

The future role of specialist colleges: a contribution to the SEND review

1. Introduction

Natspec is the membership association for organisations which offer specialist further education (FE) for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. We represent 99 specialist colleges across England and Wales, and we also offer training for the wider further education sector to help improve the quality of provision in all FE providers.

Our vision is that all young people with learning difficulties or disabilities can access high quality education and training, which meets their individual needs and supports their aspirations for skills, work and life.

This paper:

- explains how specialist colleges could be positioned to enable them to play an important role in a future SEND system
- provides background information and proposals for consideration by the DfE's SEND Review team
- summarises the changes needed to facilitate specialist colleges to assume the roles proposed.

In considering the future role of specialist colleges, we have applied the following principles:

1. The FE sector should be a joined-up system with appropriate levels of funding and operational arrangements to enable specialist and mainstream colleges to work together.
2. There should be clearly defined roles for both GFE and specialist colleges, with each complementing the other.
3. A significant majority of young people with SEND/ALN should continue to be placed in GFEs, and colleges should have access to more resources and support to meet demand.
4. Specialist colleges should continue to meet the needs of the minority (up to 10%) who require a more specialist setting, and also play a role in supporting the mainstream.
5. Young people should be able to access high quality specialist support wherever they are placed.

We offer a separate annex in which we begin to explore some of the issues relating to the rising number of specialist colleges; and the planning that is necessary to achieve the optimum number and spread required if specialist colleges are to fulfil the roles we propose for them in a future SEND system.

2. The future role of specialist colleges

Specialist colleges provide further education and training for students aged 16+ or 19+ who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, many of whom have complex needs. Currently the role of specialist colleges is largely limited to offering direct provision in the form of learning programmes and associated support.

We propose that specialist colleges should take **four key roles** within a future SEND system:

1. direct provision
2. partnerships with GFE colleges to create joint placements, contracted services and/or co-located provision
3. sub-contracted specialist services
4. specialist training across the whole FE sector.

2.1 Direct provision

Whilst the vast majority of students have their needs met in mainstream – and should continue to do so - it is widely recognised that for a small number of students, specialist provision is required. The right of students and families to choose a placement with specialist provision is also enshrined within the Children and Families Act.

We fully support a position where general FE colleges are the main provider of education for young people with SEND and recognise their current and growing role as such. The 238 GFE colleges in England provide education and training for 2.2 million people, including around 700,000 16-18-year olds¹. 23% of 16-18-year olds and 14% of adult students in GFE colleges have a self-declared learning difficulty or disability².

In direct contrast to the school sector, the numbers of FE students with SEND being educated in a mainstream setting is rising rapidly. The LA SEN2 data for 2020 reports an **11.5% increase** in young people with EHCPs being placed in GFE colleges – up to 52,168 from 46,786 in 2019³. According to ESFA High Needs place number data, **numbers have doubled** from 15,000 in 2013/14 to over 30,000 in 2020/21⁴.

However, we see a continuing role for specialist colleges in meeting the needs of the small minority of students with EHCPs, whose needs cannot reasonably be met in a GFE.

Around 10% of the total number of young people with EHCPs placed in the FE sector as a whole are currently educated in specialist colleges. This percentage has hardly changed for the last 5 years (SEN2 and ESFA data). The needs of these young people are met by 133 specialist colleges (as registered on the Department for Education’s Get Information about Schools (GIAS) database), 113 of which are funded by ESFA in 2020/21. They cater for approximately 6,000 students.

While both specialist and GFE colleges provide programmes of learning designed to enable students with SEND make a positive progression from college, specialist colleges tend to work with students who need more specialist input, including multi-disciplinary support and expertise.

These include students with more complex low incidence high needs, which cannot be easily resourced in a GFE, and those who would struggle in a busy GFE environment, for example because of behaviours that challenge or the nature of their SEMH needs.

Specialist colleges have a diverse range of expertise and specialisms including those associated with a specific condition (such as epilepsy, autism or sensory impairment), a particular level of

¹ Association of Colleges Key Facts: <https://www.aoc.co.uk/about-colleges/research-and-stats/key-further-education-statistics>

² FE Data Library: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-further-education-and-skills>

³ SEN 2 data: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england>

⁴ ESFA place numbers: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-needs-allocated-place-numbers>

support need (such as profound and multiple learning difficulties) or a particular vocational focus (such as hospitality and catering).

If specialist colleges are to continue to provide for these students and play this important role in a future SEND system, the SEND review needs to address some of the barriers that currently prevent this being done effectively. These barriers include:

- Misunderstanding and misperceptions about the nature and status of specialist colleges, resulting in LAs sometimes not considering them alongside schools or GFE colleges as potential providers. There is a tendency for specialist colleges to be perceived as “private” and they are often excluded from the Local Offer or from discussions between LAs and other providers. It is important that all involved in SEND and HN funding recognise that both mainstream GFE colleges and specialist colleges are independent of local authority control in terms of the SEND system. The vast majority of specialist colleges are run by charities or not for profit organisations, and the high needs students they provide for are all state funded by ESFA and local authority high needs budgets.
- Linked to the above, specialist colleges are sometimes perceived as a last resort, meaning that placements are made very late, following disputes or appeals rather than being planned in a timely manner as the appropriate type of provision for the smaller proportion who require it. The statutory deadline of 31 March is routinely missed for the majority of learners coming to specialist colleges. In May 2020, 31% of Natspec members had NO September starts confirmed. This is a perennial issue for colleges and causes significant issues relating to budget setting, staff recruitment and financial sustainability.

To address these issues, a single place planning system is required that encourages LAs to consider specialist colleges alongside FE colleges as potential providers, combined with the creation of strategic planning groups by LAs involving all post-16 providers.

A change in perception is also more likely to be achieved if DfE, ESFA and LAs used the term “specialist colleges” alongside “GFE” or “mainstream” colleges rather than various terms which can be misleading, such as ISP, ISC and SPI.

As part of a future vision, specialist colleges should be positioned as an **integral part of FE sector**. There should be a clear set of policies for mainstream and special schools, and a separate set of distinct policies for mainstream and specialist FE.

2.2 Partnerships between specialist and mainstream FE

There should be more flexibility in placements to allow for an increasing number of mainstream-specialist partnerships. Currently, young people and families - and commissioners - must make a choice between a specialist college and GFE college, even though the most appropriate offer might be a blend of provision from the two provider types.

The current binary system can lead to a young person being placed in a specialist setting in order to access a limited number of key services that are not available in the GFE setting. Conversely it can mean a young person is denied access to these specialist services because the GFE is deemed the ‘best fit’. The binary system certainly contributes to the level of conflict between families and LAs about FE placements.

Specialist/mainstream partnerships could result in a range of different approaches to benefit young people, such as:

- joint placements, with students attending both a specialist setting and a GFE setting for different elements of their placement, thereby receiving both specialist and vocational expertise and learning different skills from each type of setting
- two or three-year programmes with a planned move from specialist setting to mainstream, mid-programme once particular barriers have been addressed or skills and/or confidence have been developed
- specialist colleges being co-located on mainstream sites, for example through the creation of satellite sites from existing specialist colleges and/or re-location, providing students from both sites the chance to mix, and creating opportunities for sharing staff expertise and facilities
- more flexible use of residential staff and facilities, for example specialist colleges providing short residential placements for GFE students, to support the development of independence skills.

In order for these types of partnership to take place, LAs need to take a more strategic and creative approach to planning post-16 provision, drawing in the full range of potential providers. Some changes to funding arrangements will also be needed to support the commissioning of joint programmes and/or to enable GFEs to buy in specialist provision to supplement their programmes.

2.3 Sub-contracted specialist services

There are a number of highly specialist colleges which could provide advisory services across local areas to support mainstream schools and colleges e.g. for VI, HI, Assistive Technology. They could help fill the gap left by the significant cuts to LA advisory teams that have taken place over the past 5 years. For example, RNIB report that over the past two years, almost a quarter (23%) of local authorities have cut funding for their VI service.

There is the potential for specialist colleges to develop a wide range of services to enhance the experience of students in the mainstream in response to local or regional demand, e.g. providing job coaching support for students with SEND in the workplace. Offering these kinds of services to schools and GFE colleges would enable more students to have their needs well-met in a mainstream setting.

To enable specialist colleges to contribute to a revised SEND system in this way, there will need to be more flexibility and innovation in terms of funding and commissioning these services. Specialist colleges with significant expertise will also need support to develop their offers to match LA need, as for many this will be new territory.

2.4 Training for the SEND workforce

Specialist colleges could play a key role in upskilling the SEND workforce. In the absence of any nationally funded training for providers who work with young people with more complex needs, Natspec has itself invested in two training services: [Natspec Transform](#) and [TechAbility](#) which provide training for staff in both specialist and mainstream colleges and is available both to members and non-members.

We believe specialist colleges could play a role in the expansion and further development of training FE providers to work with young people with more complex needs, by providing

training directly to mainstream schools and colleges in their area. Some specialist colleges are already doing this, having developed training arms in order to provide specialist expertise through in-house or regional training sessions for different types of SEN support or aspects of curriculum delivery.

In addition, we would like to see a more strategic approach in which government invests in specific centres of specialist expertise to support local provision, building on the model adopted in the ETF's SEND Centres of Excellence, whose main focus has been on students with less complex needs. This would enable specialists to come together and maintain and develop their expertise in particular types of SEN, and/or undertake innovative research. National specialist centres would also help to halt the decline in qualified specialist teachers, giving them an opportunity to network and upskill through mutual support and training.

3. A revised role for specialist colleges: what needs to change?

The systems for assessment, funding and support need to change to enable specialist colleges to contribute effectively to a new SEND system. Current systems often act against specialist colleges who are striving to offer provision that is flexible, adaptable, of high quality and provide value for money. We have referenced many of these in the sections above.

Numerous independent reports, most recently the Education Select Committee SEND Inquiry and the LGA, AoC and Natspec independent research study on post-16 commissioning, have also made recommendations to improve the processes and set out the support required.

We see the following as the key changes that are needed to enable specialist colleges to play their part in the wider system:

- DfE, ESFA and LAs need to develop distinct SEND policy for FE, with the contribution of mainstream and specialist colleges considered together.
- DfE and ESFA should require LAs to establish post-16 strategic planning groups which involve all post-16 providers in the area.
- LAs and groups of LAs should work with FE providers on longer-term strategic planning for low incidence and/or complex SEN, backed up by demographic and trend research, and DfE should introduce a mechanism for funding this at regional or national level. A common understanding between LAs and providers about how best to meet the needs of the small number who require specialist expertise, that it is not cost-effective to provide in every local area, would address many of the current inefficiencies.
- LAs should develop a single repository of data for High Needs and share this with providers; market intelligence should be used more widely for planning purposes
- ESFA needs to change its systems of reporting and financial processes (e.g. S251 returns; HN place planning) so that GFE and specialist colleges are grouped together, rather than specialist colleges being grouped with Independent or Non-Maintained Special Schools.
- DfE and ESFA needs to change the HN funding system so that both GFE and specialist colleges use the same system for HN place planning.
- DfE and ESFA need to modify the HNF system to encourage rather than deter joint working and joint placements.

- DfE should require LAs to clearly identify and ringfence a proportion of funding within the HN block to be reserved for post-school settings.
- Government and LAs should ensure there is parity across phases and settings when grants or additional funding sources are made available.
- LAs should ensure that gaps in provision are filled by improving existing quality and workforce development, with new provision opened only where geographical gaps cannot be addressed through outreach and partnership work. Providers and LAs should be proactive about approaching each other to discuss needs and make joint commitments to filling gaps.
- Government should invest at national level into centres of specialist expertise to support training for local providers. The centres would enable specialists to come together and maintain and develop their expertise in particular types of SEN, and/or undertake innovative research.

Annex

Fulfilling our future role: issues relating to the optimum number of specialist colleges

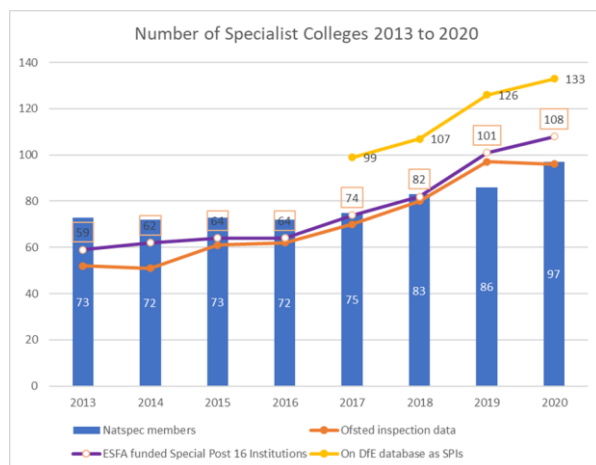
In order to fulfil the four roles described in section 2, it is important to consider the number and distribution of specialist colleges, so that demand can be met effectively.

Currently there are around 6,000 students in over 100 specialist colleges, but coverage is uneven, in part for historical reasons.

Specialist colleges can be created and become funded by the ESFA through the [due diligence process](#), but the number of organisations going through the process is determined locally, according to whether or not the LA chooses to place young people at new providers. The system has led to a lot of new colleges being created in some areas, and none in others.

There is therefore no national mechanism for planning specialist provision and ensuring that all young people can have access to specialist provision to best meet their needs. The recent growth in the number of specialist colleges has largely been unplanned and in reaction to local demand, without reference to changing or developing existing provision.

The chart below shows the increased number of specialist providers in England.



The chart shows that there are now:

- 133 organisations on DfE database (GIAS)
- 108 of them were funded by ESFA in 2019/20 (the 2020/21 allocations show that this has now increased to 111)
- 97 on Ofsted inspection list (Aug 2020)
- 97 Natspec members (Sept 2020)- recently increased to 100 (Nov 2020)

The total number of students has not increased as rapidly, resulting in a declining number of students per college: the average number of students per college has decreased from over 80 in 2014 to 56 in 2020.

Regional coverage

There is currently an uneven spread of specialist colleges, both in terms of supply (where colleges are currently located), and demand (the numbers placed by LAs). The table below shows that:

- Local Authorities in the East of England place only 3% of students in specialist colleges, whilst LAs in the West Midlands place 16%.
- There are 124 specialist colleges and LAs place over 64,000 students with EHCPs in FE – there are therefore 1.92 specialist colleges per 1,000 students. However this ranges in

the regions from the South West, with 3.5 colleges per 1,000 students, to the East, with 0.66 colleges per 1,000 students.

| Region | Number of specialist colleges* | Number of specialist colleges per 1000 population with EHCPs placed in FE by LAs** | % of FE students with EHCPs placed in Specialist colleges by LAs |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|--|--|
| South West | 22 | 3.50 | 13% |
| North East | 8 | 2.50 | 9% |
| North West | 19 | 2.27 | 9% |
| South East | 25 | 2.10 | 8% |
| West Midlands | 14 | 2.01 | 16% |
| Yorkshire & the Humber | 10 | 1.56 | 10% |
| Greater London | 16 | 1.70 | 8% |
| East Midlands | 5 | 1.14 | 14% |
| East of England | 5 | 0.66 | 3% |
| TOTAL | 124 | | |

* Edubase Feb 2020

** SEN2 data

A [Natspec research paper in 2018](#) concluded that more strategic planning and a more careful supply and demand analysis is required, and more work needs to be done to ensure high quality, age-appropriate provision in new colleges.

The lack of a national system for planning new provision results in:

- a growth in the number of colleges in some areas, but not in others
- many, much smaller providers in some areas, resulting in lack of economies of scale and the potential for dilution of specialism
- increased bureaucracy and wasted resources, for example because new colleges need their own support functions such as HR, IT, data and MIS, reporting, etc There are also increased resource implications for Ofsted and ESFA, who have to inspect and regulate a greater number of providers.
- too many smaller colleges can result in fewer options for students within a setting, as they receive reduced access to a broad curriculum, vocational options and extended facilities that are available at larger, more established providers.
- the opposite can also be an issue – too many large, diverse providers and not enough options for a smaller environment which may be better suited to those who find larger sites too overwhelming.
- Quality issues: establishing new specialist colleges often takes time to establish high quality provision with an appropriate adult focus in new settings. The majority of Ofsted inspections to new providers result in a Grade 3 or 4 judgement.

The SEND review should address the issues raised above by:

- requiring LAs and schools to first consult with existing colleges (specialist and GFE) before setting up a new college, to maximise economies of scale
- require local areas to consult across borders to undertake a comprehensive supply and demand analysis to determine if, and why, new provision is necessary
- fill gaps in geographic spread so that all young people, wherever they are located, have access to specialist provision, whether through direct placement or as a joint placement in partnership with GFE colleges.
- undertake further research to determine the optimum number of specialist colleges to ensure that increasing demand can be met, yet also achieve economies of scale and prevent dilution of specialism.