

# What can college offer young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities?



## What do colleges do?

Colleges prepare their students for life beyond college. They help their students to develop the skills they will need in their careers and/or for higher education and as active citizens in their own communities. They also provide a valuable stepping-stone between school and adult life. This can be especially helpful for young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) who need a staged progression from the highly supportive environment of school into their lives 'in the real world' and beyond full-time education.

**“Being at College changed my life, the support I received was truly incredible and definitely helped me to achieve.”**



# What types of college are there?

There are three main types of college: general further education (GFE) colleges, sixth form colleges and specialist further education colleges. Most young people with SEND go to a GFE college.

**1) General further education (GFE) colleges** typically cater for a wide range of students, both young people and adults, on courses from Entry level through to degree level in some cases. Some have multiple sites and large campuses but these are often organised into smaller zones, so that individual students do not have to spend time moving between buildings

They run courses in a wide range of vocational areas, like construction, catering, hair and beauty or health and social care. They have specialised facilities and many of their teachers also have industry experience. A small number of colleges specialise in a particular vocational area like land-based studies. Some also offer A levels. Almost all general FE colleges have a department specifically focused on providing programmes for students with SEND. Some work mainly with students with moderate or severe learning difficulties but increasingly general FE colleges are also offering provision for students with profound and multiple learning difficulties and more complex needs. Staff working in these departments will be skilled in teaching and supporting these students. Teams may include therapists as well as teachers and learning support assistants. All general further education colleges have a learning support department which is responsible for ensuring appropriate support is in place for students with SEND on courses across the college.

**2) Sixth form colleges** provide for 16 – 19 year olds, with the possibility of extending beyond 19 for young people with an Education Health and Care (EHC) Plan, who need a little extra time to complete their course.

They offer a wide range of A levels with many also running vocational courses like the new T levels. They tend to focus on providing qualifications at level 3 (that is A level-standard) and level 2 (GCSE-standard) but some run courses at lower levels, too. Like general FE colleges, they will have a learning support department to support students with SEND throughout the college.





**“I feel equal to other people, the college gives me a chance to do the same as everyone else”**

**3) Specialist further education colleges** specialise in meeting the needs of young people aged 16 – 25 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and cater only for these students. Some colleges specialise in supporting students with a particular type of need, e.g. autism or visual impairment.

Specialist college students generally have more complex needs or a lower incidence SEN and almost always have an EHC Plan. The highly skilled staff work together in multi-disciplinary teams including education, health (nurses and therapists) and care professionals, to plan and deliver students’ programmes and monitor their progress

Specialist colleges tend to have a smaller number of students. Many, though not all, will be located on smaller campuses. Some specialist colleges offer residential places or supported living options on site, with placements of between 36 and 52 weeks per year; almost all offer day places. They usually have a smaller range of courses on offer than a general FE or sixth form college, reflecting the needs of the particular student groups they serve, although they have the flexibility to offer a high degree of personalisation.

Some specialist colleges have a partnership arrangement with a local GFE college, enabling students to access a particular course at the partner college (e.g. a BTEC or an A level) while undertaking the rest of their programme in the specialist setting.

## What types of courses do colleges offer?

All courses for 16 – 19 year olds and 19 – 25 year olds with an EHC Plan are known as 'study programmes'. They will usually include at least one qualification, some work experience and some enrichment activities like sports, clubs and societies and trips. All study programmes for 16 – 19 or 19 – 25 year olds include aspects of English and maths if the young person has not yet got a GCSE in the subject at grade 4 or above. If they are capable of achieving an English or maths GCSE, then they will be supported to do that, but other types of qualifications are also available. Some students with SEND will not take an English or maths qualification at all but will work towards personalised English and maths targets instead.

Many young people with SEND, both those with and without an EHC Plan, starting out in further education will join their peers on a vocational or academic course and achieve qualifications such as A levels, the new T levels, BTECs or other vocational certificates. Alternatively, they might do an apprenticeship, in which case, the college will provide the necessary training for the young person. Colleges will put in additional support to ensure that students with SEND are able to access and make progress on all of these courses. They will also ensure that reasonable adjustments are in place to enable students to have fair access to assessments and achieve their qualifications.

Some young people with SEND may need a more targeted course especially designed for people with a learning difficulty or disability. These courses are usually simply called 'Study Programmes' but sometimes they might be referred to as 'Foundation Learning', 'Inclusive Learning', 'Supported Learning' or 'Personalised' Programmes. They may or may not include qualifications.



## What do courses targeted at young people with SEND look like?



Courses – or study programmes - specifically designed for young people with SEND may focus primarily on preparation for employment or on building skills to increase independence or on a combination of these. Most colleges use the four preparing for adulthood outcomes (employment, independent living, community inclusion and health) to help them plan a broad and balanced curriculum for each individual. Where a young person has an EHC plan, their programme will be tailored to ensure it addresses the outcomes in their plan.

Study programmes that focus on preparation for employment may offer a taste of different vocational areas with students able to access the different specialist facilities in the college, or focus on a specific area, such as hospitality and catering. They will include an element of work experience or work placement, usually with an external employer, and there will be a strong focus on developing skills and behaviours for work. Many colleges now offer supported internships where the young person spends most of their time in the workplace with the support of a job coach, as they learn the skills they need for one or more particular job roles. Some of these preparation for employment courses may lead to qualifications at Entry level or level 1, for example in employability skills or retail.

Study programmes designed to build independence are often highly personalised to match the specific needs of the individual, with every student having a slightly different programme. There will almost always be a strong focus on communication skills, including expressing preferences and making choices and decisions, to enable the young people to become more active agents in their own lives. Programmes might also include skills such as independent travel, looking after your own home, healthy eating and exercise, making friends and managing relationships, shopping, handling money, personal and online safety, directing your own support, or using community facilities. While students will have a classroom base, they will usually spend a considerable proportion of their learning time out in the community or in other settings on the college site, such as the college shop, café or other social enterprise. They will typically be engaged in group activities with a strong emphasis on learning through doing. Some of these programmes may lead to qualifications at Entry level, for example in skills for independent living.

## How long is a college course?

Most further education courses last for one or two years. Young people can move on from one course to another while they are at college, so long as they are continuing to make progress. All young people aged between 16 – 19 are entitled to two years of publicly funded education or training.

Those with an EHC Plan may need longer to complete their course. They can continue to be publicly funded until they have achieved the education and training outcomes in their EHC Plan, provided they are under the age of 25, the outcomes remain relevant, and they are still making progress towards them. Typically, young people with an EHC Plan spend no more than three years in an FE college before moving onto their next step.

**“You have inspired me to push myself to the limit so I can achieve my qualifications. You did not just prepare me academically but you have also prepared me for whatever life has in store for me.”**

**“I feel I am getting my confidence back”**



# What are the key differences between school and college for young people with SEND?

- Courses at college tend to focus very strongly on preparing students for adult life, including employment for most young people. The content of their study programme will be determined by their post-college progression goals. Much of their learning may take place out of the classroom, e.g. in a workshop, a social enterprise, the workplace or the wider community. The variety of subject areas on offer at college is usually much greater than at school.
- College students are treated as young adults. For example, they may be supported to assess risks for themselves, rather than simply be protected from them. There is a more equal relationship between teacher and student. For example, students will typically address staff by their first names.
- While college students with SEND will have access to plenty of support, there will be a strong emphasis on working towards making each young person as independent as possible. This will happen in a gradual way, with support being reduced over time, wherever possible, as the young person's independence grows.
- Most college courses are based on 3 or 4-day-a-week provision rather than 5-day provision. Time spent in college can be combined with other activities such as volunteering, work placement or pursuing other interests in the local community.
- Schools cannot keep young people after the age of 19. However, specialist colleges and some sixth form colleges can take students up to the age of 25, if appropriate, and there is no upper age limit in a general FE college. This means that if a young person aged 19 is partway through their course and continuing to make progress towards the educational outcomes in their EHC Plan, they can stay on at college to complete their course and achieve their outcomes. Almost all young people who remain on course beyond the age of 19 complete their further education by the age of 23, with many finishing aged 20 or 21.

This guidance was put together by representatives from the 19 local authorities in the South East of England and from general and specialist FE colleges across the region. It was first published in 2021.

A huge thank you to Chichester College Group, St John's College, North Kent College and Activate Learning for the use of images and to the young people for their insightful comments.

