

Natspec response to Health Committee Inquiry



Children and young people's mental health: role of education

1. Background

- 1.1 Natspec is the membership association for organisations which offer specialist provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. Our vision is that all young people with learning difficulties or disabilities can access quality education and training which supports their aspirations for skills, work and life. Our members provide multi-disciplinary specialist support and expertise which enables students aged 16 to 25 to make a successful transition to adult life.
- 1.2 Natspec welcomes the Health Committee's scrutiny of the role of education in children and young people's mental health and the recently announced green paper on this topic. We would urge the government to include post-16 learning providers as fully as possible in the planned support for schools to ensure young people as well as children reap the benefits.
- 1.3 As all our students are aged 16 or over and have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, our response to the Health Committee's inquiry focuses on the emotional well-being and mental health needs of this particular student group, the specific issues they face, and the role of learning providers in supporting these students.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 A significant number of our students experience mental health issues in addition to their learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Research suggests that people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are generally more susceptible to mental health problems for a range of reasons including medical or biological causes, a reduced social circle with fewer friends, difficulties in understanding and expressing emotions, a lack of opportunities to engage (e.g. in sport, leisure, travel), and a lack of control over their lives. Certain conditions, such as autism, are particularly associated with an increased risk of depression and high levels of anxiety.
- 2.2 Specialist colleges have been working over many years to support their students to achieve and maintain emotional wellbeing in the face of this increased risk of mental health difficulties. In that time, they have developed and refined many successful strategies for doing so. In recent years, they have observed a marked increase in students presenting with mental health difficulties. This is the case across the whole of the further education (FE) sector, and we are working closely with the Association of Colleges, whose President has identified 2017 as the year of mental health in response to the significant concerns of general FE colleagues about the rising number of students with mental health difficulties.

3. Promoting emotional wellbeing, building resilience, and establishing and protecting good mental health

- 3.1 Key to successful promotion of emotional wellbeing is taking a whole-college holistic approach. This includes developing an ethos of acceptance and respect for individuals, tackling the perceived stigma of mental illness, encouraging open discussion of mental health between staff and students, taking a personalised approach to promoting individuals' positive mental health, and staff from different disciplines working together to achieve a common aim. Some colleges have a discrete mental health policy including references to relevant organisations and further information to underpin this whole-college approach.
- 3.2 One college has, over a 16-year period, developed an 'Emotional Growth Approach', led by an educational psychologist with the support of a mentor team. They focus on supporting the development of emotional growth of students through the application of the principles of attachment theory and systems psychology, recognising the opportunities within everyday life to promote emotional growth. Another college has had a registered mental health nurse in post for the last five years to lead a cross-college approach to supporting good mental health and building self-esteem, which is often low in young people with a learning difficulty and/or disability.
- 3.3 Colleges are putting the promotion of good mental health on the same footing as good physical health. In practice, this means: taught sessions on achieving and maintaining emotional wellbeing and developing self-esteem and resilience, for example as part of tutorial time or a personal development module; prominently displaying accessible information about positive mental health; and providing social and leisure activities which support both good physical and mental health. Particular tools or approaches described as helpful in the promotion of emotional wellbeing include: Guide to a Good Day, Person-Centred Support Plans, Wellness Toolboxes and Wellness Recovery Action Plans (WRAPs). Some colleges point out, however, that there is a lack of accessible resources for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or material/approaches that are relevant for use with students with more complex needs who may be non-verbal, or who struggle to understand abstract concepts or express emotions.

4. Support for young people with mental health problems

- 4.1 Young people in our colleges are experiencing a wide range of mental health problems. These include both long-term mental health issues such as psychosis conditions, addiction, bipolar disorder and personality type disorders, and acute or situational poor mental health such as low self-worth, anxiety conditions, low mood, self-harming, risk-taking behaviour, and erratic sleeping and/or eating habits.
- 4.2 Support for young people with mental health problems in specialist colleges comes from multiple sources: specialist staff employed by the college (eg counsellors and psychologists); support staff and tutors; peers and external partners. College counsellors are providing cognitive behavioural therapy, other talking therapies and mindfulness training for students. They are also working with students to identify specific strategies or techniques students can

apply themselves, such as those for reducing anxiety. To achieve maximum impact, these need to be shared with staff across the college so that they can all support students to apply the strategies in the context of their learning and everyday lives and, where appropriate, be built into behaviour management plans. Inter-disciplinary working is key to successfully supporting students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and mental health support is no exception. Mental health needs are now routinely included in initial and ongoing multi-disciplinary assessments for students, leading to early identification and intervention.

- 4.3 Tutors and support staff identify issues and concerns and provide low-level, informal interventions. They use role play, music therapy and relaxation and yoga sessions to help students manage anxiety and express feelings. There is a high level of pastoral support available in colleges, including Student Support open door policies as well as timetabled sessions for targeted individuals. Colleges cite a supportive peer group as important to students with mental health problems and some have trained ambassadors in place for this purpose.
- 4.4 External partners include CAMHS for 16-18 year olds and, for those aged 19+, the Community Mental Health Team and Intensive Assessment Treatment Teams. Many colleges are frustrated by the difficulty in getting timely referrals to these services, particularly for those aged 19+, where young people often need to be in crisis before they can be seen. The transition between CAMHS and adult services can sometimes be traumatic for young people, while for others issues arise about where they 'fit in the system' because of their need for both learning disability and mental health services, sometimes leading to long delays or even a lack of service altogether. Therapeutic services are often limited and the focus of engagement with CAMHS can be solely on medication review. Information sharing between external partners is not always straightforward; in some cases, consultants are reluctant to share information with education providers as they do not understand their relevance in supporting young people with mental health issues.
- 4.5 Some colleges are struggling to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of young people presenting with mental health difficulties in a climate where resources are very tight. Providing enough supervision and support for staff who are dealing with student distress is also difficult and colleges are concerned that without this, staff are themselves at increased risk of stress and mental ill health. Natspec is in regular contact with colleagues at the Department for Education regarding the financial difficulties some member colleges are facing due to pressures on high needs budgets in local authorities. Until issues such as reduced fees, late payments and lack of budget certainty are addressed, colleges will continue to find it very difficult to provide the levels of trained staff required to meet the needs of students with mental health difficulties.

5. Building skills for professionals

- 5.1 Colleges typically focus professional development on general awareness-raising in relation to mental health, including recognising and responding to mental health issues and ways to maintain wellbeing and promote emotional growth. Sessions on mental health are planned into their annual CPD programmes and some colleges intend to do some focused training as part of Mental Health Awareness Week in May this year. Many colleges have one or more

staff who have undertaken the Mental Health First Aid Course (one has 15.) Those who have done the course are usually expected to cascade the learning to other staff members. With the increasing numbers of students experiencing mental health issues, one college suggests that awareness of mental health issues should form a mandatory part of initial teacher training.

- 5.2 Natspec is prioritising wellbeing and mental health as a CPD topic for members; Ian Ashman, President of AoC, is giving a key note address on the issue at our conference in March where we will also be running a workshop showcasing the work of one particular college in supporting students' emotional wellbeing.

6. Social media and the internet

- 6.1 The internet is a mixed 'blessing' for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. It presents numerous opportunities for education, research and recreation. It can help students develop self-confidence and social skills, allowing them to build friendships and to reduce their sense of isolation. For people with restricted mobility and fewer opportunities to access social settings, social media and internet gaming can give them easy access to friends and a sense of being connected to a wider community with shared interests. The internet and social media, in particular, can also be used to promote understanding and de-stigmatisation of mental health issues.
- 6.2 However, some students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities derive a huge proportion of their self-worth from interaction on social media, making them very vulnerable to having their self-esteem easily damaged, potentially with a catastrophic impact on their mental health. Our students are also vulnerable to sexual predators and bullies when they are on-line. The amount of time some students spend on-line has resulted in reduced face-to-face social interaction which can be counter to sustaining good mental health. Some colleges have imposed a curfew on internet use to ensure it is not affecting good sleeping habits while others have encouraged students to engage in alternative activities in addition to their 'screen-time'.
- 6.3 All our colleges include e-safety within their curriculum to help students inhabit and navigate the on-line world safely and in a way that allows them to maximise the opportunities it offers them. Natspec is working with members to find the right balance between effective use of internet and social media, and overuse or over-dependence. We would welcome further support/resources on doing this effectively for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in a world where technology is constantly evolving.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 Natspec is happy to provide further evidence to support this enquiry. We would also welcome the opportunity to work with others to address the issues raised, so that together we can improve young people's mental health and wellbeing.