Thematic Review:

Meeting the support needs of learners in Scotland’s colleges

20 February 2025

Introduction

The support needs of learners in Scotland’s colleges are varied and complex. Some learners require support for declared disabilities and conditions, whilst others are coping with the impact of poverty or chaotic lifestyles. Increasingly, learners present with multiple and complex needs. The Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected colleges’ capacity to meet the needs of learners, including those who require additional support to engage fully in learning.

# Throughout the pandemic the number of learners declaring one or more additional support needs increased exponentially. In academic year (AY) 2022-23, the proportion of Scottish Funding Council (SFC) credits delivered nationally to learners with a declared disability was 27%. This is approximately a 5% rise on pre-pandemic levels. 17% of learners enrolled in Scottish colleges have a declared mental health condition. However, many learners remain reluctant to declare their disability or physical or mental health condition, and consequently start their programmes without seeking the support they need. These additional needs can often stem from social or emotional factors related to the home environment, poverty or personal circumstances.

Reports[[1]](#footnote-1), [[2]](#footnote-2) published over the last few years suggest that there are a number of themes that support learning pathways for learners with additional needs. These are:

1. Well-planned personalised progression pathways which are relevant and have credibility.
2. Supportive and effective transitions available from school to college and from college onwards.
3. The availability and currency of shared services and partnerships and the impact of these on college learners.

This report examines how colleges are addressing these challenges, focusing on key areas such as:

# planning for support to meet learner needs;

# identifying learners’ additional support needs;

* delivering support;
* supporting transition to further learning and employment;
* partnership working;
* evaluating the impact of additional support; and,
* equity, attainment and achievement.

Drawing on recent data and thematic insights, it highlights effective practices and areas for improvement, providing recommendations to enhance learner outcomes in the post-pandemic landscape.

Background

SFC use a number of measures to evaluate rates of recruitment, retention, attainment and progression for all learners, including those with additional needs. This data indicates that during the pandemic, the number of learners withdrawing from programmes increased and was impacted by a range of factors. These included mental health and wellbeing; remote and digital learning fatigue; a lack of confidence in undertaking assessments; insufficient opportunity to learn and interact, face-to-face with peers and lecturers; reduced work placement opportunities; caring and other personal commitments; and financial pressures. This serves to highlight the impact of an increasingly diverse range of needs on learners’ ability to sustain their learning in colleges. At the end of the pandemic, the return to face-to-face tuition in colleges saw an increase in the number of learners declaring additional support needs.

The profile of learners attending college in Scotland has changed significantly in the last few years. Currently, around half of all learners at college are aged 16 to 24 years, and just over a quarter of school leavers enter full-time college provision. This shift has increased the demand for colleges to address the diverse needs of learners.

Previous national reports[[3]](#footnote-3), [[4]](#footnote-4) on meeting the additional needs of school-age learners identify the high number of learners requiring additional support who progress to college programmes from school. This is reflected elsewhere in the United Kingdom. For example, Ofsted reported[[5]](#footnote-5) in 2022 that in England:

“*In many cases, learners’ behaviour was more challenging than usual, particularly that of young learners who had enrolled directly from school. Disruption towards the end of this cohort’s education had resulted in more disruptive and juvenile behaviour. During classes, some learners struggled to concentrate and learn with their peers. Many learners were experiencing mental health problems, including anxiety about taking external examinations.”*

The [2023 Scottish Pupil Census](https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-census-supplementary-statistics/) indicates that the proportion of pupils on the school roll with identified additional support needs, is 42.9%, an increase of 8.3% in five years. Given the numbers of school leavers entering college provision, a growing proportion of whom have an identified additional support need, the demand for colleges to meet learners’ additional needs is increasing.

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Methodology and approach

HM Inspectors visited eight colleges across Scotland to learn about how colleges are meeting the support needs of learners. The colleges selected took account of variations in college scale and size and included urban, rural, specialist and non-specialist colleges, colleges with different regional structures and those that are single or multi-campus. Fieldwork took place in the first half of 2024.

HM Inspectors drew on the quality indicators and themes from the [*How Good is Our College* (HGIOC)](https://education.gov.scot/media/rxanmgiz/frwk18-how-good-is-our-college151216.pdf) framework to focus discussions with staff and key stakeholders.

For the purposes of this report the term ‘additional support’ refers to support required due to a recognised barrier to learning. This includes, for example: dyslexia; dyspraxia; or mental ill health. However, support is increasingly required to also meet the wider needs of learners who do not have a declared disability. Additional support encompasses a very broad range of situations and conditions that vary considerably in longevity, stability, and complexity.

Colleges also deliver provision for learners who have profound and complex needs, who undertake unique and bespoke academic progression and career pathways. This report does not include consideration of provision for this learner group.

During visits, HM Inspectors engaged in professional dialogue with managers and staff in support and curriculum roles, learners, and external partners. The team considered:

* The effectiveness of arrangements to meet the needs of learners who require support;
* Partnership working internally and with external agencies to support learners who have support needs to transition to work or further learning;
* Progression pathways for learners who have additional needs to employment or further learning; and,
* Learner views on the planning and delivery of support services.

Summary of findings

Planning for support to meet learner needs

All colleges highlight a significant increase in the level and severity of learners’ additional needs over recent years. Staff cited a range of issues affecting learners: a lack of socialisation skills; anxiety disorders; attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other recognised conditions; erratic concentration and focus; eating disorders; poverty; and family breakdown.

All colleges reflect extensively on the provision of support for learners who have additional needs and the capacity of the college to meet these needs. Reduced college budgets mean that in most cases, colleges have reviewed and refocused staffing levels whilst attempting to maintain the delivery of their support services. Managers indicate that further reductions in budgets will affect staffing and resource capacity within support functions, and in the levels of support available. This will impede efforts to improve learner outcomes or potentially contribute to further decline in outcomes for some groups of learners.

From 2022, funding for mental health counselling was available to all Scottish colleges for a period of two years. The demand for this support continues to increase. Colleges recognise the potential impact that any reduction in this service may have on learner recruitment and performance, and many have chosen to continue mental health counselling services through alternative sources of funding. In all colleges, mental health first aiders are available to help and provide guidance to those experiencing mental health challenges. However, continued funding for this provision is not guaranteed.

All colleges have effective and comprehensive strategies in place to support learners

who have multiple additional needs. In many cases, strategies are co-designed with learners, college staff and external partners to address all aspects of learners’ engagement at college. Almost all colleges screen and assess the core skills of learners at the start of programmes and use this information to place learners on the appropriate level of study.

In all colleges, managers use data effectively to identify the known demand for additional support and the impact of these services on learner performance. This has resulted in many colleges investing in resources, structures, and staffing to support learners prior to, and throughout their programme. Staff support roles vary in terms of specific duties, but typically include:

* Learning support advisors (LSA) who support delivery of personal learning support plans (PLSPs) for learners and access to specialist equipment, reasonable adjustments to materials or classroom assistance, including scribes.
* Learner development workers (LDW) who meet regularly with individual learners to discuss and review the impact of additional support on the learning experience.
* Personal academic tutors (PAT) who refer individual learners to the student guidance and support team, from where PLSPs are initiated and conveyed to curriculum staff.
* Personal tutors, who support individual learners to develop strategies and techniques to address specific needs and accommodate preferred learning approaches.

Some colleges have a number of learning centres that are distributed across often disparate and remote local communities. The role of the local centre manager or equivalent is instrumental in identifying additional needs quickly to ensure learners are able to access prompt and responsive support. Learners highlight that staff are proactive and work well as a team to identify issues at an early stage and coordinate support to assist learners to complete their programme.

Identifying learners’ additional support needs

Over the last three years there has been a 30% increase in the number of college learners requiring PLSPs. This increase in demand creates significant pressure on colleges to respond to and meet the needs of more learners. It is important to note that the rise in PLSPs is common to all types of college; small, large, multi-campus, urban and rural.

In one college, the number of full-time learners with a PSLP increased from 14% in 2020-21 to 37% in 2023-24. In the same college, the number of full-time learners in receipt of hardship funding increased from 6% in 2020-21 to 19% in 2023-24.

Increasingly, colleges use arrangements to identify the capacity of each learner to complete their programme successfully, either on application or during their programme of study. In most colleges,this is supported by a ‘fitness to studypolicy’ or similar. Staff identify learner attributes or behaviours that may impact on a learner’s ability to engage in learning, or when mental health is presenting a risk of withdrawal or non-attainment. Staff engaging directly with learners consider this effective for initiating and mobilising support quickly to help learners to stay on course and complete their programme successfully.

All colleges provide learners with multiple opportunities throughout application and enrolment arrangements to declare additional needs. In all colleges, the information disclosed by learners on enrolment who choose to do so, is shared with support services. All learners who disclose an additional need are invited to a helpful and reassuring meeting with a member of staff. Following this initial meeting, staff produce an individualised plan identifying the types of support the learner will require. In most cases, learner support staff and course tutors meet regularly to review the impact of support on the engagement and progress of learners. However, this practice is variable across colleges. For a variety of reasons some learners choose not to disclose their additional needs at application or enrolment. These include the desire for a ‘fresh start,’ lack of awareness of the support available or how to access it, or a perceived stigma around admitting to having additional support needs. As a consequence, support needs can go undiscovered until the learner seeks help, or a member of staff identifies issues around progress, performance or behaviour in class.

In most colleges, teaching staff are able to identify learners with additional needs through information contained in the class register. However, in a few colleges, learners with additional needs are not identified clearly for staff on class lists or registers. This limits the ability of individual teaching staff to respond appropriately to meet the needs of these learners at an early stage in their programme.

Many colleges operate across and within multiple local authorities to deliver part-time vocational programmes to senior phase learners from secondary schools. One college provides school-college programmes for 36 schools spread across several local authority areas. Many of these learners have additional support needs that have been identified at school. In a few regions, arrangements for sharing transition data between schools and the colleges work well. For example, at one college, learners from one secondary school have a pupil support officer who works with college staff to plan curriculum pathways for school leavers.

However, this information is often not passed on to colleges in advance of a young person starting a programme. Many young learners in receipt of additional support at school believe they will receive the same levels of support in colleges automatically. Although learners may expect similar support to that experienced in school, it cannot always be replicated in a college environment. The lack of detailed information about the needs of school aged learners who enter college programmes too often prevents college staff from anticipating, planning and coordinating effective support to meet the needs of these learners. The need to disclose their needs again can be distressing for learners and can lead to withdrawal from their programme.

Overall, the number of learners coming directly from school who are identifying support needs at college has increased. This rise in demand is due to a range of factors including; increased disclosure during college admission arrangements; the focus in colleges on creating an inclusive environment for learning; and the societal and educational impact of the pandemic on young people. Almost all college staff spoke of the challenging behaviours of many school-age learners and the prevalence of a lack of social skills. These behaviours are impacting negatively on the ability of staff to deliver programmes effectively.

Overall, the key elements that support effective transition from school to college, including resource alignment and active measurement and sharing of data for awareness and improvement, are not consistent across all colleges and local authorities. This can lead to poorer experiences and outcomes for school-age learners coming to college with specific needs.

Delivering support

Almost all learners are supported well by college staff prior to starting their programme. Colleges organise and deliver supportive pre-induction information sessions and events, and provide access to online resources, campus tours and learning needs assessments. These arrangements help learners to become more confident in their plans to attend college and help to reduce or mitigate against learner withdrawal. Colleges use a range of helpful initiatives to support transition for school-aged learners starting a college programme. These include taster sessions and informal workshops, many with a focus on previously disengaged school-aged learners. In most colleges, incomplete online learner applications are followed up by staff. Potential candidates are contacted to understand better any difficulties they may be having in applying for their programme. Tailored help is provided if required, and this ensures applications are processed timeously. For example, in one college, managers and staff from across geographically diverse centres will contact applicants directly to assist with enrolment. This approach proves very supportive for those learners who are experiencing anxiety about coming to college.

Almost all colleges have improved online application arrangements to encourage learners to provide detailed information about their specific learning support requirements. Support service teams use this information well when it is disclosed to make necessary arrangements and ensure that resources and adaptations are implemented promptly.

In all colleges centralised support services are delivered by skilled and committed staff. Learners are very complimentary about college support staff and how their interactions are positive and helpful.

Support staff provide all learners with a structured induction when they commence their studies. Induction content includes sessions on finance and the use of the college’s interactive digital support technologies. Where required, college managers deliver induction sessions for those learners who may be fearful or anxious about enrolling on a college programme. These sessions take place at a time when the college is less busy and help to support recruitment and retention. Staff provide a helpful introduction to college life for learners who require tailored support, and this helps familiarise them with the college campus and staff. At one college, learners worked with staff to prepare a short animation for others to access via YouTube which highlights the types of support available for learners. Another learner who is supported by a service dog described how easy it was to organise arrangements for her dog to accompany her to college. Many learners comment that support approaches adopted by college staff makes the college accessible and helps ease their levels of anxiety and stress.

All college staff recognise that some learners are apprehensive about disclosing their additional needs or concerns. However, all learners are complimentary about the care and sensitivity college staff use when discussing these issues and organising support arrangements for their learning needs.

In almost all colleges, discussions with learners and survey evidence indicate that learners are content with arrangements for supporting their transition on to college programmes. All learners said they are satisfied with the information on college websites about entry requirements, required competencies and progression pathways. They comment on how this proved very helpful in supporting them to make informed choices about their programme. Access to readily available information helps to identify points throughout the academic year when learners might be under more workload pressure and when additional support may be required. All learners highlighted that support arrangements work well and that they value the support and adjustments which have been implemented.

All colleges use initiatives to help learners manage their health and wellbeing during their programme. These include support for mental health through access to counselling, gym passes and vouchers. To help alleviate financial pressures, all colleges have introduced breakfast and lunch vouchers which are used well by learners. A few colleges are distributing unused food from refectories and teaching kitchens to provide learners with free evening meals.

Many colleges designate rooms on each campus to provide a quiet, informal and safe space for learners who experience anxiety and need a break from noisy environments. In one college, learners are provided with access to a quiet space on each campus.

Support staff work quickly and productively with learners and curriculum staff to ensure support arrangements are agreed and actioned timeously. They work effectively to reduce waiting lists for additional support provision that occurs at peak times during the year. However, in a few colleges, learners state that waiting times for appointments with support staff can be lengthy and can have a negative impact on their performance. Learners in one college experienced a lengthy wait for their disabled students’ allowance. This prevented them from being able to access essential resources to participate fully in class activities. These learners highlighted the prolonged wait for funding had a detrimental effect on their mental health and wellbeing.

All colleges maintain effective partnerships with external agencies and with their student association to offer access to support services while learners attend college. Many of these are associated with providing financial aid and focus on providing support for mental health issues.

All colleges work well with many external partners to support learners and their mental health needs throughout their learning experience. For example, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) training for staff, and online counselling for learners, are highly effective in raising awareness of mental health issues. This in turn helps staff to assist learners who may be experiencing mental health challenges. Increasingly, some colleges provide training opportunities for staff to support learners who may have experienced some form of mental health trauma.

Teaching staff report an increase in the number of learners displaying poor planning skills, low mood, lack of motivation and lower levels of understanding. They state that many learners experience challenges with on-campus learning and team and group working. Learners often require adjustments to learning and teaching approaches to encourage engagement and focus on developing important skills. Overall, teaching staff use curriculum review approaches to make changes to programme frameworks to take account of the changing needs of learners. For example, more integration of assessment approaches is reducing overall assessment burdens and helps to improve outcomes and transitions.

Learners welcome the additional support they receive from teaching staff. Many learners comment that the pace of learning is planned to ensure all learners can cope with the demands of their programme and this ensures no learner, no matter their level of support need, is disadvantaged. Positive relationships between support staff and their lecturers make it easier for learners to highlight any concerns or additional needs. Many learners can provide examples where their additional needs was identified and appropriate support arrangements put into place quickly.

At one college there has been a significant increase in the number of learners on the autistic spectrum enrolling across various curriculum areas. As a result, a specialised transition programme has been developed. The programme is structured to accommodate the specific needs of learners with autistic spectrum disorders by implementing tailored support arrangements.

Some colleges have replaced the use of stand-alone unit assessments with project-based approaches, and these have been welcomed by learners. Awarding bodies are working to be more flexible and innovative to better meet the needs of learners. For example, the transition of graded units in computing programmes from a traditional format to integrating the use of tools such as Microsoft Forms is proving worthwhile.

In a few colleges, assessment approaches used by staff do not take sufficient account of the range of needs of learners. Awarding bodies determine the types of assessment that can be used to measure learner performance. However, there are often opportunities for staff to use alternative assessments to accommodate specific needs. This can include replacing written evidence with online or recorded evidence for those learners who have difficulty with formal exam settings, struggle with literacy, or who are generally anxious. In some colleges, staff do not consider fully the range and appropriateness of assessment options available to meet individual needs.

In all colleges, the volume of demand from learners with additional needs for adjustments to assessments has increased significantly. The increasing costs associated with recruitment of specialist staff such as scribes, and in releasing space for individual assessment purposes is a recurring and concerning challenge in accommodating all learners to be assessed in a way that meets their needs.

Supporting transition to further learning and employment

Overall, college staff place strong emphasis on providing support and assistance to learners transitioning beyond college to further study. Colleges arrange bespoke university tours and information sessions to help learners make informed decisions about their future educational choices. These events provide learners with a comprehensive overview of various higher education options, including entry criteria, financial aid, campus life, academic programmes, and support services available to learners with disabilities or learning needs.

To comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2018) requirements, colleges are required to seek the agreement of learners prior to the release of personal additional support data. Where colleges partnership with employers, only personal information agreed for release by the learner can be communicated to them. This can restrict the amount of learner transition data colleges can share with employers and other partners as learners progress from their programmes. In addition, it can limit the information employers and other organisations can use to help plan support for the future transition of learners when they leave college. In a few cases, colleges have developed service level agreements with external organisations to allow the transfer of data. In addition, some learners will give permission for data to be transferred to external organisations. There are many success stories of learners with complex needs attending college and entering employment. In a number of colleges, the *Project SEARCH* initiative has resulted in learners with additional support needs realising their potential and using their talents to gain employment.

Learners highlight how college websites have helpful examples of available progression routes and that there are many case study examples available to help them understand their career options. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) staff are based in colleges to support learners’ next steps, including activities such as curriculum vitae (CV) preparation and accessing the career management tool *My World of Work*. Employers visit colleges to discuss job opportunities with learners and work placements are available on several programmes to help inform career options. During careers fayres, learners and staff speak to prospective students about progression opportunities when college programmes are released.

Partnership working

Colleges work effectively with external partners to provide specialist support to learners, including those experiencing mental health issues, or those who may come from a care experienced background. The range of partnerships colleges have with external agencies is wide and varied. These partnerships help colleges to meet learner needs. Many of the relationships between college staff and their partners are purposeful and productive and lead to high-quality support for learners. The development and maintenance of this broad range of partnerships by colleges is a significant strength of the sector.

In many local partnership forums, colleges take the lead in external strategic working groups. They work collaboratively with a wide range of referral agencies to support learners with additional needs. Colleges work extensively on issues relating to housing and homelessness, benefits, challenges created by intergenerational poverty and with local authority housing and tenancy requirements. Providing support in this way assists learners to stay on their college programme.

Colleges work very well with a range of partner agencies to help support learners when they are attending college, including those impacted by social and emotional factors related to their home environment, poverty and personal circumstances. There are many examples of strong partnership working supporting learners, including Career Ambassadors NHS, Bridge to Businesses, the Scholar programme, Through Care and After Care and work with universities.

Social inclusion

The cost-of-living crisis has had a significant impact on many learners. In one college, this led to an increase in the number of learner referrals by the college to homelessness support projects. These projects provide valuable services, including advice and guidance on housing and welfare benefits, to ensure learners can access the resources they need to continue their college programme.

Collaboration with agencies such as the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and SDS are essential to supporting learners with their transition beyond college. They are effective in supporting key groups of learners, providing them with counselling support, job applications assistance, and work placements. These agencies collaborate well with colleges to bring about improvements that support key groups of learners to achieve their learning goals.

Careers information advice and guidance

Many colleges encourage external support agencies to promote their range of services for learners. Many learners access career advisors and advice and guidance information from a good range of external partners and this helps them make decisions about their future options. SDS partnership agreements with colleges include regular meetings with learners and representatives from the college management team. These discussions provide helpful opportunities to share relevant data such as anticipated leave dates for school leavers, which helps colleges to plan curricula to meet the needs of learners. SDS also support college initiatives through attendance at open days and helping individual learners with their CV writing skills.

However, in a number of colleges joint self-evaluation and sharing of performance data with external partners is not sufficient to enable reflection on the impact of support provided to learners. This affects the ability of colleges and their partners to evaluate the impact of their collaboration on withdrawal and success rates and to plan future arrangements. Most colleges work in partnership with multiple local authorities and schools but rarely evaluate their programmes jointly.

Engagement with secondary schools

Many colleges have a dedicated team which works productively with local schools to promote college programmes within surrounding local authorities. Enhanced support for learners with additional needs over the summer months and prior to entry to college is an essential component of preparing school leavers for college. In most colleges, LSAs work well with school learners and staff to gauge individual needs and create PLSPs if required. In many instances, extensive online resources are available for those learners who cannot or do not wish to attend face-to-face meetings. However, too often school pupils’ expectations of college life are not accurate. As a result, many school leavers withdraw from their college programme early due to a lack of awareness of the vocational and academic challenge demands of their programme.

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision

Each year, Scotland welcomes increasing numbers of people who are seeking asylum. Throughout Scotland, college staff are supporting asylum seekers and refugees, many of whom are traumatised from their previous experiences to access ESOL programmes and progress to become college learners. Some areas of the country are designated areas of sanctuary for asylum seekers. Student support advisors at one college have recently completed training to support learners from the growing numbers of asylum seekers in their area. The student advice and support team have recently completed professional learning on trauma informed practice. This helps improve staff understanding of the support needs of asylum seekers and refugees. However, across Scotland demand outstrips the supply for ESOL provision and many learners have lengthy waits to access this support.

Care experienced learners

All colleges have engaged with a range of partners to support their work with care experienced learners and learners with mental health concerns. All colleges work effectively with external partners such as Hub for Success for care experienced learners. Through arrangements such as early referrals and support for non-completion of applications, college staff help improve support and outcomes for care experienced learners. Who Cares? Scotland delivers training sessions in many colleges on corporate parenting responsibilities. This helps ensure colleges take responsibility for the welfare and development of their care experienced learners.

Colleges work extensively with agencies such as Women's Aid to provide professional learning for staff on trauma-informed practice and domestic abuse. However, despite the increased focus on and support for learners with a care experienced background, outcomes for this group continue to be significantly lower than the rest of the learner population.

Mental health services

Learners highlight how college links to partners providing mental health services are very positive. NHS mental health liaison officers are able to offer crisis intervention and further support. Learners and their college support workers are able to re-evaluate learning plans and provide tailored one-to-one support helping learners to progress with their studies. However, colleges found some partnerships of limited value and preferred to utilise in-house counselling staff to support their learners.

Family engagement

Increasingly, colleges implement programmes to provide a range of career development resources for the parents of young learners. Participants can access support services to help them achieve their employment goals. For example, delivery of the *Multiply* *Programme* helps to boost maths and numeracy skills for work and daily life. Other projects such as homework clubs for parents and secondary school age children are proving successful approaches to family learning. The use of online skills-boost courses allows learners to work at a time and pace that suits their lifestyle.

Evaluating the impact of additional support

Most colleges have sophisticated management information resources to track learner needs and performance and demonstrate how effective the implementation of support measures have been. This data is also used well to inform staff about learners’ caring responsibilities, helping them to respond flexibly to these needs by extending deadlines or providing resources for learners to work from home. This focus is vital in ensuring there is equity of success for all learners. For example, some colleges can demonstrate lower levels of attainment for learners who have a PLSP in comparison to learners who do not require support. However, this approach is not consistent across all colleges.

Improved collaboration between support and teaching staff is contributing to the successful implementation of improved data tracking and monitoring. In some colleges, strong collaboration between support staff and lecturers to track learners’ progress has led to a reduction in learner withdrawal rates. This approach has helped to reduce the gap in attainment for those learners who have declared a disability and those who have not, which has narrowed in the last few years for both higher education (HE) and further education (FE) learners.

Almost all colleges have well-established internal arrangements for evaluating the quality of provision and to plan for improvement. These arrangements are used well by most staff to assess the effectiveness of support provided to learners. College managers evaluate learner support arrangements well. They draw on these findings to influence policies, implement procedures and deploy staff to meet the needs of a growing number of learners who have a wide range of support needs. They use feedback from staff, learners and key stakeholders to assess the capacity of the college to deliver additional support to meet the needs of learners. Following extensive learner consultation and a comprehensive review of student support, the senior leadership team in one college have established a framework for learner success. This approach allows the college to interrogate data to understand better how learners with additional needs perform and to make improvements based on accurate data. Staff in almost all curriculum teams meet regularly to discuss learner progression to identify those learners who are causing concern, those who may not remain on their programme, or those who are not progressing sufficiently well. These meetings enable staff to follow-up with learners or guidance staff and other staff members where appropriate. Learners and staff value this approach as helping to identify undisclosed learner needs and discuss potential support arrangements.

Learner performance data is evaluated effectively by most staff to provide information on why programmes have significant drop-out or where learners are not attaining their award. In the best instances, college staff combine data relating to the performance of a learner, or a cohort of learners from multiple sources. This coordination of data can include information on learners using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), attainment and retention rates, and whether individual learners have specific additional needs. In this way, colleges can plan support for learners who need it most and put in place interventions which mitigate against low attainment or retention rates.

In many colleges, support staff work alongside teaching staff to reflect on what is working well and to identify trends and improvements in their support for learners. For example, in one college, joint planning for improvement is used well by staff to monitor and evaluate individual learner and programme performance. As a result, college staff understand better the issues around additional support needs. They identify specific support mechanisms that are working well and how they connect to the performance of the learners and the college overall.

In one college, teaching and support staff analyse data to track learners with additional support needs and cross-reference this data with college performance indicators. This is helping to focus support on specific groups of learners. Through this approach staff have been able to highlight the increasing volume of full-time learners who declare a disability, mental health condition, or specific learning difficulty.​ In colleges where evaluation of support for learners is done well, teaching and support staff work collaboratively to support learner transition between and across education, training and employment opportunities. Evaluation arrangements involve support staff and teaching staff jointly and take good account of the views of learners and partners. However, in a few colleges, staff do not evaluate sufficiently the impact of support services on learner success. In these colleges, evaluative activities do not engage teaching and support staff in jointly evaluating the impact of support on individual learners and learner groups. This reduces the ability of staff to work collaboratively to improve and enhance the quality of learning support services and demonstrate the impact they are having on learner outcomes.

Evidenced based action planning

Ongoing development of the curriculum based on reflection and evaluation by colleges and partners and the integration of support for learners is an important element for all colleges. Curriculum review arrangements are used well by managers to respond to performance data such as declining recruitment to full-time programmes and low retention and attainment rates. This can lead to adaptations to the design and content of programmes and in some cases, reduction in their duration. Staff also widen the range of Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) programme levels available to ease access and improve progression opportunities to help overcome barriers to accessing education. In one college outdoor learning is now prioritised to provide learners with diverse and meaningful learning opportunities which foster critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork skills, and promote positive mental wellbeing. In another college, the introduction of environmental awareness provision helps learners to connect with nature and gain the benefits of working in a natural setting. These approaches are supporting learners’ wellbeing and improving their mental health, reducing social isolation, and enhancing skills development and progression opportunities.

Formal feedback arrangements for learners to evaluate the provision of support services are used well by staff in most colleges. Through regular course team meetings or the involvement of student associations, colleges capture feedback from learners about the support they receive. Feedback is then shared with faculties and support areas to support planning for improvement to the quality of services to support learning. College staff provide multiple opportunities for learners to reflect and feedback on their programme experiences. Learner feedback is used effectively by support and teaching staff for self-evaluation and action-planning for improvement at a local and institutional level. Action planning in this way ensures good awareness and understanding by staff of emerging learner challenges and the sharing of effective practice. In one college, fidget toys were introduced to all campuses as a result of student feedback on the different measures to support neurodiverse students.

Almost all colleges identify the need for all staff to be adequately trained in specific areas of support, including mental health. However, this is not yet consistent in all colleges and not yet mandatory for all staff, which limits the consistency of staff approach to learners who present with mental health challenges.

Equity, attainment and achievement

Ensuring equity in attainment and achievement is a key priority for colleges in Scotland. While some progress has been made in narrowing attainment gaps, significant disparities persist, with success rates varying widely across colleges and learner groups. Addressing these challenges is critical to improving outcomes and fostering inclusivity across the sector.

Rates of successful completion for learners with a declared disability have declined in the last year, and over the last four years. However, the gap in the rate of successful completion between learners who have a declared disability and those learners who do not, has narrowed

in the last four years. Overall, less than two thirds of learners who declare a disability successfully complete their programme. This is below the rate of successful completion for all learners and for those who do not declare a disability.

Rates of successful completion for learners on full-time programmes who declare a disability fell for both HE and FE in the last year and have declined over time. The overall success rate for full-time learners declaring a disability varies between colleges. This variation is up to 15% for HE and 13.5% for FE between colleges with the highest and lowest success rates for full-time learners with a disability.

Full-time learners declaring a disability related to hearing impairment, or a social impairment have higher rates of attainment. Learners with disabilities related to a physical impairment, a mental health condition or visual impairment have much lower levels of success.

Whilst the rate of successful completion for care-experienced learners has risen by 2.9% overall, the gap between overall full-time FE and HE learner success rates is 7.9% and 10.1%, respectively. Rates of learner completion with partial success have remained steady. The number of care experienced learners who withdraw from their programme has decreased by 2% from the previous year.

Overall, the rate of successful completion for learners from the 10% most deprived postcodes has increased by 2.5% from the previous year, and the gap in attainment between the most deprived learners and the rest of the learner population has decreased by 1%. The rate of learner withdrawal for this group has decreased by 3.6% from the previous year. However, the gap in attainment between the most deprived learners and the rest of the learner population varies in individual colleges.

Whilst some colleges have high rates of learner successful completion, there remains significant variation in learner retention and attainment rates between colleges. Seven colleges are below or significantly below, the sector average for full-time FE learner attainment. The sector continues to have significant challenges around overall learner retention rates and to a lesser extent, overall rates of learner partial success. By addressing the challenges experienced by the increasing numbers of learners with additional needs, the sector can take steps to improve rates of learner successful completion overall.

Key insights

* There has been a significant increase in the number of learners declaring disabilities, mental health conditions, and other support needs since the pandemic, with additional challenges related to poverty, family instability, and chaotic lifestyles. These shifts are reshaping the nature and complexity of the support required in colleges.
* College staff provide effective support for a wide range of needs, including disabilities such as autism, dyslexia, mental health conditions, and learning difficulties. Alongside this, a growing number of learners require support for multiple and diverse needs. Colleges will need enhanced and sustained resources to meet these challenges.
* Additional needs are not disclosed by many learners entering college. This makes it challenging for college staff to provide timely and appropriate interventions. More proactive strategies are needed to encourage early disclosure and engagement with learners to clarify the demands of future pathways.
* Increased demand for support services combined with uncertain funding for mental health support, is placing strain on learners and college staff and resources.
* Almost all colleges face challenges in obtaining important learner information from schools. This leads to delays in providing appropriate support and hinders effective transition. Unrealistic expectations about college programmes exacerbate the difficulties for new learners.
* There remains inequity in learner outcomes, particularly for learners with physical impairments or mental health conditions. While progress has been made in narrowing the gaps for some groups, success rates and attainment for learners who have a disability remain concerning.
* College staff collaborate well with external agencies to source and provide specialised support for learners with complex needs. However, there is a need for stronger joint evaluation and data sharing with schools, agencies, universities and employers to ensure improve transitions and outcomes.

Recommendations

To address the findings outlined in the Key Insights, the following are recommendations for colleges and national bodies to improve the quality of provision and services across Scotland’s colleges.

1. **Improve the early disclosure of additional needs**

* Encourage and support all learners to disclose additional needs through:
  + improved data sharing between schools, colleges, and external agencies, ensuring compliance with GDPR
  + proactive strategies that build trust and encouragement for all learners to provide information on their needs, and
  + increased visibility and accessibility of the support available at college.

1. **Support for mental health**

* Continued investment in support for learner mental health and wellbeing, ensuring:
* mental health awareness training for staff to improve consistency in support;
* mental health support is accessible and sufficient to meet growing demand; and,
* promoting partnerships with local mental health organisations to expand available resources.

1. **Improving information sharing on transition**

* Improve the sharing of relevant learner information from schools to colleges about school-aged learners, by:
* improving data-sharing agreements, and
* providing comprehensive pre-college information for school-age learners, focusing on realistic expectations and the skills required for college success.

1. **Improve learner outcomes for key groups**

* Address inequity in learner outcomes by:
* Implementing targeted interventions for learners with disabilities
* Using data-driven approaches to identify at risk groups and prioritise support, and
* Improving self-evaluation and action planning for improvement, particularly with key partners.

1. [Review of additional support for learning implementation: report - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/review-additional-support-learning-implementation/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Conclusion - Pupils with complex additional support needs: research into provision - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/research-provision-pupils-complex-additional-support-needs-scotland/pages/5/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Review of additional support for learning implementation: report - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/review-additional-support-learning-implementation/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Conclusion - Pupils with complex additional support needs: research into provision - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/research-provision-pupils-complex-additional-support-needs-scotland/pages/5/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [Education recovery in further education and skills providers: spring 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-recovery-in-further-education-and-skills-providers-spring-2022/education-recovery-in-further-education-and-skills-providers-spring-2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)