

Finished
at
School

Creating inclusive colleges for
learners with autism

Showcasing good practice



**Ambitious
about Autism**



Ambitious about Autism

Ambitious about Autism is the national charity for children and young people with autism. We provide services, raise awareness and understanding, and influence policy. We exist to enable children and young people with autism to learn, thrive and achieve.

www.AmbitiousAboutAutism.org.uk

Association of Colleges

The Association of Colleges exists to represent and promote the interests of General Further Education, Sixth Form, Tertiary and Specialist Colleges, and provide members with professional support services.

www.aoc.co.uk

157 Group

The 157 Group is a membership organisation that represents 27 large, successful and regionally influential Further Education colleges in England.

www.157group.co.uk

Natspec

Natspec is the membership association for independent specialist colleges providing further education for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

www.natspec.org.uk

About Autism

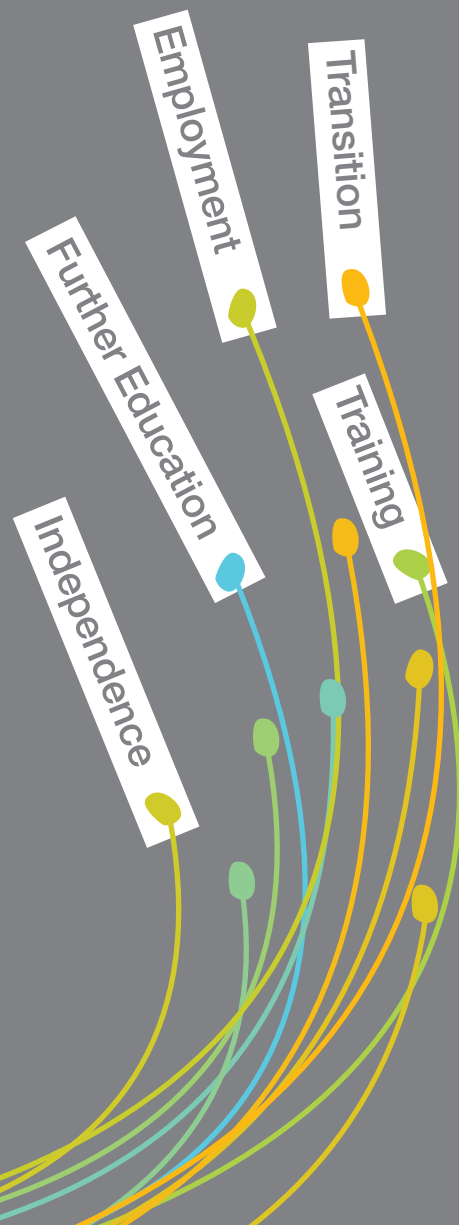
Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects 1 in 100 people in the UK. It affects the way a person communicates and how they experience the world around them. Autism is described as a spectrum condition. This means that while people with autism, including Asperger's Syndrome, share certain characteristics, they will be highly individual in their needs and preferences. Some people with autism are able to live independent lives but others may face additional challenges, including learning disabilities, which affect them so profoundly that they need support in many areas.

Thanks

We would like to thank all the learners, staff and college leaders who have contributed to this guide. Their ambition, vision and hard work is helping to raise the bar for all learners with disabilities.

Finally, we would like to thank our partners who have funded our transition work. Without them, this guide would not be possible:

- Paul Hamlyn Foundation
- The Mercers' Company
- SEIF, managed by The Social Investment Business





Contents

- 04 Ministerial foreword
- 05 Introduction
- 06 The Finished at School campaign
- 08 The College Inclusion Charter
- 12 Good practice examples:
 - [Listening to learners](#), St Vincent – Sixth Form College
 - [Removing barriers to learning](#), NESCOL – General Further Education College
 - [Creating an ethos of inclusion](#), TyneMet – General Further Education College
 - [Supporting transitions](#), East Kent – General Further Education College
 - [Developing your workforce](#), Weston – General Further Education College
 - [Enabling progression through flexible approaches](#), Thornbeck – Independent Specialist College
 - [Social support](#), Hereward – General Further Education College
 - [Design for inclusion](#), Burton and South Derbyshire – General Further Education College
- 28 Conclusion
- 30 Further resources

Ministerial foreword

All young people in our country deserve a world class education to set them on the path to success.

That should be no different for young people with learning difficulties or disabilities. That is why the government is reforming support and services for young disabled people, alongside our reforms to further education. It is also why we support this guide to creating inclusive colleges for learners with autism.

Further education has a long history of delivering excellent teaching and learning, particularly to groups that have been excluded from other opportunities. We want all learners — including those with autism — to benefit from what colleges have to offer.

We hope all general further education colleges will provide inclusive, accessible, and high quality study programmes for learners with autism and other disabilities. This expectation, already implicit in the Equality Act 2010, will be strengthened in the forthcoming Children and Families Bill.

This guide will hopefully share best practice in inclusive learning across the college community. It gives real examples from colleges about everything from listening to learners with autism and training up your workforce, to supporting transitions and enabling learners to access employment. It includes stories that feature students across the autism spectrum. It also demonstrates the effectiveness of joint working between specialist colleges and their mainstream partners.

Colleges understand the benefits to learners, communities and societies of diverse populations and inclusive approaches. They increase our understanding, our innovation, and our potential workforce. Young people with autism have a great deal to offer, and we must unlock their potential.

Our aspiration is for all young people, regardless of their disability, to be supported to enter the world of work and live as independently as they choose. Colleges have a vital role to play in making this aspiration a reality. This guide will support them in that endeavour.



Edward Timpson MP
Minister for Children and Families



Matthew Hancock MP
Minister for Further Education,
Skills and Lifelong Learning

“We believe that every student can do something. It’s not about what they can’t do — it’s about what they can do.”

Lynn Reddick, NESCOL college

Introduction

Why improve your offer for learners with autism?

All colleges want the best for their learners. Further education has an excellent record of engaging excluded groups and enabling learners to achieve their potential.

However, learners with autism are still struggling to find education opportunities that meet their needs when they leave school.



50,000

Less than **1** in **4** people with autism access education beyond school.¹

That's over **50,000** potential learners aged 16–25 who are currently not able to access education to develop their skills.¹

This wasted potential is just one of a number of reasons to improve your offer to learners with autism. Here are some of the others:

- New legal duties on colleges to admit and support learners with more complex disabilities will come into force in 2014². Now is the time to gear up to meet these duties.
- Improving your support structures should improve retention and achievement for your learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Many of the examples in this guide show that small changes make a big difference. They are a cost-effective way to improve your approach to equality and diversity.
- New funding structures coming into force in 2013³ should better support the inclusion of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in general further education colleges.
- As the participation age is raised, a large number of additional learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged 16 and 17 will be staying in education longer. Local authorities will be looking for provision to meet the needs of these learners.
- Many local authorities are looking to support learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to stay in their local communities. You could be the solution they are looking for.
- What works for disabled learners works for all learners. It's surprising how many providers find that improving accessibility of curriculum, environment and support improves outcomes for all learners, not just for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

1. Ambitious about Autism, *Finished at School Report*, 2011

2. These duties will be introduced through the forthcoming Children and Families Bill. You can find out more at www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a00208753/childrens-bill-family-support

3. The education funding reforms will affect funding for schools, colleges, and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged up to 25. You can find out more at: www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00070-2012

The Finished at School campaign

The Finished at School campaign aims to secure more and better education options for young people with autism aged 16–25, to support them to develop new skills, gain employment, live more independently, and live the life they choose. The campaign is a coalition of 25 colleges and 24 organisations from across the education and voluntary sectors, led by Ambitious about Autism. Together, we share a belief that with the right support young people with autism can learn, thrive and achieve.

There are some examples of excellent provision for young people with autism, as evidenced in this guide. However, these examples are currently very limited. The vast majority of colleges want to support young people with learning difficulties and disabilities to achieve their potential. The Finished at School campaign has been working to reduce barriers in the system to allow more colleges to do this.

The campaign has made progress towards its four key aims:

- A clear legal right to educational support up to the age of 25 for young disabled people
- A funding system that gives young people and families more information, choice and support
- A cross-government focus on outcomes and destinations for young disabled people
- A further education workforce with the skills to support young people with autism to achieve their ambitions.

The next stage of the campaign is to help share learning between colleges, so that best practice for learners with autism becomes common practice. This guide and the College Inclusion Charter it is based on are part of that process.



Thank you

to all our Finished at School campaign supporters

Partners



Disability Rights UK



Colleges



The College Inclusion Charter

The College Inclusion Charter has been developed as part of the Finished at School campaign. It aims to support further education providers to improve their offer to young people with autism and other disabilities. The Charter was developed with learners, college staff, principals, and disability organisations.

The eight good practice examples that are featured on the following pages show how colleges are implementing the points in the College Inclusion Charter. In each example staff from the college set out what action they took to deliver on a specific element of the Charter.

We want as many colleges as possible to sign up to the College Inclusion Charter, and commit to delivering quality education opportunities for learners with autism and other disabilities. While it is phrased around autism, we hope colleges will take the opportunity to improve accessibility for all disabled learners.

Download the Charter today at www.AmbitiousAboutAutism.org.uk/collegecharter



College Inclusion Charter



..... is ambitious for learners with autism. We aim to provide outstanding teaching and learning focused on progression. We will work with our partners to ensure that by our college demonstrates that we:

- Understand and recognise the rights and needs of learners with autism by listening to their views and those of their family, personalising their programmes, and supporting them to reach their chosen destination
- Meet and exceed our legal duties to make reasonable adjustments for learners with autism, through actively removing barriers to accessing learning
- Create a whole college culture and ethos of inclusion and high aspiration, leading to progression and positive outcomes for all learners
- Effectively support transition for all learners, both from school to college and from college into living, learning and working as independently as possible
- Ensure all college staff have an understanding of autism, and that teaching staff draw on specialist expertise to effectively adapt the curriculum, and develop inclusive teaching methods for learners with autism
- Adopt a flexible approach, enabling learners to progress and gain meaningful qualifications in the settings and time frames that work best for them
- Run a social support programme, developed in partnership with external agencies, to enable learners to enjoy the broader social life of their setting and community
- Follow the principles of design for inclusion in developing the environment, facilities, and social space of our college

We will evidence this by:

- Building an action plan for delivering this charter into our strategic plan
- Publishing the results of a satisfaction survey for disabled learners, including the numbers and destinations of disabled college leavers
- Delivering an annual report to Governors on progress against each of the areas above
- Ensuring our learner voice strategy effectively engages with learners with autism and responds to their views

Signed by
College Principal:

Date:

Signed by
Chair of Governors:

Date:

In partnership with:





“Peter’s lecturers supported him by making reasonable adjustments but at the same time treating him as they did all the other students — as an individual who had an individual learning style, an individual learning programme and aspirations to move on to higher education.”

Tutor, Yeovil College



Good practice examples

The following eight examples show how colleges are implementing each of the points in the College Inclusion Charter. They each include contact details so you can learn more from your colleagues.

1. Listening to learners

St Vincent — Sixth Form College

Charter point 1:

We understand and recognise the rights and needs of our learners with autism by listening to their views and those of their family, personalising their programmes, and supporting them to reach their chosen destination.

What was our aim?

St Vincent College, working in collaboration with Baycroft School, a partner school for students with moderate learning difficulties, wanted to implement a specialist course for students with autism. Baycroft School knew there was very little specialist post-16 education available within the locality for these students. The Headteacher of Baycroft approached our college with a view to developing provision within the community.

From the outset we knew we had to listen to learners and develop the provision based on their aspirations, views and needs, in order to get it right.

How did we achieve it?

We knew that the students would require a long transition period if the project was to be successful. So in early November the college invited the young people, their parents, carers and Baycroft staff to St Vincent. The event included a tour of the college, a talk from the Learning Support Manager on the proposed programme and an introduction to the teaching and support staff. We left good time for a relaxed question and answer session which allowed young people and parents to express their views, and allayed many of the doubts and fears that young people, parents and carers had.

St Vincent staff then began to visit the young people in the school setting. This was designed to get to know the young people, understand where they were coming from and where they wanted to get to, and to observe successful teaching methods and routines in operation. Learning from these visits was used to create a recognisable, personalised and robust structure for each student when they commenced their programme of familiarisation within our college.

Students and parents told us that continuity in staffing was paramount to their success, so specific staff from St Vincent were identified at the outset of the programme. These staff members stayed with the young people throughout the transition period. Initially staff worked alongside Baycroft colleagues, but as time progressed and the young people became more confident, the Baycroft staff gradually withdrew until the handover was complete.

The course content was developed based on the learning aims and needs that students and parents identified. It concentrates on personal and social functioning, and is adapted for each learner. The curriculum will be delivered using a TEACCH⁴ approach and embedded methods to meet the needs of young people with sensory difficulties.

What has the impact been?

The young people have now all enrolled at college and are progressing well. Young people and parents have provided positive feedback on the move to college and their courses. By continuing to listen to our learners and their families and respond to their views, we hope to ensure all learners successfully complete their learning programmes and go on to live positive and more independent lives.

4. TEACCH is a system used in educating and communicating with people with autism. Find out more at www.teacch.com



Top Tips

- Create opportunities to hear what learners want by arranging meetings at local schools, home visits or open days;
- Spend time with learners and their school staff before they transition into college, to learn how they work best and what's important to them; and
- Identify specific staff for learners to address concerns and questions to, and structured time to gain feedback from learners.

Contact:
Di Lloyd, Principal
dlloyd@stvincent.ac.uk / 023 9258 8311



2. Removing barriers to learning

NESCOT – General Further Education College

Charter point 2:

We meet and exceed our legal duties to make reasonable adjustments for learners with autism, through actively removing barriers to accessing learning.

What was our aim?

We wanted our curriculum and our college to be accessible to all students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and particularly those on the autistic spectrum. We felt that so often students are failed because they are inadequately prepared to move on to college. In order to do this we needed to not only meet our legal duties but go beyond the norm and be innovative in the way we approached provision for learners with additional needs.

How did we achieve it?

We know that the move from school to college can itself present a significant barrier to accessing learning, so our initial aim was to facilitate a smooth transition into college. We worked closely with our local special schools in order to understand the needs of their students, in particular a school that caters specifically for students on the autistic spectrum. This allowed us to plan appropriately for the needs of the students, and proactively design an environment that would present as few barriers to their learning as possible. For example, we set up a dedicated 'meeting and greeting' area at the college reception to facilitate a calm and routine entrance to college for students with autism.

Many of our students with autism found that the social expectations of a college environment could act as a barrier to their learning. We introduced break clubs before and during college, and a buddy and mentor system, and support systems in the classroom and outside if necessary to overcome this barrier.

We make each learning programme as accessible as possible for our learners by having a personalised curriculum, including late starts or early finishes as required. A personal tutor is available throughout the day, during breaks and before and after college to meet with students

and parents/carers to ensure any difficulties are identified and rectified early on. We use accessible timetables and feedback diaries with plenary recaps for each session to show progress and problems.

One of the key barriers to learning that some of our students had faced in the past was having staff who did not understand autism. We arranged autism awareness training for 85 members of staff across our college to improve understanding of students' needs. We also held disability awareness events to raise the profile of the difficulties faced by our autistic students among all students, and across the college.

What has the impact been?

Retention and achievement of students has increased, and enrolments are up year on year as word of our experience and expertise grows locally. Students are happy and successful and are recommending the college to their friends. Parents and carers have developed a trust in the organisation to teach and care for their young people. The department has been internally assessed as grade 1 for the last three years and the profile of the college's work is well respected amongst the local community and education providers.



Top Tips

- Work with individual learners, their families and school staff before they enter college to proactively address any barriers to learning that college may present;
- Consider the social as well as academic barriers that learners with autism may face and create accessible social opportunities; and
- Tailor the school day around the learners' needs, building in flexible breaks and start/finish times where possible.

Contact:

Lynn Reddick, Head of Preparation for Work and Life
lreddick@nescot.ac.uk / 020 8394 1731

3. Creating an ethos of inclusion

TyneMet – General Further Education College

Charter point 3:

We create a whole college culture and ethos of inclusion and high aspiration, leading to progression and positive outcomes for all learners.

What was our aim?

We have established a successful provision for learners on the autism spectrum: TyneMet's Foundation Department has been judged outstanding by Ofsted since 2002. Our next aim was to ensure that the whole college understands and recognises the rights and needs of learners with autism, and also the strengths they can bring to the whole college and the wider community.

How did we achieve it?

We believe in cultivating the aspirations of all young people, using their individual skills and strengths to set personal targets which are carefully monitored. This is achieved through outstanding teaching and learning focused on progression and personalised programmes and support to help students reach their chosen destination.

We know training is key to a deep understanding of inclusion and autism, so we introduced training for all TyneMet staff. This was to ensure all staff have an understanding of autism, and that teaching staff learned to develop inclusive teaching methods for learners with autism. Senior management have recognised the importance of the training, so all management, teaching and business support staff undertake it. The training is delivered in-house in partnership with Autism in Motion on three mandatory learning and development days and at various optional dates throughout the year.

The knock-on effect of this can be seen in the changes taking place around the college. For instance, we have created 'low arousal' classrooms in a large quiet building separate to the main college. Our staff support learners to access the wider college community at their own pace, and all resources at the college have been made accessible to students with a range of additional needs. Social interaction is supported through the use of a social room which has a Wii, board games, TV and DVD player and musical

instruments. Where required, additional learning support staff are on hand to facilitate interaction. We also run a monthly parent and carer support group, recognising the importance of broader family support for many of our learners.

We want all students at TyneMet to understand autism and include their peers. So as well as supporting learners with additional needs to access all mainstream elements of the college, we have created a page dedicated to autism awareness in our virtual learning environment, which all students and staff are enrolled onto automatically.

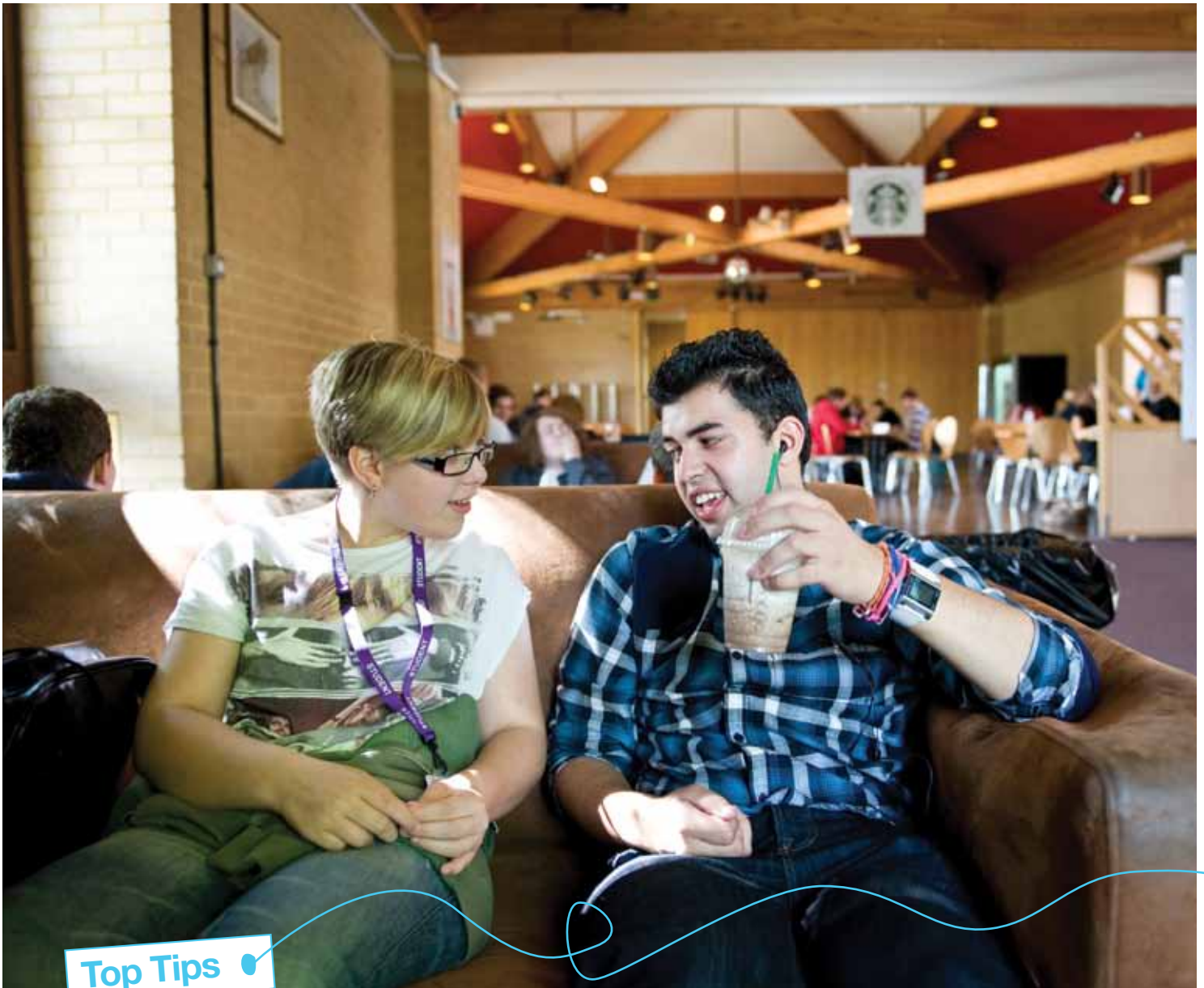
What has the impact been?

Learners successfully progress within college and the wider community onto a range of courses. Some of our learners who started in the Foundation Department are successfully completing Foundation degree courses here at the college; others have progressed onto level 2 courses in ICT, Music and Performing Arts and others have moved on to work skills courses.

Our learners have won student of the year for three years running at the annual student award ceremony. One learner won the award for outstanding contribution for his work in promoting autism awareness through a song which he wrote about autism, recorded on CD and performed at a variety of events.

This year the group has written, acted, directed and edited a silent movie 'Don't be Silent about Safeguarding'. This highly acclaimed film was shown at a conference at TyneMet and a copy of the DVD was given to each of the 140 delegates to use as a teaching aid. This group has won the Class/Group of the Year at the NT Adult Learning Awards.

Through these events and successes we have reinforced our whole college culture and ethos of inclusion and high aspiration.



Top Tips

- Include leadership teams in training on inclusion and disability equality, to ensure the culture of inclusion starts at the top and filters through the college;
- Introduce activities to raise awareness of disability equality among all learners, and build an ethos of inclusion throughout the whole student body; and
- Look at every aspect of college life — learning, socialising, gaining independence, career development — and work with students to ensure it is inclusive.

Contact:

Lisa Wilson, Course Leader
lisa.wilson@tynemet.ac.uk / 0191 229 5000

4. Supporting transitions

East Kent — General Further Education College

Charter point 4:

We effectively support transition for all learners, both from school to college and from college into living, learning, and working as independently as possible.

What was our aim?

East Kent College aims to meet the needs of all young people on the autistic spectrum who wish to be educated at their local college. Early intervention is vital to their transition into college, and partnerships with employers and other agencies are vital to their transition from college into a positive adult life. Support from senior management, including the funding priority they placed on our work, has been critical to the successes our learners have achieved.

How did we achieve it?

Our additional learning support facilitators built up links with all local specialist schools, ensuring the college is invited along to important events such as Year 10 and 11 parents' evenings and reviews. At Year 11, the focus is on learning difficulty assessments, to ensure the right provision is in place for each young person in good time. We offer coffee mornings or meetings with students and their parents at home — whatever makes it easier for them to discuss what they want from further education.

Last year our facilitators attended over 50 local school reviews, identifying those students that would require supported transitional activities. Early profiling is therefore undertaken with students, parents and staff, to design a personalised programme of additional support for the student well before their move into college. This includes taster sessions at the college.

An essential part of the transition process involves learning support practitioners engaging with students and their school staff, to build on 'what works' and develop effective strategies for when they move onto college. Continuity of staff through this process helps ensure the transition is a smooth one.

A designated 'Hub' area is currently in development to aid access to the entire college campus for students. The area will be accessible to those students on the autistic spectrum and with a high level of anxiety. The 'Hub' will be staffed at all times by those with the appropriate skills. Built into the 'Hub' will be a review process supporting students' transition into different areas within the college, dependent on their progress. Similarly, we support our learners to progress from heavily supported courses into more independent and mainstream learning at the pace which suits them.

The transition out of college and into work and/or independent living is even more important for our learners. Over the past two years, the College has established the award-winning Project Search employment programme, delivered at Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital in Margate. This is a partnership with Kent Supported Employment and the East Kent Hospital Trust. We work very closely with advisors such as Connexions, providing quality support for learners throughout this process. We are looking to expand this by working with more employers and engaging with agencies such as the Shaw Trust.

What has the impact been?

Our intake of learners with disabilities, including autism, has increased over recent years, as have the retention and success rates for these learners. Through the 'Bright Futures' project we have helped support more of our learners with additional needs into paid work than ever before.

We were selected by the Department for Education to pilot a Supported Internships scheme, providing a range of sustainable employment opportunities for students with a high level of learning difficulties and disabilities. The programme will provide supported work-based training for these students, whatever their level of ability.



Top Tips

- Build strong links with local schools and attend parents evenings and reviews for students from Year 9 onwards, so transition planning and partnership work can start early;
- Offer taster sessions at your college, so that learners can try different courses and get a real sense of college life, and so that you can learn about the aspirations and needs of your potential students; and
- Build relationships with local employers, supported employment providers, and adult services, so that you can support a successful transition out of college and into work, higher education or independent living.

Contact:

Colleen Flegg, Additional Learning Support Facilitator
colleen.flegg@eastkent.ac.uk / 01843 605040

5. Developing your workforce

Weston — General Further Education College

Charter point 5:

We ensure all college staff have an understanding of autism, and that teaching staff draw on specialist expertise to effectively adapt the curriculum, and develop inclusive teaching methods for learners with autism.

What was our aim?

Our aim was two-fold: Firstly, to provide a high quality inclusive curriculum to meet the needs of all learners wherever they are on the autism spectrum and secondly, to develop a well trained workforce, equipped to deal with the challenges this might present.

How did we achieve it?

Weston College has always had a high level of commitment to training. All generic learning support assistants undertake a Level 2 course initially and then progress to Level 3 'Supporting people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities', run by the college. However, it was deemed that this training still did not address the challenges presented by the increasing numbers of learners with complex and multiple needs who required a more specialist, in-depth understanding.

In response to this, the 'Foundation degree in Inclusive Practice' was developed by Weston College staff in conjunction with the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol). This bespoke training is practice-based, and enables participants to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding within the context of their everyday work and experience. It is a two year programme delivered at Weston College, one day per week, with their professional practice being observed through the working week. Participants have the option to convert to a BA Hons if a third year is undertaken.

The degree provides the knowledge, understanding and skills needed when working in the field of learning difficulty and disability. This includes the option to specialise in working with young people with autism. A number of our support staff have chosen to undertake the training. The specialist staff we develop through the programme support other staff across the college to develop inclusive teaching methods. This often has a positive effect on teaching and learning for all students, not just those with identified disabilities.

We invested heavily in developing the Foundation Degree and building a good partnership with UWE Bristol, as there is no additional funding. We are happy to share good practice and this training with other colleges through a franchise model.

What has the impact been?

This is a highly effective and innovative approach to providing support, which promotes effective partnership arrangements between tutors and learning support assistants. It targets specialist support effectively and provides a unique career structure for support staff. Not only does it result in significantly improved achievements for learners but it is also highly efficient, making the best use of experienced and talented staff to maximise learning and develop inclusive teaching practice.

The quality of support ensures that learners with autism can be as independent as possible. By supporting tutors to adopt strategies and approaches which meet needs, such as making use of assistive technology or adjusting delivery style, learners are able to access the curriculum with less 'physical support'. As a result the support costs typically reduce over time, preparing learners successfully for life beyond college and, in many cases, for higher education.

Numbers of students on the autism spectrum at Weston College have increased from 10 to 102 in five years and staff qualified in autism have increased from one to 26. This has impacted significantly on retention and achievement, which is now 100%, for learners with autism. This is particularly significant considering the high percentage of this cohort who previously fell into the 'not in education, employment or training' category.

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5. Find out about the Autism Education Trust and their free autism training at www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk
 6. More information about the Learning and Skills Improvement Service is at www.lsis.org.uk



Top Tips

- Introduce a basic level of autism awareness training for all college staff. You may be able to access this free of charge from providers such as the Autism Education Trust⁵;
- Work with a local training provider to deliver more specialist training for staff who work closely with learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Colleges such as Weston and organisations like the Learning and Skills Improvement Service⁶ have training models and courses you may be able to access; and
- Share expertise across your college by building in time for staff with specialist training to support other staff in developing inclusive teaching methods and an accessible curriculum and assessment structure.

Contact:

Barbara Titmuss, Advanced Practitioner (Autism) and
Programme Leader FdA Inclusive Practice; MA Education
barbara.titmuss@weston.ac.uk / 01934 411411



6. Enabling progression through flexible approaches

Thornbeck — Independent Specialist College

Charter point 6:

We adopt a flexible approach, enabling learners with autism to progress and gain meaningful qualifications in the settings and timeframes that work best for them.

What was our aim?

At Thornbeck we aim to work in partnership to strengthen the capacity of providers in the North East to meet the needs of learners with autism, learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Our ultimate aim is to support young people with autism in our region to reach the best possible outcomes for them, including employment and independent living.

How did we achieve it?

Thornbeck College is an Independent Specialist College based in Durham that provides person-centred learning programmes for individuals with autism, learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college works closely with local authorities to develop and deliver local strategies. We believe it is crucial that provision matches the individual requirements of each learner.

Inclusive learning is central to our mission. The college implements proactive strategies to provide inclusive learning by focussing on meeting the needs of individual learners. We avoid a viewpoint which locates the disability within the learner, and instead work on our capacity to understand and adapt to the learners' requirements. We develop sustainable partnerships with a range of agencies, so that we can be as flexible as possible in order to improve outcomes for learners.

We create personalised destination-led learning programmes based on learners' aspirations and needs and their multi-agency assessments. The programmes are captured in person-centred learning plans, which empower learners to be actively involved in setting targets and recording their progress and achievements.

For example, one of our learners created an electronic person-centred learning plan to identify his aspirations. This allowed him to imagine his future and communicate his long term goals through a visual rather than a verbal approach. He wanted to gain confidence handling money, be able to make himself snacks, learn how to travel using

public transport and improve his reading, writing and IT skills. He also wanted to develop skills and a qualification in retail to gain employment. He received support from a multi-disciplinary team including his parents, key tutors, learning support assistants, Connexions, employers and a speech and language therapist. He has achieved a BTEC Level 2 in retail, is working towards his Level 3, and is undertaking a one year internship with a local employer.

We work flexibly to enable all learners to develop employability skills. This includes having a practical curriculum, and teaching learners in realistic work environments and innovative social enterprises. Our learners receive careers information, and advice and guidance to develop employability skills such as timekeeping and attendance, dressing appropriately, working as part of a team, applying for jobs and interview techniques.

Learner involvement is given a high priority. The views of all learners are systematically collected and acted upon to influence organisational development and quality improvement. We are flexible about where learning takes place. For example, many of our students undertake travel training in the community, to help them get the skills they need to travel to and from college and work independently.

What has the impact been?

100% of our learners continue to make a positive contribution within the local community and interact with a mix of people, which is crucial to their personal and social development.

We have developed sustainable partnerships with schools, colleges, local authorities, housing associations, employers and local communities. This has led to tangible benefits: improving outcomes for learners, promoting social and economic inclusion and well-being, enriching lives and demonstrating value for money. In addition, we have strengthened regional and local capacity and reduced the need for learners to travel out of county.



Top Tips

- Be as flexible as possible in designing learning programmes, so that you are led by the aspirations and needs of each individual learner, rather than by structures within the college;
- Use electronic or picture based person-centred learning plans for students who learn best through visual rather than verbal methods; and
- Be open-minded about where learning takes place. Develop partnerships with employers and social enterprises so that students who struggle to transfer learning between environments can learn 'on the job' rather than in college.

Contact:
Christine Dempster, Principal
chris.dempster@ne-as.org.uk / 0191 410 9974

**north east
autism society**
Thornbeck College

7. Social support

Hereward – General Further Education College

Charter point 7:

We run a social support programme, developed in partnership with external agencies, to enable learners to enjoy the broader social life of their setting and community.

What was our aim?

We wanted to provide a safe environment where students can develop new social, communication and listening skills, and develop their self-awareness and identity. Our aim is to encourage students to build their confidence in an unstructured but supervised environment, and ultimately to enjoy their broader social and community life.

How did we achieve it?

We started an Aspergers social group at Hereward a number of years ago, run by members of staff from the mentor team at the college. It has now been expanded to two groups, each of which meets weekly at lunchtimes. Some of the project work has been extended through the rest of the curriculum and other settings, including Friday afternoon enrichment sessions.

The groups are led by students wherever possible. Students are encouraged to work together to put across their opinions and thoughts in an appropriate time and manner, whilst learning to compromise, listen to others, empathise and help others.

Staff members enable students to develop the skills needed to run their own group as this gives them a sense of ownership. Staff encourage students to take a full and active part in the decision making process around what activities and work the group will be doing throughout the year.

From this base, the learners have progressed to using their social skills with other students, within other organisations and within the local community. Students initiated a joint project with Coventry University staff and students to share understanding about autism and what it meant to them. The 'Our Autism in Pictures' project involved students using their recently developed skills to hold a number of off-site meetings with students from Coventry University to plan their work.

The students have also attended a number of events and activities using their independence and social skills, such as going to art galleries. One of the students also recently addressed an audience of over 100 professionals from Coventry City Council who were attending an autism awareness event.

What has the impact been?

The participation, development and enjoyment of the students has been evident. Students have become more confident, willing to share ideas, support each other and to take on new and exciting challenges.

Examples of this have been students from the group travelling to London for two days to represent the College at the Autism Show at the Excel Centre, and producing a photographic exhibition in conjunction with Coventry University to showcase 'Our Autism in Pictures'. The students gained further confidence and skills from this experience, whilst working on the College stand where they had to deal with enquiries from members of the public and other professionals.

Many students within the group have developed new friendships which have grown independently of the group. One student has now set up his own social group, called the Animation Club, which has become an attraction for the College wide student population.



Top Tips

- Encourage learners to discuss and design the kinds of social opportunities they would like to take part in, and practice them together in a supported environment;
- Consider a gradual approach, moving from small, supported social situations towards unstructured social time on the broader college campus; and
- Creating a project — such as a photography exhibition — can give learners a focus for working together outside usual college settings, and for engaging with others in the college and the wider community.

Contact:

Jon Clugston, Vice Principal
Student Independence and Progression,
Jon.Clugston@hereward.ac.uk / 024 7646 1231

8. Design for inclusion

Burton and South Derbyshire — General Further Education College

Charter point 8:

We follow the principles of design for inclusion in developing the environment, facilities and social space of our college.

What was our aim?

Our aim is to create an inclusive environment in our college where all learners can thrive, particularly those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. We want to ensure every area of college life is accessible to each learner.

How did we achieve it?

Our principal places a great priority on inclusion and wants to create a college that is truly accessible for all learners. This has filtered through all staff, to create a whole college ethos of inclusion. It means that all our building or renovation projects in recent years have had accessibility built into them from the very start.

We haven't had any specific funding for inclusive building projects; we have just prioritised this within our existing budgets. Often the things that improve accessibility have little or no cost. We always seek views from the 'experts' — our staff and learners — when developing our environment, to ensure it can be as accessible as possible.

We have chill-out rooms that are built to be accessible to all learners with additional needs, including autism. They are decorated in soft colours, textures and fittings which reduce anxiety and create a stress-free environment. We also have a quieter social area, which many of our learners with autism enjoy. Staff are on hand at a suitable distance to provide support if needed.

The main social areas of the college are accessible too. Our cafeteria is designed in themed colours to aid navigation. There are clearly identified pedestrian walkways, so that we avoid crowding and jostling. Our corridors and departments are also painted in coloured themes, to help learners with visual learning styles move around the college more easily without support.

Little things that make a big difference include having photo boards outside each staff room to show learners where to find staff, and improving the signage so that there are directions at every point you could need them. We also have quiet rooms around the college that learners can use at any time if they find the rest of the college space too noisy.

We have good local transport links, which helps with travel training for our pupils. Many learners are initially supported to and from buses to make their journey into college, and this support can then drop away as learners become more independent.

We have just developed a new autism unit on our campus, in partnership with local special schools. It has been designed to provide transition from a special school environment into potentially mainstream college courses. It should allow learners to adjust to change incrementally and access opportunities within college at their own pace.

What has the impact been?

The most obvious impact is watching the learners become more independent. We find learners need less support from staff.

The additional independence our environment offers also leads to greater peer support between learners with disabilities. More experienced learners show their younger peers how to use the facilities, and support each other around the college, which is mutually beneficial and helps build relationships among students.

Our ethos of inclusion creates a virtuous circle. All staff — from finance to facilities — now respond positively when asked to adapt something or find funding in order to support inclusion.



Top Tips

- Gain a commitment from your college leaders that accessibility will be integral to decisions on building renovation and design;
- Seek the views of learners about how the built environment impacts on their learning, and use the principals of 'Inclusion by Design'; and
- Often simple and cost neutral measures can make a big difference to learners. Clear signage and uncluttered spaces may benefit all students.

Contact:

Margot Nicolle, Course Leader,
Learning for Life,
margot.nicolle@bsdc.ac.uk / 01283 49 4400

**Burton and
South Derbyshire
College**

Conclusion

A number of themes are consistent across the good practice examples in this guide:

- Start planning early, based on the aspirations, views and needs of each learner;
- Develop expertise and partnerships within your community to improve your offer; and
- Keep a relentless focus on outcomes and destinations including employment and independence.

This guide demonstrates the priority that college leaders, staff, and Ministers increasingly place on improving the further education offer for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The investment of time, effort and resources shown by the principals of the colleges featured here are a testament to the tangible benefits of becoming more inclusive. These include attracting a new cohort of learners, improving retention and achievement rates, and saving substantial funding on support costs by enabling learners to become more independent.

With new legal duties on colleges to admit and support learners with disabilities being proposed from 2014, there has never been a better time to become an inclusive learning provider.

Sign our Charter

Please demonstrate your commitment to disabled learners by signing up to the Ambitious about Autism College Inclusion Charter now at:
www.AmbitiousAboutAutism.org.uk/collegecharter



“I have made lots of friends at college and it’s nice to know that my support worker is there if I need her. At times I do still feel scared and anxious, but I know it can be sorted out.”

Learner

Further resources

We know lots of colleges want to deliver better and more inclusive education for young disabled people. The college staff who led the inclusion work set out in this guide have kindly provided their contact details alongside each example. Please feel free to contact them for further information and to share learning.

Here are some links to further examples, information and support for college leaders and staff.

- Watch our short films and read more examples of what works in inclusive learning from students, families, college staff and principals at: www.AmbitiousAboutAutism.org.uk/finishedatschool
- Visit the Excellence Gateway which provides easy access to thousands of resources to support your professional development in the further education and skills sector: www.excellencegateway.org.uk
- Getting learning support right is crucial. There are resources specifically about the work of the Enhancement of Learning Support project at www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/17215
- Sign up for the Association of Colleges' learners with learning difficulties and disabilities briefing through their website: www.aoc.co.uk
- Sign up to receive updates from the Learning Difficulties Information Network run by NIACE, by emailing YolaJ@niace.org.uk
- Find out about the Autism Education Trust and their free autism training for education staff at www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk
- Read and use the principals of 'Inclusion by Design' to ensure your learning spaces are as accessible as possible. You can find the publication at: <http://bit.ly/o9Ed7Q>
- The Achievement for All 3As charity is developing a programme to improve outcomes for learners with additional needs in further education. Find out more at www.afa3as.org.uk
- Email us at supportfas@ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk if you want more information or consultancy support for improving accessibility in your college. We may also be able to put you in touch with a partner college in your area who can support you.





“I’ve gained confidence — reached out for a bit of myself, and because of the support to learn, I’ve been able to be me.”

Learner

Address The Pears National Centre for Autism Education,
Woodside Avenue, London N10 3JA

Telephone 020 8815 5444

Email info@AmbitiousAboutAutism.org.uk

Website www.AmbitiousAboutAutism.org.uk

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