, the Pilot prompted employers to reassess their assumptions about disabled and neurodiverse candidates. They also began to consider the range of roles these students could do:

> *We met with the [an industry association] … They want to change how they view students with additional needs and are open to taking on people with neurodiverse needs (BITCI, WS03).*

A minority of school staff interviewees also observed some spillover effects on other students with disabilities and sometimes the whole class getting involved in activities and events being carried out with participating students. One interviewee felt that participating schools were in a better position to retain similar students in future cohorts.

A minority of school staff and stakeholder interviewees commented that the Pilot had resulted in increased parental engagement, particularly in mainstream schools. For example, before the Pilot parents would not have necessarily known about the supports and services that were available to their children. With the Pilot, interviewees felt that parents were able to learn about the range of post-school options and financial supports available:

> *There has been a lot more contact made with the parents of the students in the Pilot programme [compared to those who were not involved in the Pilot] (School staff member, M14, at a rural, mainstream school).*

> *There's an issue about the parents getting linked into the [transition] process... A lot of them would say that they didn't really know what was available or out there (School staff member, M03, at an urban, mainstream school).*

This point aligns with the perspective of parents, who reported high levels of involvement. Seventy-seven per cent (n=20) of respondents to the parent survey felt involved in their child's participation in the Pilot:

> *[I was] asked what supports we felt my [child] needed. I met the teacher involved (Parent survey respondent, PS2.10).*

> *Great information from school and Pilot programme (Parent survey respondent, PS2.17).*

A minority of parents gave suggestions about how parental engagement with the Pilot could have been increased. This included:

- Having a teacher-student-parent meeting to discuss and plan the student's transition and foster collaborative action.
- Providing more information on the Pilot (how it works and its purpose).
- Providing more information on events, opportunities and stakeholders that might be of interest for parents wanting to help their child to transition.

5.4.2 Post-Pilot impact

The Pilot contributed to changes in how local areas and wider stakeholders will approach post-school transitions. These changes involved forming collaborative ecosystems and reallocating resources across sectors. As noted in Section 5.2.1.3, most interviewees felt that the early engagement with post-school organisations, enabled by the Pilot, helped to personalise pathways and should ultimately lead to more successful transitions.

It was widely felt that the Pilot could potentially lead to more inclusive hiring by employers. For example, some employers developed work-based learning opportunities during the Pilot. Many of these partnerships continued beyond Phase 1, suggesting an increased openness to offering task-specific roles or support placements:

> *Now, a lot of local employers are coming back and saying they're happy to take someone to do one task (Education and training support representative, WS07).*

> *Employer links [with a large organisation] extended beyond the Pilot year (School staff member, WWW05).*

This indicates that the Pilot might help to shift employer attitudes towards more inclusive hiring. Such changes could lay the foundation for more sustainable, meaningful employment pathways for students with disabilities, potentially improving social inclusion and business outcomes in the long term.

A minority of school staff and stakeholder interviewees reported that the Pilot showed signs of creating lasting collaborative local ecosystems to support transitions in the long term. They observed that the Pilot encouraged cooperation beyond individual schools, breaking down barriers between education, employment, training and community development organisations. Shared planning days and cluster meetings were key to fostering local engagement. By moving from fragmented institutions to shared transition pathways, the Pilot was seen to be setting the stage for community-driven inclusion:

> *Funding can make people very focused on what they offer. That can make them cautious about what they say to others offering similar courses or working in the same sector. But I felt the cluster days broke down some of those barriers. People were more collaborative (Education and training support representative, WS09).*

In addition, a minority of stakeholder interviewees saw the Pilot as a potential lever for rebalancing resources within the wider health and social care sector. By supporting students earlier and building structured transition pathways, organisations could work more efficiently and responsively. This could potentially ease pressure on adult disability services in the long term.

> *If we were to front-load more resources into this space, it could free up adult disability services to work differently (Policy representative, WS02).*

5.5 Alternative Scenarios

Interviewees were asked how the current outcomes they observed from the Pilot compared to the alternative scenario – that is, before the Pilot in non-participating schools or for non-participating students. There was consensus among the stakeholders involved in this evaluation that the Pilot raised expectations, improved transition support and support systems. Most interviewees felt that these things would not have happened if the scheme had not taken place. They described a pre-Pilot environment with missing or weak supports, limited and often inappropriate pathways, and high risk of student disengagement. This suggests that without the Pilot, participating students would probably have faced more fragmented, reactive or non-existent transition processes.

The majority of stakeholder and school staff interviewees noted that before the Pilot there was little structured transition planning, especially in special schools. They said that school staff lacked a formal approach and examples of effective practices. As a result, they felt that students often missed meaningful work experiences or did not engage with employers:

> *Just over two years ago, I was told there was an idea, but it wasn't developed. No one had spoken to schools about it. (Policy representative, WS02).*

> *For the three [students] I described, they benefited greatly from the Pilot… We wouldn't have been able to provide these experiences without the extra teacher (School staff member, WWW02).*

The parents involved in this research echoed this sentiment, highlighting a stark contrast between the Pilot and their previous experiences. They felt that consistent guidance, structured placements and early planning were not widely available before the Pilot. In contrast, the Pilot introduced proactive and organised transition planning. Respondents felt that these opportunities and supports would not have developed naturally within the existing system:

> *We have gone from [my child] not wanting to do anything to wanting to do a PLC… I am not sure how we could have managed this without the support of this Pilot programme (Parent survey respondent, PS1.7).*

> *[The Pilot] made a world of difference. We didn't have to search for work experience ourselves. The Pilot gave us a leg up (Parent interviewee, PFG03).*

Most stakeholders and school staff reported that in non-participating schools or pre-Pilot contexts students were often directed into narrow or default options regardless of their goals (such as disability-funded services). They said this led to low expectations and a lack of awareness about the range of available post-school options:

> *These students were often funnelled into narrow pathways due to perceived challenges. This programme helped disrupt that (BITCI, WS03).*

> *Sometimes the only option presented is a disability-funded service when other opportunities might be available (Health and social care representative, WS04).*

> *They wouldn't know how to transition… They wanted apprenticeships, but [we] had no idea how to help them (School staff member, WWW05).*

A minority of school staff interviewees believed that without the Pilot some vulnerable students might have disengaged or dropped out. They said that without the Pilot's proactive, personalised support these students might also have felt an increased sense of isolation and had more limited awareness of post-school options:

> *I'm convinced [that] three [participating students] wouldn't have finished school otherwise (School staff member, WWW03).*

> *We can say most of this wouldn't have happened without this programme… at least half of them would be sitting at home (School staff member, WWW04).*

This suggests that the Pilot contributed to keeping participating students engaged in, and connected to, school, thus reducing the likelihood of dropout and supporting their continued inclusion in education and employment.

5.6 Summary

In summary, the Pilot created positive impacts at participating student, school and post-school levels.

Participating students experienced strong in-school impact, including satisfaction with the support received, improved awareness of post-school options and early engagement with external organisations. Participating in the Pilot was expected to improve the transition experience of students. Post-school impacts included improving their readiness for education or work, independent living skills and employment outcomes.

The Pilot also built teachers' knowledge, spread this knowledge to other staff, and improved structured transition planning during the Pilot. Schools improved their capacity to identify students needing extra support and became more visible in the local community. Some schools reported greater collaboration, stronger external links and more embedded, year-round transition planning because of the Pilot. This has potentially enabled a cultural shift towards treating transitions as a shared responsibility.

There was evidence of stronger collaboration between schools, statutory agencies and community-based organisations during the Pilot. Some of these collaborative practices continued after the Pilot, with local employers engaging more actively with participating students. The Pilot also created spillover benefits for other students with disabilities and sometimes whole classes. Parents were said to have engaged more with schools and other organisations because of the Pilot. All these changes may help to reduce pressure on adult disability services over time.

Without the Pilot, it is likely that participating students would have faced more fragmented, reactive or non-existent transition support.

CHAPTER 6

Scalability of the Pilot

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the potential and conditions required for scaling up the CES Transition Pilot. It draws on quantitative survey data and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews, focus groups and workshops with a broad range of stakeholders. It describes views from school staff, parents, students and other stakeholders.

The Pilot has gained attention across multiple government departments, including education, employment, health, social care and welfare. This positions the transition of students with disabilities as an important aspect of national policy and suggests opportunities for better coordination and sustained funding. While strategic engagement with education-focused departments has been strong, connections with welfare organisations remain less developed. One stakeholder emphasised the importance of ongoing engagement across Government and with the Oireachtas.

> *We have regular engagement with stakeholders, education partners, and other government departments. They're all aware of what's happening. I also appear regularly before Oireachtas committees, and they've shown strong interest in this programme. Politicians have been very keen (Policy representative, WS02).*

These findings highlight the strategic importance and policy relevance of the Pilot, offering a useful perspective for considering its future scalability.

This chapter addresses RQ4: 'What lessons can be drawn from the Pilot to inform future provision?' It starts by identifying the key factors that stakeholders felt supported effective transitions for students with disabilities (Section 6.2). It then explores the perceived feasibility of scaling the Pilot nationally, including reflections on demand, delivery challenges and flexibility (Section 6.3). The chapter also considers the sustainability of the approach beyond the funded period (Section 6.4). It concludes with a summary of key findings (Section 6.5).

6.2 Factors Contributing to Effective Transitions in Post-school Settings

This section outlines the key factors identified by interviewees as contributing to effective transitions. These are summarised in the table below.

Table 8 – Factors Contributing to Effective Transitions to Post-school Settings

In-school	• Early and active involvement of informed and committed school staff. • Practical preparation on work-related and independent living skills. • Reducing students' anxiety through emotional scaffolding, familiarity with new settings and personalised support.
Post-school	• Clear and consistent communication among schools, families and post-school providers. • Adequate capacity, training and confidence among post-school providers to support students with disabilities.

Most participating staff said that early and active involvement of informed and committed school staff was key to enabling successful transitions. One interviewee from an urban, mainstream school said it was important that the staff delivering transition support in school should have an interest in, or knowledge of, careers. A minority of interviewees from mainstream schools recommended involving teachers and career councillors in transition planning from the outset. They also suggested building some flexibility in timetables to allow the delivery of transition activities. The Padlet was considered as a valuable resource for planning activities:

> *Having all the information and resources in one place is great… the awareness element is useful (School staff member, M04, at an urban, mainstream school).*

Most school staff and stakeholder interviewees identified practical preparation as vital for effective transition. This included work experience placements, supported travel, exposure to real-life settings and the development of key skills such as administration, digital literacy and making informed choices. This is also evidenced by student survey data, whereby a small number of respondents felt that more work experience would have been beneficial to them (14% of respondents to Question 19 in Survey 2, n=6). A minority of school staff and stakeholder interviewees felt that embedding key skills and additional supports into transition planning could help to reduce the risk of student disengagement and drop-out. Where such preparation is delayed or fragmented, students may leave school without the necessary practical and emotional readiness required for successful transition into post-school life:

> *It can be tricky if the student doesn't provide paperwork at commencing in [the setting] as they cannot apply for funding (FEI representative, WS18).*

A minority of parent interviewees highlighted the value of emotional scaffolding, familiarity with new settings and personalised support in easing student transitions. Repeated visits to their new setting and geographical proximity were said to reduce students' anxiety and increase confidence. A minority of stakeholder interviewees reported that the Pilot was able to help reduce long-standing disconnects between schools and adulthood. Fostering early, structured collaboration among schools, employers, families and training agencies created a more stable and coherent transition process. This helped to reduce stress for students and families, improved placement outcomes, and minimised last-minute planning:

> *Transition is incredibly stressful and anxiety-inducing – for both families and the young person… Anything that can be put in place to support them… is important (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

A minority of school staff interviewees also noted that some form of post-transition follow-up could help to address the sense of vulnerability that some students experience after leaving school. They explained that students who had received structured transition support were often used to intensive guidance and could struggle without it. This finding was confirmed by student and parent survey data. A minority of the student survey respondents transitioning to adult day services highlighted a need to familiarise themselves with the setting before leaving school (two out of nine). However, often placements are not confirmed until late in the school year, leaving limited time for students to visit facilities and get acquainted with the staff. This can make the transition seem more sudden and abrupt for the student and therefore more difficult for them to settle into their new placement. This has caused worry and anxiety for participating students and their parents (as mentioned by four of the nine parent respondents whose children were planning a transition to adult day centres):

> *[I would like more support to] visit adult services (Student, SS1.20).*

> *It would be great if the adult service placement could be confirmed much earlier. Then there would be a longer lead-in period for transition for everyone involved. This would lessen the stress and anxiety around the whole thing (Parent survey respondent, PS1.34).*

> *These students are in the system for years – but the placement plan happens last minute (School staff member, WWW02).*

A minority of stakeholder interviewees indicated that effective transition requires clear and consistent communication between relevant stakeholders (including schools, families and post-school settings). They raised concerns that once students turned 18, the lack of parental involvement, combined with restrictions on staff contact, could result in student struggles' going unnoticed in the post-school stage. Teacher interviewees echoed this, emphasising the importance of raising awareness among parents while the child was still at school. Incomplete or delayed transfer of documentation may create support gaps in the new setting:

> *Parents can pull back in third level in supporting students and may not be aware if the student is struggling (HEI representative, WS15).*

In addition, a minority of school staff interviewees noted that the transition would be more effective if post-school providers had adequate capacity, appropriate training and greater confidence in supporting students with disabilities. They reported that personal assistants or carers currently provided in some post-school settings were not always appropriately trained. The Pilot placed greater emphasis on in-school activity than on post-school follow-up. Many students experienced a hard stop at the end of the school year, with no overlap or continuity in support. Without the structured, individualised guidance that they had previously received in school, some students could struggle. While continued provision of transition support after the students leave school was not a feature of the Pilot, this suggests it could be an area for further consideration in future schemes:

> *[The] nature of the support needs to be looked at…agency staff provided to students to assist students in post-school is not adequate (HEI representative, WS15).*

> *We prepared them [students]. But the PLCs weren't ready. One college asked, 'Why did you send [them] here? [They're] not able.'(School staff member, WWW03).*

An education and training support representative added that rigid funding models can restrict access to viable placements, for example, the 42-month time limit for accessing post-school supports for students with disabilities, which refers to the maximum period during which students can access certain HSE funded services after leaving school. After this period ends continued support may be reassessed or limited:

> *We had everything in place. We had the employer. We had the placement. But we couldn't proceed because the funding [for additional support] fell through (Education and training support representative, WS07).*

There is evidence that the Pilot has supported national goals related to inclusive education, independent living and employment by:

- Promoting greater independence, social inclusion, and employment for participating students.
- Bridging disconnects between schools and post-school settings.
- Informing the evidence on what works in transition planning and support.

6.3 Feasibility and Long-term Sustainability of National Rollout

The Pilot supports broader strategic thinking by generating evidence on what works in transition planning. It offers a clear model for achieving a range of transition pathways. It can also inform both mainstream and special school strategies and has the potential to help shape future national guidance in line with current initiatives on the lifelong guidance strategy (Department of Education, 2023). This dual focus is seen as critical to ensuring inclusive and differentiated support models:

> *It [the Pilot] made you think about what could be possible (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

> *We intend to expand the current version [of the Pilot] to additional special schools [in Phase 2] … with the aim of informing two major strategies: one for mainstream [Phase 1] … and one aligned with the commitment to expand provision in special schools [Phase 2] (Policy representative, WS02).*[18]

Most interviewees across stakeholder groups believed that a national rollout was feasible and necessary, especially given the reduction in support for disabled students after leaving school. However, they also highlighted significant challenges that must be addressed for successful and sustainable implementation.

6.3.1 Key challenges and conditions for success

Workforce capacity and staff constraints

Staff shortages, limited flexibility in timetabling and existing pressures on school staff were major concerns. Interviewees stressed the importance of protected hours and designated roles to ensure personalised support and inter-agency coordination:

More often than not, programmes add work but leave schools trying to do it all. What we need is more hands-on deck (School staff member, WWW02).

To me, 12 hours wasn't a lot in the schools, but I suppose if you roll it out nationally, it adds up to a lot of money... They couldn't recruit someone part time, so they ended up involving the chaplain, the home-school liaison person, and maybe even a dinner lady to take a few extra hours (Health and social care representative, WS01).

We can't give 12 additional hours to every post-primary and special school in the country – it's just not feasible or practical (Policy representative, WS02).

If the hours are only allocated in small blocks, and teachers are coming and going, they can't build a relationship with the child (Policy representative, WS08).

18 For further details of Phase 2 see Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions.

Funding and infrastructure

Funding gaps for essential activities like transport and trips were noted, especially in rural and more deprived areas:

> *Transport is such a major issue. Some people will never manage public transport… they're not brilliant at the moment (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

Interviewees also called for practical coordination tools, shared resources and clear national guidance to support local innovation:

> *It would be beneficial for schools to be able to steer family members… to a platform that gives insight into what options are available (Health and social care representative, WS04).*

> *Perhaps there could be clear parameters… rather than leaving it open-ended (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

> *We'd love to see a Digital Transition Passport (Disability support representative, WS10).*

School commitment and flexibility

Successful rollout depends on the willingness of individual schools to prioritise inclusive transition support. Flexibility in allocating hours and tailoring support to student needs was seen as essential:

> *All schools in Ireland should have hours dedicated to helping students transition into post-school life (Parent interviewee, PFG03).*

> *You'd want at least six hours – if you're bringing them anywhere, it's a full day. You won't get far with an hour (School staff member, WWW04).*

> *We're a victim of our own success – more students now benefit, but we need more time (School staff member, WWW01).*

Inter-agency collaboration and system-level barriers

Effective transition support requires sustained collaboration across education, health and employment sectors. However, siloed service structures and misaligned timelines often impede coordination:

> *Maintaining liaison between NCSE, HSE, and education staff is vital (Health and social care representative, WS01).*

> *Currently, everyone is siloed… not a lot of joined-up thinking in the system (Disability support representative, WS10).*

> *There's a mindset shift needed among companies (BITCI, WS03).*

Tailored support and school-capacity building

Interviewees described varying levels of student need, indicating that a one-size-fits-all model may not be effective. Support must be personalised and proportionate to school size and student needs:

> *Every allocation to each school should be based on the number of children (Policy representative, WS05).*

> *They actually needed the hours most after they left (School staff member, WWW03).*

Planning and early engagement

Earlier engagement with students, parents and external organisations was repeatedly recommended to avoid last-minute decisions and ad hoc pathways:

> *If I had a magic wand, I would carry out the profile process much earlier (Health and social care representative, WS04).*

> *Start working with the HSE earlier (School staff member, WWW03).*

Empowering schools for sustainable delivery

The project coordinator model was praised, but long-term sustainability requires shifting towards a facilitative model that builds internal school capacity and encourages ownership:

> *With only 20 schools, it's manageable, but if we're looking at scalability, it's not feasible for the coordinator to do all this (Policy representative, WS05).*

> *It does shift the responsibility… 'Passing the buck' isn't quite the right phrase, but it's about encouraging ownership (Policy representative, WS02).*

> *Once they commit to something, they do it well. I don't understand why we don't recognise that as a skill (Education and training support representative, WS07).*

To scale effectively and sustainably, the Pilot must move towards a model where external support is clearly defined and gradually tapered, empowering schools to embed transition planning within their own systems and take increasing responsibility for delivery.

6.4 Summary

This chapter has explored lessons from the Pilot to inform future transition support for students with disabilities. Key factors supporting effective transitions include early and active involvement of informed and committed school staff. Practical preparation on work-related and independent living skills was seen as vital for effective transition. Emotional scaffolding, familiarity with new settings and personalised support helped to reduce students' anxiety about transition. Clear and consistent communication among schools, families and post-school organisations supported students' transitions into post-school settings. Adequate capacity and training among post-school organisations helped them to support post-school transition of students with disabilities.

Most interviewees across all stakeholder groups viewed national rollout of the Pilot as feasible and necessary. Protected staff time and designated transition roles were considered essential to embed the Pilot as a lasting feature. Early engagement with students, parents and external organisations was said to contribute to effective planning. Shared resources and clear central guidance helped to improve consistency of support. However, workforce capacity and administrative constraints within schools pose substantial challenges for scaling. Lack of funding for transportation and trips could limit meaningful transition experiences. Variation from senior leadership in school commitment for transition support may also affect the consistency of a national rollout. Additionally, fixed support hours may not suit diverse student needs or school capacity. Likewise, weak inter-agency coordination could limit support for meaningful transitions.

CHAPTER 7

Discussion and Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesises the evaluation findings from Phase 1 of the CES Transition Pilot and links them to the broader literature on transition support. It also outlines lessons learnt to guide the development of a framework for national rollout and provides recommendations for future monitoring and evaluation practices. It is important to note that while the evaluation focused on transition support for students with disabilities, many of the findings are common to all students. The limitations of this evaluation are acknowledged, including limited engagement from parents and a decline in student response rates over time, especially during the post-school stage. Staff time pressures and potential acquiescence bias among students further complicated data collection and interpretation. These factors may have impacted the consistency and depth of insights gathered during the study.

It should be noted that the Pilot has been extended since this evaluation was commissioned. Phase 2 of the Pilot began in September 2024. In a change to Phase 1, Phase 2 targets students in their final year at a special school. A total of 40 special schools were selected to participate in Phase 2. There was also a wider geographic spread of schools. While the number of participating schools increased from 20 schools in Phase 1 to 40 in Phase 2, the total number of support hours per week was reduced from 12 hours in Phase 1 to 6 hours in Phase 2.

7.2 Implementation of the Pilot

The Pilot was largely implemented as intended with schools delivering tailored support to students including profiling, life-skills workshops and work placements. Multidisciplinary planning was also a feature in mainstream schools, aligning with international evidence on effective transition programmes. Test *et al*. (2009) highlight the importance of structured transition support. This research also points to consensus across school staff and stakeholders that the allocation of 12 flexible teacher hours was crucial. This protected time for meaningful engagement, allowing staff to work with students, families and external partners to provide personalised support. This finding is consistent with research by Daly and Cahill (2018), who recommend evidence-based transition programmes for post-primary students. It will be interesting to see the impact of reducing support time from 12 to 6 hours on Phase 2 of the Pilot.

The following enablers of implementation were identified:

- Supportive leadership and whole-school buy-in were considered vital to effective implementation, because they ensured that the Pilot was a priority. This aligns with the 'whole-school approach' advocated by the Department of Education (DES, 2017).
- Proactive coordination by the NCSE was considered a strong enabler by school staff. The full-time project coordinator shared resources-issued reminders and modelled best practice. This consistent support was highly valued by all school staff members interviewed and fostered smooth delivery of the Pilot.
- Protected transition-support hours enabled meaningful engagement. Where implemented consistently, these hours allowed staff to work closely with students and families. Staff valued having time set aside for one-to-one conversations, planning and attending external events. These hours were seen as vital for making transition support a priority within busy school schedules.
- Flexibility allowed schools to develop creative programmes and it was widely felt that the Pilot's flexible model encouraged innovation. While the Department of Education provided a broad framework, schools could tailor supports to local needs. This approach supports the principles of person-centred planning and student involvement in goal setting emphasised by Baer *et al*. (2011) and Carter, Austin and Trainor (2014).
- School staff found structured shared-learning forums and networking opportunities beneficial. The Dublin–Galway cluster model facilitated peer exchange. Teachers shared planning templates and problem-solving strategies. This fostered communities of practice, thus aligning with the importance of collaborative approaches (Inclusive Education Ireland, 2022).
- Inter-agency and employer partnerships were also highly valued by stakeholders. Regular steering-group meetings involved various stakeholders, including HSE, BITCI and service providers. These meetings helped those involved to troubleshoot issues and align expectations. While not consistent across all schools, there were strong examples of schools working effectively with local employers and disability service providers. Where partnerships worked well, they broadened the experiences of students and eased transitions. This echoes wider research about cross-sector collaboration being crucial for successful transitions (Test *et al*., 2009).
- Strong school–parent communication supported trust and clarity. Respondents to the parent survey typically felt well informed and involved in transition planning for their child (77% or n=20). Ongoing communication helped to manage expectations and reduced uncertainty about next steps. Therefore, actively involving parents from the outset should remain a core feature of the approach.

However, there were also some areas for improvement:

- A key issue raised by school staff was the pressure of delivering the Pilot alongside existing responsibilities. This highlights a common challenge in educational settings. For example, Humphrey and Lewis (2008) noted insufficient resources as a barrier to effective inclusion in mainstream schools. Administrative tasks were seen as time-consuming and, in some cases, unsustainable without protected time. It is worth noting that Phase 2 of the Pilot no longer requires staff to complete the Excel-based template for recording time, activities and students' outcomes. This was in response to feedback received in Phase 1 about the difficult and time-consuming nature of the process. The next phase of the evaluation will seek to uncover whether, with less paperwork, staff are able to spend more time with students and less on forms and how this impacts delivery. To further reduce burden and ensure continued delivery, future phases should streamline reporting by aligning monitoring tools with existing IEP or student support-planning processes. Staffing models should also protect dedicated time for a transition coordinator or provide shared roles across schools, to reduce pressure on individual teachers. It is important to note that some staff reported undertaking Pilot activities in their own time, which is not a sustainable model.
- Inconsistent BITCI engagement and employer linkages also posed challenges for some schools. Delays in employer listings undermined the Pilot's employer-engagement strand, while some employers were incorrectly listed. To address this, stronger partnerships should be developed with local employers through formal agreements and regular updates. Dedicated staff (based either at regional or cluster levels) could take responsibility for vetting placements, keeping listings current and building relationships with employers who can offer meaningful experiences. This would help ensure that opportunities are both relevant and accessible, particularly in rural areas.
- The timing of transition planning was another area identified for improvement. While most activities were delivered in the final years of school, evidence and wider literature suggest that planning should begin earlier – ideally in the Junior Cycle. Starting earlier would give students more time to build readiness, develop life skills and explore options. Schools should be supported in embedding a structured, person-centred planning process from third year onwards, with clear timelines and responsibilities integrated into school calendars.
- A lack of whole-school embeddedness was evident in some settings. Awareness of the Pilot was often limited to coordinators and direct participants, with little involvement from other staff. Once the funding for dedicated hours had ended, activity often slowed or stopped. Future phases should take a more systemic approach, embedding transition into whole-school planning, staff CPD and leadership structures. This includes integrating transition planning into school improvement plans and ensuring that all staff understand their role in supporting post-school transitions for students with disabilities. Involving students with disabilities in termly transition reviews and sharing progress across staff meetings may also help to normalise the process and reinforce whole-school ownership.

- School staff noted some operational constraints that further reduced their time for transition support. They felt that planning activities before the academic year was crucial and coordinating teacher timetables was difficult. Activities in mainstream school were sometimes difficult to schedule around exam periods. Irregular student attendance also undermined consistency. Scheduling guidance could help schools to avoid peak academic pressures and maximise student engagement. Access to trips and external activities varied widely, particularly where schools lacked funding for such activities. The lack of a dedicated budget for trip-related expenses created access inequalities, especially for students whose families were in financial hardship. A centrally funded budget for travel and event fees could help ensure all students, regardless of background or location, can benefit equally.
- A minority of parents offered suggestions for improving parental engagement including having a teacher-student-parent meeting to discuss and plan the student's transition and foster collaborative action. They also indicated a desire for more information about the Pilot, transition events, opportunities and stakeholders to help them support their child's transition.
- Finally, continuity of support after school emerged as a major concern. Some students were left without guidance once they had exited the school environment, particularly where adult day-service placements were confirmed late. This created anxiety for students and families and limited time for preparation. In the future, schools should begin coordination with adult service providers at least six months before the end of the final year. Familiarisation visits and transition handovers should become standard practice, ensuring that students do not face a sudden decline in support. Linked to this, confirmation of adult day service placements earlier in the students' final year of school could support more effective transitions. There needs to be sufficient time for transition leads to help students to visit the day centre for a smoother transition. Stronger links with post-school providers and follow-up mechanisms will be essential for tracking longer-term outcomes and supporting smoother transitions.

Despite these challenges, schools adapted and delivered core activities. The Pilot demonstrated the importance of dedicated resources, strong leadership and collaborative networks. These factors are critical considerations for guiding the development of any national rollout.

Future monitoring, evaluation and impact measurement must move beyond short and medium-term feedback, which was patchy in places as some schools inevitably lost contact with students after they had left. Developing longitudinal tracking is key to understanding lasting effects and capturing long-term outcomes. Future evaluations should explore using Ireland's national data infrastructure, such as the Educational Longitudinal Database or National Data Infrastructure, to track student pathways into further education, training or employment. This would require appropriate consent and secure data-sharing agreements with relevant agencies.

Future evaluations should also take a systems perspective. A systems-mapping exercise at national and regional levels could chart key agencies, information flows and service gaps. This would support more coordinated monitoring and evaluation, align measures across sectors and identify opportunities to integrate data collection into existing structures, such as Junior Cycle school reviews.

Introducing a comparison mechanism would also improve causal insight. A phased rollout or waitlist control model[19] offers one approach. This would allow all schools or students to eventually access the Pilot; it would and prevent the denial of support but enable evaluators to compare early and later groups. Where rollout control is not feasible, propensity score matching[20] using administrative data on background, level of need, school and region would offer an ethically sound alternative. A feasibility study for a quasi-experimental design would also help to set out the available options.

Finally, evaluation tools must be refined for precision and feasibility. Reflective practice logs could be used for schools to record implementation progress and then inform the evaluation. As mentioned earlier, reporting templates should be user-friendly and embedded within IEP or other school planning tools to reduce burden. Together, these enhancements would support more rigorous, inclusive and pragmatic evaluation, while ensuring that the Pilot remains student-centred and grounded in real practice.

7.3 Impact on Students

Respondents to the student surveys reported receiving high levels of support. This remained consistent throughout the school year. Parent survey respondents confirmed this positive sentiment, noting that the Pilot boosted their child's confidence. It also provided clarity about post-school pathways. This aligns with research emphasising the importance of emotional support (Sefotho and Onyishi, 2021).

The Pilot improved students' awareness of post-school options. It broadened their aspirations, as they explored further education, work experience and apprenticeships. School staff and other stakeholders noted a mild shift from reliance on traditional services. They stated that the Pilot created alternatives to default transitions. Deferral options allowed students to trial mainstream pathways, which promoted greater independence. This is consistent with the goal of promoting personal autonomy (Disability Act, 2005) and supports the HSE New Directions policy for adult day services (HSE, 2012).

The Pilot facilitated early engagement with external organisations such as BITCI, NLN and local colleges. This coordination helped to personalise student pathways and reduced adjustment anxiety. Although engagement was not consistent across external organisations, this level of external collaboration was not standard before the Pilot.

19 Waitlist control model is a method whereby participating groups receive the intervention later, allowing early outcome comparison.

20 Propensity score matching is a statistical method that pairs participants with non-participants based on similar characteristics.

When responding to the post-school survey, students identified trips and work experience as the most helpful transition activities. Learning about options and feeling supported were also highly valued. This indicates the importance of practical and emotional support. Students also reported increased confidence and personal development. Survey findings suggest they were more likely to ask for help and engage with peers since participating in the Pilot. This aligns with research on self-determination skills (Carter, Austin and Trainor, 2012).

Many students successfully transitioned to training or employment (89%, n=17). Over half of those responding to in-school and post-school surveys achieved their planned destination. It should be noted that there are many reasons why students, not just those with disabilities, may end up following a different pathway. This is not necessarily a negative outcome. In fact, most of the students who responded to the post-school survey were happy or very happy with their post-school destination (86%, n=19). It was also found that the Pilot improved employability skills. Students gained skills in CV writing and IT tools. Mock interviews and work experience were particularly beneficial, which reinforces findings by Husni and Min (2024) on school-to-work transitions.

Stakeholders and parents reported that students had developed independent living skills (81%, n=21 of parent survey respondents). For example, many students gained confidence in using public transport and managing money. These small steps are crucial for autonomy although gaps in post-school support could threaten the sustainability of these outcomes and lead to students regressing.

7.4 Impact on Schools

Most school staff said that the Pilot built teachers' knowledge of post-school options and transition pathways for students with disabilities. This learning occurred through CPD and peer sharing and enhanced their capacity to provide guidance for students with disabilities. In around half of participating schools it was noted that these learnings spread to other school staff, thus helping to raise awareness across the whole school. Staff said that the Pilot helped them to better define responsibilities and coordinate support. A core outcome of the Pilot was that it improved capacity in participating schools for structured transition planning. This moved participating schools towards more proactive planning for vulnerable students. In some cases, particularly for special schools, the Pilot increased the school's visibility in their local community. It also helped to raise awareness of challenges faced by disabled students, which in turn, fostered a greater sense of belonging for students.

Stakeholders and school staff expected the Pilot to lead to greater collaboration between mainstream and special schools in the medium and longer term. Enhanced links with external organisations were also expected to last beyond the Pilot. The Pilot prompted a shift towards more formalised, year-round transition planning in participating schools, which indicates a move towards shared responsibility.

7.5 Impact on Post-school Settings and Other Stakeholders

The Pilot went some way to strengthening collaboration between schools, agencies and organisations such as BITCI, NLN and post-school settings. Wider stakeholders and school staff agreed that regular meetings enhanced their relationships. They acknowledged that this supported more informed planning and reduced duplication of services for those involved. This collaborative approach is a key factor in successful transitions (Test *et al*., 2009).

Additionally, it was found that local employers engaged more actively with students with disabilities in the context of this Pilot. For example, school staff and wider stakeholders noted that the Pilot led some employers to reconsider assumptions about neurodiverse candidates. In the longer term, this could contribute to more inclusive hiring practices for those organisations. However, substantial employment brokerage and awareness-raising would be required to achieve this goal and bring alignment with the CES (2015).

Finally, a small number of school staff reported that the Pilot created spillover effects for other students. This included those with disabilities who were not participating in the Pilot, and sometimes the whole class got involved in transition activities within their school. This suggests a wider positive influence that could be leveraged in future phases. Increased parental engagement was also noted as a positive outcome. Parents of participating students felt more involved and informed about their child's transition, which is crucial for successful transitions (Mazzotti *et al*., 2021).

The Pilot has the potential contribute to collaborative local systems that could support long-term transition outcomes. There is emerging evidence that it could also help to alleviate pressure on adult disability services. By supporting students earlier, resources could be rebalanced.

When asked to imagine an alternative scenario, where the Pilot had not been implemented, wider stakeholders and school staff said that support would probably have been more fragmented and participating students were likely to have considered more limited or less appropriate pathways. They also felt that there would have been a higher risk of complete drop-out for some students. The Pilot introduced proactive and organised transition planning, and it is unlikely that these opportunities would have developed without the structure and resources that it provided.

7.6 Scaling up the Pilot

Stakeholders involved in this evaluation widely considered that the national rollout of the Pilot was both feasible and necessary. They also felt there was a clear need for continued support for students with disabilities after school ends. The successes observed in Phase 1 demonstrate its potential and this aligns with international calls for systematic transition planning (Simonsen and Sugai, 2019).

However, this evaluation noted several challenges, summarised above, which should be addressed to facilitate successful scaling. These included workforce capacity, administrative constraints, staffing shortages and limited flexibility in timetabling. School budgets are already under pressure and adequate investment and system capacity are crucial for meaningful implementation.

Without targeted investment in system infrastructure, a national rollout risks exacerbating existing inequities for students with disabilities. The following parameters should be considered when planning for scale up:

- **Commitment from school leaders.** Some schools may prioritise inclusive transition support more than others. This could lead to disparities because successful scaling depends on widespread willingness to engage, thus suggesting the need for clear mandates or strong incentives.
- **Protected hours and designated roles.** This ensures consistent, personalised support. Earlier engagement with students, parents and post-school organisations is also critical, as late profiling and last-minute decisions were found to hinder long-term success.
- **Flexible time allocation models.** A one-size-fits-all approach (for example, a fixed number of support hours for every school) might not suit diverse needs. Resource allocation should reflect the volume and complexity of student needs. Flexibility is needed for tailored support, including post-school support where necessary.
- **Funding for essential activities.** Lack of funding for transport and trip-related costs could limit meaningful experiences. This was particularly true for students in rural or deprived areas. Thus, a national rollout requires sufficient funding for these activities.
- **Inter-agency coordination.** Exposure to a range of appropriate post-school options is required for students to explore a variety of pathways. Stronger collaboration between agencies is essential for achieving effective transitions.
- **Practical coordination tools and clear national guidance are needed.** Local innovation works best with national infrastructure. This would also support greater inter-agency collaboration, providing aligned timelines and consistent approaches.
- **Shared learning activities.** As the Pilot expands national shared learning days may become too large to be meaningful. Wider stakeholders suggested that county or regional support networks could be more manageable and would maintain the benefits of peer collaboration.
- **Project Coordinator role.** While this was unanimously felt to be effective, it is resource intensive. Sustainable scale-up requires building internal capacity within schools. It is suggested that external support should be clearly defined and gradually tapered so that schools are empowered to take ownership and sustain transition planning independently. Central support should shift over time from hands-on guidance to enabling structures, such as training, shared resources and light-touch oversight.

In summary, national rollout was deemed feasible with careful planning. However, resource constraints need to be addressed and collaboration fostered. Furthermore, a flexible, needs-based approach was felt to be paramount to ensure equitable and effective transition support for all students.

7.7 Concluding Remarks

Phase 1 of the Pilot laid a strong foundation for improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. It contributed to the operationalisation of policy ambitions such as the EPSEN Act (2004), New Directions (HSE, 2012) and the CES (Government of Ireland, 2015). The evaluation found that the Pilot was largely implemented as intended, with schools delivering tailored support through dedicated hours, structured planning and inter-agency collaboration. Participating students reported increased confidence, awareness of options and readiness for life after school. Schools reported enhanced capacity for transition planning, and examples of local ecosystems in support of more inclusive pathways began to emerge. This aligns with national and international best practices in inclusive education.

While the Pilot demonstrated clear benefits, challenges remain. These include staffing, funding for transition activities and the need for consistent, reliable employer engagement. These challenges must be addressed for successful scale-up and long-term sustainability.

The Pilot aligns with national policy ambitions and contributes to the evidence base on effective transition support. Future phases should build on this momentum by embedding transition planning earlier, strengthening inter-agency coordination and ensuring flexible, needs-based support. With sustained investment and system-level change, the Pilot has the potential to transform how transitions are supported across Ireland.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Evaluation Requirements

The Department of Education has requested the NCSE to commission an external evaluation of this Pilot programme. The evaluation should set out the transition experience from the perspective of students with disabilities or complex educational needs participating in the Pilot and determine the impact that the Pilot is having on students and schools, incorporating feedback from a range of stakeholders. The evaluation will also seek to review the wider impact of the programme on families and the community. The evaluation should outline good practices adopted in schools as well as areas that require improvement. The evaluation should make recommendations as to the potential to scale the programme to a national level.

The evaluation findings are anticipated to guide the development of a framework for future support for the transition of students to post-school options at a national level. The following tasks are required as part of the evaluation, though the list is not exhaustive:

1. Develop and agree a clear methodology and project plan to undertake the evaluation. The project plan should include a range of quantitative and qualitative methods.
2. Briefly set out the current landscape and pathway options to which students with disabilities transition post-school, to set the context for the evaluation.
    - Note and set out where and how the Pilot complements and supports work underway in other areas, for example the National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028.
3. Review and provide a summary of national and international evidence on programmes, guidance and research related to the post-school transition outcomes and experiences of students with disabilities
4. Collect and analyse data from all students and a range of stakeholders within each of the 20 school sites/post-school sites to track the transition experience of students and to ascertain the impact and perceived impact of the Pilot programme on student outcomes.
    - Data collection to be undertaken at a minimum of three points, in the early development stage, during the final year of school and in the post-school context.
    - Information on context, outcomes and experiences of all students participating in the Pilot programme to be collected.
    - In-depth data to be collected from a sample of students across the school sites, using, for example, the case study approach.

- The stakeholders should include:
  - a sample of students and their parents
  - a sample of school staff (for example, teachers, management, SNAs)
  - a sample of education and health staff
  - a sample of LTDIG/BITCI staff
  - a sample of staff in the post-school settings.

5. Collect and analyse data from a range of stakeholders at different stages within each of the 20 school sites/post-school sites such as schools, LTDIG, project coordinator, the NCSE to ascertain the impact and perceived impact of the Pilot programme on schools and school staff. The stakeholders should include:
   - a sample of school staff (for example, teachers, management, SNAs)
   - a sample of education and health staff
   - a sample of LTDIG/BITCI staff
   - a sample of staff in the post-school settings.
6. Produce a report for publication with a clear framework that identifies the impact of the Pilot programme on students with disabilities in respect of their experiences and outcomes, drawing on data collected on the preparation for, during and after their post-school transition. The report must also incorporate the data from the range of stakeholders on the impact and perceived impact of the Pilot programme on schools and school staff and any perceived impact noted by post-school settings. The report should also:
   - Outline good practices and identify areas for improvement.
   - Include findings and recommendations incorporating the potential scalability of this project nationally and set out guidance for the development of a framework for a national rollout.
   - Be succinct and written in accessible plain English.

The research evaluation team will be required to liaise with the NCSE and various stakeholders of the Pilot programme on an ongoing basis and prepare interim reports at various intervals. The research evaluation team must obtain ethical approval for the evaluation approach and adhere to data protection legislation and best practice in the management of personal data throughout the Pilot.

Appendix B: Additional School Profile Information

School	Location	Type	No. of Students Enrolled	Mixed/Single Sex	Language
1	Galway	Special	18	Mixed	English
2	Galway	Mainstream	430	Mixed	English
3	Dublin	Mainstream	276	Mixed	English
4	Dublin	Mainstream	564	Boys	English
5	Dublin	Mainstream	1045	Mixed	English
6	Galway	Mainstream	330	Mixed	English
7	Galway	Mainstream	987	Mixed	English
8	Galway	Mainstream	705	Mixed	English
9	Galway	Special	64	Mixed	English
10	Dublin	Mainstream	440	Girls	English
11	Galway	Mainstream	729	Mixed	English
12	Galway	Mainstream	1100	Mixed	English
13	Galway	Mainstream	400	Mixed	Irish
14	Galway	Special	16	Mixed	Irish
15	Dublin	Mainstream	656	Mixed	English
16	Dublin	Mainstream	623	Girls	English
17	Dublin	Special	52	Mixed	English
18	Dublin	Special	52	Mixed	English
19	Dublin	Special	30	Mixed	English
20	Dublin	Mainstream	500	Mixed	English

Appendix C: School Visits

As part of the evaluation, the evaluation team conducted school visits at two different timepoints during the in-school data collection stage. The first set of visits took place in December 2023 and January 2024. The second set of visits took place in May 2025. During these visits, evaluators met with students and teachers to gather data through surveys, which were completed either individually or in groups. The details of these visits, including dates, attendees and the number of participants, are outlined in the tables below.

Appendix C (i) – Overview of the first Set of School Visits

School	Participants	Mode of Completion	Group 1-1
1	1 staff 3 of 3 students	Paper copies, substantial assistance	1-1
2	1 staff 3 of 4 students	Paper copies, minimal assistance	Group
3	2 staff 2 of 3 students	Online, minimal assistance	Group
4	1 staff 1 of 4 students	Paper copy, minimal assistance	1-1
5	3 staff 5 of 6 students	Paper copies, minimal to moderate assistance	1-1
6	2 staff 3 of 5 students	Online, minimal assistance	Group
7	1 staff 4 of 5 students	Paper copies and online, minimal to moderate assistance	Group
8	4 staff 4 of 5 students	Online, minimal assistance	Group
9	1 staff 4 of 4 students	Paper copies, moderate to substantial assistance	Group, 1-1 for 2
10	2 staff 2 of 3 students	Paper copies, minimal to moderate assistance	Group
11	2 staff 7 of 9 students	Online, minimal assistance	Group, 1-1 for 1 student
12	2 staff 6 of 6 students	Online, minimal assistance	Group
13	3 staff 2 of 2 students	Paper copies, moderate assistance	1-1
14	2 staff 2 of 2 students	Paper copies, substantial assistance	Group
15	2 staff 6 of 7 students	Paper copies, minimal assistance	Group
16	2 staff No students	Paper copies, minimal assistance	1-1
17	1 staff 1 student	Online, substantial assistance	1-1
18	2 staff 2 of 3 students	Papery copy, substantial assistance	1-1
20	3 staff 4 of 5 students	Online, minimal assistance	Group

School 19 was not included in the first set of school visits because it had left the Pilot at that time. It rejoined the Pilot after the first survey had closed.

Appendix C (ii) – Overview of the Second Set of School Visits

School	Participants	Mode of Completion	Group 1-1
1	1 staff 3 students	Paper copies, heavily assisted	1-1
2	1 staff 0 students	Paper copies, minimal assistance	-
3	2 staff 2 students	Paper copies, minimal assistance	Group
4	1 staff 0 students	Online, minimal assistance	-
5	3 staff 5 students	Paper copies, minimal to moderate assistance	1-1
6	2 staff 0 students	Online, minimal assistance	-
7*	-	-	-
8	2 staff 2 students	Paper copies and online, minimal assistance	-
9	1 staff 4 students	Paper copies, some assistance	Group
10*	-	-	-
11	2 staff 6 students	Online, minimal assistance	Group
12	2 staff 0 students	Online	-
13	1 staff 0 students	Paper copies, minimal assistance	-
15	2 staff 6 students	Online, minimal assistance	-
16	2 staff 4 students	Online, minimal assistance	-
17	1 staff 1 student	Paper copy, substantial assistance	1-1
18	3 staff 4 of 5 students	Online, minimal assistance	Group
19	2 staff 6 students	Unable to complete the survey	-
20	3 staff 3 students	Paper copy, minimal assistance	1-1

** Due to conflicting schedules, the evaluation team was unable to conduct a second visit to these schools*

Appendix D: Profile of Survey Responses

Appendix D (i) – Survey Responses per School

School	Participating Students	Student Survey 1	Student Survey 2	Student Survey 3	Parent Survey 1	Parent Survey 2
1	6	3	2	1	5	3
2	4	3	0	2	4	3
3	3	3	2	0	1	0
4	4	1	2	0	0	0
5	6	5	4	4	3	5
6	5	4	4	0	0	0
7	5	5	2	0	0	0
8	5	5	2	2	4	3
9	4	4	3	1	1	2
10	3	3	2	0	0	0
11	9	9	8	4	6	1
12	6	5	5	3	5	2
13	2	2	2	0	0	0
14	2	2	2	0	2	0
15	7	6	7	1	2	2
16	5	5	4	1	1	1
17	2	1	1	0	0	0
18	4	3	2	0	0	3
19	6	0	0	0	0	0
20	5	4	3	3	3	1
Total	**93**	**73**	**57**	**22**	**37**	**26**

Appendix D (ii) – Student Survey Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Student Survey 1		Student Survey 2		Student Survey 3	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Type of school attended:						
Mainstream	61	84	47	82	20	91
Special	12	16	10	18	2	9
DEIS	36	49	30	53	11	50
Non-DEIS	37	51	27	47	11	50
Location of school attended:						
Dublin	31	42	27	47	9	41
Galway	42	58	30	53	13	59
Gender:						
Male	43	59	N/A	N/A	8	36
Female	28	41	N/A	N/A	11	64
Total	**73**	**82**	**57**	**64**	**22**	**25**

Appendix E: Sample Topic Guide for Teacher Interviews

Section 1 – Background

1. **[All] Please briefly describe your role within [insert name of school/organisation].**

Probe in relation to:

- How long they have been with the school/organisation.
- Their role in relation to the Transition Pilot.
- Any involvement in post-16 transition of students with disabilities prior to the Transition Pilot.

2. **[Training or employment destination reps] Can you please tell me a bit about your organisation and its relationship with the Transition Pilot to date?**

Section 2 – Implementation

3. **Can you give me an overview of how the Transition Pilot is being implemented in your school?**

- Areas/themes of focus.
- Strategic partners within the local area (for example, the Local Transition Development and Implementation Group (LTDIG), Business in the Community, local employers, HE/FE colleges, other training providers, other schools).
- Who is leading the Pilot within the school?
- What other staff are involved and how?
- Has there been any additional parental engagement? If yes, how does this differ from parental engagement before the Pilot?
- What new activities or processes have you implemented as part of the Pilot for staff/pupils/parents?
- How many children are taking part?

4. **Can you give me an overview of how the Transition Pilot is being implemented in your area?**

- Areas/themes of focus
- Strategic partners (for example, participating schools, the Local Transition Development and Implementation Group (LTDIG), Business in the Community, local employers, HE/FE colleges, other training providers, other schools).
- Coordination activities and administrative process.

5. **From your experience, is the Transition Pilot being implemented as intended?**
    - Have implementation plans changed over time? If yes, why and how have they changed?
    - What aspects of the Pilot are sustainable? Are any aspects not sustainable? If so, what aspects and why?
6. **Are they any factors that have supported or enabled the scheme to be implemented in your school/area?**
7. **Have there been any barriers or challenges that slowed or limited progress?**

Section 3 – Embeddedness

8. **What impact has the Pilot had on staff in your school/organisation?**
9. **To what extent has the Pilot become embedded and/or habitual in your school?**

Section 4 – Impact

10. **Have there been any early (short-term) impacts from the Pilot on the young people who are currently participating in it? If yes, probe what impacts are and ask for evidence.**
    - Compared to the alternative scenario before the Transition Pilot or in non-participating schools
11. **What do you think will be the main impacts from the Pilot in the medium to long term?**

Probe in relation to different levels of impact:

- Young person (for example, life satisfaction of young person with disability; social connectedness; sense of purpose; quality of life; physical and/or mental health).
- School (for example, staff training, change in practice, culture change).
- Local area (for example, better signposting, more joined up working).

Section 5 – Wider Policy and Scaling-up

12. **Do you think the scheme is an effective tool to increase awareness of, and access to, a range of post-school opportunities for young people with disabilities?**
    - What has worked well?
    - What has not worked/areas for improvement?
13. **How feasible would it be to scale the Transition Pilot Scheme to all post-16 schools? What challenges may manifest in different areas/contexts?**

Section 6 – Wrap-up

14. **Are there any further comments or feedback you would like to give in relation to this study?**

15. **Would it be okay to contact you again if we had any more questions?**

Thank you for taking part.

Appendix F: Student Survey 1

You are getting help from people at school to prepare for leaving school.

We want to ask you about your experience preparing to leave school.

We need your consent. Consent is permission to talk to us.

- I agree to take part in the study.
- I understand what the study is about, and it has been clearly explained to me.
- I know that I do not have to take part and that I can stop at any time.
- I know that what I say may be used in reports and presentations.
- I know that my name will not be used in reports or presentations.
- I understand that taking part in this study won't change things for me.
- I understand I can stop taking part whenever I want to.

Your name

Date

Name of witness (if applicable)

Date

Do you consent to take part in this survey?

- Yes, I consent to take part in this study.
- No, I do not consent to take part in this study.

Q1. How old are you?

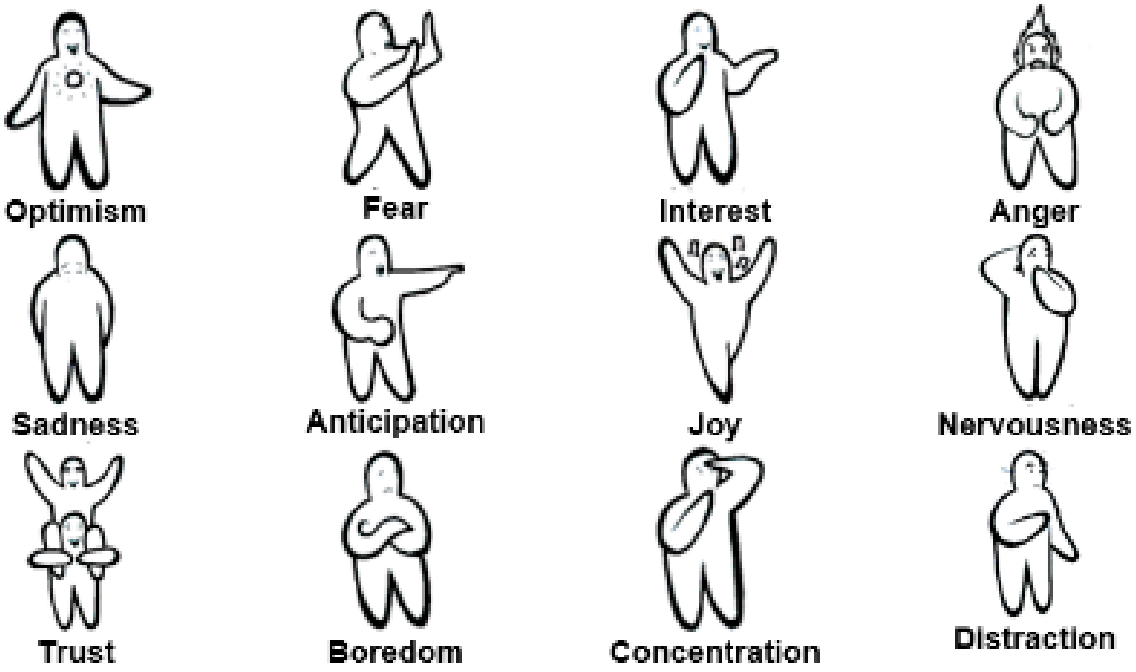
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19

Q2. Are you…

- male
- female
- prefer to self-describe
- prefer not to say.

Q3. What is the name of your school?

Q4. Which of these pictures shows how you feel about moving on from school? (tick or circle)



Q5. Are you being supported to think about moving on from school? (tick or circle)

Q6. How prepared do you feel to move on from school? (tick or circle)

Q7. Which of these activities has your school provided? (tick all that apply)

- budgeting/managing money
- office skills
- practice interview
- work experience
- met with guidance counsellor
- met an employer
- had a class talk
- went on a trip
- went to a careers fair
- digital skills
- learnt about my options
- learnt new skills
- other.

Q8. What would you like to do after school? (tick all that apply):

- do a training course
- go to day services
- get a job
- do an apprenticeship programme
- go to college
- other.

Please add more detail about what you would like to do after school.

Q9. How sure are you about what you want to do after school?

Q10. What has helped you think about leaving school?

- learning about my options
- learning new skills
- feeling supported
- N/A.

Q11. Was there anything that was unhelpful? (tick all that apply)

- budgeting/managing money
- digital skills
- had a class talk
- learnt about my options
- learnt new skills
- met an employer
- met with guidance counsellor
- nothing
- office skills
- practice interview
- went on a trip
- went to a career fair
- work experience
- other.

Feel free to add more detail about your activities

Q12. Have you been given enough help to plan leaving school? (tick or circle)

Q13. Before you leave school is there any extra support you would like? (tick)

- yes
- no.

Please explain your answer.

For the last question you can write an answer, draw a picture or both.

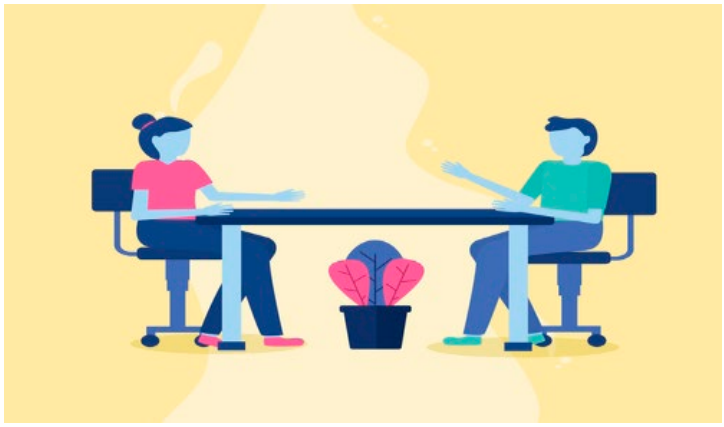
Q14. Please think about leaving school. What would you like to happen?

Thank you for completing our survey. We will talk to you again in March 2024.

Appendix G: Student Survey 2

You are getting help from people at school to prepare for moving on from school.

We want to ask you about your experience for this transition.



We need your consent. Consent is permission to talk to us.

Young Person Assent Form

- I agree to take part in the study.
- I understand what the study is about, and it has been clearly explained to me.
- I know that I do not have to take part.
- I understand I can change my mind and stop taking part at any time.
- I know that what I say may be used in reports and presentations.
- I know that my name will not be used in reports or presentations.

Your name

Date

Name of witness (if applicable)

Date

At the end of the survey, we will ask you to share your contact details so we can find about how you are getting on later in the year and learn more about your experience of leaving school.

- Yes, I consent to take part in this study. ☐
- No, I do not consent to take part in this study. ☐

1. What school do you go to? (please circle)

- [REDACTED]

2. How old are you?

- 16 ☐
- 17 ☐
- 18 ☐
- 19 ☐

3. What are you planning to do after school?

- Get a job ☐
- Do an apprenticeship programme ☐
- Go to day services ☐
- Do a training course ☐
- Go to university ☐
- Other ☐

If 'other', please explain.

4. Where are you planning to do this? (give the name of the place, the company, course provider, college or university)

5. What is the name of the course, job or programme you want to do?

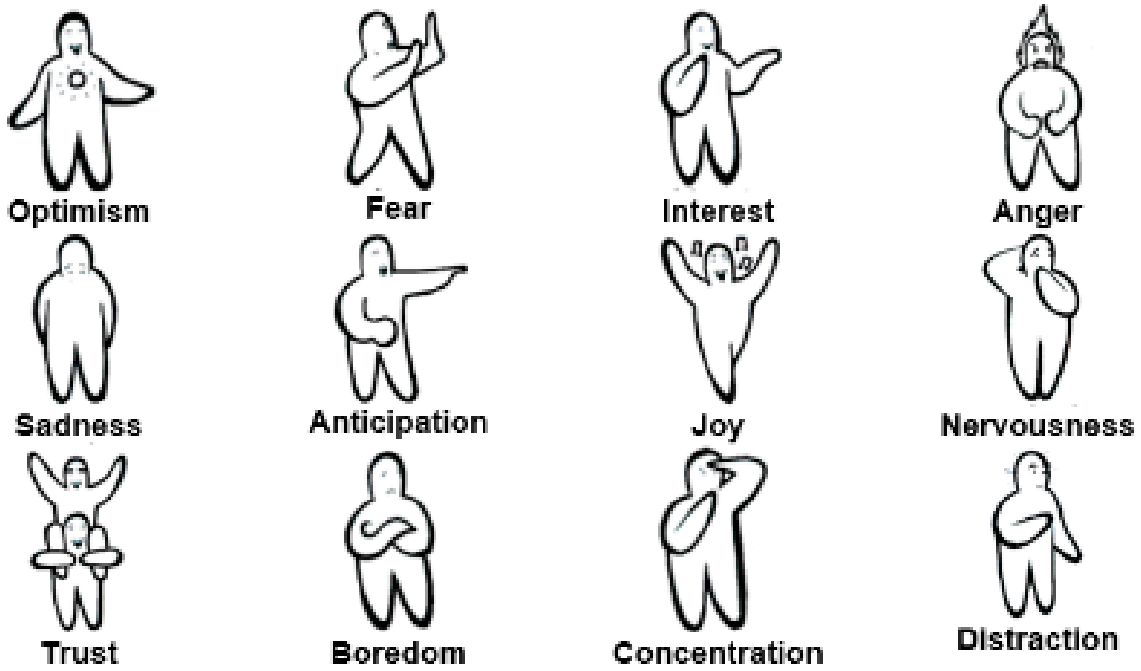
6. Why did you choose this course, job or programme?

7. What is involved in you getting your preferred course, job or programme? (for example, do you have to fill in an application, do an interview, etc?)

8. Are you considering any other options for when you move on from school?

9. Why are you considering this other option(s)?

10. Which of these pictures show(s) how you feel about moving on from school? (tick or circle) You can choose up to three feelings.



11. How aware are you of the supports outside of school to help you prepare to move on from school? (for example, a disability access officer, AHEAD, the HSE or SOLAS)

12. Looking ahead to leaving school, do you feel you will have enough support available to you?

- Yes ☐
- No ☐

13. What are you looking forward to after you move on from school?

14. Is there anything that you are worried or concerned about after you move on from school?

15. How prepared do you feel for when you leave school?

16. Would you like any more help or support before you leave school?

17. How do you feel about the support you have received in school to prepare for leaving school?

18. What have you done that has helped you prepare the most to move on from school?

19. What do you think schools can do to improve supports for students like you leaving school?

20. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience preparing to move on from school or your hopes for the future?

21. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in the Transition Study Pilot?

We plan to speak with you at the end of 2024 or early 2025, to learn about what you are doing after leaving school. Could you please share your phone number or email address so that we can get in touch with you at that time?

Phone number:

Email address:

Please feel free to leave your parent or guardian's contact details if you feel that it is more appropriate.

Phone number:

Email address:

The Department of Education, NCSE and Pilot evaluation team wish you all the best in your next phase after you leave school. We will be in touch with you about a survey in late 2024/early 2025.

Appendix H: Student Survey 3

Last year, you got help from people at school to prepare for moving on from school.

We want to ask you about your experience of this transition from school and how you are getting on now.

We need your consent. Consent is permission to talk to us.

Young Person Assent Form

- I agree to take part in the study.
- I understand what the study is about, and it has been clearly explained to me.
- I have read the young person information sheet
- I know that I do not have to take part.
- I understand I can change my mind and stop taking part at any time.
- I know that what I say may be used in reports and presentations.
- I know that my name will not be used in reports or presentations.

Your name

Date

Do you consent to take part in this survey?

- Yes, I consent to take part in this study ☐
- No, I do not consent to take part in this study ☐

Section 1 – Background information

1. What school did you go to? (please circle)

- [REDACTED]

2. How old are you?

- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20+

3. Are you?

- male
- female
- prefer to self-describe
- prefer not to say.

4. Now that you have finished school what are you doing?

- doing a training course (this includes a PLC)
- in a day service
- in a job
- in an apprenticeship programme
- in college/university
- other.

  Can you tell us what the 'other' is?

5. What is the name of the course, day service, job or programme you are currently doing?

6. If you are not attending anywhere now, what do you plan to do next?

- do a training course (this includes a PLC)
- go to a day service
- get a job
- do an apprenticeship programme
- go to college/university
- other.

7. Can you tell us what the 'other' is?

8. What are your plans for the future?

Section 2 – Preparation and Support

9. Why did you choose your course, day service, job or programme?

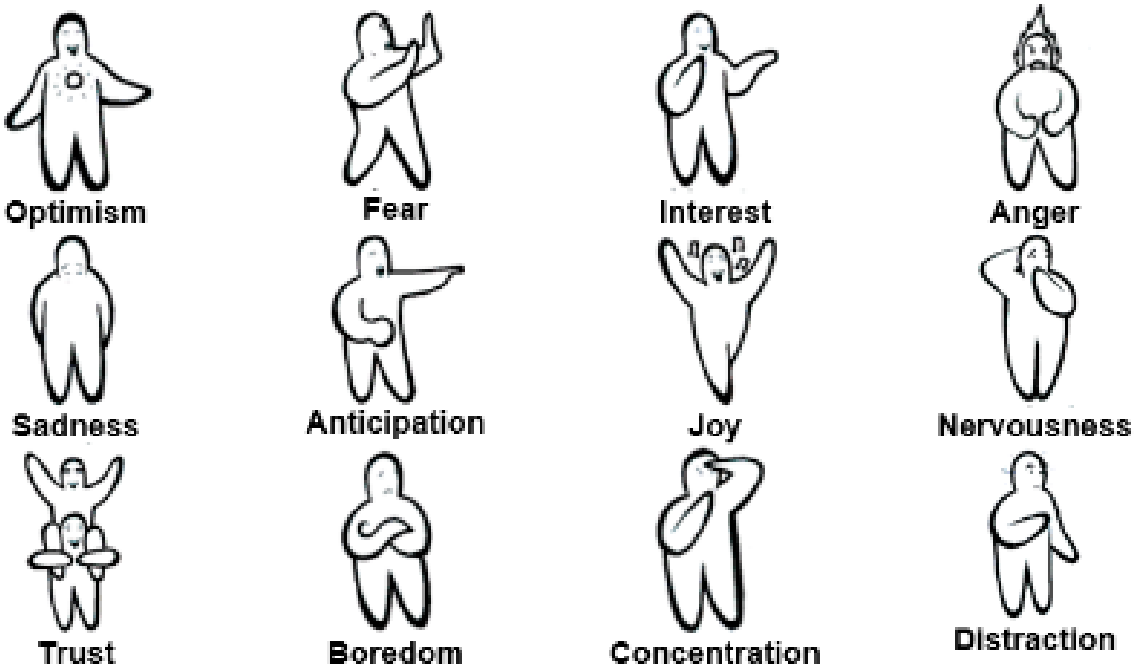
10. Would you have liked to do something else when you left school?

- yes
- no.

If 'yes', please explain

11. Before you left school, did you change your mind about what you would like to do?

12. Thinking about when you left school, which of these pictures show how you felt (please select up to three pictures)



13. Looking back to when you left school, did you feel prepared?

14. What activities helped you prepare to leave school? (tick all that apply)

- budgeting/managing money
- class talks
- going on trips
- using public transport
- going to a career fair
- learning about your options
- meeting with a guidance counsellor
- meeting with an employer
- office skills
- practice interview
- social skills
- work experience
- working on digital skills
- other.

  If 'other', please explain.

15. Are there other supports that you would have liked before leaving school?

Section 3 – Current Experience

16. How are you feeling about where you are now?

17. On a scale of 1 to 10, do you feel you have enough support from the following people?

Area	1 No Support	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Lots of Support
From my Family	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
At my Post-school Destination	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

If there are any other people providing support to you now, please give [details] on how they are supporting you.

Section 4 – Looking Forward

18. On a scale of 1 to 10, mark how well you feel the Transition Pilot helped you prepare for leaving school?

1 – Not at all **10 – Very well**

19. Can you describe how the Transition Pilot helped you prepare to leave school?

20. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in the Transition Pilot?

Thank you for all your help with this project.

We wish you the very best for the future

Appendix I: Parent Survey 1

Introduction

Thank you for your participation in this survey. Before you proceed, please take a moment to read the following information carefully. This page provides details about the survey, its purpose and what your participation entails.

This survey aims to gather information on the perspective of parents and guardians with children participating in the Department of Education's Comprehensive Employment Scheme (CES) Transition Pilot Project. This Pilot fulfils the Government's commitment to 'develop and demonstrate an approach to transitions for young people with disabilities to improve access to, and opportunities for, post-school options'.

The NCSE commissioned RSM Ireland to conduct an evaluation of the Pilot Programme. Your responses and responses from other participants (students, school staff, etc.) will be used to write a report and help inform future policy in this area.

The overall aim of the evaluation is to determine the impact the Transition Pilot has on students and schools, incorporating feedback from a range of stakeholders and make recommendations as to the potential to bring the programme to a national level.

Your privacy is important to us. Your responses will be kept confidential and your identity will be protected. All data will be pseudonymised, ensuring that no individual's identity will be discernible.

Survey data will be used throughout the evaluation report, in the form of quotes and statistics but your identity will not be shared.

Participation in this survey is voluntary. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or decide not to proceed, you may withdraw without any consequences. You may choose not to answer any question.

All survey data will be securely stored and accessible only to authorised people involved in the research.

If you have any questions about the survey, your participation or any concerns, please contact the project director, Dr Rachel Iredale, at Rachel.Iredale@rsmireland.ie

Please contact Caroline McKeown NCSE research officer at Caroline.McKeown@ncse.ie if you have queries about the Evaluation of the Transition Study Pilot.

Consent Form – Parent Survey

By continuing with the survey, you indicate that:

- You have read this information.
- You understand the purpose of the survey.
- You voluntarily agree to participate.

Consent

- Yes, I consent to take part in this study ☐
- No, I do not consent to take part in this study ☐

First name

Last name

We plan to speak to your son/daughter at the end of 2024, to learn about what they are doing after leaving school. Could you please share your phone number or email address so that we can get in touch with your son/daughter at that time?

Phone number:

Email address:

Section 1 – Background Information

1. Student's first name

2. Student's last name

3. What school does your son/daughter attend?

- [REDACTED]

4. What is your employment status?

- employed full time (30 hours per week or more)
- employed part time (less than 30 hours per week)
- student
- caregiver
- seeking employment
- other (including illness or disability)
- prefer not to say.

5. Are you your son's/daughter's:

- parent or other female guardian
- father or other male guardian
- other relative?

6. Is this your first child to leave post-primary school?

- yes
- no.

Section 2 – Preparations for Leaving School

7. How do you feel about your son/daughter leaving school?

8. Leaving school is different for everybody. What do you feel are the positive or negative aspects of leaving school that your son/daughter may experience?

9. How much do you think your child is being supported to think about moving on from school?

- no support at all
- not much support
- moderate support
- a good amount of support
- a lot of support.

10. How prepared do you feel your child is to move on from school?

- not prepared at all
- a bit prepared
- moderately prepared
- well prepared
- very well prepared.

11. What activities have been most useful to your child? (tick/circle all that apply)

- budgeting/managing money
- office skills
- practice interview
- work experience
- guidance counsellor meetings
- employer meetings
- class talks
- class trips
- careers fair
- digital skills
- learning about their options
- learning new skills
- other.

12. Please provide more information about why these activities were useful for your son/daughter.

13. What do you think your son/daughter would like to do after school? Please be as specific as possible.

14. Did you have any input in your son/daughter's transition plan? If yes, please outline how and at what stage.

15. Do you think your son/daughter's plan is achievable? Please explain your answer.

16. Is your son/daughter considering any other back-up options for when they leave school?

17. Over the past two to three years, has your son/daughter's post-school plans changed? If so, what were the main factors causing this change?

Section 3 – Impacts

18. What support would you, as the parent/guardian, like to receive to better support your son/daughter's transition?

19. Before your son/daughter leaves school, are there any other activities, supports or preparations that you think would be of benefit?

- yes
- no.

If yes, what supports would you like your son/daughter to receive?

20. What are the benefits of the Transition Pilot for your son/daughter?

21. Are there areas for improvement in the Transition Pilot? Please explain your answer.

22. What do you think are the key parts of a transition programme for young people similar to your son/daughter?

23. Is there anything else you would like to say about the Transition Pilot or the experience of your son/daughter leaving school?

Thank you for your submission.

Appendix J: Parent Survey 2

Introduction

Thank you for your participation in this survey. Before you proceed, please take a moment to read the following information carefully. This page provides details about the survey, its purpose and what your participation entails.

Information about the Study and Survey

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) commissioned RSM Ireland to conduct an evaluation of the Transition Pilot. The overall aim of the evaluation is to determine the impact the Transition Pilot has had on students, families and schools, as young people prepare to leave school. Your responses and responses from other participants, such as students and school staff, will be used to produce a report which will help inform future policy in this area.

This is the second survey gathering information on the perspective of the parents and guardians of students who participated in the Transition Pilot. Parents were first surveyed in 2024 when the students were preparing to leave school. This survey focuses on how the young people are getting on now, and to reflect on your experience of the Transition Pilot.

How We Manage Your Data

Your privacy is important to us. Your responses will be kept confidential and your identity will be protected. All data will be pseudonymised, ensuring that no person will be identifiable. Participation in this survey is voluntary. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or decide not to proceed, you may withdraw without any consequences. You may choose not to answer any question. All survey data will be securely stored and accessible only to authorised people involved in the research.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about the survey, your participation, or any concerns, please contact the project director, Dr Rachel Iredale, at Rachel.Iredale@rsmireland.ie

Please contact Cliona Doherty NCSE research officer at Cliona.Doherty@ncse.ie if you have queries about the evaluation of the Transition Pilot.

Consent Form – Parent Survey

By continuing with the survey, you indicate that:

- You have read the information above about the study.
- You understand the purpose of this survey.
- You voluntarily agree to participate.

Consent

- Yes, I consent to take part in this survey ☐
- No, I do not consent to take part in this survey ☐

First name

Last name

Section 1 – Background Information

Student's first name

Student's last name

1. What school did your son/daughter attend? (please circle)

- [REDACTED]

2. What is your employment status?

- caregiver
- employed full-time
- employed part-time (less than 30 hours per week)
- seeking employment
- student
- other (including illness or disability)
- prefer not to say.

3. Are you your son/daughter's:

- mother or other female guardian
- father or other male guardian
- other relative?

  If 'other', please describe your relationship to the student.

Section 2 – Reflecting on Leaving School

4. Looking back, before your child left school, how aware were you of the Transition Pilot and what it involved for your son/daughter?

- not at all aware
- not very aware
- moderately aware
- well aware
- very well aware.

5. Did you feel involved in your child's participation in the Transition Pilot?

- yes
- no.

If yes, please explain how you were involved.

If no, what might have helped you feel more involved?

6. How did you feel when your son/daughter was leaving school last year?

7. How do you feel now your son/daughter has left school?

8. When do you think your child's school should start preparations and supports for the transition to life after school?

- as soon as they start school
- three years before they leave
- two years before they leave
- at the start of their last year
- a few months before they leave school.

Please explain your answer.

9. How prepared do you feel your son/daughter was leaving school?

- not at all prepared
- not very prepared
- moderately prepared
- well prepared
- very well prepared.

10. Which activities were most useful for your child in preparing to leave school? (please select up to five)

- careers fair
- class talks
- class trips
- digital skills
- employer meetings
- guidance counsellor meetings
- learning about their options
- learning new skills
- office skills
- other
- practice interviews
- work experience.

If 'other', please explain what activities were useful.

Please provide more information about why these activities were useful.

11. How much did the Transition Pilot help your child in the following areas?

Area	Not at All Helpful	Slightly Helpful	Moderately Helpful	Very Helpful	Extremely Helpful
Learning about Their Options	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Improving Employability Skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Independent Living Skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Improving Social Skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Building Confidence	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Providing More Choices	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

12. Are there any extra supports that you feel would have prepared your child to leave school?

Section 3 – Post-school Destination

13. What is your child doing now?

- doing a training course (this includes a PLC)
- in a job
- in an apprentice programme
- at a day service
- in college/university
- other

Please provide more details.

14. Was this your child's first preference?

- yes
- no.

15. Did your child's preference for what they wanted to do after school change during the school year?

- yes
- no.

16. Were there other options you would have liked to consider for your son/daughter after school?

- yes
- no.

If yes, what other option(s) would you have liked them to consider?

17. Can you describe the ways the Transition Pilot has helped your child in their post-school destination?

18. Do you feel your child has received enough support with their transition from school in their post-school destination?

- yes, fully supported
- yes, mostly supported
- somewhat supported
- not supported enough
- not supported at all.

19. Is there anything you would like to add about the supports for your son/daughter since leaving school?

20. What type of supports are important for your child now? (tick all that apply)

- getting a job or work experience
- access to further education or training
- building friendships
- improving social and communication skills
- integrate into the community
- learning daily life skills (for example, cooking, managing money etc.)
- other.

  If 'other', please specify.

Section 4 – Looking Forward

21. Thinking about your experience of the Transition Pilot, is there anything you would change?

22. On a scale of 1 to 10, would you recommend the Transition Pilot to other parents?

1 – No **10 – Definitely**

23. If you were talking to another parent/guardian about their child taking part in the Transition Pilot this year, what would you say to them?

Could you please provide us with a name and/or contact details for someone you child has engaged with in their post-school destination?

RSM and the NCSE would like to extend our thanks for your participation in our survey!

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