Written response to the recommendations from Forth Valley College

Forth Valley College welcomes the opportunity to respond to the recommendations that refer specifically to colleges in the report Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities.

Recommendation 39
The Committee recommends that all further and higher education providers seek stakeholder feedback to the services they provide and respond where appropriate.

Forth Valley College realises the importance of obtaining learner feedback and using this feedback for operational planning and improving/reviewing systems and services. External partners host focus groups for the Equalities Team to gather learner feedback. This feedback is systematically incorporated into the operational planning process for the following session.

Further to this, the Equalities Team regularly receive feedback on their service through the Personal Learning and Support Plan Review process. The team consistently adapt their practices to meet the needs of the diverse group of learners that they work with.

External Agency/Partner Reviews are embedded in our formal quality processes. The External Forum for each area meets once per year. This in turn feeds directly into the team and then departmental Self-Evaluation. Ongoing dialogue with partners such as schools, social work departments, parents/carers supports future developments with the College.

Recommendation 40
The Committee recommends that further and higher education providers should develop mechanisms which allow them to go beyond the minimum specifications in the Disability Discrimination Act with regard to informing disabled students about their legal rights.

Invitations to advocacy groups e.g. Advocacy into Action, to attend classes and internal moderation meetings ensure that, where possible views are heard and taken into account in curriculum planning and marketing. Subjects such as Self-Advocacy on a range of courses will inform and encourage students to exercise their rights. Our pre-exit guidance processes includes an examination of support entitlement when moving into employment. We also work closely with partners who support individual students, especially Social Workers with regard to legal and financial statements.
Recommendation 41
The Committee welcomes the toolkit developed by the funding council to ensure that further and higher education providers comply with their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act and recommend that further and higher education providers make full use of it and other resources available to them.

Forth Valley College welcomes the change to a needs-led model of assessment and is working towards the quality indicators, as outlined in the toolkit. The College is currently working with Post School Psychological Services to review their processes to determine where they are in terms of meeting these indicators.

The College’s commitment to the needs-led assessment model is evident in its high investment into relevant staff development opportunities in this area, for example, the College has 9 key staff members BRITE trained and have a key role in developing an inclusiveness culture within the College.

Recommendation 44
The Committee recommends that all providers, in conjunction with their disabled students carry out a stock taking exercise of the information they provide to ensure it is appropriate and meets the needs of disabled students.

The College is committed to ensuring that the information they provide is accessible and appropriate to the needs of all students, including disabled students. The College has the means to produce information in a wide range of formats e.g. Braille/ audio/ translate to ensure the needs of a diverse student body are met.

A College Accessible Information Strategy is currently being developed and will provide service standards to be adhered to when considering requests for alternate formats. It also highlights the importance of having clear routes and responsibilities embedded into the College structure to manage such requests.

The College process of ensuring that learners identify learning and personal goals within PLP’s and our Listening to Learners encourages comment on information provided and that relevant support mechanisms are in place.

It is important that students are involved in the further development of differentiated materials. The development of the Prospectus has highlighted focus groups which include students with a range of disabilities. This approach will be extended to include other information marketing and information materials.
Recommendation 46
The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government should work with, for example, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the funding council, to consider how best to promote close working relationships between schools and further and higher education providers in a coordinated fashion across Scotland.

It is vital at this point to promote a more uniform approach across the country. We currently have “concerns regarding funding” of students attending College links from school and uneasy shifts in responsibility especially around areas such as support for students in transition from school to College.

Recommendation 49
The Committee recommends that there must be systematic planning from schools, the career services and colleges or universities to ensure that the support a disabled person receives whilst in transaction is seamless. The Committee notes that the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 may have the potential to achieve this.

Historical mechanisms removed since the introduction of ASL Act (Records of Need etc.) have been replaced by processes that are led by the schools and do include Careers, College reps etc. However these processes need to involve Colleges early, Schools strive to manage this process effectively. However, there is a requirement to respond to late applicants who are entitled to the same level of support. The involvement of Adult Social Services, which is imperative during the transition phase, has improved however further collaboration will be required to develop a robust system which meets the need of the learners and the agencies involved.

Recommendation 52
In order to encourage more disabled learners to take advantage of early starts and familiarisation visits to acclimatise and to access and identify and additional requirements for support, the Committee recommends that-

- Further and higher education providers should consider how best to provide early starts and familiarisation visit to disabled people as a matter of course, before the students commence the academic year.
- The Students Awards Agency for Scotland works with further and higher education providers to publicise that early start support and funding is available to potential students.
- Scottish Ministers explore how familiarisation visits could be funded to allow disabled students to fully investigate their choice of further or higher education provider.
Forth Valley College actively encourages visits by prospective students and their representatives as early as possible, either in groups or by individual appointment. However, it is not always possible for agencies and or individuals to take up this offer however, it is important that every effort is made at induction for learners to familiarise themselves with staff and to identify support requirements.

At pre-entry guidance we also arrange informal college visits. These visits provide the opportunity for prospective students to familiarise themselves with the college. If a student discloses any additional support requirements prior to this visit, arrangements are made for the student to have a Personal Learning Support Plan carried out.

The College is committed to providing pre-entry guidance to prospective students, including disabled students. The Learner Advisory Team offer drop-in sessions and appointments at all college campuses. Information is also available to learners in alternative formats.

The recommendation to fund visit to allow learners to fully investigate their choice of further or higher education is welcomed.

Recommendation 54
In order to remove the potential barriers caused by the professional occupational standards, the Committee recommends that-

- The career service, colleges, universities and the Scottish Qualifications Authority should develop clear and appropriate guidance to ensure that students in every situation are in a position to make informed and considered career choices

- Professional bodies and government agencies work in partnership with the careers service and further and higher education providers to provide regular up-to-date information on how specific impairments might effect a person’s ability to be considered for a particular career

Forth Valley College is committed to providing excellent careers guidance. A partnership agreement between the college and Careers Scotland ensures that all students have access to Careers Advice in each college campus. This service ensures that learners can make informed career choices. In addition learners have access to Learning Advisors who also work in close collaboration to Careers services local employers and other relevant agencies. Careers and guidance fairs are a regular feature of college life and provide learners with an early opportunity to explore options.
Recommendation 55
In order to remove the barriers to disclosure and to ensure disabled learners receive appropriate services, the committee recommends that-

- All further and higher education providers should develop and foster suitable procedures and environments to encourage students to disclose a disability
- Further and higher education providers share techniques which will support a disabled person’s choice to disclose

Forth Valley College is committed to providing learners with optimal opportunities to disclose an additional support requirement. Learners have an opportunity to disclose on application, at interview, at induction, or any other time during their attendance at college. The Equalities Team have had a strong physical presence at learner open evenings and inductions, to encourage learners with additional support requirements to disclose. This exercise has proved successful as a large number of referrals have been generated from the induction process.

Completely agree with the statement regarding sharing techniques to support the choice to disclose. Forth Valley College experiences a very small number of students who choose not to disclose at the beginning of our relationship. Many of these students, because of the development of good professional relationships based on trust and respect will disclose to staff with whom they have formed a bond.

Recommendation 56
The Committee considers the issue of communication support to students to go much wider than British Sign Language interpretation and recommends that the Scottish Government, the funding council and further and higher education providers should work together to investigate ways of increasing the availability of a comprehensive range of communication support to disabled students such as Deafblind communicators, Palantypists, Makaton, graphic symbol charts, speech-to-text reporters and BLS interpreters

Funding – Disabled Students Allowance – only open to those on HN courses at the moment and perhaps consideration should also be given to include students on NC/NQ programmes and others who don’t have access to this fund.

The College currently works with speech and language therapists to help meet this support need however this has an impact on the agencies resources.
Recommendation 61
The Committee agrees that the timing of applications to the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SASS) can present a barrier and result in a backlog of applications. The Committee, therefore, recommends that the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and the funding council work with further and higher education providers to identify disabled students earlier and signpost the Student Awards Agency for Scotland services to them.

Forth Valley College ensures that all progressing non advanced students have access to SAAS funding workshops. These workshops outline SAAS support enabling students to identify which form of support they are eligible for. All students are encouraged and supported to complete and return SAAS applications by the recommended May closing date.

Pre-entry applicants accessing the Learner Advisory Team are informed of all SAAS funding support available and are encouraged and supported, by the team, to apply at the earliest possible time. Advanced level applicants are provided with information regarding SAAS funding. This includes a step-by-step guide to online application.

A text system has recently been introduced which alerts learners to funding deadlines and support mechanisms.

Recommendation 64
In order to ensure that barriers, such as those presented by “pretendy” courses, are removed, the Committee recommends that-

- The Scottish Government should consider and address the perception that colleges are becoming day centres. The Committee notes that this situation may conflict with the social inclusion agenda, but considers that it must be dealt with more effectively to ensure appropriate choice and service provision to disabled people.

- The Scottish Government, the funding council and further and higher education providers develop solutions to ensure that students are not forced to study life courses as a means of keeping occupied, as an easy option for social services, or to get colleges extra funding.

If a disabled person placed on such a course, then it must be as a result of personal choice and as part of a structured programme of evaluation and development.

Forth Valley College actively promotes an inclusiveness approach to learning and value disabled people as a whole person and not in terms of their perceived disability. Access and inclusion is embedded in our approach to learning and teaching and reflected in college policies our curriculum planning.
process takes into consideration the needs of disabled learners in designing and the delivery of provision and relies on the supportive partnership arrangements with a wide range of agencies to ensure flexibility of provision with clear progression routes for all learners. These partnership arrangements strive to reduce the barriers that many disabled learners may face and also provide learners with a real opportunity for accreditation where appropriate.

Recommendation 66
The Committee recommends that the Scottish Qualifications Authority work with further and higher education providers to provide accessibility and access modules as integral parts of courses with a clear requirement for inclusion, for example, course on architecture, website design and teaching. The Committee does not wish to be prescriptive in detailing which courses should have accessibility included and considers this to be a matter for the Scottish Qualifications Authority to determine.

Forth Valley College agree with the recommendation to provide access modules. The important element is the “work with further and higher education providers

Forth Valley College welcomes steps to ensure that accessibility and inclusion issues are rigorously addressed within all programmes to which they are specifically relevant and support an approach leading to integration of inclusion throughout the whole curriculum than one where inclusion was treated as a separate topic.

Forth Valley College welcomes the opportunity to work with the Scottish Qualifications Authority on the design and review of its qualifications

Recommendation 67
The Committee, therefore, recommends that colleges should review existing provision with a view to developing courses and facilities appropriate for students with complex needs. The Committee notes the funding concerns of local authorities but considers that provision for people with complex needs should be mainstreamed.

Formal review of existing provision is only a first step. Forth Valley College currently works with partners, especially schools, on the impact this will have in the future. Access to information on school pupils from S1 onwards who have complex needs, and on how their needs might change by the time they reach school leaving age is key to the success of the review. This impacts on Estates development, staff development and succession planning, development/purchase of appropriate materials including learning technologies which will support the development of an inclusive organisation.
Recommendation 68
Therefore, the Committee recommends that consideration should be given to funding provision for students with complex needs from the funding council, along with other further and higher education provision.

It would be essential to involve further and higher education providers in consideration changes and/or amendment to the existing funding for learners with complex needs to ensure that funding is targeted at those with greatest need. An area of concern is accessing funding for additional support for learners on transition programmes from school to further education. Clear guidelines on funding mechanisms to support those with complex needs would create opportunities for learners to access programmes of study which meet their needs and develop skills and knowledge to aid progression.

Recommendation 46 and 48 are linked and consideration should be given to both when considering the implications and impact on funding and relationship between schools and further and higher education providers.

General Comment/Question
Consideration should also be given to the Scottish Executive Partnership Matters guidance document as this sets out the roles and responsibilities of various agencies involved in supporting learners with additional support needs studying in further education. It emphasises the importance of partnership working in ensuring the best possible support arrangements are in place to meet the needs of individual learners.

Linda McKay
Principal
Forth Valley Collage
6 December 2007