



Are the wheels falling off?

The state of post-16 transport for learners with SEND

Key findings

- **69%** of respondents said that it was **more difficult for learners to access local authority transport support** in this academic year compared to the previous year.
- **65%** said transport issues had resulted in **learners being unable to attend college or attending intermittently**.
- One college reported **30 learners had been unable to start in September** due to transport issues, with another reporting that **21% of their entire learner cohort had been impacted by transport issues**.
- **59%** said **fewer learners than last year have LA-arranged transport** and **51%** said **some families have been asked to contribute more to transport** this year than last.
- **40%** said that **some learners had been offered transport that was unsafe**
- **82%** reported **increased stress and anxiety for SEND learners** as a direct result of transport issues.
- **81%** stated that **increased stress was also an issue for learners' families**, with **72% struggling to balance work commitments** whilst providing transport themselves.
- **74%** reported **colleges having to spend increased staff time** on supporting families with transport issues, with staff having to provide transport directly themselves in some cases.
- **86%** wanted **the statutory requirements for providing transport that currently apply to children of compulsory school age to be extended to include all learners aged 5-25 with an EHCP**.
- **84%** wanted **transport arrangements to be agreed in principle at the point at which a college is named in an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)**.

Introduction

Transport support is critical for many children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in enabling them to access their education. For children of compulsory school age (5 to 16 years) with SEND, local authorities in England have a legal duty to provide free home-to-school transport where it is deemed necessary to facilitate attendance at an agreed school. These same statutory duties do not extend to 16 to 18-year-olds or to 19 to 25-year-olds with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Local authorities in England are only required to publish an annual post-16 transport policy and to prioritise those with SEND. Arrangements for these learners must be accessible, flexible, and appropriate to meet individual needs; there is no requirement to offer any free transport. The situation in Wales is broadly similar, where local authorities are required to ensure travel arrangements are reasonable and accessible for learners with additional needs, but are not under any statutory obligation to provide or fund transport for learners aged 19-25.

Over the last eighteen months, Natspec member colleges have reported increased difficulty for learners and their families in accessing suitable post-16 transport provision. In October and November this year Natspec conducted a survey of its members to explore

- the extent of transport issues for learners attending specialist FE colleges in England and Wales
- the impact on transport issues on learners, their families and on specialist FE colleges
- possible policy solutions that would remedy the situation.

This report summarises the survey findings.

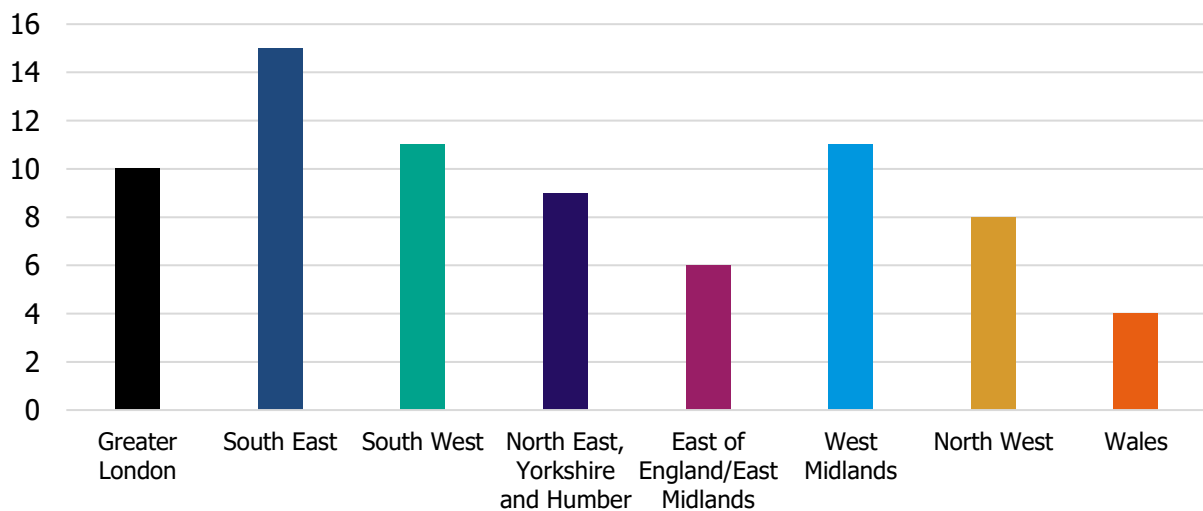
Methodology

A roundtable discussion with a sample of Natspec members was held to explore the difficulties associated with securing appropriate transport support, including the extent of the issue, the experiences of learners and colleges 'on the ground', potential causes and contributing factors.

Building on the insights gathered during this discussion, a survey was developed with the aim of determining the prevalence of the issues identified in the roundtable discussion. The survey consisted of 17 questions, designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. They included both closed questions with multiple-choice options and open questions where respondents could provide unlimited free text responses. The survey was sent by email to heads of college in all 130 Natspec member colleges and promoted in member networks and regional meetings. It was open for three weeks across October and November.

Over half of Natspec member colleges responded (66) with a total of 74 survey responses received, including a spread across all regions within England and from Wales. Respondents included heads of college, operational managers, admissions staff, funding managers, transition managers and regional area managers.

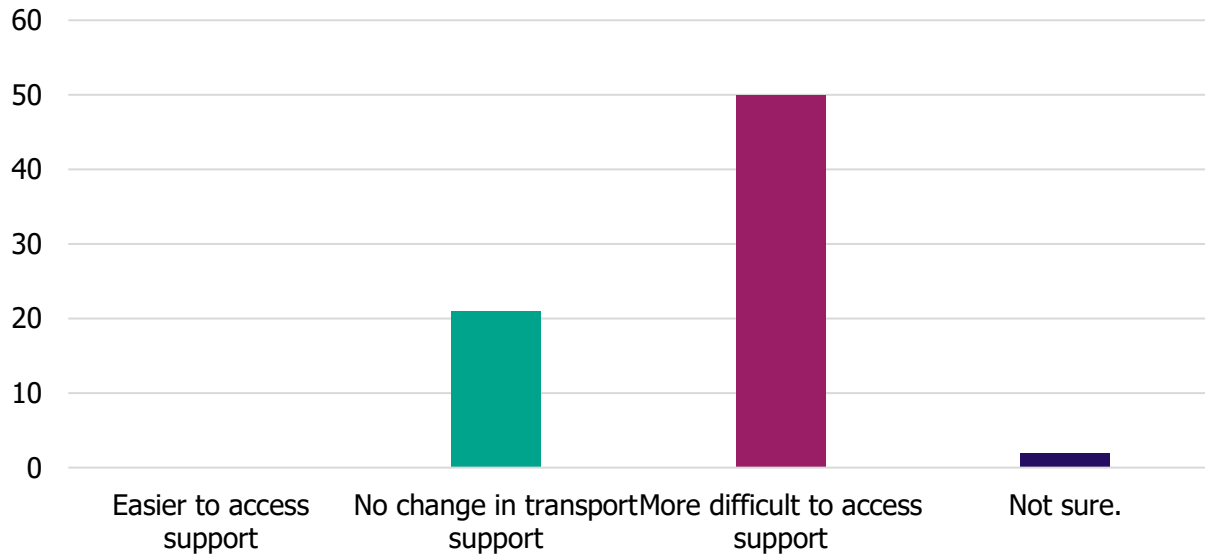
Figure 1: responses by region



Survey results

Provision of transport support

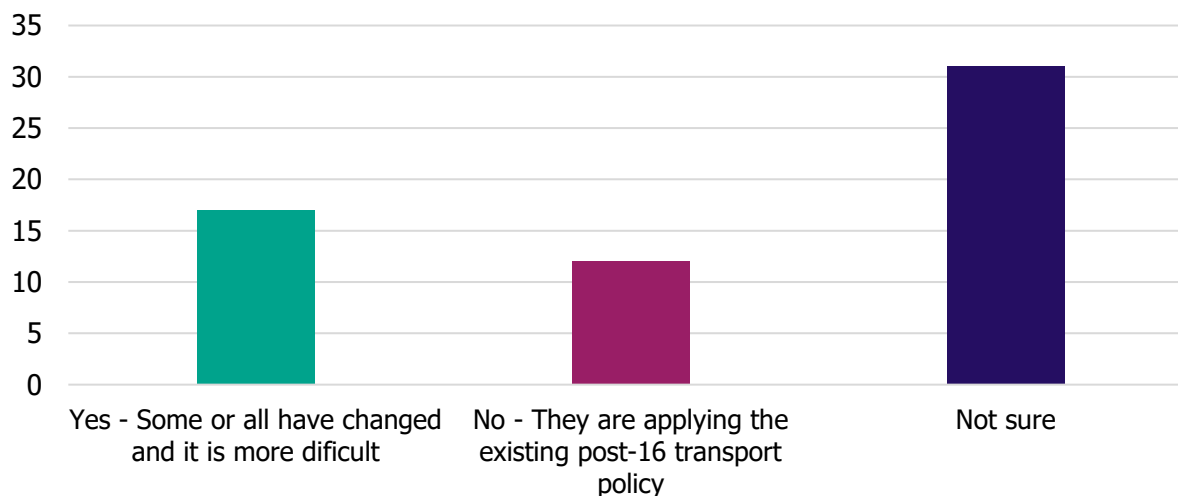
Figure 2: change in transport support from 2023/24 to 2024/25



Respondents were asked how access to transport support from their local authorities had changed for their learners for the 2024/25 academic year compared to 2023/24. Figure 2 shows that 69% of respondents stated that it was more difficult to access transport support this academic year than in the previous year. 28% said that there had been no change in access to support. None of the respondents said that it had become easier for learners to access transport. Increased difficulty was reported in all regions but was more prevalent in Greater London, the South West, the West Midlands, and Wales, where between 73% and 80% (Greater London) of respondents from each region indicated that transport had become more difficult to access.

Local authority post-16 transport policy and process

Figure 3: changes to post-16 transport policy



As shown in figure 3, just over half of respondents were unsure whether local authorities had changed their post-16 transport statement. 28%, however, stated that changes had been made and that these had led to a reduction in support available to their learners. 20% of respondents said that the policy had not changed from last academic year to this.

Respondents were similarly uncertain (47% not sure) about any changes to the application process for transport support. 25% said there had been a change and 27% said there had been no change. One respondent noted that a positive change had been made with one local authority now requiring new applications only during transition years (e.g. from secondary to further education) instead of at the start of each academic year. However, for the majority of respondents, the changes were negative, resulting in lengthier and more complex processes which were more difficult for families to navigate. They included:

- a blanket policy of initially refusing transport provision and requiring families to go through an appeals process before personal transport needs would be considered
- reducing eligibility criteria
- moving the deadlines for transport applications to earlier in the year (typically around May) or requiring a student to be fully funded before transport was discussed. Both circumstances resulted in transport not being in place at the start of the academic year as places are typically confirmed all the way up to August.
- a requirement for families and colleges seeking transport support for returning learners to demonstrate that the learner was making progress, based on narrow definitions of progress that are not meaningful for many learners with SEND
- more complicated application processes with additional paperwork and extra steps, which was especially challenging for parents with learning difficulties or disabilities or difficulties with literacy and numeracy
- applications going through lengthy panel processes
- information on the application process not being provided to learners and families, meaning families are unaware of their options unless colleges act as 'middle-men'.

Current issues in transport support

Figure 4: the issues associated with post-16 transport

1	Fewer learners than last year have LA-arranged transport	59%
2	Some families have been asked to contribute more to transport	51%
3	Fewer learners than last year are receiving transport support from their LA	49%
4	Some learners have a longer journey due to transport changes	37%
5	Overall, transport has been sorted later this year than last	37%
6	Overall, learners who require transport are receiving reduced support this year	37%
7	Some learners who were offered a place did not take it up because of transport	29%
8	Some transport offered does not align with the college day	24%
9	Some returning learners are not receiving the same transport as before	22%

Figure 4 shows that overall respondents reported reduced transport support for this academic year. 59% of respondents said that fewer learners were receiving local authority arranged transport provision (such as taxi services organised by the local authority) and 49% said fewer learners were receiving any transport support from local authorities this year.

Increased parental contribution was the second most common issue identified, with over half of respondents (51%) reporting that families of learners were being asked to contribute more to transport costs, raising issues of equity given that some families will be less financially able to contribute than others.

Issues with timeliness and quality of transport provision were also noted, with 37% of respondents reporting an increase in learners' journey times and 24% stating that students' arrival and departure times did not align properly with the college day as a result of transport changes. Only 22% of respondents stated that returning learners were facing reduced transport provision this year compared to last year, suggesting that difficulties are more acute for new starters as they transition from school into further education.

While there was some variation in prevalence of specific experiences across colleges and regions, there is clear evidence that issues with transport support are endemic.

Local authority variation

Figure 5: Are some local authorities more generous than others in terms of transport support?



Many Natspec members have learners on roll from several different local authorities which enables them to compare their different approaches to transport support. As highlighted in figure 5, just under half of respondents said that some local authorities were more generous than others. Those who commented on reasons for this variation believed that budgetary considerations were the main driver. Some also highlighted that in some local authorities, access to/levels of transport support were influenced by whether or not the learner was travelling out of their local area.

Personal travel budgets

54% of respondents reported no change or were unsure if there had been any change in the use of personal transport budgets. Of the 15% who had noticed an increase, only 11% felt that the funding provided through the person budget was sufficient to cover the full cost of transport.

The impact of changing transport provision

Age of learners affected

Figure 6: age of learners impacted by transport issues

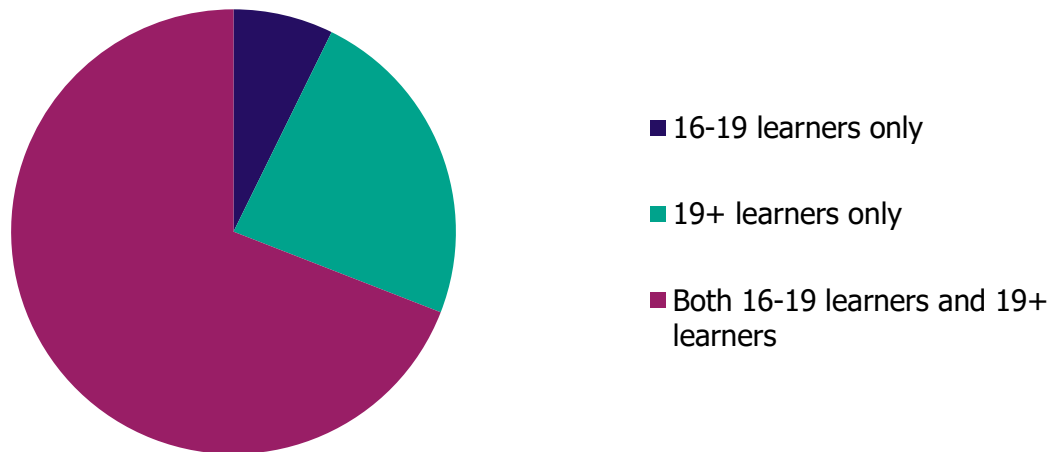
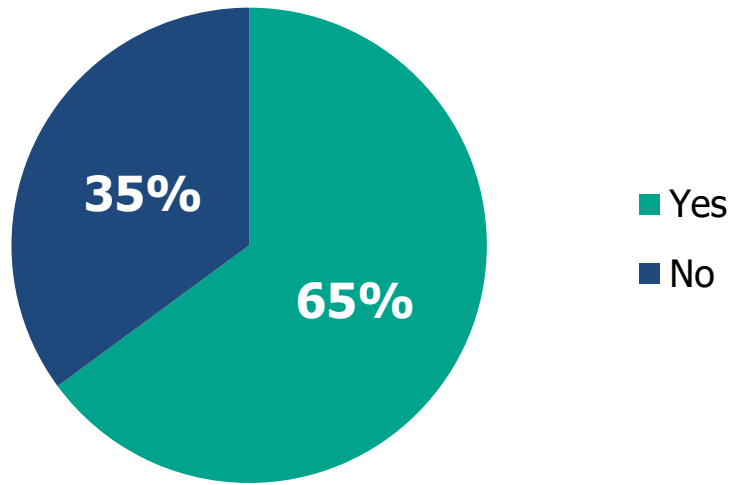


Figure 6 demonstrates that the issues with transport in specialist further education were seen to be affecting both 16-19 and 19+ learners, with 69% of respondents stating that both groups were impacted. More respondents (24%) felt it was an issue only for 19+ learners compared to solely for 16-19 learners (7%), but this may reflect the fact that some colleges only have 19+ learners, while almost all colleges with 16-19 learners also have 19+ learners.

Impact on learning

The impact on learners' access to education is particularly concerning. 65% of respondents stated that transport issues had had a direct impact on young people's learning as a result of a delayed start to their term; the same number reported that transport issues were causing intermittent attendance (see Figure 7). Several respondents added an additional note to the effect that they had some learners still unable to access education as a result of transport issues, well over two months into the 2024/5 academic year.

Figure 7: Has learner attendance been impacted by transport provision?

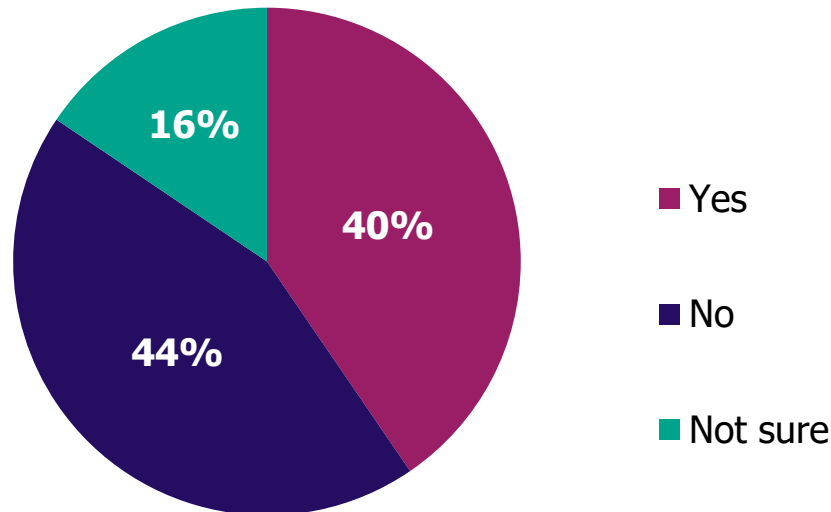


65% of respondents reported that some learners had had a delayed start to the term because of transport issues. Those providing exact numbers had on average experienced 9% of their cohort being unable to attend due to transport issues. In one college, 30 students had had a delayed start to the academic year; another reported 21% of their entire cohort had had their education impacted by transport issues this academic year. Delayed starts to the academic year were particularly prevalent in two regions with 83% of respondents in the East of England and 75% in the North West having at least one student whose start at college had been delayed due to transport issues.

While delayed starts were more frequently reported, there were also ongoing issues around intermittent attendance. Some said this was occurring as a result of local authority funding only covering the costs of a portion of necessary transport and parents having to provide transport themselves whilst juggling work commitments.

Safety and appropriateness of transport

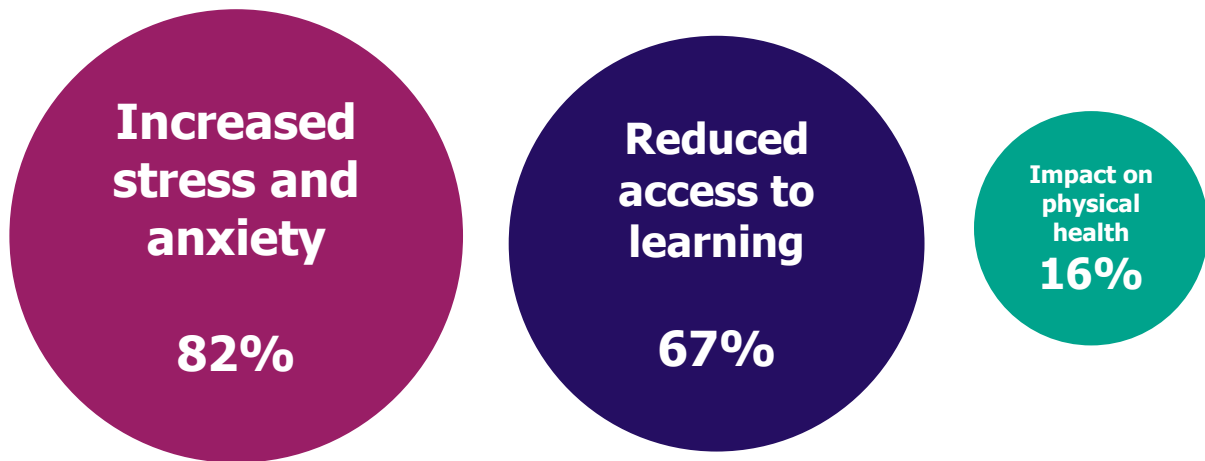
Figure 8: Have learners been offered transport that is inappropriate and/or unsafe?



40% of respondents raised concerns about the appropriateness and safety of transport provision offered. (See Figure 8). Decisions about transport in some cases cited by respondents suggest a lack of understanding of disability and more complex special educational needs. Concerns mentioned included

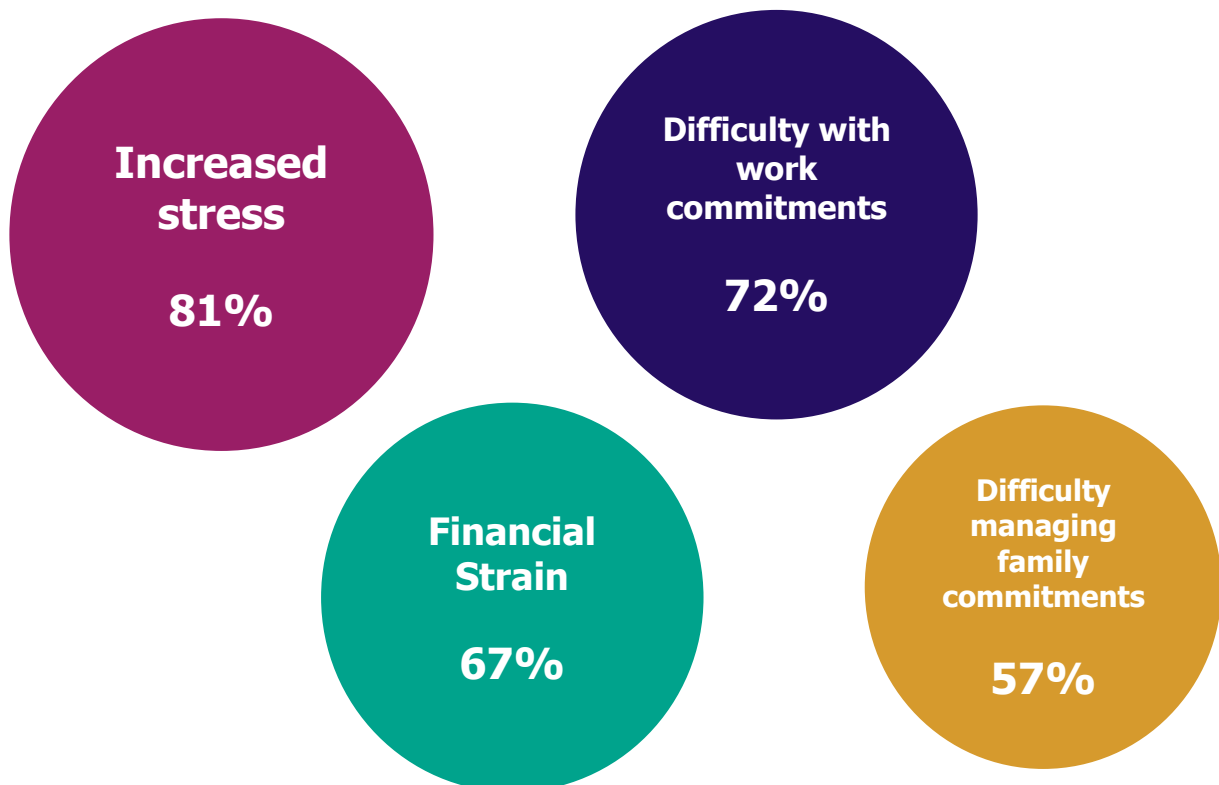
- inappropriate groupings of students within shared transport without consideration of individual learner need, including adult learners being placed with children
- inappropriate groupings leading to increased anxiety and triggering behaviours frequently leading to safety concerns
- overly crowded, cramped conditions and seating arrangements leading to physical harm
- increased numbers in one vehicle meaning some learners had to take much longer routes or travel early/late to accommodate all the learners using the shared transport
- transport failing to arrive or arriving on incorrect days
- lack of support staff onboard transport to escort learners, meaning learners' medical needs were not catered for
- learners who are unable to travel independently being issued bus passes or asked to use other modes of public transport, including one route that involved three changes
- vehicles provided being too small to accommodate learners' behavioural or medical needs, including lack of access due to the height of vehicles and learners' mobility needs, or with insufficient wheelchair restraint system and unreliable tail-lifts
- sudden changes to transport, including changes to vehicles, routes, staff and providers, without informing students or families causing anxiety and behavioural issues.

Impact on learners



82% of respondents noted that the current transport provision was increasing the levels of stress and anxiety felt by learners and 67% said it was reducing their access to learning. 16% of respondents were concerned about its impact on learners' physical health.

Impact on families



80% of respondents said that issues relating to transport support were creating increased stress for families. They believed that some families were struggling to maintain work (72%) and family (57%) commitments as a result of having to provide more transport themselves. Changes to transport support are resulting in families having to make a greater financial contribution. 67% felt that transport provision was putting a strain on families' finances, with

respondents highlighting specific cases in which families were required to pay for transport in full to ensure that their young person was able to attend college

In addition, some respondents noted the negative impact of lack of transport on families' outlook in relation to the future options for young people, the difficulty for families in maintaining their young person's engagement with engagement, and the particularly difficult situation for families already struggling financially or with other vulnerabilities.

Impact on colleges



For Natspec member colleges, issues around transport provision are increasingly consuming staff time. 74% of respondents reported spending more time than last year on supporting families in gaining access to transport, whilst 69% are spending more time liaising with local authorities to get learners the transport they require. Many also said that individual sessions were being disrupted by late or early arrival of learners due to unsuitable transport arrangements. In some cases, colleges were funding transport to cover students who would otherwise be unable to attend. A few said that staff were providing transport themselves where no other options were available, or that staff were having to work both before and after their usual paid hours to be present for students whose transport was being provided outside of college hours, creating costs that were not being reimbursed by local authorities.

National transport policy

There was widespread agreement that policy covering the provision of home to school transport for post-16 learners with SEND needs changing at national level. 86% wanted the statutory requirements for providing transport that currently apply to 5–16-year-olds to be extended to all learners aged 5-25 with an EHCP or the equivalent in Wales. 84% respondents said that transport arrangements should be agreed in principle at the point at which a college is named in an Education, Health and Care Plan. 37% thought that local authorities should consider commissioning transport services directly from colleges where this was possible. However,

others highlighted that this was dependent on college capacity and for many specialist FE colleges, providing transport would not be feasible.

Several respondents stressed that greater understanding of the needs of individual learners should underpin any policy changes and that no 'one size fits all' approach will be workable for learners with SEND. Others noted that whilst some learners can be trained to use public transport, this is not the case for all, particularly for those with more complex needs. Some pointed to a need for collaboration between colleges and local authorities to ensure that the correct expertise is used to determine a student's transport needs and potential to travel independently. They also suggested that transport arrangements agreed pre-16 should normally be continued throughout a young person's learning journey post-16. Others highlighted the need to ensure that transport is not only considered in the context of home-to-college, but also home to work/placement for students undertaking work experience or external college placements as these are essential for the transition into adulthood.

Conclusion

Responses to this survey confirm that it is becoming increasingly difficult for post-16 learners with SEND to access suitable transport support. Some local authorities have made explicit changes to their transport policies while others are applying existing policies in a way that is resulting in reduced support. These restrictions are having a direct impact on learning, causing delayed starts and intermittent attendance for learners, and in the worst cases preventing them from taking up their college places. The quality of transport support has also diminished with some learners being offered inappropriate or even unsafe transport options.

There is strong support from specialist colleges for a change in national post-16 transport policy to ensure consistent, equitable access to education for learners with SEND across local authorities in England and in Wales. Natspec is aware that several local authorities that have not made changes for this year have already indicated that they will be revising their post-16 transport support for the 2025/26 academic year, making the need for change urgent. Without a change in policy, there is a high level of risk that this situation will rapidly worsen, and more young people will be prevented from attending the post-16 setting best able to meet their needs.