

Natspec

The voice of
specialist further
education



Unlocking potential

A manifesto

for specialist
further education

natspec.org.uk

A manifesto

for specialist further education

Natspec is the membership association for organisations that offer specialist further education (FE) and training for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged 16 to 25.

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.



Whichever party wins the next election, they will inherit a set of issues relating to special educational needs and disability (SEND) that need urgently resolving. A major reform programme was launched in 2023 with a primary focus on children of school age.

The next government has the opportunity to improve what is meant to be a 0-25 SEND system so that it fully embraces not just school-aged children, but also pre-school children, and **young people aged 16-25**.



The essential role of further education for young people with SEND

Further education (FE) provides young people with SEND with a platform from which they can step off into fulfilling adult lives. It equips them with the skills, knowledge, behaviours and attitudes to gain and sustain employment, participate in their communities, and live as healthily and independently as possible.

The next government must

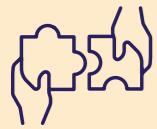


- ➔ Recognise the important contribution of FE to the SEND system.
- ➔ Design a fair funding system to ensure FE providers have access to sufficient funding to enable them to deliver high quality learning programmes for young people with different levels of need.

With these commitments from government, we can work together to build a high-functioning FE system which truly **unlocks** the potential of young people with SEND.

Characteristics of a high-functioning FE system for young people with SEND

A shared vision



Learning

Access to a high quality learning programme that matches their needs, interests and aspirations for every young person with SEND, along with the support to prepare them for a fulfilling adult life.



Providers

A mix and balance of different provider types, including both general and specialist, which together are capable of meeting the diverse range of needs of learners within a local area and at a regional level.



Staff

Sufficient staff with appropriate expertise to meet the broad range of needs of young people with SEND, including those with the most complex needs.



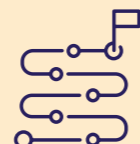
Funding

Sufficient, effectively administered funding for every post-16 provider to deliver high quality, personalised education, training and the support to meet the needs and Preparing for Adulthood outcomes of every young person with SEND.



Local areas

A comprehensive understanding of FE and the needs of 16 to 25-year-olds with SEND in every local area, informed by the voices of the young people themselves and their families, and backed by resource to support effective provision planning and person-centred decision-making about FE placements.



Post-college opportunities

Employers, adult health and social care, higher education institutions, adult learning providers and other agencies, each taking responsibility as partners in supporting young people with SEND who are leaving FE to flourish in the next stage of their lives.

The specific role of specialist FE providers

While the vast majority of young people with SEND in the FE system attend a mainstream setting, specialist FE providers cater for around 8,000 young people with the most complex needs. This amounts to roughly 10% of the FE population with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Government is reliant on specialist FE providers to deliver education and training to this small group. Without access to specialist provision, these young people would be effectively excluded from further education altogether. Specialist FE providers are essential to achieving an inclusive FE system.

We are calling on the next government to deliver 3 key things for young people with complex needs



1

Fair access to further education for young people with complex needs

What's going wrong?



Some young people with complex needs are not given any opportunity to participate in education beyond school. This can be as a result of misguided decision-making about which young people merit a place in FE or because of a lack of strategic planning to ensure there are enough specialist places to meet needs. Other young people face the uncertainty of funding for their places only be confirmed annually or even termly, leaving them unable to plot a steady progression route to their post-college goals and often in a state of high anxiety.

Some local authorities are reluctant to fund FE places for young people capable of improving their skills for independence but unlikely to achieve employment. Others, seeking to reduce costs, avoid placing young people in specialist settings despite the complexity of their needs. Many of the current government's [Safety Valve Agreements](#), designed to reduce local authorities' high needs overspend, actively encourage the exclusion of specialist providers from the local SEND system. Without the opportunity to develop these vital skills for adulthood, with the support of expert staff, these young people face a bleak future.

Too much local authority decision-making about placements is poor. Some of it is unlawful as evidenced by the [high number of first tier tribunals which find against the local authority](#). The current system of accountability, however, does little to discourage non-compliance with [Section 3 \(SEND\) of the Children and Families Act](#).

Access to timely and sufficient [information, advice and guidance about the full range of post-school options for young people with SEND](#) is generally poor.

Too often securing specialist FE feels like a battle for the young person and their family. They are facing a postcode lottery that causes undue anxiety.



What's the solution?

Any future government should

a Ensure better provision planning at local and regional level

- Set high expectations of local areas in relation to the strategic planning of post-16 provision for young people with SEND at local and regional levels including requirements to:
 - secure an appropriate mix and balance of provision, including both mainstream and specialist providers, to meet differing needs
 - address the shortage of supply and rising demand for specialist placements
 - engage in cross-boundary/sub-regional planning to avoid duplicating highly specialist provision
 - involve specialist colleges in strategic planning of post-16 provision and ensure their representation within relevant partnerships and on decision making boards
- Collect as much SEND data on young people in FE as it does on children in schools, and present and analyse it in a way that supports local areas to understand the national, regional and local position, and to plan 16-25 provision accordingly
- Ensure continuous professional development is available to local authority staff to enable them to understand the needs of young people with SEND and to be able to strategically plan provision and commission the most appropriate FE placements for individual young people.

➔ **See this in action** – Case Study 1, p14

b Strengthen the current system of accountability

- Introduce penalties for non-compliance with legislation and the SEND Code of Practice including specific consequences for the poorest performing local areas that go beyond simply re-inspection
- Ensure new local area inclusion dashboards specifically report on performance in relation to 16-25 provision, using metrics such as the percentage of post-school placements confirmed by the statutory deadline.

c Provide better information and support for young people and families about post-16 options

- Require local authorities to share comprehensive information about the full range of post-16 options with young people and families from Year 9 onwards
- Enable young people and their families to access independent support from a dedicated transitions adviser to help them understand their options.

d Facilitate partnership-working between general and specialist FE colleges

- Reform funding and commissioning systems to make it easier for general and specialist FE colleges to work together to meet the needs of individual young people and hence reduce the need for [a binary choice between specialist and mainstream provision](#).

➔ **See this in action** – Case Study 2, p16

2

High quality further education for young people with complex needs

What's going wrong?



Further education for young people with complex needs is under-resourced. There is not enough investment in growing specialist expertise or in developing or maintaining specialist facilities. Some local authorities are placing young people with more complex needs in unregulated provision where there is no independent assessment of quality at all. This cannot be acceptable.

It is the young people who suffer from this insufficient investment in specialist FE. Some are missing out on essential therapies or behaviour support or being denied a broad and challenging curriculum. Others are learning in sub-standard buildings or cramped conditions. Increased demand for specialist FE provision cannot be met when there is no resource to support growth, leaving some young people with no appropriate FE place at all.



What's the solution?



Any future government should

a Provide sufficient funding

- Reform the high needs funding system so that it works more effectively for FE providers and provides them with a more proportionate funding allocation that better reflects the balance of learners with SEND across schools and colleges
- Introduce a consistently applied mechanism for funding young people aged 16 to 25 with the most complex needs, who

may need regional or national specialist provision that is not efficient to duplicate in every local area

- Introduce a one-off capital improvement fund for publicly-funded specialist FE colleges and thereafter grant them eligibility for future FE capital funding rounds from which they are currently excluded.

b Invest in workforce development

- Invest in specialist hubs to support the continuing professional development of specialist staff, including those working with young people with the most complex needs

- Include the benefits of working with young people with SEND in FE in government-funded FE recruitment programmes.

c Stop the use of unregulated high needs provision

- Require local authorities to inform the Department of Education of all post-16 providers they fund for provision to meet the needs of young people with an EHC Plan
- Require Ofsted to inspect that provision and resource it do so.



3

Post-college opportunities for young people with complex needs

What's going wrong?



The experience of leaving FE for many people with complex needs is of 'falling off a cliff-edge'. There is little point in government investing public money in the further education of young people with SEND only to deny them the opportunity to put into practice the skills they have developed. There is too little post-FE support for getting and keeping jobs or to help them participate in their communities and enjoy fulfilling social lives. There is a lack of suitable accommodation and too few opportunities to engage in adult learning. As a result, young people with complex needs are at risk of losing the skills and behaviours developed in FE, and government gets a poor return on its investment in their education.



What's the solution?



Any future government should

a Ensure better transition arrangements for FE leavers

- Require local authorities to:
 - signpost FE leavers to services that can provide ongoing support and to work with appropriate partners to develop these where they are currently insufficient
 - coordinate multi-agency post-college planning at least a term ahead of the education leaving date of a young person with ongoing support needs and before any EHC Plan can be ceased
- Ensure funding arrangements support the increased involvement of social services and reduced educational input during a young person's last term in FE.

→ See this in action – Case Study 3, p18

b Increase support for employment

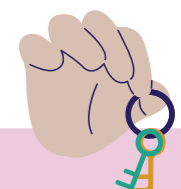
- Provide access to a trained specialist careers adviser for all young people with SEND
- Reform the benefits system to address disincentives to work for young people with SEND and improve messaging to families
- Increase the number of disability employment advisers trained in supported employment principles and practices
- Provide a dedicated funding stream for post-college support for young people transitioning into employment and their employers.

c Improve supported living arrangements

- Invest in a range of suitable accommodation options for young people with SEND that support them to live as independently as possible, with other young people and in the area of their choice.

d Increase lifelong learning opportunities

- Require a fixed minimum proportion of the adult education budget in every local area to be spent on provision for people with learning disabilities.



5 things

MPs can do

to support specialist
further education



- 1 Publicly support our vision for a high-functioning FE system for young people with SEND.
- 2 Ensure policy makers within your party understand the importance of specialist further education ahead of the 2024 General Election.
- 3 Highlight the vital role of specialist colleges through Parliamentary questions and debates, especially when special educational needs and disability are being discussed.
- 4 Find out if there is a specialist FE college in your constituency. Speak to principals and visit colleges to understand the challenges they are facing.
- 5 Discover more about specialist further education by visiting: natspec.org.uk or emailing: info@natspec.org.uk

Case study 1

→ Pan-London review of post-16 SEND provision

London Councils commissioned a review to identify the gap in post-16 SEND provision across London boroughs, and produce a sustainable methodology for projecting demand to inform future planning cycles.



The review consisted of five parts:

- a demand model that projected the number of 16 to 25 year olds with EHCPs with different levels of learning support
- an analysis of current supply
- a gap analysis
- an EHCP review
- stakeholder interviews.

Key findings from the analysis included a likely rise in demand for certain types of post-16 SEND provision including speech and language support and autism provision; a mis-match between projected demand and existing supply particularly for 19-24 year olds; a wide variation in availability of provision across boroughs; and a lack of robust evidence on which to base commissioning decisions.

Resulting recommendations for the SEND sector in London included sub-regional hubs to co-ordinate training and share resources between specialist and mainstream providers; increased funding to address gaps in provision; a London-wide register of providers for commissioners; refreshing demand projections annually and sharing information from EHCPs from Year 9 onwards with commissioners and providers to support their planning.

Regional or sub-regional planning of this nature for FE provision for learners with SEND **should be an expectation of all local areas.**





Case study 2

➔ Partnership working between a specialist college and a general FE college in Stoke-on-Trent

Newfriars College and Newcastle and Stafford College Group (NSCG), a specialist and a general FE college, joined forces to explore how the experience of learners with SEND could be improved if the two colleges worked in partnership.

Two years on they have established a joint supported internship opportunity with Tesco, open both to NSCG and Newfriars College learners. They have strengthened transition programmes enabling some of the specialist college students to progress successfully onto performing arts and IT courses at the general FE college. In addition, NSCG learners on health and social care courses have been on work placement at Newfriars College, helping to build a future specialist FE workforce, while their hair and beauty learners have delivered beauty treatments for Newfriars learners with complex needs, raising their awareness of clients with disabilities.

The ultimate ambition of the two colleges is for joint placements, with learners benefitting from provision from both colleges on a highly individualised basis. For example, a learner might access a physio programme, educational psychologist and small group English and maths sessions at the specialist college. They could also benefit from an accredited computer design course that gives them access to the expertise and industry-standard equipment that the general FE college can offer, with the support of a member of staff from the specialist college that may reduce over time.

Current funding arrangements, including existing sub-contracting rules, would make this type of provision complex to organise.

Greater flexibility in the allocation of high needs funding by local authorities could enable more person-centred approaches like this, where the provision is built around the young person rather than the young person being placed with a best-fit provider.



Case study 3

→ Transition into social care from Chadsgrove Educational Trust Specialist College



Chadsgrove College focuses from the outset on securing a successful progression to an appropriate social care provision for each of their students, all of whom have learning disabilities and physical and/or complex health needs. Their local authority, Worcestershire, commissions three-year placements with the young person attending college for four days per week in their first two years and three days in their third year. On the remaining days, most are accessing social care provision, funded by social services.



In the first year, the college takes each student to visit different social care providers and observes them interacting with staff and peers in situ. They explore settings based on locality, taking into account their needs, interests and preferences. In their second year at college, the young person spends their non-college day trying out different social care provisions. By the third year, most will be spending three days in college and one or two days in the provision that they will move onto after college.

Collaboration between the college and social care providers means that when the time comes to leave education, the students can make a positive next step. They do not experience the cliff-edge that so many young people and families describe where on one day they have access to a full range of familiar provision and the next it's either all change or worse – there is nothing available to them.

This transition-planning is entirely led by staff at Chadsgrove College. While they have the support of their local authority, it is the college that:

- advises the young people on what's available and the differences between different types of social care provision
- secures the visits to the social care provision
- invites the social care staff to the young person's annual review from their first year in college onwards
- brings in the social care staff from the receiving provision to observe the young person engaging in learning at college, to find out more about particular techniques or use of equipment relevant to the individual
- sends in specialist staff, including physiotherapists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists, to advise and train staff in the receiving social care setting – all without any additional funding.

All local authorities need to work collaboratively across the LA SEND team and adult services in the way that Worcestershire is doing. **Planning for young people's transition from college into social care provision should be local authority-led, begin well in advance of the young person's last term in college, and involve both education and social care teams.** Closer working between these two different parts of a local authority will also enable better planning of adult services, based on a knowledge of the young people coming through the system. Both teams need to be resourced to enable this essential collaboration.





The voice of specialist further education

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