

Education Committee Inquiry: The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services



Supplementary evidence from Natspec

Introduction

1. Natspec is the membership association for organisations which offer specialist further education (FE) for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. We represent 94 colleges and approximately 6,000 students and provide training for the wider further education sector to help improve provision for 16 to 25-year-olds with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. As an FE organisation concerned with the education of young people with high needs, we have focused our evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on this group, their families, and the providers who support them.
2. We previously submitted evidence to this inquiry in May 2020, ahead of the original 31 May deadline. We are now taking the opportunity to provide some supplementary evidence which provides further details, raises new issues and reflects the fact that we have now had greater time for reflection. This supplementary evidence includes some recommendations to government. It should be read alongside our previous submission.
3. We have organised the evidence under three headings:
 - **Issues of process** – in which we offer a critique of the way matters have been handled where this has had an impact on young people with SEND, with a view to helping influence more effective practice in similar situations in the future
 - **Impact of COVID-19: looking beyond the immediate effects** – in which we identify ways in which COVID-19 has affected the education, health and care of young people where the impact will continue beyond the immediate period, with a view to highlighting where supportive policies/investment will be needed
 - **Positive consequences** – in which we identify practices, introduced in adversity, which have had a positive impact on learners with SEND, and which we are therefore recommending should be retained as we go forward.
4. We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the committee for calling on the government to respond to its 2019 SEND Inquiry and to make urgent progress and report on the current SEND Review. COVID-19 has rightly been pre-occupying the government in recent months, but it is essential that it is not distracted, as a result, from addressing the fundamental flaws in the current SEND system.

Issues of process

5. It has not always been clear to special post-16 institutions where they should look for guidance that applies to their settings or learners. For the most part, SPIs have been included in specialist setting/SEND guidance which is clearly targeted predominantly at children and special schools and therefore difficult to interpret for colleges with students aged primarily 19-23. While the Department for Education (DfE) has involved us in shaping such guidance to increase its relevance to colleges and young people, this has not always proved easy. In some guidance,

evidence is included to reassure readers that children and young people have a low risk of contracting or transmitting from COVID-19; however, it is not at all clear that the same is true for young adults.

Recommendation 1: In future, guidance for specialist FE colleges (SPIs) should be presented within documentation targeted at the FE sector, with cross-references made within that to any specialist-setting guidance that is deemed to be needed.

6. Some of the guidance from the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) has conflicted with that published by the DfE, particularly in relation to safe working practices, use of PPE and vulnerability of specific groups. This has been especially difficult to manage for residential specialist colleges which are also registered care homes. Members have on occasions asked us, 'Which guidance trumps which?'

Recommendation 2: There should be greater joined-up working in the future between DHSC and DfE to ensure guidance is not conflicting and that terminology is used consistently across departments.

Impact of COVID-19: looking beyond the immediate effects

Lost learning over the last four months

7. Many of our students have experienced an extended period without the input of an interdisciplinary team or face-to-face contact with specialist staff, either because they have been at home or because on-site learning has been restricted by COVID-19 risk reduction measures or staff absences. This has had a negative impact on physical and mental wellbeing as well as educational progress.
8. The lack of full programmes, substantial changes in routine, and the absence of face-to-face therapy has led to not just a lack of progress but, for some, a regression of skills (e.g. cognitive skills, motor skills) and positive learning behaviours (e.g. ability to concentrate, cope with change).
9. It is likely that a divide has opened up between those for whom home learning has been largely successful and those for whom it has been much less so. The committee is already aware that access to and confidence with technology is a factor, along with parental capacity to support young people. It is also the case that some learners have learning difficulties which make it much more of a challenge to provide meaningful home learning; for example, it is very difficult to provide a rich home learning experience for learners with profound and multiple learning difficulties who would normally follow a sensory programme with high levels of therapy input.
10. Some of our students will need considerable additional input to help them address loss of skills or lack of progress. However, unlike their counterparts in schools, FE students were not covered by the original catch-up funding. It has taken until the first day of the summer holidays for an announcement of catch-up funding for FE, with no clear details of eligibility currently available. We are concerned that focusing the funding on English and Maths catch-up or solely on socially disadvantaged young people will exclude some students with more complex SEND who need a different type of support to re-engage and start to make progress again. This is likely to mean that some students will not achieve their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) outcomes or reach their full potential.

Recommendation 3: Eligibility criteria for catch-up funding for FE students should ensure that students with more complex SEND, including those in SPIs, can access the specific additional support they need.

Recommendation 4: There should be parity across phases and settings when future grants or additional funding sources are made available. For example, the amount of funding for free meals for eligible FE students should be increased so that is on a par with that for school pupils.

Recommendation 5: If funding is made available to support the FE sector's recovery, SPIs should be eligible to apply for it - to prevent 6,000 of the sector's most vulnerable students from being excluded.

Recommendation 6: The forthcoming FE White Paper should reflect the invaluable contribution of the FE sector in meeting the needs of young people with SEND and include proposals to help ensure these young people are supported to contribute to the country's economic recovery.

Compromised transition-planning

11. Transition from school to FE is normally very carefully planned to ensure a positive experience for young people. Colleges have made considerable efforts to continue this work, holding virtual meetings, creating virtual tours, sending home social stories and towards the end of term, in some cases, engineering socially-distanced site visits for new starters. However, the impact of missed transition work for incoming students is likely to mean longer lead-in/settling in time and more time spent on thorough baselining, which will delay the start of their full programme. It is likely that a few students will turn out to have been wrongly placed, either on the wrong course or with the wrong provider. More detailed initial assessments may lead to adjustments in the amount of support provided, in some cases involving a fee adjustment.

Recommendation 7: The DfE should advise local authorities (LAs) that they should anticipate that some fee adjustment (either up or down) for high needs students who were not able to have a face-to-face pre-entry assessment may be necessary, once baselining assessments are complete. LAs should be asked to work collaboratively with colleges to arrive at adjusted figures.

12. Late decision-making about FE placements for new starters and confirmation of funding for returning learners is a perennial issue for colleges. The statutory deadline of 31 March is routinely missed for the majority of learners coming to specialist colleges. However, uncertainty about student numbers is causing additional difficulties for colleges this year as they try to plan learner groupings, staff working patterns, and how to make their site as safe as possible. Some are reporting that late confirmations are likely to lead to a delayed start to full programmes in September, and to a great deal of anxiety for students and families over the summer while they don't know where they will be in September or what their provision will look like.

Recommendation 8: DfE should require LAs to confirm as a matter of urgency outstanding placements for young people moving this year from school to FE colleges. It should also investigate why so many LAs routinely fail to meet the 31 March statutory deadline, specifically monitoring those with the highest percentage of unconfirmed places by the end of March, with a view to addressing barriers to timely decision-making and enforcing the deadline for future years.

13. Young people due to leave college have also missed out on transition work. Some colleges have reported greater difficulties than usual in engaging with adult services and decisions being taken very late in the term about post-college living arrangements or care packages. For some, these rushed placements will mean that their previously held ambitions for their next steps will not now happen. In some cases, LAs have agreed to extend college placements

because no suitable places have been found for young people who were due to leave education. However, others are leaving with no clear plans for the future.

Recommendation 9: DfE and DHSC should work together to identify targeted funding for the outstanding transition work needed for some college leavers to ensure the investment in their education is not wasted.

Future employment prospects

14. A shrinking economy and highly competitive jobs market are likely to disproportionately affect disabled school/college leavers. Even before the pandemic, this group was struggling to find sustained paid work; employment figures for people with learning disabilities have been especially low – and dropping. Government programmes and incentives to support school/college leavers into work must be inclusive of young people with SEND with specific measures in place to reduce existing and new barriers to their employment.
15. Colleges are already reporting that they are struggling to secure work placements for next term. Clearly this will be issue for many post-16 students but those with SEND may be disproportionately disadvantaged as schools and colleges vie for placements for students across a range of programmes, including T levels. Smaller employers are already indicating that social distancing measures mean they will not be able to have an extra person on site; where a young person also needs a support worker/job coach and perhaps is not able to socially distance consistently, they are likely to be even less welcome. The '[Place and Train model](#)' is critical to the success of supported internships and other preparation for work approaches for students with SEND. Reduced access to external employers' workplaces is likely to significantly reduce the numbers of students progressing into employment.

Recommendation 10: the Kickstarter scheme should be opened up to supported internships and be available to a wider group than just those claiming universal credit. Government should consider making eligible young people who had an EHC Plan at the point at which they left education.

Recommendation 11: Financial incentives for employers taking on or employing apprentices and trainees (£2.5k and 1k respectively) should be extended to those taking on supported interns.

Recommendation 12: The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should ensure that the expansion of work coaches includes disability employment advisors, with an understanding of learning disabilities, and that online job-finding support services are fully accessible.

Recommendation 13: DWP should improve the Access to Work scheme to speed-up decision-making so that job-hunters with disabilities are not disadvantaged by delays in agreeing support, including for job interviews.

16. Most colleges are planning reduced off-site experiences in the community and workplace in the autumn term in a bid to minimise COVID-19 risks. Despite colleges' best efforts to build in alternative meaningful on-site opportunities, these constraints are likely to have an impact on the breadth and richness of the curriculum for the next term at least, meaning some students may need longer programmes or more in-depth support in order to achieve their EHC Plan outcomes and ambitions for adult life.

Financial impact on specialist providers and the longer-term planning of provision

17. Colleges are reporting loss of commercial and retail income from facilities on college sites and from fund-raising activities, alongside increased costs for cleaning and PPE and for staffing to

cover for those on sick leave/self-isolating or to enable learners to be grouped in small bubbles. The furlough scheme has helped some to cover wages for those employed through non-public income streams, but some colleges have been forced to make cuts, including redundancies. It is possible that a small number will struggle to recover and may even close.

18. The current year-by-year funding system for FE provision (even for returning learners) gives specialist providers, particularly smaller colleges, little to no financial stability. A lack of systematic strategic planning within and across LAs for post-16 high needs provision also contributes to this uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed just how precarious the situation is for many specialist providers. There is a real risk that some individuals with valued specialisms may be lost to the sector and that some highly specialised provision may be lost altogether, leaving some children and young people without their needs met.

Recommendation 14: The revised inspection framework for joint Ofsted/CQC SEND Area Reviews should include a focus on post-16/post-19 strategic planning, with a requirement for LAs to establish planning groups including every post-school provider. There should be a clear expectation that LAs will need to work together at a regional level to plan how to meet low-incidence needs, and a recognition that some highly specialised provision may need to be accessed at a national level.

Recommendation 15: SPIs should be given the same flexibilities as general further education colleges so that there is an option for them to enter into three-year funding agreements with LAs for high needs students.

Positive consequences

19. COVID-19 has 'bounced' some colleges into implementing technology that one principal described as 'long-talked about but always drifting onto the back burner', e.g. virtual learning environments; remote meeting facilities; YouTube channels. Colleges have made highly effective use of these innovations and plan to continue to develop their potential further. For example, one college has found that moving its student forum online has enabled them to involve a more diverse range of students than previously; they do not plan to go back to physical meetings in the future.
20. Many staff have very quickly developed new IT skills and found the confidence to use them at a time when others were learning too, and everyone was therefore very forgiving. Some colleges have discovered that individual staff members have skillsets they were not previously aware of, such as creating and editing videos. They are now applying these to great effect and will continue to do so.
21. Colleges have developed both the platforms for providing home learning and their understanding of what makes for *effective* home learning. A few will continue to offer an element of home learning on a routine basis as part of blended provision. Others however plan to use approaches developed during this period to
 - support learners who cannot attend college during periods of ill-health
 - set learning tasks on snow days
 - help learners who want to maintain skills during holidays
 - involve parents and carers more fully in their young person's learning
 - encourage more independent learning for those students who are capable of it.

22. Some colleges have reported that learners and families have found virtual reviews easier to participate in and more inclusive. Attendance by local authority representatives has increased considerably and, in many cases, more professionals have been able to attend and input, resulting in a more coherent approach to meeting young people's needs.

Recommendation 16: Local authorities/colleges should be encouraged to continue to organise on-line reviews where appropriate. DfE should commission some guidance or tools to ensure accessibility and inclusiveness for all involved, drawing on effective practice developed during this period.

23. Similarly, some colleges have found virtual tribunals to have worked well, both from a college staff and learner/family perspective. They have described them as well-handled, more focused, and happening in a more timely fashion. Some young people and families have found making their case from their own kitchen table to be much less intimidating than appearing in a court. College staff have also noted that not having to travel, sometimes across the country, to court has resulted in savings in time and travel costs.

Recommendation 17: HM Courts and Tribunal Service should continue to offer virtual tribunals where this format is agreeable to all parties.