

**Valuing specialism;  
realising potential**

# **A general election manifesto 2019**



# Introduction

Natspec represents 94 specialist further education (FE) providers across the UK, working with around 5,000 young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. We believe that all young people with learning difficulties and disabilities should be able to access high quality education and training, which meets their individual needs and supports their aspirations for skills, work and life.

Natspec calls on the next government to recognise the importance of further education for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities and the role of specialist colleges, alongside mainstream providers, in meeting their needs.

While there has been unanimous support for recent reforms that aim to put young people with learning difficulties and disabilities at the centre, offering them greater choice and control, high quality provision and successful preparation for adulthood, that vision has not been realised. Too many young people and their families face an uphill struggle to have their needs met; too few are able to move on from education and training into paid employment, suitable housing, or achieve the level of independence of which they are capable.

**We recommend the next government focuses on three key areas in order to improve outcomes for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities:**

- ▶ high quality education and training
- ▶ a system that works for young people
- ▶ brighter futures.

# High quality education and training

**Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities** should have access to high quality education and training from providers with appropriate expertise to meet their specific needs and preferences.

Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are not always made aware of the full range of post-16 or post-19 options available to them. The localised system for assessment and funding, which does not suit the larger catchment areas of further education and makes regional or national planning difficult, has resulted in some young people only being offered provision available within their own local authority area, despite the existence of more suitable provision slightly further afield.

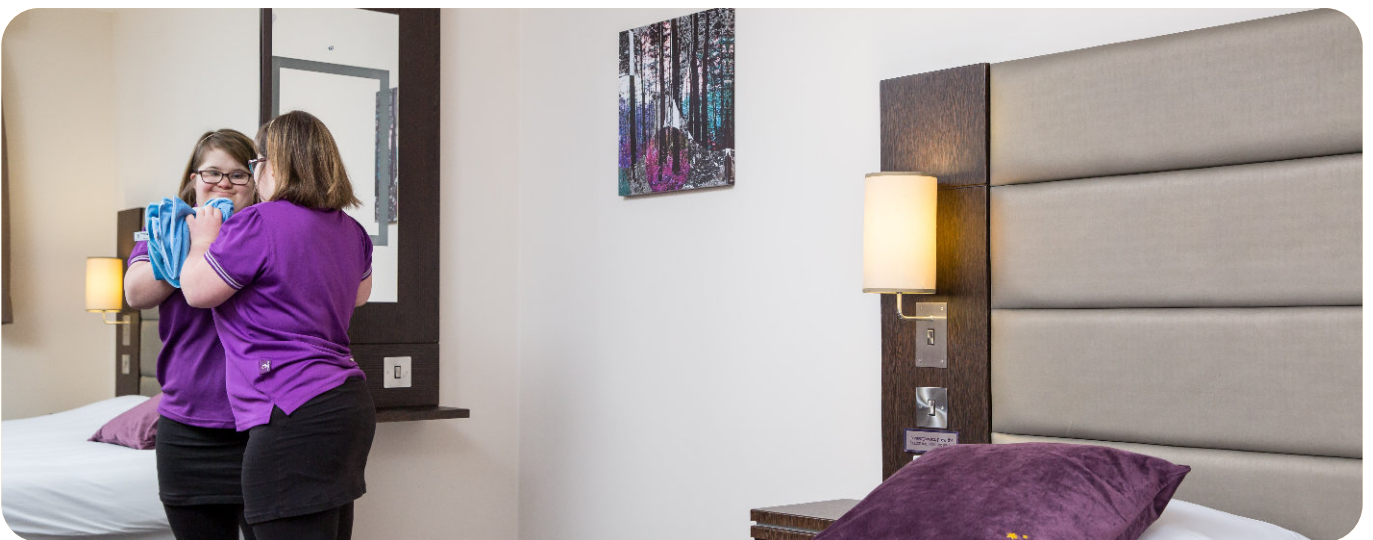
A lack of strategic planning for post-16 and post-19 provision by local authorities has also led to a proliferation of very small providers rather than more cost-effective planning for places through outreach or satellite centres of established providers. This has resulted in a dilution of specialism and expertise, exacerbated by the well documented funding crisis, severe cuts to the FE sector and a shortage of staff. There is no national plan for, or investment in, essential workforce development to ensure young people have continuing access to the specialist support they need.

All these issues have had a particularly negative impact on young people with low incidence, more complex needs where provision cannot be easily or cost-effectively sourced or developed locally.



We call on the next government to:

- ▶ invest at national level in developing specialism in the FE workforce, including creating hubs for specialist expertise to help providers across the country improve support for young people with low-incidence needs, such as sensory impairments.
- ▶ require local authorities to publish strategic plans for post-16 and post-19 provision, supported by a forum of all post-16 providers serving their area, including details of regional planning and their approach to commissioning specialist services



# A system that works for young people

**Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities** in England should have their rights under the Children and Families Act realised and be served by a system which lives up to the original vision of the SEND reforms. In Wales, lessons from the English experience should be learned and the same mistakes avoided in transforming the system for those with additional learning needs.

The current SEND system in England is under-funded, with too little money in the high needs budget to support the full 0–25 age range. Lack of funding results in too many decisions led by financial considerations rather than by young people's needs or preferences; their right to take a lead in decision-making is largely overlooked.

The system is mired in what the Education Committee recently described as a 'treacle of bureaucracy' and rather than becoming less adversarial, for many young people and their families it has become a battleground as they fight for their rights. Moreover, there is no system of accountability and no sanctions for any parties who fail to comply with their duties under the Children and Families Act.

There is a significant risk that the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) reforms in Wales will repeat the English experience, with a similar localised funding system leading to inconsistent decision-making across local areas and young people's needs and preferences going unmet.





We call on the next government to:

- ▶ increase the overall amount of high needs funding and implement a revised high needs funding system that is more workable for post-16 providers, leading to more young people achieving their aspirations for work or independence, and producing long-term savings to the public purse
- ▶ introduce a system of accountability including sanctions for non-compliance, in line with the recommendations in the Education Select Committee's recent [SEND inquiry report](#)
- ▶ reduce bureaucracy by requiring local authorities to use standardised procedures and paperwork, including a national template for Education Health and Care Plans
- ▶ fund training for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on understanding their legal rights and developing the skills to become more self-determining.



# Brighter futures

**Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities** should be able to capitalise on the knowledge and skills gained at college and go on to lead happy and fulfilling adult lives, living as independently as possible with paid employment where appropriate.

While further education is helping young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to grow in confidence and develop their work and independence skills, they are not always able to put these to maximum effect once they leave college.

A lack of employment support and specialist careers guidance, a benefits system that disincentivises paid work and too little appropriate accommodation means that a significant number of young people are not achieving their potential. These young people are often left isolated and frustrated when they could be contributing, including financially, to their communities.

Not only are we failing to maximise the return on investing in their education and training, we are also unnecessarily increasing their demand on the public purse in terms of the cost of future social care and benefits.





We call on the next government to:

- ▶ introduce national transition standards and protocols for transition from school to FE and from FE into post-college life, requiring multi-agency involvement where appropriate
- ▶ fund training for specialist careers advisers so that young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have access to appropriate careers information, advice and guidance.
- ▶ re-examine the benefits system to identify and address disincentives to work for young people with a disability
- ▶ invest in housing, adult social services and employment support for people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

