Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research

Evaluation of the ‘Finished at School Programme’ for
Ambitious about Autism, 2013-2015:
Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction
Ambitious about Autism (www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk) is the national charity for children and young people with autism. It provides services, raises awareness and understanding, and campaigns for change. Its vision is, ‘to make the ordinary possible for children and young people with autism’ and its mission is, ‘to help them to learn, thrive and achieve’.

Ambitious about Autism, with its partners, nasen and the Association of Colleges, was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to run the ‘Finished at School programme’ from April 2013 until March 2015. The programme plan involved four colleges, each working with three partner secondary schools, supporting around 110 young people with autism to make a successful transition to post-school education. The aim of the programme was to prepare the general further education sector for the new responsibilities enshrined in the Children and Families Act, 2014. The programme also built on Ambitious about Autism’s campaign, ‘Finished at School’, for more and better post-school educational options for young people with autism. The context of the campaign was that fewer than one in four young people with autism continued their education beyond school.

This summary relates to the final report of the programme. A previous, interim report was published in 2014.

Key findings
- The Finished at School programme successfully established four college-led hubs, each working in partnership with local secondary schools and other relevant agencies to improve the transition from school to college of over 110 young people with autism, including complex autism.
- All 45 young people in the project who left school in summer 2014 made successful transitions to continued education. Thirty-four of these were to general further education colleges.

The three-day core training\(^2\) on personal centred approached to transition planning for young people with autism was viewed very positively. For college and school-based participants, it was effective in inspiring improvements to the transition to post-school education of young people with autism.

Substantial evidence of positive impact was found in relation to the five key areas of project work:

- Development of staff skills
- Improved person-centred planning
- Strengthened assessment processes
- Development of new curriculum pathways
- Improved access to college life.

There was also clear evidence of strategic impact in two areas that bode well for sustainability of the work:

- In each of the four areas of the country, improved and extended local partnerships were created in and through the project hubs, linking in to pre-existing strategic planning forums and partnership boards.
- In all four colleges, support for learners with autism was written in to key strategic plans.

**Detailed findings**

**Hub developments**

The four colleges were successful in engaging a mix of mainstream (4) and special schools (8) to participate in the project\(^3\). It proved hardest to involve mainstream schools in the project. Reasons for this were mainly related to being unable to commit the time required to deliver the project\(^4\). Each hub developed links with key local strategic forums, such as the local Autism Board, enabling links to be made with a wide range of representatives, including from Health, Social Care and local employers.

Prior to the Finished at School programme, some schools and some colleges involved in the four hubs had already incorporated autism-specific aspects to the

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\(^2\) Designed and delivered by Helen Sanderson Associates with National Development Team for Inclusion.

\(^3\) During Year 2, two schools had to withdraw from project activity (but not from proactive transition planning) due to long-term staff illness.

transition of young people with autism to the further education sector. Others relied on general special educational needs processes. For two schools, one a special school and the other an enhanced resource provision for autism, transition to post-school was a new process as their respective first cohorts of students made this transition in September 2014.

By early March 2014, the target of identifying 110 young people with complex autism to participate in the project had been surpassed. ‘Complex’ autism was defined operationally as autism plus other special educational needs or disabilities, or autism that was viewed as complex by relevant professionals. Each young person included in the project had to be due to make the transition to post-school education in September 2014 (Cohort 1), September 2015 (Cohort 2) or September 2016 (Cohort 3). The majority of the young people had a statement of special educational needs.

**Views of the training**

Views of the core three-day training in, ‘Person-centred approaches to transition for young people with autism’, designed and delivered by Helen Sanderson Associates with National Development Team for Inclusion were very positive. The majority of delegates had some involvement in transition planning for at least one young person with autism (78%) but had not received such training before (71%). At the end of the third day of training, delegates were very positive about the value of the training and about how it had been delivered. At that time, the majority of participants:

- Understood the value of one-page profiles (88%);
- Valued the opportunity to be on training with partnership colleagues (83%);
- Could see how they could use what they had learned (80%);
- Had learned new tools to use in their practice (79%);
- Thought that the person-centred reviews would fit well with their school or college processes (74%);
- Felt confident they knew how to write person-centred outcomes (55%).

The training had been effective in inspiring almost all (92%) to reflect on at least one positive change they planned to make to improve the transition process for learners with autism. Most of these plans centred on adopting a person-centred approach, increasing learner voice and using one-page profiles.

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5 The percentage given in brackets combines the percentage ‘strongly agreeing’/’agreeing’ or ‘strongly disagreeing’/’disagreeing’ (as appropriate) with the relevant statement.
Views of the training expressed during both Year 1 and Year 2 telephone interviews with the college and school leads were also positive overall. By Year 2, it was clear from these interviews, and from the 16 responses to the follow-up questionnaire, that the training had led to positive developments in the practice of person-centred planning with young people with autism and their parents. In many places, these practices had been generalised to a wider group of young people with special educational needs.

**Impact**

The Finished at School programme stimulated positive changes in person-centred practices that enhanced the transition to further education in September 2014 of the first cohort of project young people. These encompassed all five areas where the programme aimed to make a positive difference. Further changes in practice were also in place, or planned, to benefit the second, and later, cohorts of young people with autism moving on from school. All the interviewees said they had benefitted from being involved in the Finished at School programme. It was highly valued as an opportunity to test out the person-centred approach and processes set out in the new SEND Code of Practice 0-25. The opportunity to focus specifically on the transition of young people with autism, as opposed to transition in general, was also viewed as very beneficial as previously that had not happened to the same extent.

**Development of staff skills**

- Joint training of school and college representatives led to a more cohesive approach to transition planning and practice in the hub areas, as new learning was implemented together.
- Staff skills were enhanced around how to make annual reviews and transition planning centre on an understanding of each young person and of each young person’s aspirations for adult life.
- Learning from the core training delivered as part of the project was shared with other colleagues in schools and colleges.
- The relationships developed in the hubs enabled mutual learning across school and college representatives and increased supportive contact between the four colleges and the between each hub’s school partners.

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6 These were 16 of the 27 people who agreed to be followed up one year after the initial three-day training.
The project focus on autism stimulated a desire for further training on autism such as the Autism Education Trust’s post-16 training which was delivered in three of the lead colleges.

Enhanced strategic planning for transition

- Relationships developed through the hubs enabled the college leads to join key strategic planning forums, such as the local Autism Board, and to be involved in the development of the Local Offer.
- The hub relationships also stimulated local hub schools to work more closely together, for example, to enhance the curriculum offer across Sixth Forms.

Improved person-centred planning for transition

- One-page profiles were created by the young people with autism which were found to be very useful by the receiving college staff.
- Hub schools put in to practice person-centred annual review meetings which transformed the experience for the young people and their parents.
- Greater emphasis was placed on providing the Cohort 1 young people with autism and their parents with opportunities to gain information about the range of post-school destinations available, and to have the opportunity to visit and to attend taster sessions in order to support young people’s choices.
- Once a choice had been made, there were enhanced opportunities to become familiar with that new environment through visits, link courses, ‘in-fill’ sessions and the creation of person-specific information packs including photos of key college staff and draft timetables for the new academic year.

Impact on the young people making the transition in 2014 (Cohort 1)

- All 45 young people in Cohort 1 made a positive transition; 30 of them to the hub colleges.
- The young people’s views of their one-page profiles depended on the quality of the process by which they had been created, that is, the more a young person was involved in creating his or her profile, the more it was valued.
- All the young people interviewed were very positive about the activities that had supported their ability to make an active choice of post-school destination.
- The young people were also very positive about the activities that had enabled them to feel familiar and comfortable in the new college environment.
Strengthened assessment processes

- The Finished at School programme enhanced the amount and quality of information collected by colleges about the young people with autism enrolling as students.
- This enhanced information enabled the colleges to prepare better, and to understand more about each young person’s autism, meaning that assessments included sensory needs and social communication needs, as well as curriculum progression.

New curriculum pathways

- All four colleges undertook curriculum development work with new courses being offered and new bespoke programmes of study created to better match the ‘spiky profiles’ of individual learners with autism.
- Strong links between the hub schools and colleges enabled enhanced curriculum progression pathways to be created.
- There was a much stronger focus on preparing the young people for adulthood which began in school and intensified in college.
- Planning for the next transition began early on in the lead colleges.

Improved access to college life

- In all four colleges, young people with autism were included in college life – they were supported to access college facilities to the level each learner desired and also to have access to quieter alternatives to noisy, busy college facilities, such as canteens.
- On some college campuses, new facilities were developed specifically for learners with autism, such as the creation of quiet areas and of sensory rooms. Attention was also paid to how best to adapt routes in to classes and to key facilities, such as libraries, to reduce the sensory impact.
Conclusions

It is clear from the evaluation data collected that the Finished at School programme was a success. The training on person-centred planning and reviews was welcomed by the four hubs and was effective in increasing knowledge about person-centred approaches and in inspiring positive changes in practice, including a greater involvement of parents and young people in person-centred planning. The hub-based work was valued for creating both new and enhanced relationships locally, and as an arena for sharing good practice and ideas. The programme increased understanding of the practical implications of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the new SEND Code of Practice 0-25. The opportunity, created by the programme, to focus on improving transition for young people with autism had a positive impact on day-to-day practice in the schools and colleges and also generalised to improve transition for young people with other special educational needs. Regarding Cohort 1, it was clear that young people who would not otherwise have done so, moved on from school to a general further education college. All 45 Cohort 1 learners moved on to positive post-school destinations. This was a major achievement, underpinned by improved person-centred planning.

For those Cohort 1 learners who moved on to the hub colleges, there was evidence that these colleges had improved assessment processes. College staff gathered more and better information earlier about the young people with autism who planned to move to the college. This enabled staff to plan ahead and to provide appropriately for these learners’ needs. There was also evidence of positive developments in the curriculum pathways available for young people with autism, and of a greater focus on preparing for adulthood. Aspects that had previously been perceived as barriers to college for young people with autism were systematically addressed: for example, where possible, autism-friendly adaptations were made to the physical environment to reduce sensory overload and triggers for anxiety.

In short, the Finished at School programme has demonstrated that, with locally coordinated person-centred transition planning, reasonable adjustments, and appropriate support, many more young people with complex autism can access local college life successfully.
Recommendations
Based on the data collected for the evaluation of the Finished at School programme, we make the following recommendations.

Recommendations to Ambitious about Autism and its partners

- Ambitious about Autism and its partners, nasen and the Association of Colleges, should seek to continue the work promoting positive, person-centred, outcome-focused transition planning for young people with autism.
- The work should expand to encompass, not only the transition pathways from school to college or training for work, but also from college or training to a fulfilling adult life.
- Ambitious about Autism should continue to promote its College Inclusion Charter, appropriately updated to take account of the Children and Families Act 2014.
- Ambitious about Autism and its partners should encourage relevant staff in all secondary schools and general further education colleges to access training in person-centred approaches and training in understanding the implications of autism for learners and for educational providers.

Recommendations to Local Authorities (including commissioners) and partners

- Local authorities should support the creation of ‘Finished at School’-style partnership hubs to enable a strategic focus on successful transition to further education or training for local young people with autism.
- Local authorities, working with relevant partners including parents and young people, should ensure that the Local Offer includes local post-school provision to support the aspirations of all local young people with autism, across the full autism spectrum, so that young people with autism are not forced to move out of area in order to access appropriate post-school education.

Recommendations to general Further Education colleges

- In relation to young people with autism, the general further education sector should, as part of the duty to, ‘use their best endeavours to secure the special educational provision that the young person needs’\(^7\), learn from the good

\(^7\) Paragraph 7.3 of the *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0-25 years* (July 2014)
practice approaches to transition from school to college, as exemplified in the Finished at School programme.\(^8\)

- Through the development of individual EHC plans every further education college should work with its feeder local authorities to support strategic planning for successful post-school transitions for young people with autism. This practice should support the transition for all young people with autism including those who do not have EHC plans.

- Further education colleges should work with Local Authorities to ensure that specific information about courses and facilities for potential and existing learners with autism is part of the Local Offer.

- Each further education college should, as far as possible, enable young people with autism to have opportunities (such as clear information, taster sessions, link courses) to find out about the range of courses offered at college. Colleges should recognise that the young people may need support from parents or school and/or college staff to take up these opportunities. College staff should be aware of, and act upon, the requirement to have a bespoke transition plan in place for each young person with autism wishing to attend a college.

- Further Education colleges should develop outcomes-focused personalised study programmes based on the aspirations in individual’s Education, Health and Care plan.

- As far as possible, each college should plan alongside feeder local authorities and schools to ensure that a college representative is invited to attend, and attends, annual reviews from Year 9 onwards for any learner with complex autism who is likely to transition to the college.

- To support the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, and the Children and Families Act 2014, every general further education college should make ‘best endeavours’\(^9\) to include in its Quality and Improvement Plan and Equality and Diversity policies a commitment to staff training on autism awareness and to embedding effective practice supporting learners with autism. All staff in general further education colleges should have access to at least awareness-raising training on autism from a credible provider.

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\(^9\) Paragraph 7.3 of the Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0-25 years (July 2014)
Recommendations to senior leaders in secondary schools

- All secondary schools should adopt as far as possible the good practice in transition planning recommended in the SEND Code of Practice 0-25 years and highlighted by the Finished at School programme.

- All secondary schools should ensure that, from Year 9 onwards, young people with autism and their parents are supported to be involved in person-centred planning for transition to further education or training after the end of schooling.

- All secondary schools should allocate time to the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) or another appropriate staff member to work with the local authority and relevant partners, including local further education colleges, to support strategic and operational planning for successful post-school transitions for young people with autism, including passing on information to colleges about the young people’s educational achievements, areas for development and autism-specific support needs.

- All staff in secondary schools should have access to at least awareness-raising training on autism from a credible provider, such as the Autism Education Trust, and time to embed new or enhanced learning into practice.

- All relevant staff in secondary schools should have access to training in person-centred ways of working with young people, including those with autism, and time allocated to embed new or enhanced learning into practice.

- All secondary schools should endeavour to support joint working/training between mainstream and special schools to enable the mutual sharing of teaching expertise and of person-centred approaches to preparing young people, including those with autism, for transition from school.