

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymchwiliad i effaith argyfwng Covid-19 ar blant
a phobl ifanc yng Nghymru

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on
children and young people in Wales

COV 200
Ymateb gan: Natspec

COV 200
Response from: Natspec

I am writing on behalf of Natspec, the membership association for organisations which offer specialist further education (FE) for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. We represent seven colleges in Wales which provide for 300 students with complex needs.

In response to your request for information on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on children and young people in Wales, we would like to provide some feedback on issues relating to young people at specialist colleges. In particular, we would like to bring to your attention the exclusion of these young people from Welsh Government education-related guidance, leaving colleges without support and risking the safety of staff and students.

Students from Wales at specialist colleges are entirely funded by the Welsh Government, so we would expect specialist colleges to be mentioned as one of the providers in the FE guidance, with some cross-referencing to any guidance for specialist settings, in line with the approach taken by the Department for Education with regard to specialist colleges in England.

Specialist colleges remained open throughout the Spring and Summer terms in order to provide continuing on-site education for students who would be more vulnerable at home than in college. They also provided home learning, both by digital means and through the provision of home learning packs to those students who remained at home.

Staff at specialist colleges have worked all year to keep learners safe, but have been hindered significantly by the lack of guidance as to how they should operate.

In the absence of education-related guidance, specialist colleges, many of whom provide residential placements, continue to deal with the ramifications of the pandemic. In doing so they are necessarily seeking guidance from bodies willing to provide it including Public Health Wales, Social Care Wales and Environmental Health. It is ever more apparent that the consequences of having no education-related guidance is compounding the challenges they have in relation to curriculum delivery. We believe that Welsh Government should provide guidance for this group of Welsh learners as it has done across all other aspects of post-16 provision of further education in Wales.

The continued lack of guidance from Welsh Government presents a very real inequity for this group of learners and the staff working at specialist colleges, which have remained open for the duration of the pandemic and continued to provide an education to some of the most vulnerable students in Wales despite significant challenges.

It is unclear to us why specialist colleges appear to be the only state-funded institutions that have been asked to operate without guidance from the Welsh government.

We note that [independent boarding and residential special schools](#) in Wales have been provided with guidance and that this document clearly states it is not of relevance to FE colleges. We also note the guidance for [vulnerable and disadvantaged learners](#) references children and young people with SEN, but then excludes specialist colleges from the list of providers for whom the guidance is targeted.

Where guidance has been provided to [FE colleges](#), it is clear that references to learners with ALN and those described as '*studying Independent Living Skills*' are of no relevance to specialist further education colleges.

As a representative of Welsh specialist further education colleges, we have been raising this matter with Welsh Government since March. We appreciate that Ministers are extraordinarily busy and that this cohort of Welsh learners is comparatively small. We don't believe however, that the nature of this group's additional learning provision warrants exclusion from arrangements for the safe delivery of learning.

We urge the committee to include this important area of state-funded education in all policy areas, both during and after the current COVID-19 crisis.