

Moving forward?

How well the further education and skills sector is preparing young people with high needs for adult life.

In August 2012, the Ofsted survey 'Progression post-16 for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities' found that transition arrangements for these learners to post-16 education and into adulthood were not fully effective. Schools, local authorities and other agencies did not work together sufficiently well to ensure that learners were adequately prepared for transition between school and post-16 provision.

Three years on, this survey sought to evaluate how well further education and skills provision meets the needs and interests of young people aged between 16 and 25 with high levels of need. It also assessed the extent to which the early implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014 has enabled the sector to help these young people to succeed in education and prepare them for adult life.

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Executive summary

Learners with high levels of need are defined¹ as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who require additional support to help them progress and achieve. These learners receive additional funding to provide the support required to meet their individual needs. Learners will typically be supported by a range of staff providing specialist education, health and care support services.

In 2014/15, there were over 22,000 young people in England aged 16 to 24 with allocated places as learners with high needs attending further education (FE) and skills providers.² There is a vital role for the FE and skills sector to play in helping these learners progress from school into post-16 provision and to prepare them for adult life. However, transition arrangements and the way in which education, health and social care agencies worked together in the past were not fully effective. All too often, learners with high needs did not progress as well as their peers.

The Children and Families Act 2014³ (the Act) made a firm commitment to address these issues and help learners with high needs to succeed in education and prepare them for adult life.

This survey explored the early impact that the Act has had on the lives and prospects of learners with high needs. Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 17 providers between January and March 2015, analysed inspection reports covering the period September 2014 to March 2015, collected the views of over 1,600 young people and talked to over 60 young people in focus group meetings. Inspectors were particularly interested in how well learners' needs were assessed as they moved from school to an FE provider at age 16 and the quality of the provision supporting their progress to adult life. In addition, inspectors wanted to get an accurate understanding of the quality and accessibility of the information about local authorities' local offer to young people and their parents.⁴

Inspectors found that the extent to which the 17 providers visited were equipped to support learners with high needs varied considerably. Although all providers had previous experience of working with learners with special educational needs or

¹ For the purposes of this survey, a learner with high needs is defined as: i) a young person aged 16-18 who requires additional support costing over £6,000; and ii) any young person aged 19 to 25 subject to a learning difficulty assessment (LDA) or, from September 2014, an education, health and care plan (EHC plan) who requires additional support costing over £6,000. This does not include high needs learners funded by the skills funding agency.

² An additional 17,000 16- to 18-year-olds were placed with schools but these learners are not included in this report.

³ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents/enacted.

⁴ A local offer gives children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities and their families information about what support services the local authority think will be available in their local area. Every local authority is responsible for writing a local offer and making sure it is available for everyone to see.

disability, **only three providers stood out for their high quality of provision.** Eight of the providers visited did not have adequate strategies, experience or expertise to ensure that they were able to support their learners with profound and multiple learning difficulties or disabilities. These providers were not able to provide the support and guidance necessary to enable learners to make adequate progress in their continued education and progression to adult life.

The provision of specialist, **impartial careers guidance to learners with high needs was generally weak.** The young people and their families interviewed by inspectors frequently stated that they had received insufficient information about the full range of opportunities available to them. Of the 20 local authority websites that inspectors reviewed, **16 failed to provide sufficiently detailed information.** Worryingly, this lack of information was a particular problem for those young people with more complex or profound learning difficulties or disabilities. Parents, carers and young people often reported that their schools and local authorities recommended an FE and skills provider within easy access and where they had established working relationships, rather than considering individual learners' educational and support needs, interests and aspirations.

The quality of provision offered in the providers visited was too variable and often not of a high enough standard. **Provision was not focused sufficiently well on preparing learners with high needs for adult life.** Only eight of the 26 providers sampled offered study programmes that included all the required components to meet the individual needs of learners. (See 'Notes' for methodology.) Although programmes at and below level 1 mostly included vocational training, **too much provision lacked meaningful work experience.** Too many learners were following programmes that were not fully meeting their personal aspirations and did not lead to further learning, employment or independent/supported living.

Learners' progress in English and mathematics was often too slow because, for example, teachers failed to provide their learners with opportunities to apply speaking, listening, writing and essential mathematics skills.

However, it was the assessment and recording of learners' progress and achievements that was the weakest aspect of the provision seen for learners with high needs. Inspectors found that **too few learners in the providers visited understood what progress they were making** or were clear about what they needed to do to improve further. In many cases, this was limiting the extent of learners' progress and so they were not achieving their full potential.

The effectiveness of commissioning arrangements for places in FE and skills providers was extremely variable. Transferring these arrangements from the Education Funding Agency to individual local authorities has led to different approaches. As a result, learners from different local authorities often experienced **wide variations in the range and quality of provision offered**, including, in some cases, by the same FE and skills provider. For example, some local authorities commit to two- or three-year funding for individual learners while others fund one year at a time.

In the best examples, local authority staff provided an excellent service, using their long-standing experience of working with vulnerable young people to commission provision based on a thorough understanding of each learner's individual needs. However, in a few cases, inspectors found that the local authorities did not have staff with expertise in working with learners with high needs. Often, commissioning decisions were delayed or did not take into account the full range of learners' education, health and care or support needs.

While the aims of the Children and Families Act 2014 are commendable, inspectors found that, at the time of the fieldwork, **the early implementation of the legislation by local authorities and key stakeholders was not fully effective**. In almost half the providers visited, inspectors judged that critical information about the support that young people should receive was not shared well between the providers and the relevant health and social care organisations. This typically meant that the practical and professional education, health and care support received by the learners was not coordinated adequately nor were the right professionals involved at the right time. For example, inspectors met tutors who were teaching learners with severe speech difficulties, but they indicated that they rarely had available information about each learner's speech therapy programme to enable them to adapt their learning activities accordingly.

Inspectors also found that local and national oversight arrangements for the monitoring and evaluation of FE and skills provision for high needs learners, valued at nearly £133 million in 2014/15, were ineffective. The limited data and information available was often incomplete or unreliable. It was not possible for inspectors, local authorities or the funding agency to fully evaluate the impact of FE and skills provision on the achievements of learners with high-needs and how well they were prepared to progress to adult life.

It is only right that these learners receive additional support and resources to help them to achieve their potential. Nonetheless, providers and local authorities must be held to account for the value this support adds to these individuals' lives. Providers and local authorities must collect and analyse information on learners' progress and achievements. Only then can the impact of this provision be fully evaluated and the information used to bring about further improvements to provision to ensure that learners with high needs succeed in education and are well prepared for adult life.

Key findings

- **Only eight of the 17 providers visited were fully equipped to support the increased numbers of learners with high needs being enrolled.** Five providers did not have the specialist resources, including staff with the necessary experience and expertise, required to support learners with high needs. This was especially the case for those learners with complex and multiple learning disabilities.
- **The provision of specialist, impartial careers guidance was weak in many of the providers visited.** Learners, parents and carers frequently said

they did not receive comprehensive information, advice and guidance from their schools or local authorities that informed them of all the available options and opportunities.

- **The quality of provision for learners with high needs reviewed during this survey was often not of a high enough standard.** Provision did not focus on preparing learners for adult life well enough. In over half the providers visited, work experience was not meaningful or relevant in supporting the learner to meet their goals or it happened too late in the learner's programme. Learners' English and mathematics skills were not developed adequately to prepare them for adult life.
- **Arrangements for recognising and recording learners' progress and achievements were weak.** Three quarters of providers did not identify specific, meaningful learning goals or plan activities to meet the different needs of individual learners. Inspectors found that too few learners understood what progress they were making or were clear about what they needed to do to improve further.
- **The effectiveness of commissioning arrangements for learners with high needs varied considerably.** The providers identified that individual local authorities had different approaches, which meant that learners attending from various local authorities often experienced a different offer and quality of provision within the same provider.
- **At this early stage of implementation, the requirements of the Children and Families Act 2014 had not been fulfilled in many local areas.** Critical information about the support that young people should receive was not shared well between half of the providers visited and the relevant health and social care organisations. This typically meant that the education, health and care support received by learners with high needs was not coordinated adequately or that the necessary actions did not take place at the right time.
- Arrangements for monitoring and evaluating provision for learners with high needs in the FE and skill sector were ineffective. Data and information were typically either not available or were incomplete or inaccurate or were not used effectively to monitor the quality and impact of provision or to bring about improvements for current and future learners.

Recommendations

The government should:

- produce a national set of data detailing learners' sustained destinations to enable the impact of provision and of the Children and Families Act 2014 to be measured and evaluated.

Local authorities should:

- regularly review and revise their local offer so that it:
 - fully reflects the complete range of support and opportunities available to post-16 learners with high needs
 - includes commercial and charitable provision, independent specialist provision and colleges of further education
 - is easy for parents, carers and, where appropriate, young people to find, understand and use the information to make informed choices
- ensure that young people with high needs in schools and academies have fair access to specialist, impartial advice and guidance
- ensure that arrangements are in place that enable the relevant agencies to work well together to produce education, health and care plans that result in learners with high needs being provided with a well-coordinated package of good-quality support
- provide consistently fair commissioning of FE and skills places for learners with high needs, irrespective of where they live or the complexity of their condition and focused on meeting the needs and aspirations of individual learners.

Providers should:

- ensure that staff focus on enabling learners to develop the necessary personal, social, employability and independence skills so they can achieve their goals, ambitions and aspirations, and progress on to positive destinations including into employment
- ensure that they have the necessary specialist resources, including staff with the relevant experience and expertise to provide high-quality education and training that enables young people with high needs to successfully achieve their goals and to progress to adult life
- increase the range and availability of external work experience opportunities and supported internships to prepare learners for full-time, part-time or supported employment and apprenticeships.

Main findings

The early implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014

The response of local authorities

1. This survey found that the quality of the services provided by the 57 local authorities commissioning places for learners aged 16 to 25 with high needs in the providers visited or inspected varied considerably. Fifteen of the 17 providers visited and all of the independent specialist colleges inspected worked with three or more local authorities and reported marked differences in the approaches used to commission places for learners with high needs. These providers also told inspectors that the effectiveness of local authorities' arrangements for coordinating the education, health and care agencies to support learners varied considerably.
2. The providers indicated that almost all of the local authorities they worked with had restructured their relevant directorates in the last five years. This had often resulted in the loss of experienced staff with specialist expertise in working with young people with special educational needs or disability in the FE and skills sector. Only a few local authorities had sufficiently prioritised provision for young people with high needs following the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014.
3. The case study below highlights the very different quality of service provided to learners by different local authorities.

One of the providers we visited worked with two local authorities. One authority had set up network meetings and training opportunities that had made the commissioning process much clearer for the provider and for its partners. Multi-agency working was good, especially with the special schools in the area and the local college.

Inspectors found that parents and learners in this authority were very pleased with the commissioning arrangements. The parents and learners had received detailed information and were kept informed throughout the process. The quality of provision was good and learners were well supported by education and social care agencies that worked effectively to support their progress and development.

In contrast, the service provided by the other local authority was disjointed. The authority had been very slow to develop plans to implement the Children and Families Act with the provider. The funding system had not been fully implemented. While the provider had been told that it had an allocation of learners, the process was not in place to allow the learners to be assessed. The learners were still waiting for the commissioning of places so that they could start their learning

programmes. As a result, young people from this authority experienced delays of up to a term in starting their FE courses.

4. Local authorities are expected to develop a shared vision and strategy that focuses on learners' aspirations and outcomes. They should use education, health and care plans and other planning to anticipate the requirements of young people with high needs. Local authorities should also ensure that there are pathways into employment, independent living, participation in society and good health for these young people. However, a review of 20 local authority websites suggests that no shared vision or strategy exists across the country. Additionally, 16 of the local offers analysed either had insufficiently detailed information about provision on post-16 and post-19 support for these learners or provided poor access to this information. Often, they simply directed the reader to further websites, general resources or information or to unhelpful and complex documents.
5. Inspectors considered that only four of the 20 websites reviewed gave young people and their parents clear and easily accessible information to help them make well-informed decisions about the opportunities and support available post-16. These websites had clear information about:
 - the procedures for devising learners' education, health and care plans
 - the full range of education, training and employment options, including apprenticeships
 - health and social care facilities available to support young people's preparation for adulthood
 - other relevant opportunities, such as community links and volunteering.
6. The evidence suggests that local authorities have developed their education, health and care plans at a relatively slow pace. These plans were devised to produce a coordinated approach to planning all the different aspects of support required for young people with high needs from birth to the age of 25. However, inspectors identified some instances where learners with health and care plans were not aware they had one and other instances where learners were unaware of the content or purpose of the plan. The quality of the information on the completed plans seen also varied considerably, ranging from comprehensive assessments of learners' needs and detailed development and support plans, to vague and perfunctory statements.

The response of the providers

7. Following the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014, all 17 providers visited had appointed a governor or senior member of staff to take overall strategic responsibility for the provision for learners with special educational needs or disability, including those with high needs. Of these, 11 providers had developed an adequate strategy for developing the capacity and resources to support all their learners with high needs. Their priorities included:

- working with specialist providers, social enterprises, community groups or local and national voluntary or charitable organisations to reduce costs, maintain and improve quality and to bring in additional expertise for staff training and learner support
 - generic training for all staff and governors, and more specific training for staff teaching mainstream programmes that would include learners with high needs
 - training for specialist staff in completing education, health and care plans
 - developing specialist resources, including an independent living area or sensory rooms.
8. Arrangements for supporting learners with high needs were weak at four of the 17 providers visited and three of the nine independent specialist colleges inspected. Inspectors found that, in these providers, too few staff had the skills, training or experience to provide an effective learning environment for learners with complex needs. In these providers, managers failed to use the code of practice effectively and were therefore unclear about their role in coordinating services identified in the education, health and care plans. Furthermore, very few of their staff understood how to contribute to the education, health and care plans or the functions that these plans should have in supporting learners.
9. Twelve of the providers visited were unable to gain the information they needed about the role of health and care agencies in supporting each of their learners with high needs. The sharing of information was frequently burdensome and bureaucratic. Senior leaders within these providers gave examples of health agencies withholding important information on the grounds of data protection. It was also reported to inspectors that the relevant local authorities were slow to respond to improve the quality of the health and care services once young people move from children's services to adult services. The lack of detailed education, health and care plans has a detrimental impact on the progress and development of individual learners and their transition into adult life.

Careers provision and the transition into further education

Careers guidance

10. Careers guidance for learners with high needs was rarely specialised enough in the providers visited. Interviews with learners and staff from local authorities and the providers visited ascertained that very few learners received careers guidance from staff with the necessary level of expertise and specialism. Similarly, inspectors found that local authorities' website content of the local offers failed to provide parents and young people with the range of information necessary to make informed choices in an accessible, easy-to-understand format. Of the learners responding to the online questionnaire and most of those attending the focus group, 95% reported that their main source of advice and guidance was their family or school.

A learner's view:

'I needed to talk to someone with an understanding of and empathy with autism. Hardly anyone had that experience and they just seemed to give up on me when I couldn't get what they were telling me.'

11. Two thirds of the providers sampled worked closely with local schools with learners with high needs on roll. They offered link or taster courses so that learners with high needs could try out different courses, helping them decide on their next steps when entering post-16 provision. Learners interviewed during visits commonly said this helped to develop their confidence and provide the skills necessary to familiarise themselves with their new learning environment. The most successful providers also used these courses to identify learners' starting points so that the new learning programmes were personalised and made best use of the resources and expertise available. This process sometimes started as early as Year 9.
12. However, inspectors found from interviews with learners that, when still at school, learners typically did not receive specialist careers guidance that was sufficiently focused on providing them with information on the full range of available options. These learners suggested that too often the focus was on ensuring that they secured a place in the local provider and not on selecting the course and provider best suited to their individual needs and potential. In particular, very little guidance was given about supported internships, traineeships or apprenticeship opportunities. Ofsted's recent survey on apprenticeships,⁵ 'Apprenticeships: developing skills for future prosperity', identified that too few young people with special educational needs or disability, including those with high needs, become apprentices.

Information sharing between schools, local authorities and further education providers

13. The sharing of information between schools and providers was generally weak, even in those schools where learners were taking part in taster and link courses. Inspectors found that over half the providers sampled did not receive sufficiently detailed information about learners' achievements, progress, career aspirations and support needs. Too much of the information passed on was descriptive and failed to provide a clear picture of the abilities of the young person and the barriers to their learning.
14. This was especially the case for learners with fluctuating conditions, such as those on the autistic spectrum or with poor mental health. Consequently, FE providers had to rely on their own resources to assess learners' needs and

⁵ *Apprenticeships: developing skills for future prosperity*, Ofsted, 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeships-developing-skills-for-future-prosperity.

abilities to ensure that appropriate arrangements for specialist support could be made.

15. In the worst examples, key information regarding the behaviour, mental health or other personal circumstances of the young person was missing. This often resulted in delays in designing appropriate, individualised programmes to meet the young person's support and development needs. Thirty-seven young people who responded to the online questionnaire said that their learning support, emotional and wellbeing needs were not met at the beginning of their course, which had a negative impact on how they felt about their course.
16. The majority of the learners interviewed felt that their move from school to further education was positive, boosted their confidence and gave them opportunities to meet new people and try different activities. The small proportion of learners who were less positive tended to report delays in starting because of late funding decisions and having no key point of contact at the start of the course. The other main reasons for dissatisfaction included the FE provider not being set up to meet their needs and that they were on the wrong course because of the restricted choice available.

A learner's view

'People don't seem to talk to each other, I keep telling college staff the same things about my condition but they don't pass the information on or do anything about it. When I get tired or stressed I need somewhere to rest or get away from other people, if it doesn't happen I go into meltdown – they don't seem to get that.'

Education, health and care plans

17. The quality of the 20 education, health and care plans reviewed by inspectors varied considerably. Five provided in-depth detail of the learner's special educational and support needs, health and care requirements and educational background, including barriers to learning, achievements and medium- and long-term goals. Four had good detail and useful information. However, 11 were too vague or lacked the specific detail needed from other agencies. Inspectors judged six of the 20 plans to not be good enough.
18. The most effective plans included many of the following elements:
 - personalised assessments of the individual's health and care needs from all the relevant agencies involved
 - details about how the health and care support linked to the education programme
 - clearly identified learning goals that were relevant, realistic and strongly related to the learner's plans for adult life

- details about the type of specialist support required to enable the learner to achieve their learning goals, including language support, physiotherapy and assisted technologies, as well as reasonable adjustments required for assessments.
19. The weaker education and health and care plans lacked clarity and were overly complex. They contained too much irrelevant information, with too many phrases that were generic and not sufficiently personalised to the learner's individual special educational needs and disabilities. Although these plans typically identified each learner's abilities, learning goals that would help them to make good progress into adult life were not linked to these abilities.
20. The sharing of relevant data and information by health and care agencies was found to be poor in a third of the providers visited. Staff at these providers and the parents interviewed said that they were frustrated at the lack of consistency in staffing and slowness of responses from some social care departments. In one case, a parent told inspectors that a social care representative attended only two of the six reviews organised. On these two occasions, they were poorly prepared for the review and made little contribution, despite the family needing practical help and support to continue the placement in the local college.
21. Planning for learners' next steps after they completed their learning programme was often weak. At nine of the providers visited, learners in their final year still did not have high-quality transition plans of how their agreed destination goals would be supported once they left. The inspections of the seven independent specialist providers with residential accommodation identified an increase of about 10% in the number of learners having to return to the parental home after leaving college. This was despite the planned destination being to move into independent, supported or sheltered accommodation. This problem was less of a concern for non-residential providers as their learners were, in the vast majority of cases, already living at home.

The quality of provision

Implementation of the 16 to 19 study programme

22. The underpinning principles of the study programmes⁶ require that all learners aged 16 to 19 follow well designed individual study programmes that meet clear educational and career aspirations. These should normally be at a higher level of study than their prior attainment. This is extended to the age of 25 for disabled learners and those with special educational needs. However, only four of the providers visited gave their learners with high needs personalised study

⁶ *16 to 19 study programmes: advice on planning and provision*, Department for Education, 2014; www.gov.uk/government/publications/16-to-19-study-programmes-advice-on-planning-and-delivery.

programmes that were clearly linked to agreed next steps and supported their progress towards independent living.

23. This case study shows how Sheffield Lifelong Learning, Skills and Communities collaborated with its partners to provide a well-planned study programme for its 63 learners with high needs.

Sheffield Lifelong Learning, Skills and Communities considered each learner's potential as well as their support needs and barriers to progression very effectively when planning their study programmes.

Approximately one third of the learners had emotional and behavioural disorders. Study programmes for these learners prepared them well to progress to mainstream education, training or employment over a one- to two-year period. Each learner received a tailored programme that combined a vocational course, work experience placement, English and mathematics and enrichment activities, delivered by the provider's own staff or local specialist providers. Progression rates were good, with three quarters of learners from this group moving on to further training, including at levels 1 and 2 in subjects such as music technology, vehicle maintenance and engineering.

The learners with autistic spectrum disorders followed similar programmes that were carefully tailored to take into account their support needs.

The study programmes for the third group of learners, who had profound learning disabilities, focused on developing their practical and social skills to support their transition from school to greater independence in their adult life. Although they were mostly exempt from the English and mathematics qualification requirement, they made good progress in developing verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

24. Too few managers at the providers visited had an adequate understanding of the requirements of the study programmes. Inspectors found that the weakest study programmes were at six providers that were new to delivering provision for learners with high needs and those that had considerably increased the numbers of learners with high needs attending courses.

25. The most common weakness that inspectors identified in study programmes at the providers visited included:

- an insufficient focus on preparing learners for appropriately challenging medium- and long-term goals that would prepare them for adult life
- too many short-term learning targets that were mostly based on achieving qualifications
- a lack of specialist careers guidance and poor collaboration with learners and their parents to agree a suitable range of progression routes

- a failure to identify the most relevant training and support, including work experience, and English and mathematics provision.

26. All of the providers offered an element of work-related learning, where appropriate. Just over 900 of the learners who had responded to the online questionnaire stated that their main reason for attending college was to enter employment. Similar responses were received by those learners who participated in the focus groups. However, inspectors found that in a third of providers, work placements were not related to the individuals' preferred vocational area nor were learners clear about how it was improving their prospects of voluntary or paid work. One third of the providers sampled struggled to find sufficient external work placements to give all suitable learners the work experience they needed.

27. Only three of the providers visited made good use of supported internships.⁷ Learners at these providers developed the necessary work skills and behaviours necessary and settled into good work routines as a result of the specific support provided by job coaches. The employers interviewed said that by understanding the adjustments they needed to make, for example to work routines, they were able to place supported interns in the right departments. These were helped by staff with the right level of experience and the appropriate attitude to working with a young person with a disability or learning difficulty.

28. The case study below demonstrates the exceptional links the National Star College has with an energy provider to offer its learners supported internships.

The company showed strong commitment to developing supported internships. Initially, volunteers were chosen from the workforce to be buddies or mentors to the learners. They received training and guidance from the company and college. A member of the college staff was permanently based on the company site to provide additional support to learners.

Learners were interviewed and allocated to various roles in the organisation including administration, IT support, maintenance, catering and reception duties. In addition to workplace activities, learners received classroom-based tuition and worked towards relevant qualifications.

All learners could describe the skills they had developed as a result of the experience and how they themselves had changed. They were very positive about the organisation as an employer. They felt that staff listened to them and looked at the person and not the disability.

⁷ A supported internship is a type of study programme aimed at young people aged 16 to 24 who have a statement of special educational needs, a learning difficulty assessment or an education, health and care plan who want to move into employment and need extra support to do so.

The employer also benefited from the experience. The college and the learners helped the company overcome their concerns about working with people with disabilities. Some employees without disabilities were initially slightly uncomfortable in case they said the wrong thing, but they quickly realised that it was not a problem.

Preparing learners for adult life

29. Study programmes for the majority of young people with high needs should be designed to prepare them for greater independence in adult life, as well as employment or further training. Nearly all the providers visited included a wide range of well-planned practical learning activities in their onsite kitchens, cafés, gardens or workshops. However, only six of the providers visited and five of the independent specialist colleges inspected successfully ensured that their learners could reinforce the skills developed in a more protected setting in everyday environments. Learners at the other providers had too few opportunities to develop their skills and confidence in external settings. They were therefore not being prepared adequately for adult life.
30. At the providers visited, over four fifths of learners with high needs achieved their qualifications. Overall success rates between these providers ranged from 85% to 94%. At the better providers, learners also developed good independent living and employability skills, such as the ability to travel on public transport to attend work placements, and the customer service skills required to serve the public in college canteens and shops. However, in other settings, too few learners were able to practice these skills in real vocational settings due to the limited range of work experience with external employers.
31. Although learning programmes in the weaker providers often included projects that involved excursions to local shops, museums, cafes and the use of public transport, learners were often in groups or with a member of staff at their side. They were rarely given clear targets to achieve during the activity or constructive feedback on their performance. Inspectors identified good practice in the better provision when staff shadowed the learners while they were on individual excursions or tasks and gave them clear feedback on their behaviour, attitudes and competence.
32. Four of the providers visited had engaged well with learners' families, employers and local communities to enable learners to reinforce their learning and develop their independence. Examples of where this was successful were:
- a structured programme of internal and external work placements that set high standards and expectations for learners, enabling them to develop occupational expertise, confidence and the necessary personal and social skills to progress into paid, supported or voluntary work

- the development of social enterprises, such as a laundrette to take in dry-cleaning from the public, enabling learners to gain the full range of employability skills.

33. All of the established independent specialist colleges inspected had good access to specialists including speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists. They had developed excellent links with these specialist agencies and were skilled at combining the services they provided for different learners to save staffing costs. However, this was not the case at eight of the providers visited, especially those that had recently accepted learners with high needs. They reported greater difficulty in obtaining the necessary specialist support. They identified the lack of specialist staff with experience in autistic spectrum disorders and behaviour management as a significant barrier to meeting the specific needs of some of their new learners with high needs.

Teaching, learning and assessment

34. The quality of teaching and learning in the providers visited varied considerably across the different types of providers seen. Learners with high needs who were integrated into study programmes that led to substantive vocational and academic qualifications at levels 2 and 3 generally benefited from well-planned additional support. On the discrete programmes for learners with high needs, teaching depended on the extent to which the members of staff had specialist skills and experience in working with learners with complex needs. Where staff were skilled at providing well-planned personalised learning programmes, activities were appropriately challenging for learners.

35. The teaching was weak in providers, however, where staff showed little understanding of how learners with complex needs process information and learn. Typically, insufficient time was given to learners to process information and assessment was poor, with little constructive feedback provided to learners on their progress.

36. In the providers where teaching was effective::

- learning was highly personalised, with a wide range of suitably challenging activities that stimulated and motivated the learners with high needs
- learning was clearly related to each individual learner's goals and aspirations
- staff incorporated specialists from other professionals to develop communication and creative skills with learners with very little speech and language skill.

37. The following examples demonstrate how providers responded to the diverse needs of students.

- Learners produced a film that tackled bullying and inappropriate behaviour that was used as part of an induction for new learners.
- A learner with a passionate interest in politics had his programme adapted so that he could attend a politics class at another college. He was also supported in his work as a parish councillor.
- Education, physiotherapy and speech and language staff worked together particularly well with learners with physical disabilities, learning difficulties, sensory impairment and autistic spectrum disorders. For example, one provider used trampolines to facilitate movement, improve fitness, promote relaxation and improve communication skills.
- Learners on the autistic spectrum significantly improved their independence and social skills by living in a dedicated residential facility. Alongside their college course, they took part in community activities and undertook supported external work experiences.

Recognising and recording learners' progress and achievements

38. The use of systems to recognise and record learners' progress and achievements was the weakest aspect of provision at all the providers sampled, especially where learners were not working towards a qualification. Providers were typically weak at developing and using a reliable system to improve the outcomes for their learners beyond the achievement of qualifications. Areas for improvement that inspectors commonly found included:

- failure to analyse initial assessments of learners' skills, aptitudes and development, and support needs to identify clear development targets or learning goals
- poor consideration of learners' long-term goals or planned progression routes to develop a well-designed set of targets that focus on their overall progress
- targets that were too broad and couched in jargon or complex language not fully understood by learners, their parents and other staff
- failure to involve learners, their parents and other staff included in teaching and supporting them when setting targets or discussing learners' achievement, progress and further development needs
- weak assessments that often focused on, for example, specifying how hard a learner worked instead of assessing and giving clear feedback on the skills, knowledge and attitudes and behaviour they had developed

- failure to moderate assessments to ensure that they were accurate and rigorous and therefore reliable.

39. Inspectors identified that six of the providers visited used effective systems for target setting, assessment and feedback to learners on their progress and achievements. Assessments and the recording of information at these providers was highly personalised, clearly linked to learners' medium- and long-term goals and fully integrated into learning and assessment activities. Records were detailed and showed the small but important steps that learners made. In these providers, learners were able to communicate their achievements to inspectors and how the providers were supporting the learners' overall progress.

Evaluating provision for learners with high needs

Provider evaluations

40. Twelve of the providers sampled were not fully effective at self-assessing how well their learners with high needs were prepared for adult life when they left their organisation. Their use of performance information to analyse the effectiveness of provision, identify trends and influence the curriculum was typically weak. Their assessment of outcomes for learners was not sufficiently self-critical. They often judged achievement rates of 90% or higher to be good or outstanding, giving little consideration to how useful these qualifications were in preparing their learners for adult life.
41. Nine of the providers visited had effective systems for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. These providers used specialist staff to observe learning sessions, interview learners and review learning materials to identify good practice and develop training plans for the teaching and support staff. In the other providers, managers did not focus enough on evaluating the effectiveness of activities, the progress made by learners or the skills they acquired. As a result, the teaching staff did not receive sufficient feedback on the quality of their teaching and the areas that were a priority for further training and development.
42. Very few of the self-assessment reports reviewed by inspectors analysed adequately the differences in the achievements of different groups of learners, according to their particular special educational need and/or disability. In general FE colleges, where significant numbers of learners were on mainstream academic and vocational programmes, there was insufficient analysis of the outcomes of these specific groups of learners.
43. Almost all the providers visited had secure data on learners' progression to courses in their institutions, but only four of them had reliable and specific information on learners' destinations when they left. Half of the FE colleges sampled were relatively new to this area of work and were not in a position to record sustainable destinations because no learners had gone on to a destination that could be recorded. The other providers only recorded the destination immediately after the learner left the provider. The lack of secure destination

data made it difficult for most of the providers to fully evaluate the impact that specific qualifications and learning programmes had had in progressing learners towards a more independent adult life. One third of the providers visited were beginning to question the usefulness of some qualifications for their learners and were switching them onto non-qualification programmes, with more individualised learning outcomes and creative methods for assessing progress.

Evaluating provision nationally and locally

44. A lack of reliable performance and destination data make the full evaluation of provision for learners with high needs at a local or national level problematic. Data published by the funding agencies include the number of allocated high needs places in each provider and the total amount of funding they received. However, national and local data sets do not include information on the learners according to their specific special educational needs and/or disabilities, nor do they include the destinations for learners that leave high needs provision.
45. Inspectors identified the following gaps in local and national data that would help providers, local authorities and government to more effectively evaluate the impact of high needs provision:
- data to identify accurately the number of learners who do not progress into funded FE and skills provision or who leave their programmes early or who are considered to have left education early
 - data that records the sustained destinations of learners with high needs on leaving funded provision
 - data on the number of learners 'refusing to participate in education' or those who are receiving education in provision not funded by the funding agencies or by the local authorities.

Conclusion

46. It is right that learners with high needs receive additional funding to support their learning, development and progression to adult life. However, providers, local authorities and the Department for Education should monitor and evaluate learner participation and destination data. Performance measures for providers and local authorities should be clarified so that the effectiveness of the provision in preparing young people with high needs for adult life in different settings can be evaluated. A national set of data detailing learners' sustained destinations would enable the impact of provision and of the Children and Families Act 2014 to be measured and evaluated.

Research publications feedback

We are interested in finding out how useful you have found this publication.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or are you just interested? We would welcome your views and ideas. Complete our survey [here](#).

Notes

The aim of this survey was to investigate whether the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the changes in the funding methodology introduced in 2013/14 has made a difference to the quality of FE and skills provision for young people aged 16 to 25 with high needs. Little data or other evidence were available to review about these particular learners at the beginning of the investigation – they are typically grouped together with learners that have other learning difficulties and disabilities. Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) with expertise in the area generated the following research questions for the study:

1. How well are leaders and managers planning for the implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014?
2. To what extent are learning outcomes appropriate and how well do they support the intended and actual destinations of learners with high needs?
3. How effective are local authorities’ local offers in ensuring that learners transfer to the right provision at 16 or 19 and progress on to an appropriate next stage?
4. How well are the views and wishes of parents/carers and young people taken into account when planning provision?

To answer these questions more fully, inspectors carried out fieldwork through a small sample of visits to 17 further education and skills providers. Data and regional intelligence were used to identify providers with 20 or more allocated learners with high needs on roll. Providers from this sub-sample were then randomly selected for inclusion in the study. The providers selected covered a range of geographical and economic contexts. There was a slight bias towards general further education colleges and independent learning providers in the sample, as independent specialist colleges are inspected more routinely and not all were available for selection. To counter-balance this, evidence from nine inspections of independent specialist colleges carried out between September 2014 and March 2015 were also reviewed to support the findings from the fieldwork visits.

In total, seven of the providers visited were general further education colleges, four were independent learning providers, three were independent specialist colleges, three were community learning providers and one was a sixth form college. During the visits, inspectors observed lessons and reviewed documents including self-assessment reports, strategic plans, destination data, learner assessments and examples of education, health and care (EHC) plans. They also interviewed approximately 90 managers, 80 teachers and support staff, 30 parents, 15 commissioners⁸ and 50 learners on site. Around 60 learners took part in focus groups. The focus groups consisted of young people with high needs funding with significant communication difficulties. Assistive technology was used to enable the young people to participate and the majority had support from facilitators.

⁸ Local authority officers who purchase places.

Views were also collected from around 1,600 learners with high needs who responded to an online questionnaire.⁹ These learners were not necessarily on roll at the providers visited, but were a self-selecting group who responded to the questionnaire following communication through FE and skills providers, representative groups and Ofsted's social media. In addition, 163 parents and professionals from across the country signed up to participate in two webinars. Inspectors also spoke with representatives from Association of Colleges and NATSPEC, which is the body that represents independent specialist colleges.

Inspectors reviewed the local offers of 20 local authority websites to identify ease of use and the range and type of support offered to young people and their families. This evidence was synthesised with the user views to determine the quality of the offers provided. The local authorities were selected to provide a balanced sample across Ofsted regions and geographical contexts.

Learner survey questions

1. Getting onto a course

We'd like to know about anything that you needed help with when you were considering starting a course. In particular:

- What help you needed and did you get it
- Who helped you?
- Whether not getting the help you needed stopped you doing a course
- What kind of things did you need help with? (choose as many as you need to)
- Were they the right people to help you get things sorted?
- Who would have been able to give you the best help and support?
- Were you able to get on a course?

2. Choosing your course

Please tell us about how you chose your further education course. By further education course we mean any course that you are doing after leaving school.

How much choice did you have about the course you are doing?

⁹ The response total is derived from three questionnaires that were developed. A shorter version was trialled as a pilot to ensure that the right questions were being asked; this received just over 500 responses. A longer version was developed as a consequence, although most of the questions from the pilot questionnaire were also included in this design. This received around 1,000 responses. Finally, a Widget version (a system of symbols that are used to support text, making the meaning clearer and easier to understand) that allowed responses to be received from high needs learners with significant communication difficulties provided roughly another 100 responses.

3. **Your individual learning plan or education, health and care EHC plan (EHC)**

What kind of learning plan do you have?

- An individual learning plan (ILP)
- An education, health and care plan (EHC)

4. **After your course**

Please tell us a bit about your course and how it will help you in the future.

If your course isn't helping you do the things it is supposed to, please tell us why you think that is...

If you are not currently in college, have finished your college course or had to leave your course early, please tell us what you are doing now...

5. **Your future**

Please tell us about your plans for the future and the support you will need to achieve your goals.

How confident are you that you will get the right support to help you achieve your goals?

If you are not confident about getting the right support please tell us why.

Please tell us about anything you think could improve college courses and further education for you and other young people with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Questions put to parents/carers and people who worked with young people with high needs during the webinars

These are some sample questions. They were followed by multiple choice answers and space for comments.

- How well did the transition from school to college go?
- How are you finding your experience at your college or provider?
- How well is the course preparing the young person for adult life?
- How well are you involved in reviewing the progress of the young person and how well do you think any are valued?
- How well is the provider using education, health and care (EHC) plans to make sure all partners are involved in planning and supporting learning?
- How well do you think the provider will enable the young person to:

- achieve their potential in supported, part-time or voluntary employment
- live in independent, sheltered or supported accommodation
- make a positive contribution to their community?

Annex A: Background information

In August 2012, Ofsted carried out a survey, 'Progression post-16 for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities',¹⁰ to explore the arrangements for transition from school and the provision in post-16 settings for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities up to the age of 25. At that time, local authorities were required to carry out multi-agency assessments for pupils with statements of need or in receipt of support, prior to their transition to a post-16 provider. The survey found that these arrangements were not working effectively. Providers had received a completed learning difficulty assessment in only a third of the case studies where one should have been made available to them. These assessments were not always timely or completed adequately to form a reliable basis on which to plan support or an appropriate programme of learning.

The survey also found that the availability of specialist post-16 provision varied considerably across local authorities. Insufficient provision was available locally for learners with the very highest levels of need, and varied locally for specialist needs such as sensory impairment and behavioural difficulties. The local authority placement process resulted in significant inequities in types of provision offered to learners with similar needs.

In 2012, the government published the document 'School funding reform: Next steps towards a fairer system',¹¹ which set out a common approach to funding for children and young people from birth to the age of 25. It meant that the different institutions offering education for post-16 high needs learners would be treated on an equivalent basis.

In April 2013, the government moved the responsibility for commissioning and funding provision for post-16 learners with special educational needs from the centrally based Education Funding Agency (EFA) to local authorities. Local authorities were seen to be in a better position to identify and meet needs on a local basis.

¹⁰ *Progression post-16 for learners with learning difficulties or disabilities*, Ofsted, 2011; www.gov.uk/government/publications/progression-from-school-for-those-with-learning-difficulties-or-disabilities.

¹¹ *School funding reform: next steps towards a fairer system*, Department for Education, 2012; www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-funding-reform-next-steps-towards-a-fairer-system.

Funding for learners with high needs¹² aged 16 to 25 consists of both place funding (Elements 1 and 2)¹³ and top-up funding (Element 3). In all instances, top-up funding (Element 3) has to be agreed by the local authority with a provider, and a contract must be in place between the two parties. If the local authority does not agree to pay top-up funding for a learner, that learner is not counted as high needs for funding purposes. Top-up funding is paid from local authorities' high needs budget to meet the individual needs of children and young people with high needs, over and above the funding provided to institutions through place-led funding.

Each local authority now identifies learners with high needs and commissions the provision from the EFA in March every year for each learner starting the following September. Local authorities must identify the provider allocated to the individual learner when they submit the funding application.

Since the introduction of these funding reforms, the number of allocated places for learners with high needs in the further education and skills sector has increased from 18,509 learners in 2013/14 to 22,265 in 2014/15. Of these:

- 18,545 places (83%) were allocated¹⁴ to general further education colleges; the number of learners with high needs allocated to a single institution ranged from one to 488
- 3,168 places (14%) were allocated to post-16 independent specialist colleges; the number of learners with high needs allocated to a single institution ranged from one to 172
- 552 places (2%) were allocated to charitable and commercial providers; the number of learners with high needs allocated to a single institution ranged from one to 74.

Section 41 of Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014 deals with education. It provides the legislation to bring about greater collaboration between education,

¹² For the purposes of this survey, a learner with high needs is defined as: i) a young person aged 16 to 18 who requires additional support costing over £6,000; and ii) any young person aged 19 to 25 subject to a learning difficulty assessment (LDA) or, from September 2014 or an education, health and care plan (EHC plan) who requires additional support costing over £6,000. See: *16 to 25 high-needs funding arrangements: additional information*, Education Funding Agency, 2014; www.gov.uk/government/publications/16-to-25-high-needs-funding-additional-information. Academic year 2014/2015 and preparation for 2015/2016.

¹³ *16 to 25 high needs: funding principles for 2015 to 2016*, Education Funding Agency, 2015; www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-25-young-people-with-high-needs-funding-principles-for-2015-to-2016. The first part of place funding is Element 1. This is paid to institutions and represents the funding that all students at the institution attract for their study programmes. Element 2 is the second component of place funding and provides £6,000 to help meet the additional support costs for high needs students. Element 3, top-up funding, is the funding required over and above the place funding to enable a student with high needs to participate in education and learning.

¹⁴ Allocations are made in March each year and may alter slightly if learners move to a different local authority area or their high needs are diagnosed later than March. These numbers are usually small.

health and care agencies to support young people with high needs. It introduced the following aims and requirements:

- the participation on the part of children, young people and their parents in planning and decisions about their support and local provision
- a stronger focus on higher aspirations and on improving outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs
- a requirement on local education, health and social care services to work together to plan and commission education, health and social care jointly for children and young people with special educational needs
- a coordinated assessment approach that results in a new education, health and care plan for all children and young people from birth to the age of 25 with complex needs
- a requirement on the local authority to publish a local offer setting out all of the available provision across education, health and social care for children and young people with special needs.

Section 41 of Part 3 of the Children's and Families Act 2014 created a list of approved independent specialist institutions that local authorities could use to place their learners outside their local authority.

The special educational needs and disability code of practice¹⁵ relating to the Children and Families Act (2014) provides clear guidance and explicit expectations for local authorities regarding:

- the commissioning arrangements for provision for learners with high needs
- the integration of health, education and care services
- transition arrangements from children's to adults' services the involvement of young people and their families when agreeing education, health and care plans.

It also states that local authorities must place young people with high needs and their families at the centre of their planning, and work with them to develop co-ordinated approaches to securing better outcomes. Local authorities are expected to develop a shared vision and strategy that focuses on providing clear pathways and coordinated support to enable young people with high needs to progress into employment, independent living and participation in society. Where pathways need further development, local authorities should set out clear responsibilities, timescales and funding arrangements for that work.

¹⁵ SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years, Department for Education and Department of Health, 2014; www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25.

Annex B: List of providers

Provider	Local authority
Activate Arts	Knowsley
Area 51	Haringey
City of Bristol College	Bristol
Foxes Academy	Devon
Gloucester College	Gloucestershire
Leicester College	Leicestershire
Loreto College	Manchester
National Star College ¹⁶	Gloucestershire
Norman Mackie	Tameside
Northampton College	Northamptonshire
Peterborough Community College	Peterborough
Sheffield Lifelong Learning	Sheffield
South Cheshire College	Cheshire East
Springboard	Sunderland
Total People	Cheshire East
Weston College	Somerset
Wolverhampton College	Wolverhampton
Rotherham College of Art and Technology	Rotherham

¹⁶ National Star College facilitated a large focus group and coordinated a visit to a major national employer offering supported internships.