



# Breaking down the binary system

**How partnership working across general and specialist FE colleges can benefit learners with SEND**

**September 2022**

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## Introduction

Further education (FE) for learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is currently based on a binary system where most young people are placed in either a general or a specialist FE college. This system makes it very difficult for learners to benefit from a combination of the services or opportunities that each type of college can offer, even though it can be difficult for a single setting to meet all of their needs or support them to achieve all of their planned outcomes. Similarly, despite their shared objectives, collaboration between specialist and general FE, for example in relation to continuous professional development or sharing of resources or facilities, has been thin on the ground in recent years.

Having completed a year-long project in association with the Association of Colleges (AoC), with additional funding from the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), Natspec now has evidence to suggest that partnership working between specialist and general FE colleges can bring considerable benefits to learners with SEND. As government is about to embark on a significant reform programme, now would seem the perfect time to re-consider the way in which further education for learners with SEND is organised. The government has not itself set out a vision for FE in its [SEND and AP Green Paper](#), but that need not stop others involved in the development and delivery of FE from seizing this opportunity to put forward fresh ideas about how provision might be better organised. Any changes to systems and structures or new expectations placed on providers or local authorities by government can then be shaped to facilitate – rather than act against – partnership working.

## Benefits of partnership working: the evidence

### Key types of benefit

With the support of a facilitator and a small amount of grant funding, 26 colleges worked in 13 partnerships across the academic year 2021-2022 to explore the potential of partnership-working for learners with SEND. Rather than rushing into short-term joint projects, the

partnerships, each including a specialist and a general FE college, were tasked with building secure relationships between their organisations, identifying potential areas for collaboration, and testing out ways of working together on a small-scale before planning for more substantial, sustainable changes in practice to be implemented from September 2022 onwards. They were asked to focus on

- how partnership-working might improve provision for these learners
- what barriers currently stand in the way
- what, if any, systemic changes might be needed to facilitate further partnership-working in the future
- if partnership-working could lead to more efficient spending of high needs funding.

A number of distinct areas in which partnership-working could potentially benefit learners with SEND swiftly emerged, as identified in [an earlier summary of project activity for ETF](#). These included:

### **Extending or enriching learning opportunities for young people**

Several colleges combined forces to increase the range of work placements available. A specialist college secured agreement that their sports and fitness learners could run enrichment sessions for the general FE college's learners. Pairs of colleges opened up access to their sites and facilities to both sets of learners for work experience and for social interactions. Several partnerships identified how they might 'share a learner' with some aspects of provision delivered by one and some by the other.

### **Enabling learners to progress further or more fully reach their potential**

Some of the partnerships focused on transition from specialist FE to general FE for learners who might not otherwise have been able to access higher levels of learning. These included learners with high support needs or for whom the general FE setting might typically have proved too challenging an environment. The projects variously involved on-site taster sessions for the specialist college learners, liaison between support staff in both settings to develop the general FE college's capacity to meet the learners' needs and coordinated curriculum planning.

### **Upskilling the current and future workforce to better meet learner need**

More than half the partnerships included some focus on continuous professional development (CPD). Activities included building communities of practice across the partner organisations, opening up planned CPD sessions to each other's staff, and exchanging in-house training that reflects their different expertise. In particular, expertise sitting in specialist colleges in relation to recognising and recording progress and achievement (RARPA), positive behaviour support, personalising programmes and use of assistive technology has been shared with general FE colleges in multiple projects. Two projects involved specialist college learners designing and delivering training, one on autism to general FE staff and the other on supporting people with a learning disability for the general FE college learners on degree and post-graduate courses.

### **Supporting greater inclusion**

One specialist college provided advice, guidance and support services to a neighbouring general FE college on meeting complex health needs. This has enabled students to access mainstream courses who might otherwise have been unable to do so. Two colleges began to work together on a protocol to enable learners returning from out-of-area residential provision to transfer skills learned while away from home and become active citizens in their own communities. Several colleges brought learners together on a social basis to increase their friendship groups and their sense of belonging in the wider community.

## On-the-ground impact for learners

From September 2022, almost all of the 13 partnerships involved in the project will be implementing new ways of collaborative working which will benefit learners with SEND. The remainder first need to address outstanding barriers ahead of full implementation. Many of the partnerships are also setting in motion further exploratory collaborative projects. The following are examples of new practice that will benefit learners with SEND, introduced as a direct result of the project, and which will now become 'business as usual' in the new academic year. All will be continuing to work in partnership.

### **Students from specialist and general FE colleges learning and socialising alongside one another**

- An integrated study group made up of students from the Sheiling College and Bournemouth and Poole College will undertake green woodworking in the Sheiling's forest school.
- Newfriars College and Newcastle and Staffordshire Colleges Group will be working together to create new supported internship and work placement opportunities open to students from both settings.
- Ambitious College students will be able to join a friendship group set up by West Thames College, and now open to students from both colleges, to combat feelings of isolation.

### **Colleges sharing expertise, resources and facilities**

- Orchard Hill College has already worked alongside Crawley College to enable them to screen all consults for September 2022 starts, implement an assessment process and develop care plans for individual learners with complex health needs. This collaborative approach will become standard practice for future years, with Orchard Hill providing additional staff training to enable the college to meet specific health needs as they arise.
- Derwen and Hereford, Ludlow and North Shropshire Colleges will offer work placements to each other's students.
- Bournemouth and Poole College students will participate in existing social enterprises on the Sheiling College site (as well as setting up new ones of their own).
- Henshaws and Harrogate Colleges will operate a shared work placement database, with opportunities allocated to students from either college, based on a best-match approach using a common 'skills scan' assessment tool.
- While on work placement, students from both Henshaws and Harrogate Colleges will benefit from accessible documents and other resources developed by Henshaw's dedicated inclusive communication resource-making department
- Students from Derwen College will enjoy free use of the sports hall at Hereford, Ludlow and North Shropshire College.

### **Improved teaching and learning**

- East Kent College will be personalising programmes to a much greater extent, based on initial assessment outcomes, as a result of exploring practice at St Piers' College.
- The Sheiling College will be providing greater stretch and challenge for some students through the use of a wider range of qualifications, following advice from Bournemouth and Poole College.

- South and City College, Birmingham will be introducing new cooking and arts programmes underpinned by RARPA, newly confident in their ability to design and deliver high-quality non-accredited provision as a result of RARPA training from Heart of Birmingham Vocational College.

### **A joint approach to CPD**

- Students from Ambitious College will deliver an ongoing programme of CPD on meeting the needs of autistic learners to vocational departments at West Thames College.
- HE students at the Newcastle Group of Colleges will complete a module on supporting young, disabled people based on the lived experience, views and preferences of students at Hedley's College who will co-deliver some of the content.
- Staff at Newfriars College will be able to choose from a menu of adult education funded courses, including on mental health, autism and counselling, run by the Newcastle and Staffordshire Colleges Group
- Learning support practitioners at Northampton College, Moulton College, Canto Learning (and now Tresham College, too), will have access to a community of practice in which they can share effective ways of supporting students with SEND across all four colleges in Northamptonshire.

### **Dual placements**

At this stage, dual placements will largely be on offer as part of transition arrangements for individual students moving from a specialist to a general FE college. More ambitious plans for dual placements are being considered by some partnerships but arrangements are not yet in place.

- As part of their transition plan, students intending to progress from both Heart of Birmingham College and Queen Alexandra College to South and City College, Birmingham will be able to experience supported visits and time on courses at the general FE college. This will be underpinned by staff exchanges and joint planning of support.
- Similar arrangements will be in place between Works 4 U and Tameside College.

**Recommendation 1: Natspec, AoC and other partner bodies, such as ETF, the Local Government Association (LGA) and individual local authorities, should promote the work of the partners who engaged in this project and encourage more specialist and general FE colleges to consider ways in which they could work in partnership to benefit learners with SEND.**

## **Supporting partnership working**

### **Encouraging new partnerships**

The high-level critical success factors for effective partnership working identified by the project participants largely relate to the behaviours and beliefs of the partners themselves. They are summarised in the earlier project report for ETF and include shared values and vision, openness, honesty, generosity and trust, along with a lack of competitiveness between the two organisations. These are clearly within the control of the participating organisations. Most of the barriers they identified are also 'internal matters', for example, staff time, changing personnel, and organisational priorities. However, the colleges all felt that the small amount of seed

funding (£5,000 per partnership) and the support of a facilitator (4.5 days' facilitation per partnership) had played a significant role in enabling staff to invest the time needed to develop secure relationships, understand each other's provision, ways of working and constraints, and to identify suitable areas for partnership working. The scale of improved practice that will be underway from September suggests a high return on this low-level investment.

**Recommendation 2: The Department for Education should ensure that the Universal SEND Services programme commits funding to support the development of further specialist/general FE partnership working.**

At the mid-point in their projects, the colleges involved largely felt that the challenges they faced were surmountable and that any changes needed to secure the success of their collaborative work were within their own control. For the most part, they have maintained this standpoint; however, a number of external barriers have emerged, mostly in relation to dual placements for learners. While joint approaches to CPD and sharing of resources and facilities, for example, require no external enabling, the same cannot be said for implementing dual programmes on a sustainable basis.

## Funding

Informal funding arrangements have been sufficient for the exploratory phase of these projects where just a handful of learners per partnership have been involved, but they are not sustainable if they are to be applied to larger numbers on an ongoing basis.

One college lead explained:

*"Willingness and good intent was not, and is not, a barrier [to setting up dual placements], but developing a funding model may be, as this is so bespoke there will not be a one-size fits all model."*

Current ESFA funding rules require that a learner is 'on roll' with a single provider, with the learner only appearing on one provider's individual learning record (ILR). This makes it impossible for a local authority to directly commission provision from two different learning providers for a single learner. These rules prevent a local authority from building provision around the learner using a range of providers across the local or regional offer. Instead, one provider would need to be deemed the lead provider and charged with sub-contracting services from the other(s). However, this might be preferable from a learner point of view as it may help ensure that their overall programme is coherent and that responsibility for their general wellbeing clearly sits with a specific key worker.

Use of sub-contractors would need to be in line with ESFA's sub-contracting arrangements. These arrangements were put in place to ensure robust management controls, rigorous safeguarding arrangements, and high quality provision of sub-contracted programmes. The rules were not designed for highly individualised arrangements, and do not apply at all if the two ESFA funded institutions agree to share the delivery, but the majority of delivery is still delivered by the "home" provider.

For those partnerships which require a more formal arrangement, and sub-contracting is the most appropriate tool, we will need to agree a proportionate, fit-for-purpose arrangement with sufficient flexibility to accommodate a range of different approaches. Natspec has already begun discussions with ESFA on this issue.

**Recommendation 3: In the short-term, where they are in scope, ESFA should work with Natspec and AoC to develop appropriate, proportionate sub-contracting rules, as an exception, to facilitate dual placements for high needs students. In the medium term, ESFA should explore with Natspec and AoC funding models where two providers are named in an EHC plan.**

While service level agreements and more informal or temporary funding arrangements underpinned the provision of specific services by one provider to another during the project (such as those provided by Orchard Hill College to Crawley College in relation to meeting medical needs), these may need strengthening to ensure their sustainability or as they are scaled up.

**Recommendation 4: Colleges providing and/or receiving services from a partner college should formalise funding arrangements to enable them to specify costs accurately and include these within individual funding agreements with local authorities, as appropriate.**

**Recommendation 5: Local authorities should consider allocating element 3 (high needs) funding for an individual learner to more than one learning provider where two learning providers are working in partnership to deliver a learner's programme and collectively meet their needs.**

Planning, delivering and monitoring dual placements for learners with SEND requires collaborative time on the part of both providers, for example, to work out how best to meet the individual's needs and track progress across the different elements of provision delivered by colleges. Similarly transition planning as part of a sequential journey for a learner from a specialist to a general FE college requires a considerable investment of staff time in order to achieve a successful transition for the individual learner. Investment by local authorities at this stage, however, is likely to result in fewer failed placements and repeat years, which should result in considerable savings over the medium to longer term.

**Recommendation 6: Local authorities should recognise the need for dedicated staff time to facilitate joint placements and transition between providers and assign sufficient high needs funding to providers for this activity; ESFA should clarify within the high needs funding guidance that this is an appropriate use of high needs funding.**

## **Stakeholder understanding and commitment**

If dual placements are to be recognised as a viable 'third way' to complement traditional placements at one type of FE college or the other, LAs must understand what dual placements are available in their local area, their nature and purpose, and actively promote them as an option within the local offer. Commissioners and SEND officers within LAs will need to consider not just the specific contributions of individual providers of each type to the local, regional (and in some cases national) offer but also how these are being combined to maximise their impact for young people. They may also need to go about consults in relation to post-school

placements slightly differently. In this way, they could encourage and facilitate the development of dual placements, as well as other types of collaboration between providers.

Some colleges involved in the project reported a reluctance on the part of young people and families to engage in dual placements where the objective was to support a move from the specialist college to a general FE college. They were concerned that the young person would not manage in the larger college setting and critically that they might lose access to hard-won therapies and specialist support.

**Recommendation 7: Careers information advice and guidance provided from Year 9 onwards must cover dual placements as a possible option including their potential benefits for some learners.**

**Recommendation 8: Where relevant, potential use of dual placement should be discussed at annual reviews. Local authorities and colleges should reassure families and young people, for whom this approach is a viable option, early on in the decision-making process about the ability of the general FE college to meet more complex needs, including with the ongoing support of the specialist college in some cases.**

**Recommendation 9: The new SEND area inspection framework should incentivise local authorities to facilitate partnership working. It should set high expectations of local areas in terms of their knowledge of provision in their area, and of that in neighbouring areas, and their ability to draw on different services and providers to develop coherent packages of provision built around the needs of the children or young people.**

## Efficiencies

Partnership working is likely to reduce costs in some areas. Savings can be achieved, for example, where colleges engage in combined training and in exchanging services rather than each buying these in from third parties. Where partnership working enables a young person to take part in a blended general/specialist FE programme as a day learner, the costs will be lower than if they were to attend a specialist college as a residential learner. However, it is important to recognise that their day programme is likely to cost more than a typical day provision for a learner with SEND in a general further education setting, given the additional interventions and expertise from which they will be benefiting.

Colleges report that a substantial proportion of tribunals in which they are called to give evidence relate to disputes as to which college should be named in an EHC Plan. Young people and families are typically contesting an LA decision to place them in either a specialist or general FE college when their preference is for a college of the opposite type. The current binary system makes a compromise position almost impossible. However, if a third blended option was available, combining provision from one college of each type, this could be shaped to meet the young person's needs to the satisfaction of all parties. Savings associated with a reduction in tribunals would allow more funding to be re-directed towards improved provision for young people.

More fully meeting the needs of more young people with SEND through partnership working, may not lead to a reduction in overall fees charged by colleges. But it may reduce the number of appeals, tribunals and failed placements, and is likely to be a more efficient way of spending public money in the medium to long term, with more young people better equipped to gain employment and live as independently as possible – and hence placing less demand on the public purse.

## Conclusions

Partnerships between general and FE colleges can result in considerable benefits for learners with SEND including:

- extending or enriching learning opportunities
- enabling learners to progress further or more fully reach their potential
- upskilling the current and future workforce to better meet learner need
- supporting greater inclusion.

The benefits derived from partnership working can largely be achieved within existing systems and without external intervention. Colleges would benefit initially from a small amount of external support to help them explore and set up partnerships but this would not be needed on an ongoing basis. However, there are some aspects of partnership working, in particular those associated with the funding of dual placements, which will require systemic change and possibly different commissioning behaviours.

The main benefits of partnership working relate to improved provision for young people with SEND. In the short to medium term, it may lead to some savings for colleges in some areas. In the long-term it is quite possible that investing in partnership-led provision will lead to better outcomes for young people and hence less public spending on their post-education support.

All of the improvements to provision for learners with SEND achieved through partnership working within the Natspec project are consistent with the broad aims set out within the government's SEND and AP Green Paper. This suggests that government would be well-advised to design a SEND system that will facilitate more partnership working between specialist and general FE colleges in the future.

## Recommendations

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Heart of Birmingham Vocational College  
Hedleys College  
Henshaws College  
Hereford, Ludlow and North Shropshire Colleges  
Moulton College  
National Star  
Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group  
Newcastle College  
Newfriars College  
Northampton College  
Orchard Hill College  
Queen Alexandra College  
Sheiling College  
South and City College Birmingham  
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