



The voice of specialist further education



How young people with special educational needs and disabilities find out about their post-16 options

February 2021

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Executive Summary

In December 2020, Natspec invited parents and carers of young people with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or Welsh equivalent to share their experiences of accessing information, advice and guidance (IAG) on post-16 education and training options. 137 families completed the online survey.

Two thirds of respondents rated the overall quality of the information, advice and guidance that they or their young person received as **poor**. They were critical of the timeliness, availability, sufficiency and quality of the IAG received, and felt that they and their young people had not been fully involved in decision-making. The experiences they described are a far cry from the expectations set out in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice.

In terms of **timeliness**:

- 58% of parents said that discussions about post-16 options came too late. The delay had caused stress and anxiety for whole families and resulted in rushed transitions.
- Almost a third said that they were *never* encouraged to think about post-16 options.
- Only a third were encouraged to think about post-16 options two or more years before their young person was due to leave school.
- Only 10% said that post-16 options were formally discussed in the Year 9 annual review.
- Just over a fifth (21%) said that post-16 options were *never* covered in an Annual Review; this was twice as likely to be the case in England compared to Wales.

“Lots of hard work for parents to find the right pathway, so little information or clues as to where to find it”

“We have done all the research ENTIRELY by ourselves with some guidance from the young person’s special needs school. NO help from the local authority”.

“No information about potential courses has been shared with us. If we were not proactive as a family, we would still be unaware of options.”

“It felt like everyone was sleepwalking into post 16 - and no-one was listening to us.”

“It was suggested we look at the local offer, but this was in the full knowledge that there was nothing in the borough to meet her needs... There was no support to look for a provision that would have met her needs.”

“Advice was limited, blinkered, lacking, short, late and very poor quality.”

In terms of **availability**:

- Almost half of all respondents said that their main source of information on post-16 options came from their own research. They had struggled to access relevant information on the full range of options.
- Only 5% of respondents said their local authority was the main provider of advice and guidance.
- Schools were cited by some parents as helpful in providing information; parent networks were a valued source in England.
- A majority of the young people and families had had access to post-16 events or fairs involving multiple providers, but these were often seen to be inaccessible or irrelevant to young people with SEND. Others mentioned open days and visits by and to colleges. Many parents said they had had to organise all such activities for themselves.

In terms of **sufficiency**:

- Only a quarter of families had been offered information about several different post-16 providers and supported to understand the difference between them. Only a quarter had been given any information at all about specialist FE colleges.
- Of the families whose young people were in special schools with their own post-16 provision, 59% reported having been given *no* information about alternative post-16 options.
- Some parents described local authorities as deliberately withholding information about some options and steering them towards a single provider, influenced more by costs than the young person's needs.

In terms of **young people's and parents' involvement**:

- Two thirds reported that their young people were not very well supported or not supported at all to understand their post-16 options and/or express their preferences.
- 40% of parents thought that not much weight or no weight at all was given to their views or preferences as parents.
- Welsh parents were considerably more satisfied than English parents with the way in which they and their young people had been listened to.

In terms of **overall quality**:

Parents cited a number of key issues impacting on the quality of the IAG they received including

- difficulty in obtaining comprehensive information about the full range of post-16 options
- a lack of genuinely independent, impartial advice
- a lack of clarity about who should be providing what and when, with no-one taking overall responsibility
- local authorities adopting a default position that the local general further college was the most suitable progression option
- a lack of aspiration and imagination on the part of local authorities for young people with SEND
- poor quality EHCPs, particularly in terms of outcomes, which were therefore not helpful to the decision-making process.

Recommendations

Building on the suggestions for improvement from the parents surveyed, Natspec recommends:

- **Colleges** should provide clear details of their SEND/ALN provision to those local authorities that they might reasonably expect to place students with them. This should include information about programmes available and the range of needs they can meet.

- **Schools** should build on the support they already offer to parents and young people to ensure that conversations about post-16 options begin well in advance of transition points and that parents and young people understand their rights in this regard.
- **Local authorities** should ensure that young people and their families have access to a properly funded impartial IAG service in which advice is provided over an extended period of time by a named, trained person with a good understanding of the full range of post-16 options and the needs and capabilities of young people with SEND.
- **Local authorities** should provide young people and families with clear information including timelines on what they can expect from whom in relation to making choices about post-16 options. This should be made available to parents of children in Year 9 and referenced at each subsequent annual review.
- **Local authorities** should overhaul their local offers to provide a single point of information on *all* potential post-16 education and training options. This should be co-created with parents to ensure that the information is comprehensive and easily navigable and searchable.
- **Welsh Government** should ensure as ALN reform is implemented that safeguards are in place for young people and their families to access quality assured advice and information on the full range of post-16 options available to them.
- **DfE and Welsh government** should each ensure that there is sufficient funding available to local authorities to enable them to provide a level of IAG on post-16 options to meet the requirements set out in their respective Codes of Practice.
- **DfE and Welsh government** should each publish a simple 'Know your rights in relation to post-16 options' document for young people with SEND/ALN and their parents and carers, and ensure its dissemination initially to all families with children in Year 9 and above, and thereafter on an annual basis to all families with children in Year 9.
- **DfE and Welsh government** should set some standards for local authorities for inclusion of young people in the decision-making process around post-16 options, and fund training for relevant staff to enable this to happen consistently.
- **Ofsted and CQC**, as part of their SEND area reviews, should investigate and report on how effectively local authorities are providing IAG on post-16 options, identifying any failures to comply with their legal duties or inconsistencies with the SEND Code of Practice.

Background

Following special education needs and disability (SEND) reform in England in 2014, local authorities have duties laid out in the SEND code of practice to provide a dedicated and identifiable service offering impartial, confidential, and accessible information, advice and support. They are required to publish a 'local offer' setting out the provision available for local children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities.

Currently in Wales, dedicated Careers Wales Advisors work in a quasi-independent capacity to provide guidance to young people with learning difficulties and disabilities and their families. Advisors attend young peoples' transition review meetings and where required, progress applications for placements at specialist further education colleges. Additional Learning Needs (ALN) transformation being implemented in Wales moves away from this national approach and passes responsibility for the provision of impartial advice and information to each of Wales' 22 local authorities.

Despite the existing legal duties on English local authorities, anecdotal evidence suggested to Natspec that young people with SEND/ALN and their families were not always informed about the full extent of their post-16 options. This was confirmed in a report¹ into planning, commissioning and funding post-16 high needs provision published in late 2020, which detailed a number of further issues relating to transition to college, including the routine missing of the statutory deadline of 31 March for confirming places for young people with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) who are transferring from school to college.

A 2020 review by Natspec of Local Offers also found that only 45% of local authorities were providing information on all of the specialist FE colleges they are required to include, in line with the SEND Code of Practice. Young people and their families were therefore only receiving a partial picture of the options available to them.

Aims

The aims of this research were to

- find out how young people with an EHC Plan (in England) or Learning and Skills Plan (in Wales) and their families find out about their post-16 options
- gather parent perceptions on the amount, quality and timeliness of the information, advice and guidance that they and their young people receive
- determine if the different approaches taken in England and Wales result in different levels of parental satisfaction with the information, advice, guidance received
- identify examples of effective practice and where improvements are needed.

Methodology

The survey was carried out in December 2020 and January 2021 using the online 'Survey Monkey' cloud-based software. A total of 17 questions (see appendix 1) were asked seeking a combination of circumstantial and experiential detail along with asking respondents to evaluate their experiences of receiving or not receiving IAG. The survey comprised open and closed questions and sought both quantitative and qualitative responses.

Respondents were asked about the timelines for any IAG they received as well as their view on the appropriateness of that timing and on the amount and quality of the IAG received. Information was also

¹ [Arrangements for planning, commissioning, funding, and supporting provision for post-16 high needs students](#), November 2020

sought on the extent to which respondents felt their young people had been supported to understand their post-16 options and the weight that was given to parental preferences.

The survey was completed by 137 respondents, all parents of young people with SEND. Around two thirds of the respondents were accessing education and training in England and a third in Wales. The ages of the young people concerned were roughly equally spread across three age groups of 15 to 16 years, 17 to 18 years and those who were 19 years old and over. Most young people concerned were being educated in either a special school or a specialist further education college, with others attending mainstream schools, general further education colleges and alternative provision. Over half of the respondents (55%) described their young person as having autism; 13% referred to severe learning difficulties and 11% to moderate learning difficulties. Other needs included hearing impairment, physical disability, specific learning difficulty, social emotional and mental health, speech language and communication needs and other difficulty/disability.

Qualitative data was analysed by grouping emergent themes and, where appropriate, respondent responses are quoted in the findings below to exemplify specific points.

Findings

Timing of information, advice and guidance

Almost a third (29%) of respondents said that they were *never* encouraged to think about post-16 options. Just 34% were encouraged to think about post-16 options two or more years before their young person was due to leave school. Where discussions did take place, 21% of respondents in England said they happened less than a year before their young person left school. Interestingly in Wales, just over 97% of conversations *had* taken place more than a year in advance of transition. The timeliness of these discussions may contribute to the higher levels of satisfaction with IAG overall in Wales. Despite the requirement for post-school options to be introduced in the Year 9 Annual Review, just 10% of respondents said that this was the case. Just under half of the respondents (47%) said that the first mention of post-16 options in an Annual Review came in either Years 10 or 11. Almost a quarter of parents in England (24%) said that post-16 options were *never* covered in an Annual Review; the picture was better in Wales with over 85% of parents saying options were discussed at some point during an Annual Review.

Given these figures, it is not surprising that overall, 58% of parents said that these discussions started too late. This was felt much more sharply by respondents in England (67%) compared to those in Wales (34%), where two thirds of families thought the discussions began at about the right time.

Parents and carers who said the conversations about post-16 options started too late were asked about the impact of this delay. Several described their young person or whole family as being 'left in limbo' as a result of delayed decision-making. A number referred to the frustration, stress and anxiety caused - again for the young person *and* the family. Some made it clear that the delays were happening in spite of their own best efforts to get things moving. Parents also explained that where decisions were not taken when they should have been, they were then made in a rush at the end of the process. They felt this gave them little time to explore options, college open days had been missed, and some potentially suitable colleges were now full. Late decisions also meant there was little or no time for transition-planning which affected the young person's ability to settle quickly into the new provision.

Parents' observations included:

The impact of late decisions was a great deal of avoidable stress. At every stage it felt like there significant time pressures despite the preparations we had started two years earlier.'

I am stressed to the hilt with it all and have hit complete burn-out and cannot face yet more battles to get an adequate provision.. I have no fight left.'

Very rushed and stressful by the end. Local authority deliberately takes to the wire which is absolutely the worst thing for the young person who is less capable of handling uncertainty.

It felt like everyone was sleepwalking into post 16 - and no-one was listening to us when we said the current placement wasn't working and would continue not to work for post 16, so we needed to look for an alternative. This was on the advice of health professionals, not just us being 'difficult' parents'.

Sources of information, advice and guidance

Almost half of all respondents (47%) said that their main source of information on post-16 options came from their own research. School was the next most commonly cited source mentioned by 28% of respondents in Wales and 21% in England. Parent/carer networks played a role in providing information in England, cited by 11% of respondents compared to none in Wales.

Just 5% of respondents cited their local authority as the main provider of advice and guidance (4% in England and 8% in Wales). No English respondent cited an independent careers advisory service as their main source of information, compared to 8% of respondents in Wales. That said, 6% of respondents did say they had received support from Special Educational Needs Disability Information, Advice, Support (SENDIAS) local authority commissioned statutory services. One respondent noted that they had received information from a Careers Advisory Service but as it was partially funded by the local authority they did not deem it 'independent.'

Parents were asked what types of activity or events they or their young person had been offered as part of their exploration of post-16 options. Post-16 events or fairs involving multiple providers were the most commonly cited, including more recently online events. However, some respondents said that the post-16 events or fairs offered were inappropriate for them and their young person's needs. They were variously described as '*not accessible*', '*not suitable for a child with MLD and an EHCP*' or not including '*any specialist course information*.' One parent stated that the

'The post-16 fairs were completely ableist with no recognition of courses for young people with SEND. Our child attended these fairs with us and they were meaningless and very uncomfortable for her'.

Parents also referenced visits by individual colleges to schools to share information about their provision. Although one respondent described how '*colleges were present at parents evening but.. we were not really offered any insight into what support was available*'. Online or in person open days were offered with twice as many English respondents (32%) referring to these than Welsh respondents (16%). Conversely of the 15% of respondents who said visits to specific providers had been organised for them, this was twice as likely to be the case in Wales than England. Several parents mentioned that they had visited a number of colleges but that they had organised this themselves.

Significant numbers of parents felt that nothing had been organised for them to help them explore post-16 options and that they were having to do everything for themselves. One parent described their search as '*lots of hard work for parents to find the right pathway, so little information or clues as to where to find it*'. Another wrote

We have done all the research ENTIRELY by ourselves with some guidance from the young person's old (special-needs) school. NO help from the Local Authority although we obtained a few lists from SENDias.

Some parents described their local authority as deliberately limiting the options presented to them. One wrote, '*Social services only organised a visit to the college they wanted my son to attend*', another said they had only been offered '*visits to local college which proved totally inappropriate for him and damaging mentally for him*'. Another explained,

It was suggested we look at the local offer, but this was in the full knowledge that there was nothing in the borough to meet her needs... There was no support to look for a provision that would have met her needs.'

A Welsh respondent described how *'Careers Wales was extremely unhelpful and told us that the local college was the only option available to us which just isn't suitable'*.

Parent and young person involvement

Overall, two thirds of respondents reported that their young people were not very well supported or not supported at all to understand their post-16 options and/or express their preferences. 71% of English respondents reported poor or no involvement of young people. This finding is particularly disappointing given the emphasis in the SEND Code of Practice in England on person-centred practice and the importance of listening to the young person, who from 16 years old should be viewed as the primary decision-maker. Respondents in Wales presented a more positive picture with 21% of parents saying their young person had been supported very well compared to just 6% in England. Nonetheless, 58% of respondents in Wales reported poor experiences. A few parents described the involvement of the young person as tokenistic or a matter of rhetoric, with one observing,

'It very much felt like the social workers and other authorities were purely interested in gaining the cheapest rather than the best value outcome despite the empty words of putting the child at the centre.'

Also of note is the number of parents who responded by saying their young person would not have been able to participate in the process because of the nature of their SEN. Clearly, they have not been exposed to some of the more innovative practices that are enabling participation of young people with quite complex needs in decision-making about their own lives.

A handful of examples of effective practice were cited. One parent described how their young person had received support *'from the spectacularly dedicated and passionate teachers at her school'*; another wrote, *'support from ASD base in school, disability social worker and special needs careers advisors was excellent'*. Just two (both in England) mentioned that their young person had been assigned or offered an independent advocate.

40% of parents thought that not much weight or no weight at all was given to their views or preferences as parents. A third thought they were given some weight and 27% thought their preferences were given a lot of weight. Welsh respondents reported more positive experiences than their English counterparts. A significant number of respondents referred to the local authority having their own agenda, with financial considerations trumping parent or young person preference. Observations included:

It seemed as if the LEA just wanted to put my son where it suited them, even though the two places in county were not suitable. We had to push hard to ensure he got what he needed.

The Local Authority seemed to base everything on money – a one size fits all system.

We were railroaded towards local provision because it suited LA. Had to go to tribunal for specialist.

Because the view was he would need specialist provision it was an LA decision not mine, and no need for me to know anything!

The local authority was trying to get him placed in colleges that could not meet his needs and not listening to our views.

Sufficiency and quality of information, advice and guidance

Two thirds of respondents described the overall quality of the information, advice and guidance received on post-16 options as poor. Just 18% thought it was good or excellent, with the remaining 16% describing it as acceptable. Families in England were significantly more dissatisfied than those in Wales: 73% of English respondents rated overall quality as poor, compared with 45% in Wales. Only 25% of families had been offered information about several different post-16 providers and supported to understand the difference between them. One respondent described how, *'We've not been presented a variety of options – basically it's 'extended provision' at mainstream college or nothing'*. Another said, *'Everything was geared towards one college as a blanket policy'*.

Just 25% had been given any information about specialist FE colleges. Of those who had not been given this information, the vast majority (88%) said they would have found it useful. One respondent explained,

My son's current placement is out-of-county. Superb for him, no more expensive for LA than one of their own... never mentioned by LA.

Of the families whose young people were in special schools with their own post-16 provision, 59% reported having been given *no* information about alternative post-16 options. Where families *had* been given such information during Years 10 or 11, a third had decided it was in their young person's best interests to leave the school at the end of Year 11. This echoes the findings of the November 2020 report into planning, commissioning, funding and supporting high needs provision for post-16 learners in which general further education colleges reported being denied access to potential students in their school settings. On this basis, it is logical to assume that significantly more young people than is the case currently might choose to move provider at aged 16, if the option was presented to them.

Parents cited a range of different factors contributing to their negative experience of finding out about post-16 options. These included:

- the difficulty in obtaining comprehensive information about the full range of post-16 options (the Local Offer curated by the local authority was not seen as offering this)
- the lack of genuinely independent, impartial advice to help them navigate the possible options
- a lack of ownership, leadership or responsibility for managing the whole transition process, leaving parents unsure of who should be providing what and by when
- a reliance on parents to undertake all the research for themselves
- a lack of suitable local provision combined with some local authorities adopting a default position that the local general further college was the default progression option
- a sense that local authorities were deliberately withholding information about some options, in particular, specialist FE colleges, sometimes referred to as 'out-of-county' provision
- a lack of aspiration and imagination on the part of local authorities for young people with SEND, with some 'pigeon-holing' them rather than taking a person-centred approach
- poor quality EHCPs, particularly in terms of outcomes, which were therefore not helpful to the decision-making process.

The tone of many of their comments suggests a sense of exhaustion, exasperation and despair:

No information about potential courses has been shared with us. If we were not proactive as a family we would still be unaware of options.

There has been no formal transition-planning for my son from school or the LA – our requests have been ignored and we feel he has been abandoned – any planning that has happened has been because parents have tried to do own research but we feel very inadequate as we are not the 'experts' and feel like we're failing him.

Advice was limited, blinkered, lacking, short, late and very poor quality.

If there was a 'less than poor' or 'seriously inadequate' then I would have checked that.

Where parents had had a more satisfactory experience, they tended to attribute it to staff at the young person's school or to the college to which they were planning to progress.

Parents' suggestions for improving information advice and guidance on post-16 options

Parents consistently called for the same key improvements, including:

- a single reference point from they could access detailed information on the *full* range of post-16 education and training options (the local offer was not seen to provide this)

- more information to be provided by schools about post-16 options (one suggested this could include an annual event where the full range of providers were represented and all parents from Yr 9 onwards were invited)
- a properly funded impartial service in which advice is provided over an extended period of time by a named, trained person with a good understanding of the full range of post-16 options and the needs and capabilities of young people with SEND
- the complete separation of advice on the suitability of the different options from consideration of their cost
- more person-centred approaches on the part of local authorities where young people's views are fully considered.

Conclusions

Parents clearly feel that the current system for providing information, advice and guidance on post-16 options is not working. The failings in the current system are causing anxiety and stress for young people and their families. Our analysis of the responses to our survey suggests that the position is slightly better in Wales than in England but it is still far from effective.

Families are not getting IAG early enough to support informed decision-making or to ensure smooth transitions.

They believe that they are not being given details of the full range of options available to their young person. In some cases, they think that details of certain providers are being deliberately withheld from them or they are being steered towards or away from certain options on the basis of cost rather than suitability.

Many parents do not believe their preferences hold any weight and most describe their young person as not included in the decision-making process.

Families are receiving very little guidance to support them in their decision-making. Parents are doing the vast majority of the work themselves, with some of them finding it a huge struggle.

The current experience of families and young people certainly does not match the expectations of the SEND Code of Practice. However, it is not clear that anyone is being held accountable for these failings. This cannot be seen as acceptable.

Recommendations

Natspec is fully supportive of the improvements that parents themselves have called for. To help achieve these, we recommend that:

- **Colleges** should provide clear details of their SEND/ALN provision to those local authorities that they might reasonably expect to place students with them. This should include information about programmes available and the range of needs they can meet.
- **Schools** should build on the support they already offer to parents and young people to ensure that conversations about post-16 options begin well in advance of transition points and that parents and young people understand their rights in this regard.
- **Local authorities** should ensure that young people and their families have access to a properly funded impartial IAG service in which advice is provided over an extended period of time by a named, trained person with a good understanding of the full range of post-16 options and the needs and capabilities of young people with SEND.

- **Local authorities** should provide young people and families with clear information including timelines on what they can expect from whom in relation to making choices about post-16 options. This should be made available to parents of children in Year 9 and referenced at each subsequent annual review.
- **Local authorities** should overhaul their local offers to provide a single point of information on *all* potential post-16 education and training options. This should be co-created with parents to ensure that the information is comprehensive and easily navigable and searchable.
- **Welsh Government** should ensure as ALN reform is implemented that safeguards are in place for young people and their families to access quality assured advice and information on the full range of post-16 options available to them.
- **DfE and Welsh government** should each ensure that there is sufficient funding available to local authorities to enable them to provide a level of IAG on post-16 options to meet the requirements set out in their respective Codes of Practice.
- **DfE and Welsh government** should each publish a simple 'Know your rights in relation to post-16 options' document for young people with SEND/ALN and their parents and carers, and ensure its dissemination initially to all families with children in Year 9 and above, and thereafter on an annual basis to all families with children in Year 9.
- **DfE and Welsh government** should set some standards for local authorities for inclusion of young people in the decision-making process around post-16 options, and fund training for relevant staff to enable this to happen consistently.
- **Ofsted and CQC**, as part of their SEND area reviews, should investigate and report on how effectively local authorities are providing IAG on post-16 options, identifying any failures to comply with their legal duties or inconsistencies with the SEND Code of Practice.

Annex 1: Survey Questions

*** An asterisk identifies questions where respondents had the opportunity to provide additional qualitative information as part of the answer.**

1. Where does your young person receive their education? *England; Wales.*
2. How old is your young person? *15-16; 17-18; 19+.*
3. Where is your young person currently being educated? *Mainstream school; special school; general FE college; specialist FE college; other. **
4. What is your young person's primary area of need? *Autism; hearing impairment; moderate learning difficulty; multi-sensory impairment; physical disability; profound and multiple learning difficulty; severe learning difficulty; social, emotional and mental health; speech language and communication needs; visual impairment; other. **
5. How many years before your young person was due to leave school were you first encouraged to start thinking about post-16 options? *More than 4 years before; 4 years before; 3 years before; 2 years before; 1 year before; less than one year before; we were never encouraged to think about post-16 options.*
6. At which annual review were post-16 options first formally discussed? *Year 8 or before; Year 9; Year 10; Year 11; Year 12; Year 13; Year 14; post-16 options were never discussed.*
7. In your opinion, did discussions about your young person's post-16 options start too early, at the right time or too late? *
8. Which of the following was your MAIN source of information, advice and guidance on post-16 options for your young person? *School; local authority; an independent careers advisory service; parent/carer forum or network; own research; other. **
9. Which of the following have you and/or your young person been offered as part of your exploration of post-16 options? Tick all that apply: *Post-16 fairs or events involving multiple post-16 providers (e.g. different colleges); visits by individual colleges to schools where colleges explain their provision to young people and families; visits for young people to different post-16 providers organised by their school or local authority; online or in-person open days at one or more post-16 providers; short taster programmes laid on by post-16 providers; signposting to sources of useful information, including the local offer; Other experiences (do not include nay that you have organised yourself, without the support of the school or local authority). **
10. How well was your young person supported to understand the different post-16 options and to express their preferences? *Very well; quite well; not very well, not at all. **
11. How much weight do you feel was given to your preferences, as apparent, for your young person's post-16 education? *A lot; some; Not much; None at all.*
12. Were you offered information about several different post-16 providers and helped to understand the differences between them? *Yes; No.*
13. Were you offered any information about specialist FE colleges? *Yes; no; not sure.*
14. If No, do you think it would have been useful to have some information on specialist FE colleges? *Yes; no.*
15. If your child attended a special school with post-16 provision, in Year 10/11 were you given information about other post-16 provision? *Yes – but we decided that staying on at school for one or more years was the best option for our young person; Yes – and we decided it would be best for our young person to leave school at the end of year 11; no.*

16. How would you rate the overall quality of the information, advice and guidance on post-16 options that you and your young person have received? *Excellent; good; acceptable; poor.*

17. Please provide your name and email address if you would be happy for us to contact you further about this topic (optional).