



Support and aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability

Briefing paper from Natspec on the Green Paper consultation

Natspec is a membership organisation for 70 independent specialist colleges (ISCs) promoting equality of opportunity and access to further education for young people with a wide range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities who need a specialist environment in which to learn successfully and achieve their aspirations. These learners benefit from a personalised curriculum and individualised and inter-disciplinary support from teachers, support staff and a range of therapists. Natspec members are committed to learner centred approaches and offer innovative and creative solutions, using technology where appropriate, to promote real independence. Learners are at the centre of specialist college life, involved in all stages of their learning programme, celebrating their achievements and influencing their whole college experience.

Natspec welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Green Paper, which sets out an aspirational approach to reforming the system from 0-25. Below we outline our views on some of the key issues.

Education, Health & Care plan: we agree that a joint plan will have many benefits for children/young people and their families, but acknowledge the real challenge in achieving this. We believe that this will only be achieved if there is a statutory duty on all agencies to participate and to fund.

We agree that voluntary and community organisations could play a 'Big Society' role in supporting families through the assessment and planning process, but do not underestimate the skills, training and resources required to do this successfully.

The plan must take account of changing needs and aspirations as young people reach school leaving age and face the challenge of transition. The voice of young people must be included in the plan as early as possible; specialist colleges have a great deal of expertise in listening to the views of young people with the most complex needs.

Specialist colleges have a trans-disciplinary approach to learning, support and care, are well placed to promote and share its effectiveness and value for money.

Learning and achieving: the important role of further education is barely mentioned in the Green Paper, yet this is a vital phase of learning for many young people with

learning difficulties or disabilities. It allows them an adult learning experience and provides opportunities to gain a better understanding of their options for adult life.

Natspec supports the view that inclusive learning is about 'the greatest degree of match or fit between the individual learner's requirements and the provision that is made for them' (Tomlinson committee). The local solution works for many but not for all - specialist colleges are the first and right choice for young people whose learning and support needs cannot be well met locally. These students have a wide range of ambitions and aspirations, just like their peers. Colleges provide personalised programmes and hands-on experience to challenge and inspire students, and to nurture the skills for active participation in the wider community.

Specialist colleges work with a wide range of partners within their locality, including local FE colleges, employers and community organisations. These partnerships benefit learners and also enable the sharing of expertise and joint development activities. This sharing of expertise is only possible when colleges are able to retain and develop their own particular specialism.

Natspec recently led a national Learning and Skills Improvement Service funded project to explore the role of Learning Support Assistants in post-16 provision – colleges, work based providers, sixth forms and others. The project included LSAs, learners, teachers, and managers and has produced a wide range of resources promoting innovative approaches to support that encourages independence.

Preparing for adulthood: this is central to the work of specialist colleges. Individual learning programmes help learners work towards their aspirations, which might include work, independent living, further education or training, and active community participation.

Specialist colleges offer employability and vocational skills through on-site vocational training, social enterprises, supported employment, and work experience. Surveys indicate that employers welcome the support and training offered when they provide work experience. Many learners progress into work, but it is important to be realistic – only 10% of people with learning difficulties are in employment and the current economic climate is challenging.

Many specialist colleges are residential; this experience enables young people to practise their independence skills in real life situations. Travel training is extensive, as an important aspect of independence for work and living.

Successful skills outcomes are measured in many ways – accreditation is used when it is relevant and will make a difference. Learners' confidence to move into the next phase of life is the real measure of their successful specialist college experience.

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