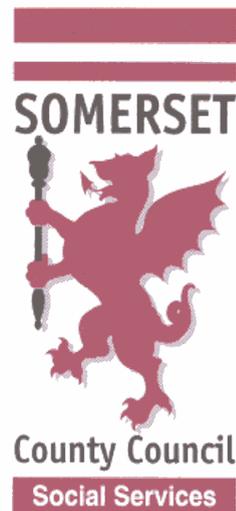# Have your say about college

A report on FE provision for young people with learning disabilities in Somerset

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Executive Summary

- **Partnership work.** Close partnership working has been emphasised by a number of LSC and joint strategy documents, as was reflected by a well-attended regional event on 'Learning for Living and Work' in May 2007. In Somerset, the partnership between LSC, Connexions, the FE colleges and the SSD has made very concrete progress, as witnessed by the current research project and by a joint job coaching scheme.

- **Forward planning is a priority.** Despite excellent attempts by individual colleges in their marketing and school links, there is patchy forward planning for FE in Somerset to meet the needs of all young people with learning disabilities. This seems to be partly because the market is provider driven, rather than driven by potential need.

- **Definitions of 'learning disability'** were not consistent across colleges in Somerset, and so it was very difficult to obtain accurate and comparable statistics. However, it appears that mainstream FE may be catering for about 50% of all young people with a learning disability in Somerset.

- **Gaps in FE provision.** There were acknowledged gaps in provision, particularly for those with autistic spectrum disorders and with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

- **Perceived LSC funding mechanisms and priorities.** Some of the changes in funding mechanisms by the LSC were considered by college staff and parents to be problematic and unhelpful. Equally, all parties were aware that some students may receive less hours of contact time. However, the new Machinery of Government changes in funding mechanisms had not been introduced at the time of this study.

- **Choice.** To make informed choices, learners themselves need better and clearer information about what is available. Choice is, however, limited in Somerset by locality and transport issues.

- **Transition.** Colleges provide a range of transition schemes, including tasters, link courses and advocacy schemes. Despite some changes in the link courses over the years, in general, families and students want a thorough and gentle introduction to college.

- **Individual planning.** The Section 140 Connexions plan focuses the young person's choices and records needs. It should have a central role in helping colleges to plan for each learner. The Person Centred Planning mechanism should be central in planning support and curriculum changes.

- **Provision in the four mainstream colleges.** All four colleges in Somerset provide Pre-Entry courses and courses covering Entry Level

through to Level 3, and offer a range of accreditation to students. For two of the four colleges, the maximum number of hours per week offered is 25, for one it is 23, and only one college offers a full-time 35-hour week for two of its courses. The new progression pathways which will be part of the Foundation Learning Tier are not being piloted in Somrset.

- **Specialist colleges** are perceived as offering a more focused curriculum, and some students move between specialist and mainstream FE. Although the LSC criteria for placement in a specialist college are clear, many stakeholders (families, mainstream FE college staff) were unclear about the operation of those criteria.

- **Parents** would like more involvement and better communication with college, and both students and parents were also concerned about what they perceived as cuts in college terms and hours.

- **Additional support in college.** Colleges generally provided small group sizes and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) to meet students' needs. Speech and language therapy was not often provided, despite the needs of students.

- **The training and quality of staff** is key to good support. For instance, students wanted to be listened to and appreciated the informal, friendly approach of the LSAs. However, training for LSAs and for teaching staff is scarce. This has already been recognised as a priority in Learning for Living and Work (LSC, 2006).

- **Students' social life.** There was some good practice in supporting students' social life and in ensuring that they mixed with students across the college. These included 'theme weeks' where different student groups took part.

- **Moving on into work.** All colleges helped students to plan for the future, but some felt that their hands were tied in respect to supporting students into work, by both the limited range of available jobs and the need for specific funding to offer 'job-coaching' and 'work buddy' services. A new job coaching project based at Bridgwater and SCAT colleges is currently being developed in partnership with LSC, local authority and Connexions.

- **Planning for future goals.** Students with learning disabilities in FE have a range of goals for their lives after college, which include work, independent living and relationships. Individual learning plans and review systems do not always appear to cover all the students' needs in planning for the future.

Recommendations

Regional Learning and Skills Council

- The LSC is in a position to monitor and share good practice across the various LSC regions, so that there is more equitable distribution of practice.

- The perception of cuts in college funding needs to be tackled. Families, in particular, need to understand the role of FE. Where young people no longer have a full college week, families should be assured that their needs are met by other partners.

- The system and criteria for allocation of specialist college placements need to be more widely discussed and communicated, and the role of specialist colleges reviewed.

- The new funding mechanisms should ensure that support is provided 'holistically' for each student.

- The LSC needs to take a lead in encouraging colleges to develop provision for students with ASD, profound and multiple learning disabilities, and also those with behavioural challenges. Provision should respond to individual students' person-centred plans, and the pace of their individual achievements.

- The LSC could lead the way in ensuring that staff from the four mainstream FE colleges, as well as the two specialist colleges, have regular meetings, information sharing and planning events.

Connexions

- Connexions should take the lead in providing a better system for forward planning for students with learning disabilities across Somerset. This would involve liaison with the LEA (SEN service), and with all the schools, in order to map the numbers of students with learning disabilities in different year groups, differentiated by area. This information should then be made available to Further Education colleges.

- Connexions should ensure better liaison between the specialist personal advisor system and the mainstream PAs. Good practice established amongst specialist advisors and transition personal advisors should be spread to mainstream PAs.

Further Education colleges

- Local FE colleges would benefit from better inter-college communication, which could be discussed and developed at joint meetings (organised by LSC, see above).

- College staff could make better use of the Section 140 documents to plan for students' individual needs.

- Colleges should ensure a person-centred approach to planning for the future, which includes students, their families, friends and other interested parties.

- FE college staff could work together, and with Connexions, to develop a forum for students with learning disabilities across Somerset. This would enable students to have a stronger voice, and to be central to any developments, changes and issues in further education.

- College co-ordinators should produce an audit of training needs for staff, which could then be discussed with HE providers in the area.

Adult social services

- The SSD could work with the colleges to produce a meaningful picture of eventual outcomes for students with learning disabilities after FE.

- Review the current job coaching pilots in Bridgwater College and SCAT, and ensure that good practice is spread more widely and maintained.

Further research is needed:

- To develop, promote and evaluate person-centred approaches to FE provision for young people who may not fit into regular college courses (e.g. those with behavioural challenges, ASD).

- To consider the issues of specialist and mainstream Further Education, in Somerset and throughout the region. We need to know more about the quality of student learning and experience in specialist colleges, the reasons for making the choice of specialist college and student outcomes. Research should investigate the possibility, for instance, of residential provision attached to mainstream colleges.

- Future research could update and build upon the work of Faraday et al. (2004), which looked more generally at students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities across the South-West. Examples of good practice in FE in the whole region could be investigated through in-depth case studies, and disseminated to other FE colleges.

- A longitudinal study could follow a group of students through their college careers and beyond, in order to assess the review processes more closely and to observe outcomes for the students.

- The present study was only about the 14-25 age group. Continuing education for adults with learning disabilities in older age groups is also a topic for future research in the region.

Introduction, background and aims of study

Background

This is the report of a demonstration research study in Somerset about local Further Education (FE) provision for those learners aged 14-25, who have a learning disability and complex needs. For the purposes of this study, we adopted the definition of 'learning disability' contained in the Government strategy, *Valuing People,* which is:

> *Those students who have:*
> - *a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information*
> - *to learn new skills, and*
> - *a reduced ability to cope independently,*
> - *with a lasting effect on their development*
>
> [Department of Health 2001]

In general, these will be students who will use Learning Disability social services support as adults. However, we were aware that definitions will vary between colleges, and between the different agencies involved. We did not wish to limit our focus to students who were narrowly defined as needing particular types of support, and so we hope that this report reflects the ways in which Further Education itself operates.

The study was commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council South West region (LSC), and took place between May-August 2007; it was carried out by staff from the Norah Fry Research Centre at the University of Bristol. The local Somerset focus was agreed upon in the light of the recent LSC report, 'Through Inclusion to Excellence' (LSC, 2005), the LSC strategy 'Learning for Living and Work' (LSC, 2006), as well as the South West regional review (Faraday et al., 2006) of provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The key priorities in Learning for Living and Work are:
- increased access to high quality provision
- improvements in quality of teaching and learning
- increased participation in learning
- increased economic participation
- increased social inclusion
- increased levels of attainment

Inter-agency working and collaboration are seen as key mechanisms for delivering high-quality, learner centred FE provision, and a number of targets were set which coincide with the current report. Additionally, the Machinery of

Government changes were announced in October 2007, with implementation in 2010/11. All funding for education of young people aged 14-19 is set to move into local authorities, and a review of the post-19 delivery chain has also been announced. These changes will have far-reaching implications, which were not apparent at the time of the current research. The publication of this report will coincide with discussion and planning in the South West to put these changes into practice.

Partnership working is seen as the central tool for improving outcomes for these learners. A young person with learning disabilities can encounter a string of planning and support mechanisms at transition, including care planning, person-centred planning, Connexions plans, and FE assessments (Heslop et al., 2001). In order to have a person-centred approach which puts the individual in control of his/her own future, it is essential that the different agencies involved work together, with the focus person (the individual with learning disabilities) at the centre. 'Progression Through Partnership' (HM Government, 2007), a joint strategy document with DfES, DoH and DWP, emphasises the need for inter-agency working, and the holistic view of the individual with learning disability. Since the report was written, a new cross-government initiative entitled 'Getting a Life' is also aiming to provide more holistic and person-centred support to young people with learning disabilities. This initiative is currently being piloted in a number of areas in England, and it is essential that Further Education takes its place as a full partner. The call for partnership working is not new (see for instance, DoH 1998 on partnership working between Health and Social Services). However, to ensure that it happens, we now have a strategy which is jointly owned across government departments and which is built on a philosophy of person-centredness. This research commission therefore came at an exciting time for FE provision for young people with learning disabilities. In particular, there were a number of local issues in Somerset:

- **A range of provision** There are four strong, mainstream FE colleges in Somerset, as well as a number of specialist colleges which provide for students with learning disabilities in Somerset and beyond. These providers offer a range of opportunities, but they may not all be available to potential students. Despite the good provision available, there may still be gaps.
- **Outcomes from specialist colleges** There is concern that outcomes for students from specialist colleges may be uneven, and may not be well planned. This issue has been underlined by recent research (Heslop et al., 2007).
- **Gaps for particular groups of students** As Faraday et al. (2006) noted, there are gaps in local provision in Somerset, as elsewhere, for particular groups of students – namely those with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) and those with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD); Tarleton, in an LSDA funded project (Tarleton, 2004) emphasised that parents and families are a key to good, individualised planning for learners with ASD. The Foundation Learning Tier, which is presently being piloted in some areas, will have an effect on the curriculum below Level 2.

- **Strategic planning** Key partners in Somerset County Council and Connexions Somerset are aware that the systems for sharing information about potential students need to be improved, particularly with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and with the FE colleges themselves.

Other issues that were raised by Faraday et al. (2006), in relation to the full range of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities across the South West, would also be likely to be relevant in Somerset. For instance, points of transition (both into and out of FE provision) were found to be problematic; work experience was valued by learners, but often under-resourced, and Faraday et al. emphasised the need for improved information, advice and guidance for those reaching the end of a college programme. Planning can be a complex issue, and individual learning plans were found by Faraday et al. to be highly valued by learners. These are documents which ideally 'belong' to the learner, and can be added to during the course of their time at college.

However, there are currently many other types of 'plans' which young people with learning disabilities will encounter during their careers. Nearly all these students in Somerset will enter college with a 'Section 140' plan, which has been developed since Year 9 with the Connexions service. This is a holistic plan which also belongs to the young person, and in which they will have expressed various goals and achievements. Some may also have developed Person Centred Plans (PCPs), which are based on assumptions about community inclusion and the informal contributions of friends and family. A PCP is likely to encompass aims and goals about a person's whole life, and will not be limited to a particular educational setting.

> *Person centred planning assumes that people with disabilities are ready to do whatever they want as long as they are adequately supported.* [Sanderson 2000, 6]

In the FE context, it is important to look at how effective any planning is. An individual learning plan may help to guide a student's choices within college, but it may also be necessary to plan forwards, towards future pathways after the end of a college course. Jacobsen (2002) found that students with learning disabilities needed particular support and guidance in order to find appropriate routes into employment and further learning, after their college courses had finished.

More recently, the NIACE Pathfinder (Strand 6: Employment) was based on the assumption that the development of employment-related literacy, language and numeracy skills were key to helping people to get a job and then to keep it. However, learners with learning disabilities often need more direct, practical experience of work, and some support to move into paid employment. Beyer et al. (2004), as well as more recent work (Watson et al., 2006), have investigated the links between education and employment opportunities. The key ingredients for success appear to be good individual vocational profiling; strong work-based learning (including targeted work experience); good links with local employers, and ongoing support for

employees, including 'natural' supports in the workplace. Further Education providers are in a good position to provide at least part of this package, and to make links with other providers who can help students to move on after college.

Finally, the quality of the experience for students with learning disabilities in FE is of prime importance. Sutcliffe (1990), some 17 years ago, was emphasising the value of FE in providing an inclusive educational and social experience for students with learning disabilities. Since the Tomlinson report in 1996, inclusion has been seen as a re-modelling curriculum opportunities to meet the needs of learners with learning disabilities. Nevertheless, the social experience of being an 'FE student' is still very important to many young people with learning disabilities, and the intervening years have seen many more children with learning disabilities being educated in mainstream, inclusive schools (Frederickson and Cline, 2002). By comparison with their counterparts from special education, this may mean that they approach FE with quite different expectations.

This study

Bearing all these considerations in mind, the aims for the current short study were to:
- Establish current needs and wishes of young people with a learning disability (aged 14-25) in Somerset.
- Find out to what extent current FE provision meets those needs, both locally and at a distance.
- Document outcomes of FE for students with learning disabilities.
- Strengthen the information base about potential learners in this group, and to provide for more joined-up forecasting and communication between the key agencies.
- Make recommendations for future developments in all these areas

The research took place between June and August 2007, and a full report of the methodology is included in Appendix A. Briefly, quantitative data from the four mainstream colleges in Somerset were obtained through a questionnaire, which was backed up by visits to each of the colleges. At these visits, the research team also carried out a series of interviews with key staff involved with learning programmes for students with learning disabilities. The project was driven by tight timing, and so focus groups at all of the colleges were planned to take place before the staff interviews. In the event, one of the focus groups proved impossible, due to consent issues, and so three groups were held. A series of individual interviews, telephone interviews and groups were held to capture the opinions and ideas of family members, and particularly of those learners who have attended residential or specialist colleges. The project planned to carry out some interviews with young people with learning disabilities who have 'missed out' on further education, but this again proved impossible – partly because of lack of access, and partly because of the timeframe of the project. Finally, the research team talked with key professionals who were involved and concerned about planning FE provision for young people with learning disabilities, including *Connexions* staff, school staff and SEN/LEA staff. In all, 40 students or young people with

learning disabilities took part in the research, 20 parents and 30 professionals and college staff.

Structure of this report

Following a list of the issues raised by different participants in the study, we have structured this report by following the logic of the student's path into college and beyond. The first chapter looks at the issues of forward planning and marketing of provision, while the second chapter looks at transition from the point of view of individual students and college arrangements. The third chapter focuses on the FE experience once students are in college, and the fourth is about additional support arrangements and needs. Finally the fifth chapter mentions some of the issues and views about future goals and destinations of students with learning disabilities.

Chapter 1   Forward Planning and Marketing

Somerset: The key players in helping the LSC to map future FE needs for young people with learning disabilities

SEN service Knowledge of all children with statements of SEN, and School Action Plus funding. Many with educational psychology input.

Independent special schools

Special Schools Until 2008, two of the special schools only have provision to age 16. One now has plans to keep youngsters with PMLD to age 18.

Mainstream schools Figures for students with 'severe and complex LDs' moving on from school.
2007-8: 14
2008-9: 24
2009-10: 39

Connexions Transition plan starts in Year 9, reviewed in Year 10; Becomes S140 in Year 11

Specialist Personal Advisors Attached to each special school.

Mainstream Personal Advisors For children with SEN in mainstream schools.

Transitions Personal Advisors (TPAs) Meets young person age 14. Starts planning transition with them at age 16, if they are likely to be in receipt of adult services.

Specialist FE colleges in Somerset
Lufton Manor
Foxes Hotel Academy
Farleigh FE (Frome)

Mainstream FE colleges
SCAT
Bridgwater
Yeovil
Strode
Richard Hewish

Out of county specialist colleges – e.g. Fairfield Opportunity Farm (Westbury), Oakwood Court (Devon).

Key: ▬▬▬ Strong links already in place.
             Links that could usefully be developed.

Chapter Summary

- **Individual colleges are active in marketing, and also made efforts to link with schools and advertise their provision.**

- **The Regional LSC plans to develop local FE provision more strategically, according to future need. However, at present future planning to meet the needs for FE of young people with learning disabilities in Somerset is piecemeal, and carried out on a college-by-college basis.**

- **Students' planning documents (Section 140s) could be used more efficiently in the process of individual planning.**

- **There were acknowledged gaps in provision, particularly in terms of support and curriculum for those with autistic spectrum disorders and with profound and multiple learning disabilities.**

- **Funding mechanisms are in flux, and a new system is awaited. Colleges' expectations of the new system were mixed.**

- **The colleges were all aware of the importance of going beyond promotional materials and establishing personal contact with both the young learners and their parents.**

1.1 Planning of provision

Advance information about the needs of future students with learning disabilities is vital, if colleges are to make the right provision. In Somerset, it seems that there are inadequate and patchy systems in place for storing and sharing such information in colleges and elsewhere. In our study, we found that levels of knowledge about future student numbers were, in most colleges, limited to the following academic year. Bearing in mind that this study was carried out in the summer of 2007, forward planning about incoming students was very short-term, and really only appeared to cover the following year's intake. Even for 2007/8, there were huge variances in estimates for enrolment, with some colleges expecting around 200 students and others around 50.

Nevertheless, all the colleges told us about different systems they had in place for estimating future need, and for planning and preparation. Essentially, these involved making and maintaining contact with a variety of other services in Somerset:

> *The way we get to those estimates is 1) our information from schools, 2) our information from Connexions and then 3) our discussions with social services and private providers.* [College coordinator]

College staff voiced frustration with the difficulties involved in making estimates of future numbers, which in turn limits the matching of provision to needs:

> *Provision should be matched more clearly to the need out there, but we have to be very confident that the data is robust.* [College coordinator]

> *Data can be misleading and create barriers that obstruct tendering from colleges, without any proper grounding to this obstruction.* [College staff]

Lack of consistency in the definition of 'learning disability' further complicates the issue of forward planning, and is discussed further in Chapter Three.

1.2 Choice and Marketing

In Somerset, as elsewhere, Further Education colleges exist in a free market economy, and will be concerned to offer appropriate provision and attract appropriate learners. All four of the colleges we visited used almost all of possible methods for marketing their provision for students with learning disabilities, as is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Methods of Marketing used by the Colleges

	Bridg	Strode	SCAT	Yeovil
Entry in main prospectus	✓	✓	✓	✓
Special prospectus or leaflet	✓	✓	✓	✓
Website information	✓	✓	✓	
Promotions in schools	✓	✓	✓	✓
Taster days	✓	✓	✓	✓
Links with Connexions	✓	✓	✓	✓
Link courses	✓	✓	✓	✓
Talks with parents/ carers' groups	✓	✓	✓	✓
Posters in community			✓	
Other (please specify)	✓	✓	✓	✓

College coordinators wanted to create the right ethos and image both for the students with learning disabilities and for other potential college entrants, and so it was felt, for instance, that provision for those with learning disabilities should be advertised alongside the mainstream courses in the college prospectus.

> *It tells parents and students that what we are doing for students at entry level is on a parallel with what everybody else is doing for every other group… It also tells other students that we have got an inclusive cohort of students coming through.* [College coordinator]

However, open publicity may not be what attracts young people with learning disabilities themselves. Staff at another college observed that whatever marketing strategies they employed, many decisions would be taken by parents or carers:

> *Other people access the information for the learners, I think. I don't think the learners are empowered to access the information themselves. Because it's not very accessible, and because it's all part of a decision-making process that involves parents, school etc.* [College coordinator]

The planning and transition arrangements for students with learning disabilities go well beyond the 'ordinary arrangements' in all four of the colleges, as will be explored further in Chapter 2 of this report.

1.3   Mapping future needs

On paper at least, the transition from school to college should be straightforward. At a meeting of representatives from key agencies, it was made very clear how the process should work:

> *At 14, there's a transitions review… by early in Year 11, the planning should be very detailed about where they want to go next. That goes into the Section 140. And it should state, 'here are the possibilities, and this is the evidence that supports each of them', or not… that's the challenge, to get the information to enable us to make good decisions.* [Professional]

Assessments of special educational needs carried out in accordance with Section 140 of the 2000 Learning and Skills Act ('140s') are central to this process, and it was considered very helpful to have a system whereby every potential student goes down the 'same route'. Indeed, these documents are central to the way in which Connexions has to return its statistics to the Government.

The feeling from professionals was that there was great variance in how much colleges engaged with the 140s:

> *I think some of the… colleges just glance at it, and put it in the drawer* [Professional]

> *When the student drops out, quite often the issue is there in the 140 under 'needs'. If the college had read the 140, and looked at the strategies the school used and done something similar, then it'd be OK.* [Professional]

Furthermore, some concern was aired during the meeting that the use of 140 data would be restricted by data protection legislation:

> *We can't send a 140 to the college until the young person has decided to go there, and applied there.* [Professional]

Yet if it is true that the '*decision about leaving isn't made until close on the time they leave'* [College staff]. For many students from special schools, this means that the use of the 140 as a forward planning document can be somewhat limited, as it may arrive with the colleges very late in the day, after provision has already been established.

The difficulty lies in producing or obtaining the relevant information, and in ensuring that it is shared and engaged with by all the relevant parties. For instance, although we have been assured that all young people with a statement are listed, one personal advisor we met from Connexions was not aware that information about children with learning disabilities in mainstream schools was being gathered by the LEA:

> *It would be very useful for us to have those lists, so that I can go back to the schools and say 'are you aware' - because our PA working in the school may not be aware, and I can chase them … there is no reason why Connexions shouldn't have the list of names and needs.* [Connexions]

1.4　Growth in demand

Most participants in this project agreed that '*there is a big increase going on'* [Professional] in demand for services for young people with learning disabilities and that demand would continue to grow. This is due particularly to population increases in two groups, those with complex and profound learning disabilities, and young people with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD).

> *There are so many more diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder, that somehow the colleges have got to get their act together to meet their needs.* [Professional]

> *We are seeing more and more individuals develop into adulthood with complex needs.* [College staff]

These forecasts are backed up by national statistics. The number of adults with learning disabilities is predicted to increase by 11 per cent between 2001 and 2021. This would raise the number of people in England aged 15 and above with learning disabilities to over one million in 2021 (Lancaster University, 2004).

Given that this is the case, then the importance of ensuring that information is being shared between schools, colleges and other parties becomes even more imperative.

1.5   Learning and Skills Council (LSC) Funding

FE colleges have a duty not to reduce LLDD provision. However, individual courses and poor quality provision may well have been cut, due to LSC and Ofsted reports on particular provision. Despite this, the perception of college staff was that they had faced repeated cuts in funding for students with learning disabilities.

Staff also spoke of changes in funding priorities that have affected provision, as follows:

- **Independent living skills and vocational skills**

Staff spoke of a move towards funding vocational skills courses and away from independent living skills courses. It is well known that many of the former independent living skills courses did not in reality lead to positive outcomes for individuals, particularly in the employment field (Jacobsen, 2002). While vocational qualifications were highly valued by students and families alike, we were told that a lot of parents were very disappointed with such changes, as vocational courses are less appropriate for some students.

- **Residential placements**

Staff stated that there had been a move away from funding places at residential colleges, meaning that more students with higher levels of need were coming into the mainstream FE colleges. The LSC aims to improve local, mainstream FE provision, and so this shift is part of an overall strategy. At the same time, however, we were informed that 100% of the school leavers from one special school were going straight into specialist colleges this year (2007/8).

- **Delays in funding decisions**

One college referred to how delays in decisions about LSC funding were making it more difficult to organise staffing (new staff would not be obtained until mid-way through the next term).

- **Changes to funding for Additional Learning Support**

At the time of speaking with college staff in Somerset, the intricacies of the new funding mechanisms were as yet unclear. Staff were fearful that the system simply would not work, as they felt it would introduce two sources of funding (one for learning support through LSC funding; and one for personal care, through local authorities). However, their fears appear to be ungrounded, as the Machinery of Government changes have since been announced, and funding will be routed entirely through local authorities. This will have significant implications for the FE colleges in this study.

- **Regional separation of LSC**

The regional organisation of the Learning and Skills Councils also creates a politics of provision. A few parents strongly questioned how LSC policies in different parts of the country could vary as radically as they believed they did. As one professional mentioned, one outcome is that each region tends only to look out for its own:

> *Our policy (in Somerset) is that we are looking after our own. Because we've got so many people coming into Somerset, we haven't got the resources to give them a full service.* [Professional]

1.6 Gaps in provision

- **Lack of provision for Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD)**

Colleges and professionals both felt that the mainstream colleges did not provide well for students with PMLD. Opinions differed about whether, and if so how, this gap should be addressed, with one professional stressing that *'the LSC have got to put the screws on the colleges, to make sure there is access for that group'.* Three of the colleges offered some part-time provision for students with more severe or profound learning disabilities, but none had specialist provision such as sensory programmes. Whilst some staff said that they would like to offer full-time provision for students with PMLD, lack of funding was a barrier. Others felt that specialist *providers* should cover such special needs:

> *We are not all things to all people, and we do not replace some of the courses and facilities that the residential colleges can offer, and nor should we… we're not specialists in that field and we would need specialists to do so… if we cannot provide education at the right level, and safely, then we should not do so.* [College staff]

- **Lack of provision for Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD)**

Similarly, professionals felt that '*there is a lack of expertise in colleges to deal with students with ASD*' and that '*the colleges have got to get their act together to meet their needs*', with many college staff agreeing that '*there's a huge gap for ASD*.' The most critical voices on this matter came from parents who felt that:

> *Those with a general background in learning disabilities don't understand ASDs.* [Parent]

As mentioned in the Introduction, parents are often the key to tailoring individual support for their own son or daughter with ASD (Tarleton, 2004), and some felt they had been overlooked by the mainstream colleges. Often we were told by parents that they had felt that a specialist residential college could in fact meet their son or daughter's needs better than a mainstream

college. The parents that we spoke with were vocal that they either wanted funding for out-of-county placements, or better dedicated in-county provision:

> *If it's so hard to get the placement out of county for a young person with ASD, and if there isn't an appropriate place within county, then they ought to think of setting up some sort of facility for these young people.* [Parent]

> *We would like [our child] to go to a special placement for ASD young people, but we're being told that's not going to happen… it's very much a funding issue.* [Parent]

- **Sex Education**

Some parents and carers we spoke with said that education covering sexual and romantic relationships was a significant gap in college provision. They did not feel this played a major part, or was even covered, in the independent living courses their young people were doing. They said that the students had either told them that they would like to be more informed on such matters, or that these issues were mentioned in the student's Person-Centred Plan.

> *The 'Towards Independence' course is teaching them all the life skills… but the 'nitty-gritty' of sex education… I don't think that has been addressed.* [Parent]

- **Time spent at college**

The number of hours students are occupied in college was an important theme. It was observed by one professional that students with learning disabilities on part-time courses were effectively discriminated against because they could not then 'amuse themselves' outside course hours in the way that non-disabled youngsters could (going to the library, as well as social activities), saying further that *'the families want people in there every day… there's an entitlement to free education at 19, and that should be free full-time'.* [Parent]

> *At lunchtime we need more sports and drama stuff… more things to do in lunchtimes, games and sports.* [Student]

> *They need somewhere to go and they can't just expect us parents or carers to have them 24/7… [my son] does need to do something. He needs to be kept involved… Why should he be left to vegetate when everyone else has the opportunities to go on and develop?* [Parent]

It should be recognised that these perceptions will persist, unless individual students can have proper support from other agencies to back up their FE experience. Further education should not be expected to fill the gap for daytime 'care'; where support is needed for a student to study independently, then that support should come from social services or from other agencies, and new options should be considered, including direct payments.

Chapter 2   Transition from school to FE

Chapter Summary

- **Students' initial choice of college is often guided by those around them, including their families. They all need better, clearer information about the real choice that may be available to them.**

- **Despite some initial worries and concerns, most students remembered their transition to college as a challenging, but positive, experience.**

- **Parents sometimes felt that the process of transition could be smoother, with a more thorough and gentle introduction to college.**

- **Colleges themselves provided a range of transition schemes, including tasters, link courses and advocacy schemes. Most of these were well received, although there were some comments about adverse changes in link courses over the years.**

2.1   Choice of college

'Transition' for young people with learning disabilities covers principally their move from children's to adult services, as well as educational and life choices as they move into adulthood. Heslop et al. (2002) found that, despite legislation and guidance, the transition process often failed young people with learning disabilities and their families. Since then, the Valuing People (DoH, 2001) support team has made transition a priority, and all young people with learning disabilities are intended to be prioritised, to have person-centred plans (DoH, 2002) and to have accessible information about their choices at transition (Tarleton et al., 2004).

In our study, however, the majority of students did not have much to say about what choices they had made around their college and course. We know that Somerset Connexions has developed a good deal of person-centred practice in their transitions work with young people with learning disabilities. Nevertheless, the perception of students was that teachers, parents or service providers (Connexions or Social Services) had made decisions for them about college. In fact, most parents that we spoke to admitted that they had a good deal of influence in their children's choices:

> *She'd been out for several day courses and though she had some input, it was more our decision than hers.* [Parent]

> *It was my choice, she would have chosen to stay with her mate, they were inseparable, but you can't go through life with just one friend.* [Parent]

Choice and voice were major issues for parents who wished for their child to attend a different college than their local mainstream. Most of the parents in this study had been successful in getting their child into the chosen college, but they felt that this was because they had been vocal and articulate enough to fight their corner. Whilst they had obtained what they wanted, some said that they had chosen to speak to us in part because they felt that the system discriminated against those who were less vocal:

> *'It was all down to me pushing & shouting', 'if you don't rock the boat then they won't see you', 'it hasn't been a problem in as much as I knew what I wanted out of the system and knew how to get it'.* [Parents]

Parents felt that specialist colleges provide specific vocational training which is often not available at the mainstream colleges. They felt therefore that it made sense for their son or daughter to access this specialist provision, even when they may already have completed a course at a local college. For some parents, secondly, spending time at a residential college was seen as a better way to develop the young person's social skills and independent living skills, encouraging them to grow up and do things for themselves. Life at a residential college could help young people with learning disabilities achieve many of the steps to independence that occur as ancillary benefits of life at university for many young people without learning disabilities.

Friendships and social interaction weighed significantly with parents in choices of college, most clearly with those whose child had attended a specialist or residential college. This was generally because the parents felt that their child benefited from a fuller immersion in the social side of residential college life where they spent much more time with their peers:

> *In these past 3 years, the improvement in her has been phenomenal. I put it down to… the friendships she's formed, the relationship skills have been so much better. She's always been a sociable person, and that's why I thought [College A] would be a good environment for her... There's no point sticking her in a field doing horticulture. She needs people.* [Parent]

As we will see below in Section 3.6, students themselves also prioritised relationships and friendships, when talking about their FE experiences.

2.2 School-college partnerships

The process of transition from school to college should be started effectively in Year 9, with the first transition review in school. College staff will of course only start attending specific review meetings at the invitation of the school. Hence the relationship between school and college is central to facilitating students' transition into FE.

Relations with special schools seemed to be more developed than did those with mainstream schools, and relations also began at an earlier stage. Most colleges had a policy of getting to know students in the special schools from Year 9 or 10 onwards, dependent upon requests from the schools, and some colleges also had strong policies of promoting their courses within the special schools:

> *We start working with students in the autumn of Yr 10. We'll have attended their 14+ reviews, been into special schools, finding out who's there, an idea of what their aspirations are and roughly what their needs will be in two years time, especially if we've got very complex needs coming through – if we need new buildings or anything like that.* [College staff]

The colleges spoke of formulating learning and progression plans for students, through interviews and with information from schools, to help in *'identifying the learning journey, identifying where the student comes in, and where they want to get to'* [College staff]. The colleges referred to a variety of planning documents (Person-Centred Plans, PCPs, and Individual Education or Individual Learning Plans, IEPs and ILPs), although the role of the 'Section 140' from Connexions seemed to be unclear.

One member of college staff talked about the centrality of personal contact in promoting Further Education as a potential pathway to both the young people themselves, and to their parents:

> *Personal contact is really important for us… Initially a prospectus is neither here nor there, the students want to meet and talk with someone… Parents have got to trust that college is going to be the right place for their youngster.* [College staff]

2.3　Going to college: 'It's a bit different to school'

Once the choice of college has been made, the actual process of transferring from school to college represents a major step for young people with learning disabilities. Some students told us that '*we didn't really know what we were doing'* changing from school to college, and that it was 'difficult', 'weird' or 'scary' at first when trying to settle in. This was because '*it's a bit different to school'*, and because some lessons had been complicated.

Nonetheless almost all students, including those quoted here, viewed the process of transition from school to college as a very positive experience, and the move into college life was seen as a point of personal growth by many students:

> *It was an amazing change, because I didn't talk to anyone at school, I kept myself to myself.* [Student]

Because of the new demands of FE, the size of colleges, and the different, more 'open' environment of FE as compared with school, it is often felt to be a good idea to become gradually accustomed to the new environment. The students in this study spoke of visiting colleges on School Links schemes and most spoke of having been introduced to some staff or other students prior to starting college, saying that '*it helped us to get to know college a bit better*' and '*it helped us learn*'.

2.4   Parents' views

The transition process received a more mixed review from parents. Some were happy with how the transition from school to college had gone and the support and advice they and their son or daughter had received. Others felt that the students needed to spend more time in college with their future peers in order to integrate properly:

> *They gave them some day-release at college, but it was done with the school group, so she was still with her school peers with no integration with students at the college. She had just two days proper in college before she started and she needed more, a week of two just to integrate. She needed to be with her new group more – as it was, she worried all summer.* [Parent]

Transition was also very problematic for some parents because of what was felt to be a lack of coordination between service providers, which meant that important decisions were not made until the last moment:

> *We had a bit of a fright, because it wasn't until the beginning of June that they realised that because of the catchment area he wouldn't be going to [that college]… so we had four weeks where it was panic stations… it was a bit of a shock.* [Parent]

One interesting suggestion made during an interview with a carer was that it would help support students with learning disabilities if they had a student without learning disabilities as a buddy (along the lines of the 'Bus Buddy' system) to help familiarise them with the college environment, explain appropriate behaviour and act as a link with social aspects of college life. This could also help overcome the concerns expressed by one college coordinator around the vulnerability of some students with severe learning disabilities and the need to 'keep an eye on inappropriate friendships being made'. In fact, as seen below in 2.6, one college did have a good scheme for advocates who made links with new students.

2.5   The role of Connexions

Transition processes for students with learning disabilities vary between mainstream and special schools. The practice of mainstream and specialist support Personal Advisors (PAs) working separately means that the mainstream PAs are not always familiar with appropriate pathways for students with learning disabilities. The idea is that specialist support PAs

should be '*there to give advice to their mainstream colleagues'* [Professional], but the communications systems that would enable this to happen could perhaps be improved:

> *The mainstream PAs do not always have the knowledge, and they don't always know that they don't know. So they just blithely carry on. We did think a while ago to have the specialist PAs going into mainstream schools, but we decided against it, because it would make the disabled student stand out.* [Professional]

Somerset is fortunate in having a team of Transitions Personal Advisors (TPAs), whose role is to work closely with the young person in a holistic way, and to link in with social services multi-disciplinary teams. The TPA is the point at which mainstream and special provision should come together, with the PAs from both types of school passing information on to the TPA. The TPA then maintains contact with the college through the student's time there.

Young people we spoke with, as well as families, were generally positive about their contact with Connexions staff.

> [Our Connexions worker] *organised things, I was lucky I had her… it was lovely to have somebody who knows you from the beginning and takes you right through, rather than being passed on.* [Parent]

2.6 The Transition Process

We asked college co-ordinators and other staff in the colleges about what works best in helping to provide a smooth transition between school and college for students. Link schemes were commonly mentioned, as were taster days.

One college recruited 'advocates' from their students with learning disabilities, who went into schools to talk to pupils and parents about their experiences in Further Education. This was seen as a very successful way of answering queries and providing a supportive 'bridge' into college, for those who may lack confidence or information. The Advocates system could be recommended as good practice, and had a number of positive influences:

> *Advocates will meet the youngsters when they come in for taster days, and they will show them round, meet the parents. Then they will go back to schools, and talk to the students there. That is incredibly powerful, and they can say 'I found this, and this is how I sorted it'. You can build this in by someone who they already know and trust, and have a social relationship with.* [College coordinator]

All of the colleges operate Link schemes to facilitate the transition between school and college, which are funded by the schools. There was no obvious difference between these schemes, and all involved the future students spending a day a week in college for their courses from Year 10 or 11 up until they finished school. One college expressly mentioned that they also had a Learning Links department that did a full assessment of the future students.

Professionals outside college, however, felt that link courses no longer provide what they used to:

> *The link courses now leave a lot to be desired. Everything is downscaled. When we used to do links, there were lots of different choices (art, plumbing, catering, everything), and now it's very limited… It's very poor provision, like a series of taster courses – not a link for work experience.* [Professional]

Taster days were seen as being especially effective when adequate follow-up was given to both parents and schools. One college, for instance, made a point of providing taster days that were just like 'normal college days'. Families were firstly prepared for this with a pre-taster talk:

> *I meet the parents one week before so that they know what's going on… And that's what this document is doing, it tells parents what they have to do to support their youngsters in Year 10. It tells them to 'talk to them when they come home from the open day', ask them what they did.* [College coordinator]

The college then followed up the tasters by sending photos back to the student's school and family. These enabled schools and parents to talk with potential students about what they had experienced in a more informed way:

> *The most important thing to them might be what they had to eat in the canteen, and so we then send stuff back into school saying 'this is what they did in college that day', so that they can do the follow-up work.* [College coordinator]

Practices such as college picnics and college-tours led by current students are other good examples of means by which to familiarise potential students with the college and college life in an informal way. The initial transition experience will influence the student's future FE career, and so it is important to get it right.

Chapter 3   FE curriculum and student experience

Chapter Summary

- **Definitions of 'learning disability' were not consistent across colleges in Somerset, and so it was very difficult to obtain accurate and comparable statistics. However, it appears that mainstream FE may be catering for about 50% of all young people with a learning disability in Somerset.**

- **All four colleges provide Pre-Entry courses and courses covering Entry Level through to Level 3, and offer a range of accreditation to students.**

- **For two of the four colleges, the maximum number of hours per week offered is 25, for one it is 23, and only one college offers a full-time 35-hour week for two of its courses.**

- **Specialist colleges are perceived as meeting the needs of some students through a more focused curriculum, which is not available at local mainstream colleges. For some students, this results in a move between specialist and mainstream FE.**

- **Students said they liked practical subjects, and also talked about the importance of social life, and having some quiet spaces in college.**

- **Parents would like more involvement and better communication with college, and both students and parents were also concerned about what they perceived as cuts in college terms and hours.**

3.1   Numbers of students with learning disabilities

The first question we asked the four colleges concerned the numbers of students with learning disabilities currently enrolled. Responses to this question pointed to a lack of clarity in definitions of 'learning disabilities' as a distinct subset of 'learning difficulties and/or disabilities'. Colleges were not always keen to 'label' students:

> *The dilemma is, they're not all in exactly the same group, and it's about how much labelling and flagging we do of students.* [College coordinator]

As a result, it was not clear whether differences between colleges were because of actual differences in the student population or different ways of defining students. When filling in our questionnaire, all colleges initially opted for the '71+ students' box that was on the form, but upon further discussion of

the *Valuing People* definition given on page 7, they negotiated a different total, as presented in Table 2:

Table 2. Numbers of Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (age 14-25) Currently Attending Mainstream Colleges

	Students with Learning Disabilities	Total Student Population	Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities
Bridgwater	50-60 (0.375% of total)	16000	300
Strode	45 (3% of total)	1500	300
SCAT	84 - on Discrete and PCLD/brain injury courses, including 30-35 - likely to go on to adult care services (0.9% of total)	10-12,000	650
Yeovil	40 (0.5% of total)	8000	No response given

From statistics for the whole of Somerset[1], we know that there are 23,500 young people overall between the ages of 19 and 25. As 2% of the population are likely to have a learning disability, we can estimate that there are 470 young people with learning disabilities between those ages. From the figures above, it would appear that about 229 of those are accessing FE, about 49%. Bearing in mind the vagaries of definitions, it is not fair to compare colleges on the above data. In fact, the figure for students with learning disabilities as a proportion of the *disabled* student population is remarkably consistent over colleges. They make up approximately one sixth of the total population of disabled students in college, or those who will be accessing additional support.

One question we discussed with college coordinators was whether, and if so how, colleges should distinguish between discrete and mainstream provision. Most colleges had students with learning disabilities enrolled across the college, and it was not seen as an easy, nor necessarily a good, thing to divide these into 'discrete' and 'mainstream' courses:

> *I have more and more of a problem trying to define what is mainstream and what is discrete… we have programmes designed to meet individual needs, and if that's discrete then yes, those are discrete programmes.* [College staff]

> *If it's an appropriate learning programme for any student, then that's the programme that they're put on.* [College staff]

Students might be recruited onto a 'discrete' course because they are not ready for a Level 1 curriculum, on the grounds of academic ability, maturity or behaviour. They would then, if and when ready, move through to another

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[1] Data sourced from <http://www.somerset.gov.uk/somerset/statistics>.

course, or begin picking and mixing parts of courses that staff agreed they were capable of doing:

> *Once the students have been here a certain length of time, we then look to see if there are any other courses that they could move on to, so they could become part of a mainstream course… so there may be points where they're partly here and partly there.* [College staff]

> *They can [take part in] regular courses if that's appropriate… they hate us in the management office, because it is so difficult, we have students taking a bit out of this and a bit over there.* [College staff]

As one college coordinator explained, students also cannot be labelled on the basis of their budgeted learning support, as students with high levels of personal care needs might not have the most severe learning disabilities.

While recognising that it is admirable to take an individual approach to student support needs, this is an area that clearly needs a lot of work at all levels. Without some agreement on how to define difficulties, disabilities and learning support needs, it is hard to plan for effective funding and provision. Any comparisons between different colleges, and across different types of provision, will be skewed.

Lack of consistency between different institutions' definitions will also test relationships between institutions and providers, given that scarce resources are allocated (both within and between colleges) on the basis of student numbers:

> *For the youngsters in mainstream schools, we have an audit of needs… In next year's Year 11, there are only 14 youngsters through the whole of Somerset who have severe autism or severe learning disabilities, or severe language difficulties. When I went to [a college] and described them, we had almost two completely different lists, their youngsters and the ones that we were identifying.* [Professional]

> *I think the colleges, some of the ones that they describe as severe learning disabilities in fact have moderate learning difficulties… The colleges use the word 'complex' a lot, to try and get more funding.* [Professional]

3.2   Curriculum in the four mainstream colleges in Somerset

Table 3. Courses Provided by the Mainstream Colleges

	Title	Level	Hrs/Wk	No. of students
B'water	Choices of Independence	Pre-Entry	15	5
	Towards Independence	Entry 1-2	25	28
	Entry to Land-based studies	Entry 1-3	25	31
	Prep 4 Life & Work	Entry 2-3	18	30
Strode	ASDAN Access to Independence	Pre-Entry	25	6
	Access to FE	Entry Level 1-3	25	17
	Preparation for Employment	Entry Level 1-3	25	9
SCAT	ASDAN Towards Independence	Entry	15-23	30
	EQOL	Entry	6-12	3-4
	EdExcel Steps to Success	Level 1	15-23	50
Yeovil	Life Skills	Milestone 4 – Entry 3	35	16
	Flex Learning	Entry	35	34

All four colleges provide a transition-to-FE course to bridge between school and FE courses and all four also provide some kind of preparation for employment training. All four colleges provide Pre-Entry courses and courses covering Entry Level through to Level 3. Whilst all courses run for the full college year, the hours of provision are quite varied. For Pre-Entry courses, the hours offered per week were between 15 and 35 (15, 15-23, 25 and 35 hours per week for the four colleges). The same was true of Entry level and above.

For two of the four colleges, the maximum number of hours per week offered is 25, for one it is 23, and only one college offers a full-time 35-hour week for two of its courses. Two colleges offered only their full-time provision, of 25 or 35 hours, with the other two also offering part-time provision of between 6 and 18 hours. We were told of problems in funding, which limits the amount of truly full-time provision that can be offered. There were also specific problems about obtaining a viable group for certain specialist courses:

Despite the LSC requirement that FE colleges should not reduce their provision for these students, the perception of college staff reflects the situation as they see it:

> *Learning difficulties funding provision has shrunk as time's gone on, so a lot of colleges have shrunk their provision.* [College staff]

> *We don't offer full-time PMLD, we could bump that up if there were sufficient numbers, but we don't have a big enough group.* [College staff]

There is still clearly a need for better and more open communication between LSC and college staff, relating to funding issues. The colleges use various systems of accreditation for their courses, with two using ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) certification. Other schemes of accreditation and recognising progression that were in use were the National Proficiency Tests Council (NPTC), Recognition and Recording of Progress and Achievement (RARPA), English Speaking Board (ESB) and Enhancing Quality of Life (EQOL).

When we asked about entry criteria for courses, the responses we received were quite variable, college-by-college rather than course-by-course, from 'none', through 'completion of secondary education', to 'ability to cope with the college environment' or 'ability to work'.

3.3   Overview of Specialist Provision

Although we were not able to visit specialist colleges as part of this project, we will give a brief overview. There are two specialist colleges in Somerset that cater for young people with learning disabilities, Foxes Hotel and Lufton Manor. Foxes works on a residential basis and trains students towards achieving Life Skills Awards, City & Guilds and English Speaking Board certificates and ultimately NVQs. It operates as a commercial hotel, and so students gain direct work experience in college, as well as accessing work placements with other employers. Lufton offers both residential and non-residential places and educates students towards MENCAP's Essential Skiils Award (ESA). It is probably fair to say that both these colleges are able to remain focused on particular vocational areas, such as horticulture, catering or hotel work.

Farleigh FE College in Frome also offers specialist provision for young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, and the other two colleges regularly used by Somerset LEA are Fairfield Opportunity Farm, Dilton Marsh (Wiltshire) and Oakwood Court (Devon). Cannington College is now a part of Bridgwater College.

The specialist colleges take students from across the country as well as students from within Somerset. Similarly some students from Somerset gain places at residential colleges out of county. We cannot therefore give any more precise figures for Somerset students in residential placements both in

and out of Somerset than those mentioned above (around 30), without undertaking further research.

It was apparent that the placement in mainstream or specialist FE is not exclusive, as there is clearly some flow-through between the colleges. One student we spoke with had moved from school to SCAT for one year, on to Lufton for a second year and was now moving into a community-placement at Cannington (Bridgwater), whilst other students we spoke with were either progressing or had progressed from a mainstream college on to Foxes. In some cases, this was quite clearly because of a student identifying a particular vocational area which they wanted to pursue. We met one student, for instance, who had completed two years at Bridgwater and enjoyed catering and cooking. She and her parents had been to visit Foxes, and she had been assessed as a suitable candidate. At the time we met her, she was waiting to see whether she had funding to continue at Foxes in the following year. In other cases, it seemed unclear to many what the precise criteria were for students obtaining LSC funding for a specialist college:

> *There is a real discrepancy. Two students who have the same profile both applied to go to Fairfield, but one of them has got in and the other hasn't. That is the assessment from the school. Then they have to go the LSC for funding. For instance, a parent whose child was at Foxes heard from another parent that they had got the funding to go to Lufton for 3 years, and then to go on to Foxes. It seemed unfair.* [Professional]

Again, the LSC criteria for residential placements clearly need to be better disseminated, explained and discussed amongst all concerned.

3.4   Students' experiences of curriculum

The 35 students we talked with in focus groups at the four mainstream colleges were drawn in the main from pre-entry and entry level courses, although some had progressed on to NVQ courses across the college, and many had flexible programmes of study which involved a range of courses. However, most of them had experienced a curriculum based on 'skills for independence'.

When asked about their favourite subjects, students said they enjoyed a variety of learning. They particularly mentioned practical activity-based subjects, such as cooking, arts and crafts, exercise and computers. Outdoor activities classes, such as gardening, were seen by some as both difficult and enjoyable in the sense that they offered the student a challenge, some exercise and 'team-building', *'it's good when it's a nice hot day and we can go out and do things. It's horrible, it's terrible when it pours down'* [Student].

Parents and carers tended to be most positive about any courses where they felt that they could see progress being made by their young person, most particularly with skills for independent living and general social interaction but also with vocational skills where appropriate:

Every year, even though you think that he's not going to be able to learn anything more, he does… He is obviously getting something from his education. [Parent]

He's come on in leaps and bounds, and his confidence is so much better, he's living semi-independently now. [Parent]

3.5   Communication with families

An opinion that was voiced by quite a few parents was that there was a lack of contact from the college about progress and problems:

She's been at the college for 5 years, but I've never been invited to be involved. [Parent]

With more communication about progress made on courses, some parents said that they could adapt their own practices to continue this progression within the home, further developing the young person's independent living skills:

It would be nice to have a bit more communication home… there needs to be more photographic evidence as well… send a photograph home, it goes up on my wall and to me, 'you've actually achieved loading the washing machine, I'm not doing it any more, you're capable of doing it'. [Parent]

Some college coordinators said that they did keep in touch with families, although there was clearly a parallel concern to treat FE students as autonomous young adults, which might militate against parental involvement. Levels of contact appeared to vary between the four colleges, although parents themselves were generally adamant that this should be a top priority. One college coordinator discussed this issue, and the importance of including parents in learning about independence skills:

We do have an open-door system with parents, we always say that you can pop in… so that we can be working from the same side really, because we're trying to get the students to become independent with something, and at home the parents are saying no… I think that's one of our strengths, that we do liaise with parents so much. [College coordinator]

All the colleges said that they liaise regularly with parents or carers through mailings, phone calls and open evenings. One college mentioned a good practice of maintaining email contact with parents, which can make communication quicker, easier and more informal and so be more actively used by the parents themselves:

We use email quite a bit, make sure the parents have our email and then it's much easier for them to send a quick email to say there's a problem, so that we're aware of it. [College staff]

3.6   Social life

The students we spoke to were all very quick to mention meeting new people and making new friends as a good thing about college:

> [Researcher] *So have you made more friends in college?*
> [Students] *many: yes*
> [Researcher] *Is that good?*
> [Student] *Yeah, because they make you laugh and they listen to you.*

Similarly, when some said that they enjoyed their work placements, this was apparently because of the social side of work as well as the sense of independence that working gave them. Residentials and team-building exercises also received strong praise from students who had done them, presumably for much the same reasons. Parents of students also spoke of how much their son or daughter both enjoyed, and benefited from, the social environment that college provided:

> *She loves being with her peers the most, she excels when she's with them, she's definitely changed for the better.* [Parent]

Despite the interest in socialising and making relationships, it ought to be mentioned that there was one creative suggestion of an 'all girls' group in college. Several female students at one college proposed having classes that were for them alone. Some of the male students in the group light-heartedly responded that they would like to have all-boys' groups, but it does raise the question of whether there are relative advantages to be gained by having some gender-divided classes.

There was also some dissatisfaction expressed about the lack of contact with other students across the college. In one college, students themselves said that they got on well with their own group, but did not get enough opportunities to mix with students from other courses, and so some felt that they were missing out on opportunities for making new friends. This was also sometimes true for different groups across a course:

> *We've got 3 groups and I think, at the end of the week, we should always get together and do something together… not seeing my friends, that's the worst thing.* [Student]

It was clear that students in all colleges tended to mix only with other students on the same or similar courses (Towards Independence, Preparation for Employment and so forth). When asked about this, students made reference to the attitudes of 'normal students' as one reason for this:

> *When you see other people around college, because they think you've got learning disabilities and that, they don't want to come over and talk to you.* [Student]

There were a few instances of what could be considered bullying that became apparent in the students' talk during the focus groups, another possible reason for social activities being restricted to the students' own class-groups. Some students at one college also spoke of unfriendliness and bullying from the students at their neighbouring school.

All these topics, of course, were not new to college staff (see Chapter 4, Section 4.5, where we discuss support arrangements for social life in college). Indeed, many college coordinators and other staff told us about specific efforts being made to enhance social opportunities across college for students with learning disabilities. They also reflected on the fact that *all* students tend to mix with those in their own course groups. This is quite natural, and not necessarily a specific difficulty for those with learning disabilities.

3.7   Noise and Space

Things that students did not particularly enjoy about college included the levels of noise and the lack of a quiet space. In general, students wanted a social space that they could easily and comfortably use. When we asked students at the end of the focus group sessions what they would like to change about college life, the things they mentioned most frequently were noise and space. Access to a common room space was strongly advocated by many students. The social side of the students' lives in college is perhaps just as vital to them as their educational goals.

At one college that had a common room, we were told that a lot of students with learning disabilities apparently did not make much use of it because it was 'intimidating' to them, due to the behaviour of other students (being too crowded, noisy, messy and other students throwing things around, were given as reasons). Students at other colleges expressed a strong desire for a common room, or else stressed that they would value more social activities that could be pursued during lunch and break-times.

> *We've got a lot of students that can't use the common room, not because they physically can't get in, not because they're not allowed to, but because it's intimidating to them, and so they don't. Any college will tell you this, but the students' Common Room isn't big enough.*
> [College coordinator]

3.8   Course hours, term times and holidays

Further suggestions from students for improving college life included shortening the length of lessons, as well as extending the length of the college year. These two points together indicate that the students do enjoy being at college, but that the levels of concentration required for long lessons can be demanding for some:

> *I find some lessons too long, especially Wednesday afternoons.*
> [Student]

I should have left school a bit more late on in the year, because I found the summer too long, really long. [Student]

The second quote here points to a gap that was also observed by parents and college coordinators. Students can struggle during the summer months with no college to occupy them, and this time was also hard for parents who had to try and find things to occupy their young person; the progression that students had made through the college year could sometimes be lost during the summer, when they were not engaging in educational activities:

It's quite hard for them, because the college is closing for the summer, and there's this gap. There should be more happening, because a lot of the [severe learning disabilities] find it hard to retain what they've learnt over a gap of two months. So if they had something to stimulate them over the summer that would improve things. [College staff]

Summer schemes, short breaks, voluntary work, and general support services could all be further developed through joint working with social services and Connexions.

Chapter 4   Access and Support

Chapter Summary

- **Colleges generally provided small group sizes and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) to meet students' needs. Speech and language therapy was not often provided, despite the needs of students.**

- **Transport was the single major issue in accessing FE in Somerset. The bus buddies scheme was praised, but did not meet all the needs in such a rural county. Lack of funding for transport often restricted the choice of college.**

- **There were some physical access issues in college for those with additional physical impairments.**

- **Students wanted to be listened to and appreciated the informal, friendly approach of the LSAs.**

- **Good practice was identified in supporting students' social life and in ensuring that they mixed with students across the college. These included 'theme weeks' where different student groups took part.**

- **The training and quality of staff is key to good support. However, colleges spoke of lack of access to good quality training and career routes, both for teaching staff and for LSAs.**

4.1   Proportions of students with different additional needs

Assessments of student needs were fairly constant across all colleges, other than for issues of 'Understanding' and 'Transport', as shown in Table 4 below. It is not possible to draw any conclusions from such a short study of whether this is because of differences in student intake and location, or of college attitudes and their assessments of students.

Table 4. The additional needs for support of students with learning disabilities

	Bridgwater	Strode	SCAT	Yeovil
Learning	All	All	All	All
Accessing parts of college	A Few	Some	Some	Some
Language and speech	Most	Some	Most	Most
Reading and writing	Most	Most	Most	Most
Understanding	All	All	A Few	Most
Behavioural problems	Some	Some	Some	Some
Transport to and from college	Most	Some	All	Most
Personal care	A Few	Some	Some	A Few

By definition, all students needed some support with learning, and in all colleges most also needed support with basic skills (reading and writing). One interesting point is the extent of needs with basic communication skills. As seen below in Table 5, despite these needs, speech and language therapy is rarely provided. Some students in all colleges were assessed as having behavioural problems and some/a few had personal care needs.

There were large differences apparent between the support packages offered by different colleges (see Table 4 below). Some of the differences in provision appear striking (particularly 'extra learning support' and 'person-centred planning'), however the need for such support will depend upon the student intake, and so again we should remember that no conclusions can legitimately be drawn without more detailed research about needs. Learning support assistants, and simply providing small group size, were the main means of providing additional support.

Table 5. Support provided to students

	Bridgwater	Strode	SCAT	Yeovil
Learning Support Assistants	All	All	Most	All
Small group size	All	All	Some	All
Speech and language therapy	Some	A Few	A Few	A Few
Peer-support sessions	n/a	n/a	A Few	A Few
Extra learning support classes	n/a	All	Most	A Few
Advocacy committees of students with learning disabilities	Some	Some	n/a	A Few
Person-centred planning	All	All	n/a	All
Programmes to support transition to work and independent living	Most	All	Some	All

4.2　Transport

The most important issue in accessing Further Education in Somerset seemed to be transport. This was generally perceived as a problem by most parties, arising from living and travelling in a rural county where distances between home and college can be great and bus services are often limited.

Distance was often given as the primary reason for choosing one college over another by both students and parents – 'we chose it because it was closest to where I live' was a commonly heard phrase:

> *It is the nearest college that does that particular course, which is my argument for sending them there.* [Parent]

> *We had the choice of [several colleges]… I'm not a great one for driving and locally the only ones were A and B.* [Parent]

The problem for students with learning disabilities is that they often need specially arranged transport, because of the limited bus services and the distances involved. The nearer they are to the college, the more likely it is that they will be able to use public transport more independently. Those who rely on special transport may suffer very long journeys, with multiple pick-ups, resulting in extremely long days:

> *Transport it a bit of an issue. Their course starts at half past nine [and it's] sixteen miles from here, and they're picked up at ten past seven in the morning! The course finishes at four and they get home at six. That is one devilish long day!… by the end of the year they're on their knees.* [Parent]

The Bus Buddies scheme, where young people with learning disabilities receive transport training with a more experienced fellow traveller, was spoken of highly by all parties. It enables students to access transport independently, who would not have done so without using such a scheme:

> *One of the things that has been helpful is the Bus Buddies scheme - there's a group of students that would not have been accessing transport, had they not done a lot of that work in school…* [College staff]

The only problem mentioned with Bus Buddies was that it could only be used by those who would progress on to using public transport by themselves. This was not a criticism of the scheme, but rather a frustration at its limits and a wish to see assistance provided for those who would never be able to use public transport by themselves:

> *He should have gone on with his peer group to the next stage but transport support was not offered. As he can't get himself on a bus (and he's not eligible for a Bus Buddy as he's not capable of travelling independently) this was quite confidence-damaging for*

him because he'd created a lot of friendships and now he was separated. [Parent]

For various reasons, it is apparent that many students with learning disabilities will continue to need special transport. Frustration and criticism *was* levelled by college staff at the current council policy of ending students' access to special transport from the age of 19 upwards. It was felt that this did not sit well with efforts to make education accessible to all and to encourage independent living, and was furthermore inconsistent with education policy where entitlement covers young people up to the age of 25:

> *One of the difficulties at the moment is that, our students with learning difficulties, they stay in the system longer, and they have a policy of finishing special transport at 19 plus. I've got a case now… of a student [age 22] progressing on to a different course, but because she's moving onto a different course, they're taking the opportunity to remove the funding for special transport.* [College staff]

Council policy of refusing to fund travel to more distant colleges was a major issue with both parents and particular service providers. Most students and parents would choose a more local college wherever possible simply because it was logistically much easier. However, for those few who found that a more distant college would give a service which more closely met their needs, funding was simply not available to make that choice:

> *I do try to take students out to different FE establishments, so that they can make an informed choice. But at the end of the day, there are often not funds for that. For instance, if they were to choose A College over B College, which some have preferred – there is lack of funding for transport. So at the end of the day, they are not really given a choice.* [Professional]

> *Your choices are limited if you want to go with transport because if you've got to find your own transport there, the cost of that is phenomenal for a college that isn't local to you and so the County Council will only pay for the one that's local to you.* [Parent]

Such transport issues pertain particularly to students who would struggle in a larger college due to the number of other students, the noise and coping with larger spaces, or due to a need for more specialist provision:

> *The main college is too much for my [kids] anyway, they can't take it - it's too big and too busy... they don't cope well in crowded places… there's more propensity for accidents and so on which freaks them out.* [Parent]

Difficulties relating to transport particularly affected students' access to evening groups and social groups.

*They cannot access [education] in the times that would suit them,
evenings or whatever, because their lives are run by transport…
we have tried to set up some twilight evening classes… but [they]
never get going because people can't get here.* [College staff]

People with learning disabilities living in care, in particular, were dependent
upon the availability of staff and minibuses, and were restricted by what the
others in their group wanted to be doing.

*One of the difficulties we see with [PMLD] students accessing
events is that nearly all students are dependent on nursing home or
community minibuses, and the nursing home minibuses have to
serve the needs of the other clients. So they do their best, but there
are limits to how much can be done.* [College staff]

4.3   Physical access and college layout

Access within the colleges was generally perceived by students to be
acceptable. Two points that did arise in conversations with students and staff
were that signposting could be better within the colleges, and that access for
those with physical impairments could be improved.

One student firstly referred directly to having problems 'trying to find the right
classrooms' at times, and several other students commented on similar
issues. Secondly, some of the rooms used in some colleges were not seen
as being easily wheelchair-accessible, and both staff and students stressed
the need to make sure that physical impairments were accounted for
alongside learning disabilities. Uneven floors were also mentioned as causing
some problems for those with walking difficulties:

*Some of the floors are uneven sometimes, and I've got a walking
problem, so I find it hard… I haven't fallen over yet but I have to
hold things, I hate it.* [Student]]

*We asked a student who just left about this, and she said the
doorways weren't wide enough for her chair, and also she
reckoned that the lifts are far too small. Some of the pathways are
a bit poor as well.* [College staff]

With one of our researchers being a wheelchair-user, we had some first-hand
experience of access within the colleges. As a general rule, access to the
central parts of the buildings that we used for the research was good, with
wide doorways and slopes rather than steps, although we cannot comment on
access throughout the colleges. It was noted that the colleges would all
benefit from having a greater number of automatic doors to assist those with
limited use of their upper-body.

4.4 Support and being listened to

One of the most important things for the students was that they had someone to talk to about any problems which arose, or indeed generally about their progress. LSAs were generally well appreciated:

> [Student 1] *With some they feel more like friends… they don't hold any power over you.*
> [Student 2] *Yeah, LSAs can be good, they treat you like humans, but teachers don't, they treat you like little kids…*
> [Researcher] *So having LSAs is a good thing?*
> [Student 1] *As long as they're the right person.*

There was a tendency to speak in warm terms about LSAs, who were at liberty to establish more informal and friendly relationships with students. By contrast, teaching staff were often perceived as having different roles. Whilst most students said that they found teaching staff supportive, others were more critical:

> *I like the teachers, they help me a lot.* [Student]

> *Staff boss you too much… [they] need to be more laid-back with us, they're too over-protective… it's like your parents at college watching you.* [Student]

Students said that the central issue in having a good college life was 'being listened to'. This ran from choosing a college and a course, to thoughts about what could or should change, as well as being listened to if they were having problems with college-life. One student suggested that having a nominated LSA who would listen confidentially to their concerns and issues with college life could make students feel more supported.

Feeling represented at college level was another important element of support for some students. The Advocates system mentioned previously (Section 2.6) again stands out as best practice in this regard. Representation on student forums was a point of contention at one college where one student was unhappy that 'none of our group are on it this year'. This seemingly led to a feeling of disenfranchisement, and one student complained that:

> *We do have feedback forms… but 2 or 3 weeks later it all goes back to how it was.* [Student]

4.5 Supporting social life

As mentioned, social life was a major topic of discussion amongst students who attended focus groups in each of the colleges, and college coordinators also recognised that friendships and social opportunities were a major motivating factor for all students in Further Education, not just those with learning disabilities:

If you talk to students about why they come to college, they'll give you the answer they think you want to hear, 'oh I need to learn, and get better at this and that'. Most of them come because they want to make friends. It is a big part for every single student who goes to college, of all abilities and all ages…. Most of us are social beings. [College coordinator]

Staff stressed that all students will tend to socialise with those on their own course, and that it should therefore not be surprising that this was also true for students with learning disabilities. Colleges indicated on the questionnaires the specific opportunities that existed for students with learning disabilities to be included within college social life (Table 6.

Table 6. Opportunities for engagement with college social life

	Bridgwater	Strode	SCAT	Yeovil
Sports & fitness activities		✓	✓	✓
Canteen	✓	✓	✓	✓
Clubs			✓	✓
Specific befriending or buddy schemes			✓	✓
Students' Union	✓	✓	✓	✓
Other social activities	Volunteer scheme for recyclers	Youth Club		

Some colleges made specific attempts to ease friendships and social links between students with learning disabilities and others across the college. For instance, one college held 'theme weeks' as part of the general college tutorial system. These themes (for instance, on citizenship or the environment) brought in outside speakers and also brought at least two different groups of students together in joint project work, *'because if you bring two groups together to work on a project, whether it's an art or a drama project, that's where the interaction starts'* [College staff].

Recognising the problems for students with learning disabilities in using student common rooms, the college had also identified 'quiet' times in the common room, and taken students with learning disabilities in for specific learning sessions:

[We've] given them space to work out how to use the pool machine, jukebox etc, put music on and had a chat – using that on a proactive basis, so that when they go in when it's more busy, they've got expectations and they don't panic. [College coordinator]

4.6   Staff training

In order to provide the right support and access to FE, the key element appears to be the personnel. However, there was a general consensus

amongst those we spoke with that there is a shortage of appropriate accredited training for teachers, LSAs and personal assistants who work with students with learning disabilities. College staff spoke of their own colleges being helpful in providing what they could, but of there being a lack of adequate external provision. Funding for professional development was also felt to be limited.

Because of the lack of training, at one college we were told that teaching staff were often being recruited 'up through the ranks' from LSAs. There was said to be very little provision for mainstream teaching staff who wished to pursue a professional development route to move into Special Educational Needs. This was felt to hold across the country, particularly as regards teaching and supporting students with more severe learning disabilities and complex needs.

Several parents of students with ASD further felt that staff trained to work with learning disabilities needed additional specific training to work with students with ASD, such as speech and language and intensive interaction training:

> *There is a lack of expertise in colleges to deal with students with ASD… there is a big issue about them not admitting what they don't know.* [Professional]

Finally, some staff we spoke with felt that provision for their students across the college would improve if other college staff were trained to work with and respect the individual needs of students with learning disabilities:

> *It sometimes feels like our students aren't as important as the mainstream students… I don't feel that our students get the same access or the same rights as mainstream.* [College staff]

Chapter 5   Goal Planning and Destinations

Chapter Summary

- **Students with learning disabilities in FE have a range of goals for their lives after college, which include work, independent living and relationships.**

- **Individual learning plans and review systems do not always appear to cover all the students' needs in planning for the future.**

- **Students and college staff all spoke enthusiastically about work-based learning.**

- **Colleges were aware of the difficulties in getting employment after college. They were not funded to make links and work with students after college, and felt it would be useful to have better working links with supported employment services – or indeed, to be funded to provide this support themselves.**

- **A partnership which ensures working futures for young people with learning disabilities must include employers.**

5.1   Students' goals and dreams

These were some of the goals mentioned to us by students in the college focus groups:

Work with SEN children…..   Continue to do Workpower…

Go to the Enterprise Centre ……   Stay in college…

Hospitality, catering or waitressing…   Go to Foxes…

Work with children or animals…..   Carer…

Dog-trainer in the army…..   Train driver…

Sports tutor …..   Taxi driver…

Be in the Big Brother house…..   Be the next Dr Who…

Singer…..   Live in Spain, get married and live in a villa…

One of the major criticisms of Further Education for young people with learning disabilities in the UK has been lack of clarity about outcomes and destinations. Indeed, social services providers sometimes see Further

Education as a 'holding' measure for three years of a young person's life (Coles et al., 2006), from which they emerge simply three years older. This is in stark contrast to the LSC's own published strategy, and so it is imperative that all partners now work together to make sure that students with learning disabilities progress from FE into employment, or into activities which they have chosen.

We heard a great variety of ideas from students for their future work and lives. It was clear that some (though not all) of the students had clear ideas of what they would like to do after college, and that whilst some were teenage dreams of fame and money, many were very practical thoughts about a future life and work they could do that would be rewarding:

> *I'd like to be a police constable… or I'd like to be an actor, I'd like to work on Doctor Who.* [Student]

> *I would like to work with special needs children, like me, I have autism and I would like to work with… with learning difficulties.* [Student]

> *Next year I'm doing supported learning, the year after I'd like to get a job in sports… a sports centre, sports shop or adventure holidays.* [Student]

> *Maybe I'll work in Asda or the garden centre.* [Student]

A few had quite concrete ideas about what they wanted to do as a job and the next steps they would need to take or were taking in order to get there. Frequently such clarity was centred around moving on from a mainstream college to more specialist provision:

> [Researcher] *What are you going to do next year?*
> [Student] *Gonna go to Foxes.*
> [Researcher] *What will you do there?*
> [Student] *Do some waitressing, some orders to tables, and do some ironing… I want to go to the hotel on my own, work on my own.*

As is demonstrated in the examples given, others spoke generally of working in a supermarket, and yet others seemed quite unclear as to what they wanted to do after college, and what their next steps would be.

Advice on the future was sought or received from many different parties; family members or residential staff, tutors or school advisors, social workers and Connexions staff. However, a considerable number of students did not seem to know who was there to help advise them at college, despite the systems set up to ensure that they did have good progression planning.

5.2 Work Placements

Some students at one college explicitly stated that they would like more help with getting jobs. Students who were already doing some kind of work, work

experience or work preparation tended to speak highly of the experience, rating it amongst the best things about college, and some said that they would like to have more work placements.

College staff told us that students are frequently given some work placement or work experience when they are ready for it, and prepared for work through issues such as time-keeping, dress and interview skills. Staff are very clear that goal-setting for beyond college needs to be done on a realistic basis:

> *The long-term aim is likely to have a ('realistic') career focus… it might be about working in a garage, or working with children – rather than 'I want to be a fire-fighter'. I want to raise students' aspirations, but also I don't want them putting totally unrealistic career goals in there.* [College coordinator]

5.3   Plans and Review Meetings

To assist students in planning their learning, and their future goals, all the colleges used individual planning systems, variously referred to as 'person-centred plans', 'individual education plans' or simply, 'learning plans'.

Throughout their time in college, the mainstream colleges also all hold review meetings for their students with learning disabilities. College coordinators spoke of a range of parties that would be invited to these meetings, including parents, Social Services, Connexions, and where appropriate Speech and Language Therapists, transitions workers, progression course leaders and residential placement representatives.

One college coordinator specifically stated that the student themselves could decide who would be invited. They also referred to an ongoing review process, involving Connexions, from 16 until the student leaves:

> *We have leavers' reviews, where we get Connexions in… my reviews now start at 16, so that at 16 the Connexions worker knows that in 4 years time, they've got to have something in place.* [College coordinator]

Ensuring that Transitions Personal Advisors are fully involved in review meetings from the beginning and remain involved should aid transition into and beyond FE.

However, students who took part in the focus groups did not appear to feel in control of these plans. When they were spoken of, it was generally because of prompting by either the researchers or teaching/LSA staff, and students did not have much to say about them, seeming rather passive. The same was true of review meetings. Students tended to speak positively about them when prompted, but did not recall them spontaneously.

Some parents we spoke with also said that they did not feel involved in plans or reviews drawn up in college. Conversely, they also sometimes felt that the

college failed to treat seriously plans which they had drawn up – either on their own or with their old school:

> *Our reviews are very hit and miss... you never know who's going to turn up… most of the time I think it's a complete waste of time.* [Parent]

> *I did pull them up at the last review… they said, yes, that is a person centred plan but this is our course and we need to stick to this for the accreditation… the college should be flexible enough to address his person centred plan, not their accreditation.* [Parent}

Parents sometimes felt that colleges were too focused on targets related to accreditation, and that these were sometimes unrelated to their own son or daughter's needs:

> *They do have targets and goals but I think they are… over-reaching or too woolly to be of any value whatsoever. They're ticking boxes on bits of paper… You have to be seen to be moving along in some way otherwise you can't justify the finance for your course for the following year*. [Parent]

5.4 Transition beyond FE and Links with employment support

> *Round here, the jobs have gone, the manual jobs are disappearing, making it more difficult for them to get employment. We've got the retail outlets, but where else do they go?* [College coordinator]

The four Somerset FE colleges all keep information about the destinations of students who have moved on. This is seen as very important '*so that we know if the courses we are offering are relevant to the destinations students are working towards'* [College staff].

The routes for students after college tend to fall into a number of fairly defined areas, with some students taking up a mix of the latter two categories:

- Moving on to Level 1 programmes in college

- Moving directly into paid employment

- Going into supported employment, through Employment Services or Social Services work preparation services

- Taking up individual day service provision packages

Problems were identified with routes into employment during the interviews. All the colleges talked about the lack of appropriate and supportive links for students to enter the world of work. Working with employment services is seen as an important function for college staff; however their ability to do this is limited by:

- The lack of supported employment services

- The cessation of their duty to be involved with a student once they have 'graduated' from college

While in college, they could have work placements, with tutorial support to monitor progress. However this ceased once they left college, and finding employment was argued to have become more difficult in many ways in recent years. Employers no longer receive financial incentives or top-ups on a long-term basis for taking on employees with learning disabilities, and for training them to develop their employability skills:

> *Another massive change would be if employers were more receptive about taking people on, instead of it being an uphill battle… what we need to have is some kind of pledge for giving people employment opportunities, a range of work placements… some of our leavers work in Tesco's, and they're still pushing trolleys round 3 years later.* [College coordinator]

Three of the four colleges said that they work with a supported employment service. The fourth college said that they had done so in the past, but do not do so now; this was because of difficulties in relations with parents and carers:

> *It's so hard… you spend forever trying to get someone a place with supported wages, and then it turns out that their parents or carers don't want them to be employed and get money anyway.* [College staff]

The college now puts full-time students into one day a week of work experience and then, when it is decided that they are ready, arranges a work placement for them. This placement is supported at first, and then the support is gradually reduced. The lack of funding support for work for these learners was also criticised by college staff as being minimal, meaning that employers are not supported in providing training, resulting in '*a shortage of appropriate destinations for leavers*'. One suggestion from a senior member of college staff was for a Work Buddy scheme, where funding would be offered to provide coaching over a few years for leavers:

> *If you had that job-coaching arm of a college working with the people we already know well, I think we'd be far more successful in getting them into employment.* [College coordinator]

The Somerset Job Coaching scheme has now started, although it was not in place at the time of this research. It has been received very positively by those who have taken part, and will certainly help to answer the concerns of some college staff. The vision is for work-based learning, with college staff continuing to provide employment support – both for the employee and the employer:

> *Research would show that the best place for those youngsters then to learn those work skills is in work, but how are the employers supported to do that learning in work?* [College coordinator]

Concluding comments

This report has offered a snapshot of provision and issues for FE provision in Somerset for students with learning disabilities in the 14-25 age group. Although it was a short study, it has highlighted many concerns in FE which are not necessarily limited to Somerset. In particular, all of the following appear to apply throughout the UK:

- The concerns about courses which appear not to provide targeted, meaningful progression

- The divide between 'mainstream' and specialist colleges;

- The issue of outcomes and realistic work options after college;

- The need for support in FE provision for those with ASD and with PMLD.

Conversely there are particular issues which probably relate directly to Somerset. Due to the rural nature of the county, we know that there are problems caused by access to transport which restrict choice of college; due to the fact that there are four established mainstream colleges, there seems to be a need for better communication and sharing of good practice.

Currently, all partner agencies in the South West are working together on a number of joint projects, and are concerned to continue this progress. All Somerset partners (Connexions, LSC, colleges, SSD) wish to establish better systems for forward planning between all the agencies involved, so that colleges can be better prepared for the diversity of needs. Finally, because of the ready access to specialist colleges, the question of the deployment of specialist colleges will be more salient perhaps in Somerset than elsewhere.

Recommendations which spring from this report are offered at the beginning of the report, with the executive summary. In conclusion, we would like to note the good practice that does exist within FE in Somerset. The following vignettes are fictional, but are all based on good practice which we heard about in FE in Somerset.

Stories of success from Somerset FE

Jane was a youngster at special school, and at the age of 17 she had very little idea of what her future would hold. She was extremely nervous and shy, and when people mentioned 'college' she was worried – she took a long while to become confident with something new. Her local college had some taster days on offer, and her parents encouraged her to go along with a group from school. At the taster day, the college support staff showed her around, and took photos of her experiences in college. For instance, she found the canteen and the queue for dinner quite intimidating. A week later, an older student with learning disabilities from college (an advocate) arranged to come round to Jane's home and talk with her and her parents. She brought the photos, and they all had a good laugh together. Jane got to know the advocate, and learnt a lot about college life. Her parents also started to

understand more about what would be involved. She decided to go on a link course, and tried out a few of the things she'd be doing in college. The following year, when Jane was ready to start her college course, she had a book of photos about college, and talked to her parents and friends about what she would be doing. She enjoyed the start of her college life, and is still in touch with the advocate she met.

Martin is someone with a physical impairment, as well as a learning disability. He uses a wheelchair, and his speech is also hard to understand. He joined a group at college in which he could settle in first, before moving on to other courses which he wanted to do; he particularly focused on computer skills. Despite his communication impairment, the staff at college appreciated that Martin was very sociable and loved to make new friends. One of the things that he most enjoyed was when the college organised cross-college events, where he could meet students from other courses. A highlight for him was when his group decided to organise a concert, and he took part by playing the drums. Students from across the college came to the concert, and several of them are now acquaintances and friends of Martin. Recently, a mainstream student arrived in Martin's group, to ask if he'd like to have assistance to go across and watch a football match. The LSA was glad to be made redundant, and Martin had a great time!

Serena had a very specific goal in life, and throughout her first year in FE, she wanted to learn about catering and to work with people. Her family was very supportive, and wanted Serena to learn skills which would lead to her being able to find some part-time work as an adult. The college arranged for her to go on to a specialist college, where she could learn about hotel work directly, and she was delighted with this. At first, Serena found the change from one college to another was quite difficult, and she also had to learn a new bus route to get to college. It took her a while to settle down, but she did make new friends and she was soon involved in work experience in the hotel reception area, as well as in the café. The specialist college helped her with a CV, and with her job profile, and she completed her pre-vocational certificate in catering. During her last half year in college, she had a number of work tasters outside college, and there was also a jobs fair in college. Her LSA went with her to talk to a local employer known to the college. Now, Serena is happily working for 2 days a week in the canteen at a local leisure park.

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Appendix A: Methodology, Analysis and Reflections

Methodology

The aim of this short study was to gain a descriptive snapshot of some of the issues, and the current situation of FE for young people with learning disabilities in Somerset. It was hoped that lessons learnt from this study would lead to further work in Somerset, but would also be applicable to Further Education for learners with learning disabilities in other areas throughout the country.

The study aimed to include the maximum number of participants during a very short time span, and so was planned as a mixed methodology study, which included focus groups, interviews and a brief survey tool for the four main FE colleges in Somerset. Due to time constraints, the three strands of the research were carried out concurrently.

Ethics

Research protocols, and consent procedures, for this study were submitted to the University ethics committee attached to the School for Applied Community Health Studies. This committee includes experienced lay members, as well as academics, and regularly scrutinises proposals for work to be carried out within the University. We were particularly aware of the need to:
- design accessible information which could be understood by the maximum number of young people with learning disabilities
- give full information about the project and its outcomes to parents, college staff and professionals.
- Explain the rights of participants to full privacy

The project did gain full ethical approval; however, it should be mentioned that it did prove difficult in some cases to respect students' rights to confidentiality, to obtain full consent, and to explain the project satisfactorily to all 'gatekeepers'. Any future work should include a stage of face-to-face discussion about the research protocol, with any professionals who are asked to be involved or to pass on information to students.

Strand 1:   Quantitative data on FE students and placements

Quantitative data from local FE colleges in Somerset were collected via a questionnaire, which sought information on:
a) Total numbers of students in each FE college with learning disabilities aged 16-25, as well as estimates for numbers of students who would be attending over the next 2 years.
b) Courses on which these students were enrolled
c) The particular support and access needs of these students
d) Systems which colleges had in place for forward planning, publicity, transition, work with parents, and monitoring of outcomes.

The questionnaire was piloted and refined with one of the FE colleges (Bridgwater), to whom we are very grateful, and then sent out to the disability co-ordinator in each FE college in Somerset. It was followed up both by telephone calls, but principally by a visit from the research team, to explore questions further. In fact, only one of the colleges was able to complete the questionnaire and send it back before the interview. In the other three cases, the form was filled in through discussion at the interview, and other questions were then pursued which related to the information given.

It proved very difficult to gain a truly comparative picture of numbers of students with learning disabilities; despite our re-iteration of the definition we had offered, colleges clearly used very different yardsticks by which they measured whether or not someone counted as a 'student with learning disabilities'. However, overall the questionnaire provided a useful tool to structure our conversations with college staff. 24 staff took part in the interviews and meetings we held.

Strand 2:   Mapping the relationship between agencies connected with FE in Somerset

The mapping of relationships was carried out through a brief questionnaire, backed up by telephone calls, and a meeting, to which representatives of key agencies were invited. It proved difficult for some to attend, and so the agencies which participated were:

- Education (School-leavers' tutor in a special school)
- Local Education Authority (SEN co-ordinator)
- Connexions (Manager and Transitions Personal Advisor)

Although this was a brief exercise, again it did reveal some of the key issues, and some of the possible ways forward to improve planning and information sharing.

Strand 3:   The needs for Further Education

Focus groups were planned for each of the four main colleges, and were successfully carried out in three colleges. The fourth college was unable to take part, as students were deemed to require consent from parents, which was not forthcoming. Question cards, with Somerset Total Communication symbols, were produced, to add a more varied structure to the sessions, and each focus group was facilitated by both the main researchers.

Each focus group session split into smaller sub-groups, and had a break for refreshments between the sub-groups. The topics were divided into 'past', 'present' and 'future' experiences, and the cards enabled the researchers to vary the presentation of the questions – with students themselves sometimes picking cards and asking each other questions. In all, 35 students attended these groups, and all the discussions were recorded on digital recorders.

We had also hoped to meet family members and carers of current college students, and did in fact hold two meetings. However, one had to be cancelled (one response slip returned), and the second one was held (but with only one attendee). It is notoriously difficult to expect busy parents to attend research groups; however, this may have been compounded by the timing and by breakdowns in the communication of information to parents. The research team was able to compensate for these difficulties by:

a) Attending a transition day in Somerset, organised by a local parent, at which 12 interviews were carried out on an 'ad hoc' basis.
b) Meeting several parents on an individual basis, either in their own homes or at other venues.
c) Conducting telephone interviews with parents.

Contact was made with young people and the families of young people who had attended residential college, and also those who had had difficulties in finding appropriate placements. The final total for parents who took part in the study was 20, and we spoke with four students who were attending or had attended a specialist college as well as one young person who was in the process of deciding which college they would attend.

Table 7 below provides an outline of those who participated in the research. This summary misses some details, such as students who had attended two or more colleges (these were classed by their current or most recent college) and parents with two or more children falling into different categories (these were classed by the child who was the main focus of the conversation).

Table 7. Summary of Participants in the Research

	Total	No. in each group	Parents/carers of such students
Current m/s students	35	11, 12, 12, 0	7
Past m/s students	0	n/a	4
Current specialist college students	2	n/a	3
Past specialist college students	2	n/a	3
NEETs	0	n/a	2
School students	1	n/a	1
Students and Parents Subtotals	**40**		**20**
College Coordinators	5	1, 1, 2, 1	n/a
Teaching Staff	15	3, 4, 3, 5	n/a
LSAs	4	2, 0, 0, 2	n/a
Connexions	2	n/a	n/a
School staff	1	n/a	n/a
LEA SEN Coordinators	1	n/a	n/a
SocServ staff	2	n/a	n/a
Professionals Subtotal	**30**		
Total	**90**		

Analysis of data

Analysis of quantitative data was carried out by simple numerical methods, and data were displayed in tables where appropriate, so that comparisons could be made. All recorded data from focus groups and interviews were transcribed for content, and were analysed qualitatively, using a software package called Nvivo. This enabled the research team to identify the key themes from the point of view of participants. Where quotations are used in the text of the current report, they are reflective of themes which have been emerged from this analysis.

The two main researchers met regularly throughout the analysis phase, to check each other's analysis and identification of themes.

Reflections and limitations

Timing considerations constrained many of the activities in this research, as for instance all interviews with students in college naturally had to be completed before the end of term. The summer period is a difficult one in which to conduct a short-scale research project such as this. Additionally, there were some difficulties in communicating the purpose and protocol of the research to staff (who were naturally also very busy at the end of term), and in reaching parents and family members. Given these problems, the final number of participants was very satisfactory, and represents a good spread of young people with learning disabilities who do access Further Education at present in Somerset. A notable absence in the sampling, however, was young people with PMLD or other issues who are not served by current FE provision. We did manage to talk to some professionals concerned with that group, but clearly much more could be learnt by studying groups of youngsters whose needs are not currently met by the local FE system.

In terms of data collection, more in-depth information about college provision could be gained by observational methods, or perhaps by engaging tutors and LSA's as co-researchers. Data about the student experience in the current project were gained entirely by self-report, or by reports of others. These methods are always limited by the communication ability of participants, as well as the natural tendency to summarise and gloss over actual experiences. The comparison of specialist provision and 'mainstream' FE would be a theme worthy of further in-depth work. We were not able to make any visits to specialist provision as part of this study, or to talk to staff from those colleges, and so the comments made by parents and others were not followed up in any way. Finally, a longitudinal design would have enabled the study to include outcomes for FE students, which is arguably the most important issue in providing good quality further education.

Final words from students

'I've got loads more friends than I had at school.'

'It's helped my anxiety and it's helped my confidence, and I've got more friends.'

'I like the teachers, they help me a lot.'

'I chose to do childcare but because I didn't have the right grades, and my mum goes 'they might not accept you', so she put me on this course to get more independence, and boost my confidence. And it's worked, hey presto!'

'I love cooking, I can cook now and I never used to, and I find it's getting easier.

'I like IT, I like doing PowerPoint and stuff like that, PowerPoint for football and all that.'

'I chose drama and I chose pottery, because at the moment I'm doing myself a Dalek for the garden.'