

SEND FE workforce development programme

Refreshing the sector needs analysis

July 2017

Introduction

In September 2016, the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) published SQW's initial [sector needs analysis](#) to inform the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) further education and skills (FE) workforce development programme. The analysis intended to ensure the programme responded to sector needs and to strengthen the capacity of the sector to implement the duties of the [Children and Families Act 2014](#), with due regard to the [SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years](#) and (non-statutory) [guidance for the further education sector](#).

The Department for Education (DfE) has provided funding to continue the [ETF-led workforce development programme](#) - 'Improving outcomes for learners with SEND' - during 2017/18. This document updates the initial Needs Analysis with the same intended purpose, drawing on findings from the 2016/17 programme evaluation report, and interviews with programme delivery partners and sector representatives conducted in Spring 2017.

The DfE funded the programme on the basis that the FE workforce would require support to respond to the relevant aspects of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice. This rationale is validated by the needs analysis and programme evaluation conducted in 2016/17, as well as consultations undertaken for the refresh of this needs analysis. The FE workforce does require support, although the nature of support and the mode of delivery varies according to type of FE provider, job role and other factors.

Wider challenges facing the FE sector add urgency to the need to build capacity for improving outcomes for learners with SEND. Providers and their workforce address the SEND reform agenda in an environment of continuing downward pressure on FE finances and [major reforms](#) affecting many aspects of their core business. Raising the participation age to 18 has resulted in more young people entering FE with a broader range of needs, including an increasing number with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Clearly, a workforce development programme alone is insufficient to tackle these wider challenges, but this wider context does underline the continuing importance of the programme.

A diverse sector and workforce

The sector

The FE sector is composed of general and specialist colleges, sixth-form colleges, independent training providers (ITPs) and adult and community learning (ACL) providers. The workforce and study body within these sub-sectors are diverse, and thus provider organisations require tailored support to ensure workforce development activities are relevant and accessible. Organisations also vary according to the quality of provision they already offer learners with SEND and their readiness and capacity to respond to the SEND reforms or further improve their provision.

The 2016/17 evaluation and recent consultation research indicated that awareness of the SEND reforms is reasonably high, but it is clear that understanding varies considerably across the sector. One of the challenges facing the programme is reaching organisations and individuals for whom SEND is not a priority, and who therefore have a weaker grasp of how the reforms address the needs of learners with SEND. We suggest there are two groups of providers who could most usefully be brought into the programme in 2017/18.

1. Specialist Colleges. Following the DfE specification, the 2016/17 programme did not focus on specialist colleges already involved in the implementation of the SEND reforms. Yet small specialist colleges, recently established by local authorities for high-needs SEND learners to be accommodated near home, are not sufficiently networked with existing umbrella or specialist organisations to be fully abreast of the SEND reforms. The needs of these new specialist providers should be addressed by the programme in 2017/18.
2. Independent Training Providers. Also following the DfE specification, the programme did not focus on ITPs, who deliver three quarters of all apprenticeships in England, but who may regard learners with SEND differently to other parts of the sector. They could play a greater role in providing access to a large number of learners with SEND, or they could develop stronger provision and support for existing learners leading to positive, sustained destinations. In 2017/18, the programme may need to persuade ITPs of the business case for supporting learners with SEND and offer some relevant workforce development activities for their workforce.

The workforce

The FE workforce comprises senior leaders, governors, middle leaders, staff developers, SEND educators, SEND specialists, teachers, assessors, learning support staff, careers and work experience staff, and admissions staff, among others. These roles have different responsibilities for learners with SEND and different levels of experience. Staff require training and support tailored to their own professional needs, both in terms of content and mode of delivery.

Strong leadership and governance on SEND is critical to ensure institutions meet their obligations fully. Yet senior leaders may struggle to prioritise SEND among other competing priorities, or may not regard SEND as integral to how they address these priorities, including area reviews, English and maths, apprenticeships, etc.. Separating leadership development on SEND from other forms of leadership development may contribute to this

compartmentalisation of SEND as somehow less important. As such, SEND leadership development activities need to be made accessible to busy leaders and governors, who find it difficult to attend offsite, single-issue events. 'At desk' development resources (such as webinars) were suggested as being particularly appropriate for this group.

Non-specialists at all levels within FE make a significant contribution to the experiences of and outcomes for learners with SEND. Yet many FE teachers, trainers, assessors and learning assistants work with learners with SEND with little or no training in how to help them meet their learning goals. Increasing their knowledge of SEND and confidence in dealing with their learners is likely to have tangible outcomes.

Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) in particular, who play a major role in supporting learners with SEND, are often in temporary and/or part-time positions. This can limit their opportunities to participate in external continuing professional development (CPD) courses/events. Finding ways to enable LSAs, alongside other front-line teachers and assessors, to participate in professional development should be a priority for 2017/18.

Learners

With more learners entering FE with EHCPs, a major challenge for the sector is to respond to the needs and aspirations of an increasingly diverse learner body. In 2017/18, it is vital that the programme continues to listen to learners with low as well as high needs, understand what they say, and ensure this informs programme design, delivery and evaluation. In this way, the programme can better help the sector to understand particular cohorts, including learners with low needs and fluctuating conditions.

The evaluation in 2016/17 revealed that learners' frustration with others' low aspirations for them is in sharp contrast with their own strong aspirations for the future, and also their deep appreciation of the support colleges provide. Low aspirations are manifest when providers set SEND learners unchallenging goals, offer them unrealistic work experience, or propose inappropriate destinations with inadequate transition support. In 2017/18, the programme should help providers to frame learner ambitions by developing clear, specific, ambitious and attainable destination goals against which learners' progress and achievements can be properly measured and recorded. Consequently, a priority for 2017/18 should be to ensure that positive aspirations are nurtured and supported within a career guidance framework.

Part of DfE's intention for the programme was to develop FE workforce capacity to meet the needs of the large number of low-needs learners (estimated to be around 200,000 learners), not just the small number of high-needs learners (estimated to be around 25,000). Many low-needs learners have mental health issues, and their number appears to be growing. This may be exacerbated by the increasing pressures on young people and austerity policies, which have reduced the capacity of other organisations to provide early intervention support.

However, only high-needs SEND learners attract additional funding and are subject to a new judgement in the Common Inspection Framework introduced in September 2015. As such, senior leaders pressed with a host of other FE reforms may struggle to prioritise low-needs SEND learners. While some FE colleges (including evaluation case study colleges visited in 2016/17) adopt a holistic approach to inclusive learning, others may struggle to extend the focus of their SEND provision and support beyond learners with the highest needs. Thus

raising the profile of low-needs SEND learners should be a priority for the programme in 2017/18.

Beyond the FE sector

The programme has the specific remit of supporting the FE workforce to implement the SEND reforms. However, the programme needs to be alive to the broader context and factors beyond the workforce that will influence the extent to which providers can meet their duties.

Strengthening collaboration with local authority and specialist services lies at the heart of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice. Further education providers need to work with other organisations to fully support learners with SEND achieve their goals. There is a specific duty on FE colleges to cooperate with local authorities with joint planning and commissioning for high-needs learners. However, the quality of local authorities and specialist services and the effectiveness of collaboration arrangements varies. Many colleges work with more than one local authority and report very different approaches to collaboration and service provision. This affects their ability to provide improved and consistent support for their SEND learners. Some colleges have difficulty engaging and working with local authority services, and expend resource on managing a multitude of different local authority processes and documents of variable quality. Specialist providers supporting particular needs in all education phases (e.g. dyslexia, autism) also need a better understanding of how the FE sector works in order to collaborate effectively with providers in the sector.

Transition is a particular area of concern. Successful transition from FE to positive, sustained destinations occurs when transition is the focus of local authority and specialist services provision, and when collaboration across education, health and care services starts as soon as a learner enters FE. In some cases transition requires a package of support services including housing, social care, job coaching, voluntary agencies and continuing education.

And transition into FE also remains an issue, where schools may not always provide accurate or full information regarding learners' abilities and aspirations, making it difficult to FE providers to respond with appropriate study programmes. The programme's scope excludes these professional practice communities upon which FE professionals working with learners with SEND depend. Strengthening collaboration between professional practitioners within and beyond FE lies at the heart of the SEND reforms.

This will impact directly on learners' progression and transition through FE to positive, sustained destinations. In 2017/18, the programme (and the ETF and DfE) therefore needs to recognise the important but ultimately partial contribution any FE workforce development programme may make to strengthening external collaboration and improving FE learner outcomes.

Summary of priorities for 2017/18

In addition to the needs identified for the programme in 2016/17, the main priorities for 2017/18 emerging from the 2016/17 evaluation and consultations with delivery partners and sector stakeholders in Spring 2017 may be summarised as follows.

1. Tailor the programme to address the needs of diverse staff roles in the FE sector, including senior leaders, SEND managers, vocational managers, careers and admissions teams and learning support staff.
2. Tailor the programme to address the needs of diverse organisations that characterise the FE sector, with particular attention to organisations not well represented in the 2016/17 programme including ITPs, ACL providers and small specialist providers.
3. Ensure the programme is responsive to sector variations in staff and organisational readiness, and capacity to engage, by offering a wide range of development opportunities and targeting those who are less familiar with the SEND reforms or who face greater challenges in their implementation.
4. Invite frontline staff working directly with learners with SEND to participate in the programme, including teachers, assessors and learning support assistants.
5. Embed programme courses, events and resources in local practitioner networks and in-house staff development activities to deepen the impact of the programme. This can be achieved by making resources created by the programme available to the whole sector, and providing guidance for local networks of providers and in-house staff development teams on how to use them with staff in their own settings.