

Natspec's response to Young People and Work Report Call for Evidence

Introduction

About Natspec

Natspec represents over 140 specialist further education (FE) colleges in England and Wales, that educate students aged 16–25 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), almost all of whom have education, health and care plans (EHCPs). Our members provide high-quality programmes of learning, preparing learners for adulthood including progression to further education and/or employment. Natspec also provides expert guidance and professional development, sharing sector-leading practice across the wider FE and Skills sector. Through our work, we aim to ensure that all young people, including those with SEND, have access to education and training that meets their needs and prepares them for a fulfilling adult life.

Scope of evidence

Our submission focuses on learners with SEND who have experienced periods of being not in education, employment or training (NEET) either pre- or post-specialist FE. In general, these learners have needs of greater complexity than can be typically met in a mainstream setting. Many have a combination of learning, physical and/or social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH).

Our evidence is drawn from feedback from learners and staff in member colleges as well as a review of research on disabled young people who are NEET. In particular, we have drawn on 11 case studies from member colleges which include personal learner testimonies on their experience of being NEET, what helped them to reengage with their education and, in some cases, progress onto further education or employment.

Inter-relationship between young people who are NEET and those with SEND

It is widely recognised that young people with SEND are over-represented amongst the NEET group. Disabled young people are [three times more likely](#) to be NEET than their non-disabled peers. This proportion [has grown significantly in the last decade](#), with the prevalence of social, emotional and mental health needs amongst the NEET group increasing rapidly. While it might be expected that possession of an EHCP should help protect a young person from becoming NEET, that is not the case. [Local authority SEN2 data](#) shows that there is an increase in all age groups of post-16 learners who are NEET. Those aged 16 and 17 with EHCPs are particularly affected and have seen increases of 8% and 10% respectively from 2023/24 to 2024/25 in the numbers of young people who are NEET.

Young people with SEND are not a homogenous group, and the reasons they become NEET are many and varied. In focusing our evidence on the cohort accessing specialist FE, we aim to:

- bring to the DWP's attention the experiences of a specific subset of young people with SEND who are or have been NEET
- identify the barriers this group faces in accessing further education and employment and the key factors that support re-engagement and progression into further education or employment
- suggest key changes that would reduce the likelihood of young people with similar needs from becoming NEET in the future.

It is worth noting that the complexity of the needs of some learners accessing specialist FE means that employment or further education or training is not a realistic outcome. While they contribute to the NEET numbers, their 'NEET status' should not be seen as concerning, provided they are progressing into fulfilling adult lives with increased independence and the ability to engage meaningfully within their own communities. However, too many young people leaving specialist FE, who *are* capable of progressing into further education, training or employment and keen to do so, are currently finding themselves NEET. Focused action is needed to address this issue.

What has stopped young people who were NEET before entering specialist FE from participating in education or training?

Specialist colleges are playing an increasing role in supporting young people with SEND who were previously NEET to re-engage in education. Some of Natspec's newer members have been set up specifically for that purpose, while some more established colleges have been asked by local authorities to develop new provision to help reduce the numbers of young people who are NEET in their local area. This experience has given the colleges a unique insight into the circumstances that have contributed to the young people's lack of participation previously.

Unmet needs

The majority of learners in specialist FE who were previously NEET have not had their SEN adequately met within the education system, either in school or in some cases by mainstream FE providers. Their needs have sometimes been identified late or not at all, or insufficient or inappropriate support has been on offer. Many of the learners also have unmet mental health needs, with difficulties in accessing CAMHS a key factor. Without adequate support, they have struggled to cope with the demands of school or college.

Inflexibility of mainstream educational settings

Learners themselves identify the rigid expectations around attendance, behaviour and assessment, particularly at school, as difficult to meet, given their SEN. Standard assessment and qualification routes, such as written tests and inflexible exam timetables, also create barriers for learners with SEND which impact on their motivation. These factors, combined with

inadequate SEN support, have left some young people feeling unable to cope. They describe how repeated failed placements and feeling misunderstood has resulted in low self-esteem and feeling anxious about attending. Persistent absence, emotionally based school avoidance or complete disengagement from education altogether have resulted for some.

Entrenched patterns of non-attendance

Learners in specialist FE who were previously NEET have often drifted slowly out of education rather than suddenly become NEET. Many have experienced periods of sustained and / or absence from school or a previous college, including as a result of breakdowns in placement, physical – and more commonly mental – health issues, being excluded or experience of the youth justice system. During that time away from learning and the routine of attending school or college, their confidence, mental health and trust in educational professionals has eroded, while their sense of alienation has gradually increased and ultimately led to their disengaging from education altogether.

Poorly planned transition from school to college

While many learners with SEND have gradually drifted into that status, a small number find themselves unexpectedly in that position when they come to the end of their time at school. Despite a system of annual reviews and a statutory deadline of 31 March for naming a post-school placement, some young people with EHCPs find themselves without a college place in September. This can happen where a local authority (LA) has failed to identify a placement, or the young person or their family is contesting the suitability of the college named in their EHCP. With a backlog of Tier 2 SEND Tribunals, there can be an extended period where a young person is out of education before their case is heard. In other cases, LAs name a mainstream setting which tries but then fails to meet the young person's needs, and the placement subsequently breaks down. The young person may then be without a college place, sometimes until the following September, while others choose at this point to disengage altogether.

In summary

It is clear from the accounts of both specialist colleges and learners that systemic issues in the delivery of SEND provision and mental health support for children and young people are a significant contributor to the rising NEET numbers.

Given the prevalence of SEND amongst those who are NEET, the 'NEET problem' is unlikely to be solved unless the upcoming SEND reforms ensure that children and young people's needs are identified in more timely fashion and education providers are better resourced and trained to meet their needs. It is also clear that the majority of factors contributing to young people with SEND becoming NEET relate to their experience of education at school. While they have not been categorised as 'NEET' until they reach the age of 16, their disengagement from education has often begun much earlier. Preventative measures therefore need to be introduced well before they reach the age of 16.

Why do some learners leaving specialist FE become NEET?

The vast majority of specialist college learners have a positive experience of further education, including those who were previously NEET, and drop-out rates are extremely low. However, not all who are capable of doing so progress from a specialist FE into education, training or employment. The reasons they become NEET are varied; however, young people's lack of desire to engage in education, employment or training is rarely a factor.

Employer confidence and understanding of disability

While many specialist colleges leavers want to work, as young disabled people they face multiple barriers to securing employment. [A recent Mencap survey](#) found that 86% of people with a learning disability wanted to work while only 5% have a paid job. Employers can be hesitant to recruit young disabled people because they are uncertain if they will be able to provide the necessary support or afford the reasonable adjustments that may be required, or because they underestimate disabled people's capabilities. Some employers are also unwilling to consider part-time or flexible working arrangements or job-carving approaches, all of which would help support higher levels of disability employment. Inaccessible recruitment processes and application forms can prevent disabled people from applying for jobs or demonstrating their ability to do them through the interview process.

Lack of availability of in-work support

While many specialist colleges have been very successful in supporting young people to gain a job on leaving college, particularly through supported internships, sustained employment has proved more challenging. A 2022 FE Week investigation identified that just a quarter of successful supported interns were still in employment 12 months after gaining work. Access to Work funding is difficult to navigate and cannot provide the light-touch support that both young people and employers sometimes need to prevent small issues escalating into job breakdown.

Financial and benefits-related anxiety

Financial and benefits-related anxiety on the part of the young person – and more frequently – their families can be a barrier to young disabled people accessing employment. Potential loss or reduction of benefits can make work feel too risky, particularly where a family has become dependent on the benefits associated with their young person not working. One young person described securing their "dream job", but the reduction in financial support for the family's housing costs that would have resulted from taking up the job meant that they turned it down. The complexity of the benefits system, along with a lack of DWP support to understand how working impacts on benefits, also contributes to anxieties about loss of income. In some cases, the belief that they will be worse off if they have a job may be unfounded.

Lack of support in mainstream FE settings

For some young people, their time in a specialist college is intended as a bridge to a mainstream further education setting where they can pursue an academic or vocational course alongside their peers without SEND. Some who make this progression, however, find that the

mainstream provider is not adequately resourced to offer the support, in particular the pastoral and relational support they need, to cope with the demands of their course and a large FE setting. Placements break down as a result, and the young people become NEET.

Early ceasing of EHCPs

A number of specialist colleges have experienced an unwillingness on the part of LAs to continue placements for learners who have achieved the qualification outcomes in their EHCPs, but who need a further period in college to prepare for employment and receive the transition support required to secure a job. In these cases, the young person has left college and become NEET.

In summary

Lack of desire, capability or readiness to continue in education or to work are not significant factors in why young people with SEND become NEET after leaving specialist FE. The causes are almost all out of their own control. The solutions must therefore focus on addressing the external barriers which prevent them from making a positive progression from specialist FE.

What would make the biggest difference to support more young people with SEND to participate?

The following suggestions for ways to support more young people with SEND to participate in education, training or employment are organised under three broad headings. Firstly, we draw on the successful practice of specialist colleges to identify effective ways to re-engage young people with SEND who are already NEET. Secondly, we set out measures that would help reduce the numbers of young people with SEND currently in education becoming NEET including when they leave college. These are based on our understanding of the factors that reduce their chances of a positive progression. Finally, we identify some features of a longer-term cross-departmental strategy that will be needed to address some of the more systemic barriers.

Underpinning all efforts to improve participation must be a strong commitment to listening to young people, recognising that some young people with complex needs may require alternative and accessible forms of communication to ensure their voices are heard.

Re-engaging young people with SEND who are already NEET

Flexible, person-centred programmes

Specialist colleges have developed and tested effective models of re-engagement, grounded in flexibility, personalisation and strong relationships, which demonstrate how young people can be supported back into education.

The following key ingredients have been effective in provision designed to re-engage young people who have been NEET:

- flexible delivery models, including phased starts, outreach or home-based learning, and small group provision
- gradual re-engagement, with learners starting on very low hours and building attendance as confidence and trust develop
- relational support, through a named mentor or key worker who understands the young person's needs, interests and experiences, including trauma
- strengths-based curricula, embedding literacy, numeracy and employability within practical or vocational learning aligned to individual interests
- bespoke programmes, with personalised pathways and curricula designed around learners' needs rather than standard course structures
- use of specialist staff, working with colleges and within local communities to support access to education, training or work placements
- ambitious expectations, actively building learners' confidence, self-esteem and aspirations

Joined-up services

Joined-up working across health, education and social care is also critical to effective and sustained reengagement. Where learners have access to coordinated wraparound support, including careers guidance, family support, health services, timely diagnosis, post-diagnostic support and therapeutic interventions, their needs are more likely to be met, and they are more likely to remain in education and progress to a positive next destination. Reducing the number of learners with SEND becoming NEET

Effective transition planning

Transitions into and out of college are key risk points in terms of becoming NEET. Identification of the right placement and provision of appropriate support are critical in securing a successful progression onto their next destination.

LAs must improve strategic planning of post-16 provision for young people with high needs. This includes provision planning for cohorts to ensure an appropriate range of placements is available to meet need and individual commissioning to enable each young person to be offered a placement suited to their individual needs sufficiently early to facilitate an orderly transition. This will reduce numbers of young people left without a post-school placement and placement breakdowns.

For those with EHCPs, LAs must ensure that planning for life after college forms part of each post-school annual review. Where young people need ongoing social care, involvement of adult services needs to happen early, so that a failure to secure appropriate housing, for example, does not prevent a young person from taking up a job opportunity in a new area.

Post-college support

There needs to be more guidance for families on support available, more funded in-work support for young disabled people, and Access to Work needs to be much easier to claim. Wrap-around support is required to ensure factors such as lack of suitable housing or difficulties in accessing transport don't impede a young disabled person's chance of taking up a job opportunity.

Improved employer understanding of disability

Employers need greater understanding of disability and the capability of disabled young people to work. Many specialist colleges have supported employer partners to increase their understanding of neurodiversity in the workplace, different types of SEND, mental health and reasonable adjustments, resulting in increased employer capacity to support young people with SEND. Bespoke training programmes have led to a culture of 'real' employer readiness where employers, supported by colleges, are willing to put in place the arrangements needed to enable a young person to thrive in their work placement. As one young person put it,

"Without the incredible support from the staff at [college], I wouldn't have the job I do now at a jewellers, where I work in photography and admin. They not only introduced me to them but ran training for employers about neurodivergence in the workplace which the owner of the jewellery shop has attended."

Employers need to have a greater understanding of reasonable adjustments and be more willing to be flexible in their approach. For example, a young disabled person may need a longer period of time to make all the arrangements they need around transport, personal assistant support or accommodation before they are able to take up a job offer. They should be more open to part-time working and job-carving to enable more young disabled people, including those with learning disabilities, to contribute effectively to the workplace.

Longer-term and cross-departmental strategies to drive system change

Most young people do not become NEET overnight; rather, they experience a gradual accumulation of the effects of unmet need, resulting from fragmented support across education, health and social care which eventually results in them disengaging. Significant reform of the SEND system and mental health support services, resulting in earlier identification of need and more timely intervention, are needed to address this problem. The DfE and DWP must recognise the inextricable link between SEND system challenges and the growing numbers of young people who are NEET. The two departments should collaborate on solutions, with the DWP strategies to reduce the numbers of NEETs and DfE SEND reforms aligning to ensure young people with SEND are better served by the education system.

NEET predictors & tracking

A more effective system for tracking young people at risk of becoming NEET is needed at both local and national level. Current tools and guidance such as the [Risk of NEET Indicator](#) are relatively unknown and underutilised and largely focus on Years 10 and 11. Specialist colleges have identified that risk factors, particularly for those with SEND, often emerge long before this

point. A more preventative approach would use routinely collected data from earlier phases to identify patterns of disengagement, including poor or declining attendance, unmet SEND, low attainment, behavioural concerns, and emerging mental health or wellbeing needs. This would allow for the earlier targeting of interventions to reduce the risk of disengagement.

Careers guidance

For young people with SEND, forward-planning about post-16 options and transitions out of school is critical. There needs to be increased access to specialist Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance for learners with SEND to help young people to identify suitable next options that align with their strengths and support their needs. Compliance with the Baker Clause and provider access legislation is inconsistent, as evidenced by the [Education Committee's report on FE and Skills](#). Better enforcement of the Baker Clause would ensure that all schools, including special schools, offer providers meaningful access to pupils in Years 8–13, so that young people and their families are better informed about vocational options that may be more suited to their strengths and interests.

Addressing concerns about loss of benefits

Disabled young people must not be financially penalised by taking up employment. They and their families should also have access to better support to help them understand the impact on their benefits of getting a job. Many young people, particularly those with learning disabilities, find the complex benefits system very difficult to fathom. Once implemented, the 'Right to Try' guarantee should help disabled young people to confidently take up work without concerns about unintended financial consequences. However, the DWP will need to ensure information and guidance about the scheme is fully accessible including to those with learning disabilities, if the full spectrum of disabled people are to benefit from it.

Conclusion

SEND and NEET are twin challenges for the DfE and DWP and must therefore be addressed together. Our evidence suggests that for the cohort of young people who have a SEN or are disabled and have experience of being NEET, lack of aspiration or unwillingness to engage are not key factors. The barriers to successful engagement in education, employment or training are extrinsic. They arise largely from unmet needs, insufficient mental health support, poor transition planning on the part of LAs, employer attitudes, and an overly complex benefit system. Solutions therefore will need to come from across government, with the focus on taking a preventative approach. This must include the dismantling of systemic barriers that prevent young people with SEND from reaching their potential and participating fully in education and employment.