

Enterprise & Skills Review – Call for Evidence

Response from Lead Scotland (Specialists in Linking Education and Disability)

Lead Scotland is a charity that enables disabled adults and carers to access inclusive learning opportunities. At a local level, we do this by providing direct support to learners¹ through flexible person-centred learning opportunities and individualised guidance and support to help them plan their learning journeys. At a national level, we provide information and advice on the full range of post-school learning and training opportunities, as well as influencing and informing policy development.

General comments

Lead Scotland welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence in relation to this review, however the consultation period may not have given service users sufficient time to respond. We would encourage the Scottish Government to ensure the voices of all stakeholders and users are heard, and that further steps are taken to specifically engage with people facing social and economic barriers with reduced access to the call for evidence.

Our evidence specifically relates to Skills Development Scotland as they are main agency our learners and volunteers are likely to interact with, so our evidence is drawn from these interactions.

4. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach?

The suite of services SDS offers employers and individuals is extensive and wide reaching and contributes towards driving forward Scotland's economy.

The focus on employability skills and national training programmes as alternative pathways for young people into work are an important feature of SDS's offer and recognises the value of vocational training.

We would however like to see an enhanced offer of provision and support for children, young people and adults who are disabled, have additional support needs

¹ We receive local authority funding to community learning and development services in Aberdeenshire, Dundee, Fife, Highland, North Lanarkshire, Moray and Perth & Kinross.

or long term health conditions. Reports from our helpline callers and those of our partners suggest the level of Careers Information, Advice & Guidance provided to children and young people with additional support needs can be insufficient, especially for those attending a special educational school. In a series of workshops on guardianship and transitions facilitated by Contact a Family and Lead Scotland across eight different local authority areas, parents of children attending special educational schools wanted to know 'what type of jobs disabled people can do' and reported an absence of any transition planning, careers advice or knowledge of SDS and My World of Work. We recognise that the picture will be different across Scotland and barriers may exist in terms of access to some of these schools as well as staff attitudes, but steps need to be taken to ensure every child and young person in Scotland has access to appropriate transitions planning and careers advice, regardless of their circumstances. Too many young people are written off as being unable to obtain work or to undertake traditional pathways into work and are leaving school without an appropriate positive destination to move on to.

Lead Scotland's Information service frequently receives calls from parents, asking about rights and legislation related to post-school transitions following inadequate preparation for their children's' upcoming school leaving date. Reports of a single meeting where college prospectuses are presented to parents without any career coaching, mapping or person centred planning are common. Parents report feelings of anxiety and fear that they're going to let their children down by not ensuring meaningful activity is in place beyond school. We also receive calls from parents of young people with complex learning disabilities and health problems, asking about opportunities for young people who have recently left school, where no appropriate offer of training/further education was made. One such case left a single parent with no choice but to try and further their child's learning and development themselves with stimulating books and activities at home whilst they juggled full time work.

Part of the issue is the lack of appropriate offers for young people with complex learning disabilities and health conditions. Opportunities for All is an explicit commitment to offer a place in learning or training for every 16-19 year old who is not currently in employment, education or training. In reality this explicit commitment cannot be realised for every 16-19 year old and recent communication with the Scottish Government OfA team confirmed there was in fact no guarantee of a place, just a commitment. Young people who have complex health needs and cannot easily access public learning centres or colleges have no options for stimulating group activity, life skills and learning other than arrangements made through self-directed support/social care budgets. This in itself is a challenge though, evidenced through the multiple calls our helpline receives around disputes between families and social workers about using personal budgets to support educational and learning opportunities. In addition, families report that social interaction with peers was the most important aspect of their child's wellbeing and development, and yet this is not always possible when activities are delivered/organised by an individual social care worker due to the inevitable reduced level of peer interaction. Families calling the helpline report a negative impact on their child's wellbeing and social skills when they leave the structured group setting of school and instead only interact with peers if and when there is suitable group provision in their local communities, but this can be sporadic. It can then be more challenging to form friendships and develop/maintain social skills.

The four capacities of the Curriculum for Excellence build expectations and aspirations from an early age that everyone will be able to contribute to society through active citizenship, volunteering, community work as well as through lifelong learning and work. The Curriculum for Excellence principles extend beyond school, but if there are no nationally available programmes offered to young people and adults with complex additional support needs those individuals become excluded from making a contribution in adulthood. This direction of travel creates inequality and has a negative impact on individual and family wellbeing.

In the social model of disability, societal barriers and attitudes can prevent disabled people from leading independent socially, civilly and economically active lives. The employment gap remains almost unchanged for a decade, with nearly twice as many unemployed disabled people compared to non-disabled people. Pathways into paid work for some disabled people need to be more flexible and innovative than the current national training programmes offered through SDS. While we welcome the work SDS are doing to broaden representation of young disabled people on the Modern Apprenticeship programme, it remains ultimately a prohibitive option for people learning at lower levels or those unable to sustain independent work and study over the required time period. We would like to see a more modular approach to the MA programme, where people can work towards milestones over a longer period of time with increased levels of support and a lowering of the SCQF levels where possible to broaden access.

Project Search continues to achieve high success rates in supporting young people with learning disabilities and/or an autistic spectrum disorder into mainstream paid work, by fully immersing learners into the work environment during each classroom day and offering intensive on-going job coaching support. Critics argue the high costs involved with Project Search make the programme prohibitive, however a [2013 Social Value Lab evaluation report](#) concluded that every £1 invested into Project Search returned £3.80 of social value, and a number of local authorities across Scotland have already purchased the one off license fee, so a site fee would only cost £300 per year to renew. Considering the recent [Joseph Rowntree research](#) published last week that shows the tangible cost of poverty equates to £1,200 for every single tax payer in the UK, investing in Project Search and making it available as a national programme across Scotland should be a priority for the Scottish Government.

Lead Scotland has delivered the Employability Fund in the past so we have first-hand experience of what's involved in delivering a national training programme. The level of administration involved to fulfil contractual obligations is disproportionately high when compared with other funders such as Big Lottery or Local Authorities. This raises administration costs which detracts from the core business of supporting young people. The lack of flexibility and language of compliance is the dominant flavour of this contract which is foregrounded and 'normalised' in communications with SDS. This compliance approach creates a lot of paperwork for learners and can cause tension for frontline staff who don't feel like trusted practitioners. The lack of flexibility can also affect attribution and results, e.g. two of our learners moved into a modern apprenticeship, but because it was a week over the deadline there is no attribution. There is a high level of bureaucracy involved with complex rules to

adhere to which we believe could be a barrier to organisations bidding for future tenders, especially if they have small contracts. Organisations are financially penalised if they strive to reach those who are the most excluded under the current system.

6. What are the right roles, services, skills and behaviours?

Helpline callers have reported excellent feedback about the level of general knowledge and advice provided by SDS careers advisors in reference to training and education options. However, some callers have expressed frustration about the absence of knowledge or expertise around disability related queries and issues.

One of the most common queries our helpline receives is related to how benefits will be affected by training or studying. Callers often present with extreme anxiety about the perceived threat of sanctioning or loss of benefit if they or their children start studying or training. This has been particularly evident from callers with mental health difficulties. Our helpline is national but it's only funded for 10 hours per week, so there is a concern that disabled people in Scotland do not have sufficient access to reliable information about the complex rules surrounding benefits and studying. A one to one appointment with an SDS careers advisor might be the only time a disabled person attempts to make enquiries about taking steps to further their career in an effort to become more employable, so it is vital to ensure the appointment is not a wasted opportunity. Lead Scotland recommends SDS assign specific disability careers advisors both in schools and in their local centres, trained in the multiple issues children, young people and adults with additional support needs will face in their lifelong learning journeys. In addition to knowledge about benefits and studying, advisors should be able to offer advice and reassurance about reasonable adjustments at college/university, how to arrange support, specialist funding and what their rights are under the Equality Act.

Another helpline caller also recently reported that a visit to an SDS Careers Centre was unsuccessful the first time due to a mechanical fault with the automatic door opening button for wheelchair users. On their return they commented about the lack of space to manoeuvre their chair and there seemed to be an apparent lack of wheelchair adapted computer stations or accessible toilets. The search function for local centres on Skills Development Scotland's website provides an address, phone number and opening hours, however as they are public centres it would be useful to include information about disabled access and facilities. Many of our helpline callers report feelings of frustration when a venue isn't fully accessible or embarrassment when faced with drawing attention to themselves or having to request 'special' assistance. This can prevent some people from making further enquiries or attempts to access appropriate careers advice.

In terms of the My World of Work website, it would be good to see more information and relevant case studies specifically aimed at disabled people in order to raise aspirations through positive role models. We welcome SDS's upcoming apprenticeships disability campaign and hope this can be embedded throughout all of their media platforms.

Some improved functionality of the course search option would be helpful so that search results are more specific. We receive regular negative feedback from learners and partners about the effectiveness of the search function – for example a search for an IT Skills course in Edinburgh brought up 283 results including post graduate courses in Screenwriting and an HND in Garden Design. Having too much information that is not specific can be a barrier for further engagement. One person who had phoned SDS to get help narrowing the search down was told that unfortunately that guidance service wasn't available. The service that was available was only phone support about how to actually use the MWOW facility. We would also welcome some additional functionality where criteria can be added to searches in order to shortlist courses that are either physically accessible or are accessible for people with additional support needs. It would also be extremely valuable to create a search function that shortlists community learning and development courses delivered through local authorities and charities, especially as formal learning and national training learning opportunities are more limited for people with complex health and disability needs.