Specialist Provision for Young People with Autism in Further Education

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Introduction

1. ColegauCymru / CollegesWales welcomes the opportunity to provide written and oral evidence to the Enterprise and Skills Committee Inquiry into Specialist Provision for Young People with Autism in Further Education. ColegauCymru / CollegesWales is the national organisation representing the 22 further education (FE) colleges and two FE institutions in Wales. ColegauCymru runs an active network of Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (LLDD) managers who have helped in drawing up this response.

2. Each college is unique in size and number and type of learners. The largest college has over 20,000 students and the smallest around 1,500 students.

3. The numbers of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) at mainstream colleges in Wales ranges from about 10-35 students per college. The numbers could be higher if more had diagnosis. That is, there are more students who display ASD traits than there are accounted for by the official data.

4. Students with ASD are applying to FE colleges in greater numbers. Better access to (and more) accurate diagnosis is leading to learners with ASD becoming a significant cohort in FE student populations.

5. One college – Bridgend College – has a residential facility.

6. Examples of the range of levels of ASD presented by students at individual colleges:

> Out of the current student cohort of 70 full time students who are on discrete courses, more than a quarter have a diagnosis of ASD or display autistic tendencies. There is a range of need across the entire spectrum of disorder, with 10% having severely autistic tendencies affecting their speech and language, more than 20% displaying moderate autistic tendencies and associated conditions such as ADHD, Tourettes and dyspraxia. Two individuals have a diagnosis of Aspergers syndrome.

> In our discrete provision we have 11 students (out of 120) with a diagnosis of Autism/Aspergers (although we also have a number of learners who have many Autistic traits). Most of these learners have a severe learning difficulty but we do have two learners who have the academic ability to access mainstream but who have extremely poor social skills.

Transition from school to FE college

7.   There have been some positive developments since the Autistic Spectrum Disorder Strategic Action Plan for Wales (ASDSAPW) was published in April 2008. A key development has been the establishment of a reference group on transition, chaired by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) (see para 10.4, ASDSAPW). This has led to five pilot projects: Anglesey, Gwynedd, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Monmouthshire. The pilot projects fund the appointment of Transition Key Workers.

8.   The ASDSAPW states: "Transition from school to further learning... should include social services departments and local health boards where appropriate..." (para 34)

9.   Where local authorities have set up multi-agency fora, these appear to be working well. The fora bring together health, social services, schools and colleges. An Autism Action Plan has been agreed by at least two separate multi-agency fora: Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. The fora and Action Plans recognise that wrap-around services must be planned across agencies and organisations for any given individual. For example, a further education institution (FEI) might be able to access funding for in-class support for students with ASD. But an FEI will not have access to funding to cover support for holidays or weekends. Hence careful planning is needed to make sure that an individual has access to the suite of support mechanisms available for each day of the year.

10.   For each individual school pupil statemented with ASD who is considering attending a local college, college staff attend Transition Plan and Annual Review Meetings at the school in order to support the transition process. Included in these meetings are the parents and multi-agency representatives.

11.   Good transition practice includes for example a school pupil's Learning Support Assistant (LSA) attending college with that pupil throughout the transition process. Transition can be a lengthy process for people with ASD – in many cases, up to a year. The required level of LSA support for transition for each individual can therefore be high and requires long-term planning and adequate resourcing. Once transition to college is complete and the learner is established at college, a new LSA is appointed. It is important that at the next transition phase – from the college to employment or to higher education, that the college LSA provides the continuous support to the individual for as long as necessary.

12.   Good practice examples reported by colleges:

- There are strong links with the feeder school where ASD students and others with additional learning needs are based
- Phased time into college where staff from a local school or specialist provision attend with the pupil. Support is also phased between the school and college staff
- Talks are given to individual parents or groups at specialist and mainstream

> schools on the provision at college and ways of meeting needs are identified
> - Close links with the Local Authority to meet the educational needs of pupils with ASD with local provision when they turn 16.

13. Whilst transition can and does work successfully, it is not always the case that parents or pupils consider a place at a further education college to be desirable. Some parents would prefer a residential placement as residential settings provide certainty of 24-hour support, seven days a week. The funding and geographical location of residential settings, however, mean that the option of a residential setting is not always realistic. This can lead to tensions.

Support in Colleges

14. "The support needs of people with ASD attending colleges... are well recorded, as is the need for awareness raising for teaching, lecture support and ancillary staff... In Deeside College, a support model was developed for adults with ASD..." (para 36 ASDSAPW)

15. Colleges respond to local demand, and we recognise that some colleges are consequently further ahead than others in establishing support for ASD. Through the ColegauCymru Network for LLDD managers, good practice from across the colleges is being shared on ASD. The Network would welcome the opportunity to work with Autism Cymru and other relevant organisations to plan specific opportunities to ensure the knowledge base and good practice is shared across sectors.

16.   Examples of support in individual further education colleges:

> - Regular meetings with parents and professionals associated with a young person whilst they are at college
> - Communication books between home and college for those with severe ASD and communication difficulties
> - Regular phone contact with parents
> - Continuous adjustments of timetables to meet the individual's needs and behaviours when they change over time
> - Communication passports devised for those with complex communication needs
> - Extra support lessons within Inclusive Studies and Essential Skills put in place where necessary
> - Flexibility within the timetable to suit personal needs e.g. if lessons have too much sensory overload (such as cooking), students are supported to carry out other activities relating to the lesson e.g. computer-based work.

> - Transport contributions / transport escorts
> - In class support with a small team of familiar support workers
> - Out of class support at breaks and lunch
> - A "quiet space" to go to if needed
> - Advocacy support in reviews and meetings

- Special exam arrangements
- Autism awareness training for teaching staff & support workers

17. Brief examples of how this support is put into practice for individuals:

> Two learners with Aspergers are accessing the Preparation for Employment and Vocational Access courses (each is in receipt of exceptional funding for 1:1 support). Both attended local high schools where they received additional support. The student on the Preparation for Employment course is in his second year of study at college and is also accessing the Intermediate certificate in IT and Media for one day per week as part of his transition programme onto a full time course in IT next year.

> One person currently on a Gateway to I.T. Course is an excellent student. He is up-to-date with all his assignments. He also on work experience 2 days a week with Elite in an office at the Welsh Assembly. He interacts well with all the students on this course and works well with all the staff.
> Two students studying a Foundation Diploma in Art and design are both up-to-date on all of their assignments. They both interact well with the other students on this course and are a joy to work with.

> One student with Aspergers finds it almost impossible to get out of bed and into college in the mornings. A flexible, multi agency approach involving the Careers service, the Engage project and the department means that he is now being offered an opportunity to follow a training scheme to motivate him and provide meaningful work related experience.

Staff Training

18. "In undertaking assessments for mainstream learning support in further education and training ... there can often be difficulties if an individual's needs are not properly understood. People making such assessments should have an understanding of ASD and an awareness of how that affects the individual." (para 37, ASDSAPW)

19. Staff who have responsibility for LLDD are committed to improving understanding of ASD. Colleges are responding to the need to support an ever increasing number of students with ASD by providing more training opportunities for a range of staff, from awareness raising up to postgraduate degree level. Often this training is undertaken in partnership with the local authority.

20. Examples of staff training undertaken by college staff:

> We have a number of staff who have had individual training on Autism and the team have had an "Introduction to Autistic Spectrum Disorders" with NAS Cymru and they are also putting on a day's training on "Socialeyes" for us in May.

> In 2008 I attended training in conjunction with LEA staff, delivered by Autism Cymru 'The Autism Inclusion Toolkit', following which I subsequently delivered INSET to the college staff.

> - Teaching and support staff are trained in
>   - Autism Awareness
>   - Communication and Autism
>   - Positive about Autistic Behaviour
> - A member of staff carrying out a MA in Autism and the links with local colleges – Birmingham University

It should be noted that is not only staff that need training – but the wider public, too, including the wider student population in colleges. One college has had some success in putting forward a student with ASD for a STAR (college-wide student representative) position in order to give the ASD perspective and to have these needs represented on the wider student agenda. In some colleges, systems for peer mentoring have been established. Good practice in this area is being explored and shared through the ColegauCymru LLDD Network.

Funding

21.   Specific funding by WAG includes LLDD Supplementary Funding (examples of the use of LLDD funding are listed in the annex). Colleges are not informed of the level of LLDD Supplementary Funding until mid-way through the academic year even though colleges will have committed resources to these disadvantaged learners. For example on 14 December 2009, colleges were informed that LLDD supplementary funding for 2009/10 had been reduced to 70% of their 2008/09 allocation. This may well have a serious impact on some learners who require support to remain in mainstream learning.

22.   The LLDD Supplementary Fund is only a contribution to resourcing the support needs – it does not cover the full costs of human and technical support. This is a challenge for colleges in facilitating the additional support that students with ASD require.

23.   Funding of training for both staff (particularly tutors of mainstream provision) and the learner population would be particularly helpful in ensuring learners with ASD on mainstream provision are able to participate fully in college life. There is a need to find the best ways to educate the peers of learners with ASD in order to facilitate the latter having authentic social relationships, and so that they can occupy visible, valued and contributing roles and simply to be part of college life as any other learner is.

Challenges and issues

24.   On a strategic level, colleges' Disability Equality Schemes and Action Plans provide a mechanism to identify the gaps in provision. Some of the challenges in meeting the needs of ASD learners include:

   ◖ Schools invite all the relevant agencies to a meeting to discuss post-school opportunities with the school pupil and the parents. It can be a challenge for colleges to attend each and every such meeting.
   ◖ The increase in the number of students with autism and/or autistic tendencies and the lack of an "official diagnosis" for some students who are displaying ASD traits.
   ◖ The lack of external support (outside of college) for some young people with ASD - and their families - particularly those with higher functioning autism who have an IQ above the threshold for accessing some services. This particularly affects their experiences during holiday periods and weekends and sometimes that can lead to colleges being expected to provide additional support beyond their remit.
   ◖ The limited post-college employment and training opportunities for these young people with ASD.
   ◖ The lack of understanding about ASD amongst the general public, including potential employers.
   ◖ The recent cuts in LLDD funding which could affect the support that colleges are able to provide for learners with ASD

25.   There is a need for funding and resources to set up dedicated ASD services in every county to provide advice, guidance and support to individuals for as long as it is required.

Annex

LLDD Supplementary Funding is used for:

- **Human support** (one to one support for learners):

  a) **Specialist tutor/adviser** such as hearing or visual impairment tutor, IT consultant, speech and language therapist or counsellor;
  b) **Tutorial** such as lecturer or IT adviser (including technician);
  c) **Communicator** (for the deaf);
  d) **Ancillary support** such as general support worker, exam support or reader;
  e) **Notetaker** such as shorthand notetaker and/or typist for assistance with learner notes; and
  f) **Assessment:** a contribution towards the cost of one-off, external assessments - where the assessment is in addition to the standard assessment and enrolment procedure.

- **Technical support:** May be used to purchase specialised equipment such as braillers, overlays, Reading Edge equipment, IT adaptations, specialist software and related licences and IT hardware, hearing loops, and conference folders.