

Evidence from Natspec for the Lenehan Review of Experiences and Outcomes in Residential Special Schools and Colleges



Executive summary and recommendations

1. Introduction

Natspec is the membership association for organisations which offer specialist provision for students aged 16 to 25. 57 of our members, including 52 in England, offer residential education including multi-disciplinary specialist support and expertise to enable students with learning difficulties or disabilities to make a successful transition to adult life.

We firmly believe that for that for some young people, residential education represents the best post-16 or post-19 option, if they are to get the preparation they need in order to lead fulfilling adult lives. Students and parents/carers value highly the education and support our colleges offer, and the positive impact they have on their lives.

We have gathered evidence from a variety of sources, including previously commissioned research and surveys, Ofsted and Care Quality Commission inspection reports and a wide range of documentation submitted by our member colleges. We have also sought the opinions of the young people themselves.

2. Understanding residential specialist college provision

Residential specialist colleges offer education and training to young people with (often complex) learning difficulties and/or disabilities, alongside care, therapies and learning support. They have a diverse set of specialisms including those associated with a specific condition (such as epilepsy or visual impairment), a particular level of support need (such as profound and multiple learning difficulties) or a particular vocational focus (such as hospitality and catering). Some operate locally and/or regionally while others are national providers.

Their primary purpose is to offer an appropriate programme of learning to enable each student to make a positive progression from college, including to employment and appropriate living arrangements, equipped with the skills they need to be full members of society, leading as healthy and independent lives as possible. This distinguishes them from social care or health providers.

Residential specialist colleges are part both of the wider education and training sector and of their local communities. Colleges share expertise and facilities with both, and students are encouraged to make use of and contribute to their local community while they are at college.

3. How and why young people come to be placed in residential specialist colleges

For the vast majority of students in specialist colleges, post-16 or post-19 residential education is a positive and active choice for them and their families. It offers students a bridge into more independent adult lives, access to specialist facilities, resources and an integrated approach to education, health and care, which results in a rich, diverse and holistic programme of learning.

Many of our residential students and their families struggle to secure funding for their places and, in some cases, to get continuing funding for each subsequent year of their programme. A significant number has had to go to tribunal to overturn a local authority decision in order to attend college. For some young people with low-incidence SEN or particularly complex and/or profound and multiple needs, specialist residential colleges can be the only providers capable of meeting their needs. Living away from home may not initially have been an active choice for some of these young people but represents a compromise they are prepared to make to secure the best possible placement.

Very occasionally, local authorities place young people in a residential college at a point of crisis. In these circumstances, it may be the need for a safe environment (and the fact that no other provider feels able to take on the young person) rather than a requirement for specialist *education* that dictates a young person's placement in a residential setting. This can sometimes lead to unsuitable placements being made, unsettling the existing college community and damaging the confidence and wellbeing of the young person - but these cases are very rare.

4. The benefits and challenges of post-16 education in a residential specialist college

There are both potential advantages and disadvantages to residential education for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, but we believe that managed and delivered well, residential education brings far more benefits. Residential education gives students the opportunity to learn independence skills away from home in a supported context, just as their siblings may be doing at university. Critically it allows them to demonstrate to their families that they are not just able to manage but can actually thrive outside the family home. It also allows young people to build up friendship groups, have relationships and socialise with like-minded people in an environment where they feel 'normal'.

Learning in a residential setting facilitates a holistic education for young people, with opportunities for skills transfer between classroom and residence and for all staff to apply a consistent approach to teaching and support. Staff from multiple disciplines work together to offer each student a personalised, seamless package of education, therapy and care, up-skilling one another in the process. They can also meet young people's complex health needs on-site, minimising disruption to their learning, making efficient use of resources and relieving the pressure on families.

Colleges are aware of the potential drawbacks of residential education for young people and their families, including difficulties in maintaining relationships with families and friends, keeping families informed about their young person's progress, maintaining links with local health services, and supporting transition to employment or suitable housing in their home area. They have strategies to address these challenges and are continually looking for ways to improve their practice in these areas.

5. The student experience in residential specialist colleges

Students are overwhelmingly positive about their experience of residential specialist colleges although they do identify some drawbacks, common to many young people living away for the first time, such as missing parents, siblings and pets. They have an active social life both on-campus and in the local community with a huge range of activities on offer. Young people make choices about what they take part in at an individual level and student committees are often decision-makers about what group activities or events take place. Colleges support individuals or small groups of students to take part in activities to match their specific interests, such as horse riding lessons, belonging to an orchestra, or taking part in disability activism.

6. Safety, care and well-being of students

Students' safety, care and well-being are top priorities for residential specialist colleges, almost all of which are subject to inspections by both Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC). Colleges

have rigorous policies and procedures in place to ensure that they are providing young people with a safe place to live and learn and a high level of staff training. Care for students is person-centred and staff are trained in understanding and applying the Mental Capacity Act and Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards, so that students are the key decision-makers about their care wherever possible.

Colleges take a whole-organisation approach to promoting physical and emotional wellbeing. They provide social and leisure activities to support mental and physical health. They encourage open discussion of mental health and run taught sessions on achieving and maintaining emotional wellbeing, developing self-esteem and resilience (including to disability hate crime), many employing specialist staff to lead this work.

7. Quality of education and learning support for students in residential specialist colleges

Ofsted inspection reports on specialist colleges confirm that teachers and learning support staff have a high level of expertise and experience, including a detailed knowledge of specific conditions or impairments and of teaching, learning and support strategies, as well as skills in using particular approaches or equipment, such as assistive technologies. They are skilled in closely observing students, enabling them to work with students to address barriers, build on strengths and equip them with new strategies, especially for improved communication.

Students are offered individual study programmes designed to help them develop communication, independence and employability skills, tailored to their needs, interests and aspirations. Learning takes place in a wide variety of settings including not just classrooms but the residences, the community and the workplace. Many specialist colleges offer supported internships and almost all students will undertake some form of work experience or placement.

The organisational values underpinning the work of residential specialist colleges are also significant. Staff typically have high aspirations for their students and encourage students and their families to believe that with the right support the young people can achieve ambitious goals. They are committed to giving students a voice to articulate what and how they want to learn and to listening and acting on what students say.

8. Quality of outcomes for students in residential specialist colleges

Residential specialist colleges concentrate on helping students to achieve ambitious post-college goals; many have dedicated transition teams in place to help them do this. Increasingly colleges are monitoring student destinations, including over time, as a means of evaluating the effectiveness of their provision. It would be helpful if destination data collected as part of the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) returns was published in more depth and detail to create effective benchmarks and help improve outcomes further.

Students are supported to understand the different housing available to them, with many progressing into their preferred housing option. However, a lack of suitable accommodation or support in the learner's home area is a barrier to achieving this for all students. Those capable of further or higher education progress onto a range of courses at general FE colleges, into university and onto apprenticeships, with the majority achieving the qualifications for which they were entered. Colleges are highly creative in trying to address the enormous disability employment gap, although it is not a challenge they can solve alone. Young people, for whom a job is a realistic aspiration, are progressing into supported and open paid employment, and also into voluntary work. Colleges' success rates vary but some are exceptional, with one getting 85% of students into a job last year.

9. Conclusion

Natspec believes that residential specialist colleges make an invaluable contribution to the post-16 education and training of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, enabling them to discover who they are as young adults and what they want to become.

A residential specialist college is not the right option - or affordable - for all but it can be the best, and sometimes only, option for a small proportion of high needs students¹. We would like to see the value of specialist further education, as part of a mixed economy of provision, more widely recognised and an option routinely presented to young people who could benefit, so that they can make an informed choice of learning environment. We would also like to see more consistent, fairer funding decisions across local authorities, so that there is equal access on the basis of need for all young people.

We would be very happy to support the work of the review further. We look forward to welcoming the review team to a Natspec roundtable at RNC Hereford in May, where we hope we will be able to answer any questions the team may have and discuss any issues that need further exploration.

10. Key recommendations

- i. Local authorities should include details of local, regional and national specialist colleges in their local offer to support the understanding of young people and their families of the full range of options open to them.
- ii. The Department for Education should lead exploratory work, in partnership with regional groupings of local authorities and learning providers, to find a fair, sustainable and cost-effective means of ensuring that the needs of young people with low incidence SEN can be planned for and met at a regional level.
- iii. The Department for Education should require local authorities across the country to apply more consistent approaches to allocating high needs funding, resulting in fairer decision-making and hence reducing the amount of resource spent on appeals, mediation and tribunals.
- iv. The Education Funding Agency should collect and publish more detailed destination data to support more comprehensive understanding and better evaluation of the impact of specialist provision on outcomes for young people.

¹ Independent specialist colleges provide places for fewer than 3,000 students out of a total of 181,582 high needs places across all stages of education. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-needs-allocated-place-numbers>

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1. Introduction

1.1 Natspec is the membership association for organisations which offer specialist provision for students aged 16 to 25. Our vision is that all young people with learning difficulties or disabilities can access quality education and training which supports their aspirations for skills, work and life. Our members provide multi-disciplinary specialist support and expertise which enables students with learning difficulties or disabilities to make a successful transition to adult life. 57 of our members (52 in England) offer residential education, most alongside day provision.

1.2 Natspec supports a mixed economy of post-16 provision, so that young people with learning difficulties or disabilities and their families have a choice, including the choice to travel to the most appropriate college, in the same way as their non-disabled peers. We firmly believe that for some young people, residential education represents the best – and sometimes only – post-16 or post-19 option if they are to become more independent and get the best preparation for successful adult lives.

1.3 We are very pleased to be able to contribute to this review of experiences and outcomes in residential special schools and colleges. We have gathered evidence from a variety of sources, including previously commissioned research and surveys, Ofsted and Care Quality Commission inspection reports and a wide range of documentation submitted by our member colleges. We have also sought the opinions of the young people² themselves.

1.4 The specialist post-16 sector is not widely understood by the general public and we therefore welcome the opportunity to share the work of our residential colleges and hope the review leads to an increased understanding and appreciation of their contribution to post-16 education and training.

1.5 Our colleges offer high-quality education and support to students with learning difficulties or disabilities. 42 of the 47 residential colleges in England that have been inspected (five are awaiting their first inspection) were judged by Ofsted to be either good (36) or outstanding (6) in their most recent inspection. Students and parents/carers value highly the education and support these colleges offer and the positive impact they have on the young people's lives and those of their wider family, as the evidence we have gathered demonstrates.

2. Understanding residential specialist college provision

2.1 What is a residential specialist college?

2.1.1 Residential specialist colleges vary considerably and include, for example, providers who specialise in working with students with particular conditions such as epilepsy, autism or sensory impairment or a particular level of support need (such as profound and multiple learning difficulties), therapeutic communities sometimes offering shared community living, and colleges with a particular subject specialism such as performing arts or hospitality and catering. What they have in common is a commitment to providing a high-quality education to young people with (often complex) learning difficulties and/or disabilities, for whom they provide supported accommodation while they are learning.

2.1.2 Most residential specialist colleges also offer day provision. In recent years, data gathered by Natspec (based on a sample of members) suggests that the trend has been for an increase in day places and a decline in residential places. Although it appears that the decline in residential places has now levelled off, the number of day places continues to rise. While the majority of colleges offer places to young people aged 16 to 25, increasingly young people are applying to residential specialist colleges at ages 18 and 19 after two or sometimes three years in special school sixth forms.

2.2 Public understanding of residential specialist colleges

² Further student voice videos, in addition to those included in this response, are available on request

2.2.1 Natspec is aware that public understanding of residential specialist colleges is not well-developed, although it has improved, in part as a result of television programmes such as Channel 5's [The Special Needs Hotel](#), featuring students from Foxes Academy and BBC 3's [The Unbreakables: Life and Love on a Disability Campus](#), filmed at National Star College. Residential college provision may sometimes be confused in the public's mind with adult social care provision, such as care homes, or with health provision, such as assessment centres or secure hospitals. These different types of provision are quite distinct. We are hopeful that this review will help improve understanding of the distinctions and of the important work that specialist residential colleges do.

2.2.2 College provision is primarily focused on education and training, with the necessary care and support provided alongside a programme of learning. Colleges are led and managed by highly qualified education professionals, who oversee a multi-disciplinary staff team offering education, care, therapies and learning support. The young people are students, rather than patients, clients or service-users. The main purpose of residential specialist colleges, as with general further education colleges, is to offer an appropriate programme of learning to enable each student to make a positive progression from college, including to employment and appropriate living arrangements, equipped with the skills they need to lead as healthy and independent lives as possible.

2.3 Community partners

2.3.1 Residential specialist colleges are very much part of their local communities; colleges typically work with many partners in their local area. As part of their learning programmes, students make use of local leisure facilities and shops and travel around the community on public transport. They undertake work experience in local businesses and work in college-run shops in the local mall or on their own market stalls on the high street. Natspec data indicates that on average, each college works with ten employers in their area. Students carry out voluntary work and visit local schools to talk about disability and inclusion, and some join classes in mainstream settings. Specialist colleges, some of which are co-located with mainstream FE colleges, also invite local people onto their campuses, for example, to use college facilities, to view exhibitions or productions, or to eat in student-staffed cafés or restaurants.

Partnership working with the local community is very strong. The excellent use of the café, gallery and theatre as a learning environment results in the public having very positive relations with the college's community.

Freeman College, Ofsted Report 2016

Partners include schools, churches, colleges, businesses, the police and a local theatre. These links provide good opportunities to enrich students' social interaction and participation in the community. They have a significant impact on their ability to make choices. Students improve their self-esteem, extend their experiences and skills, and increase their independence and confidence to communicate and interact.

National Star College, Ofsted Report 2012

The college promotes diversity very well, especially in the community. Members of the public praise the college for the contribution its students are making to the community

Arden College, Ofsted Report 2014

Students' work in local businesses is promoting positive attitudes about people who have disability in the wider community. One employer commented that having a student on placement has taught him to be less judgemental.

Percy Hedley College, Ofsted Report 2016

2.3.2 Residential specialist colleges are not a means of 'hiding away' young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Rather, they offer an outward-looking education, preparing young people to take up their place in their community.

2.4 A source of expertise for the wider sector

2.4.1 Natspec and its members are keen to work in partnership with other post-16 providers. Our colleges already share facilities and expertise with the wider sector. Some have close partnership arrangements with local general FE colleges (GFEs) and there have been schemes where GFE students have stayed in specialist college residences to help build up their independence skills. Current funding arrangements can act as barrier, however, to greater collaboration between providers of different types.

2.4.2 Many of our residential specialist colleges are active members of regional networks; 20 specialist colleges are also members of the Association of Colleges (AoC) and five principals from specialist colleges sit on their national LLDD Portfolio and Delivery groups. In recent years, Natspec and AoC have worked together on a number of curriculum and quality improvement projects bringing together GFEs and specialist colleges to exchange good practice and learn from one another. Natspec runs an annual [Maths Week](#) where we share ideas for creative approaches to maths teaching and learning and host a themed competition for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities of all ages and from any learning provider.

2.4.3 Natspec has also delivered SEND-related training and contributed to professional exchanges for the Education and Training Foundation. We have recently launched TechAbility, an assistive technology and information technology (AT/IT) service which aims to improve outcomes for students with learning difficulties or disabilities. We will shortly be launching a broader consultancy and continuous professional development programme, Natspec Transform, using seconded staff from our member colleges alongside our associate team, to share specific SEND expertise as well as advertising specialist training offered by our member colleges.

2.4.4 Natspec also coordinates the [Inclusive Skills Competitions](#). The competitions now run alongside World Skills UK competitions, building links between colleges of different types and with local and national businesses to showcase the skills of young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. They are open not just to students at Natspec colleges but to people of all ages providing they are working up to level 1 and have recently been in education.

3. How and why young people come to be placed in residential specialist colleges

3.1 A positive choice

3.1.1 For the vast majority of residential students in specialist colleges, residential education post-16 or post-19, is a positive, active choice for them and their families. It offers students a bridge into more independent adult lives, just as higher education does for their non-disabled peers. Specialist colleges give families the reassurance that young people are making this important transition in a protected environment, where they will be safe and the risks involved in asserting their independence carefully managed.

3.1.2 Many young people are attracted to residential education by the opportunity to both learn and live alongside peers who have needs and interests similar to their own. In this short video Ben, a level 1 sports student at Farleigh Further Education College, explains why he wanted a residential place and how it is helping him become more independent.

3.1.3 Young people and their families also seek out residential specialist colleges in order to have access to specialist facilities, resources and staff. While some may not have selected a college on the basis of its being residential, they understand that to access this specialist provision the young person

may need to move away from home, in the same way as a peer who wants the specialist facilities of an agricultural college or a particular degree course. (Some colleges have developed non-residential satellite centres to extend their expertise to a wider range of students, but there remain some young people whose needs are such that even so, the residential setting offers the best opportunity for meeting these needs.)

3.1.4 Parents also welcome the benefits of the integrated approach to education, health and care that residential colleges can offer, which maximises their impact while relieving families of the burden of trying to access and coordinate these services for themselves.

Creating a suitable environment in each local authority area requires skills not readily available. The alternative is to have specialised centres to draw on a larger catchment area, for both delivery and target population. The operation of a specialist college such as Seashell, provides a working instance of such a model. By definition, attendance will include individuals being away from their own home. Our own view was that the actual and potential benefits of a residential placement outweigh our own personal desire to look after [our daughter] Caroline.

Caroline has a normal life expectancy and we are also practical enough to know that we cannot look after her forever. She therefore requires independence skills. Attendance at Seashell allows this to be managed in a structured way, being independent during a working week, but still having a family home at weekends and during non-term time. This works for Caroline. She enjoys time at college and enjoys time at home.

**Parent of student with profound and multiple learning difficulties
at Royal College Manchester, Seashell Trust**

3.2 The struggle for funding

3.2.1 For many students and their families, having specifically identified a residential college as their preferred option, gaining a place can be a struggle. Students are sometimes offered places by the college but then refused funding by their local authorities on the grounds that their needs can be met locally or that residential places are not an efficient use of resources. Some local authorities will not fund residential places for students who could 'reasonably' travel to the college on a daily basis, despite the advantages of the residential placement. Some students and their families have successfully contested these decisions at tribunals while others have had to try, and fail, at a local college, or their condition worsen, before funding has been granted on a subsequent application. Colleges are sometimes enrolling learners for whom decisions about funding are still unresolved at the start of the academic year, at considerable financial risk.

The struggle to get funding

Jack and his mother first tried to get him into the Royal National College for the Blind (RNCB) in 2012 when he was in Year 11. The college gave him a place but the local authority refused funding on the grounds that the local FE college could meet his needs. Four years later, with Jack still working at Level 2 and not in the vocational area of his choice, they applied again.

Getting funding was still a struggle. I submitted the EHC plan application in January 2016, Jack went to RNCB on an interview day in March and secured a place again - then it was a case of pushing and trying to get those who were making funding decisions to understand why it was important to Jack to go. The process is tough even when the professionals seem to be working for you. We had an amazing coordinator for Jack's application to Leeds, he understood where Jack was coming from. But in order to get funding, Jack needed to work with a psychologist, we had to get professionals together who had worked with him in school, we had to get the local college to say that they did not feel able to help him get Level 3 qualifications. In June - 6 months after starting the EHC plan - we finally got the funding.

Parent of student at Royal National College for the Blind

3.2.2 For some young people and their families having been granted funding for a residential college place initially, getting continuing funding for each subsequent year of their programme can also be difficult.

A fight to remain at college

The local authority approved Caroline's placement at Royal College Manchester (see case study in para. 3.1.4) just three working days before it was to commence, so there was no planned transition period. She had never been away from home before without her parents, not even for respite. Her first term was difficult as she learned to be away from home, but she settled well in the second term.

The local authority then terminated funding for the placement at the end of the first year and refused to transfer her from a Learning Difficulty Assessment (LDA) onto an EHC plan, their rationale being that Caroline's needs could be met in a care environment. They even went so far as to say that further education would be detrimental to Caroline's long term well-being. Her parents went through all the appeal stages, mediation and finally took the local authority to First Tier Tribunal and won. During this 18 month period, Caroline received no education and her access to therapies was very limited. She is now back in college and continues to make excellent progress.

3.2.3 In this short video, Cameron, a student at Beaumont College at the time of filming, describes the lengths he had to go to secure funding for a place at a residential specialist college, before going on to summarise what his time there has taught him.

3.2.4 There is a distinct lack of consistency in decision-making across local authorities, as different areas work out how to allocate the limited high needs funding available to them, leading to something of a postcode lottery for young people and their families and, in some instances, practices which may make them non-compliant with the Children and Families Act.

3.3 Whose choice?

3.3.1 For some young people with low-incidence SEN or particularly complex and/or profound and multiple needs, specialist residential colleges can be the only providers capable of meeting their needs. This can make them a very attractive proposition for young people and their families, but at

the same time there can be a sense of injustice that unlike their non-disabled peers, ultimately the decision about where they study is not theirs, but the local authority's.

My parents had to fight to get funding for me to go there. I wanted to go because I thought I would learn the most and get the life skills I needed, but in the end, it was the local authority's choice, not mine.

Josh, former student at National Star College

3.3.2 Sometimes parents or carers, rather than the young person, are the primary decision makers. This is perfectly logical where the young person lacks capacity under the Mental Capacity Act to make the decision for themselves and the placement is in their best interest. There are instances, however, where young people do not appear to have been involved in the decision-making, despite their mental capacity. This can sometimes happen when home circumstances change (e.g. breakdown of parental relationship or a newly-born sibling) or when the behaviour patterns or physical profile of the young people change, often triggered by puberty, causing a change to the risk profile at home and parents feeling no longer able to manage.

3.3.3 Very occasionally, Natspec itself is approached by a local authority seeking advice on a suitable placement for a young person at a point of crisis, when other placements have broken down, and the local authority is desperate to find a provider who is willing to take on the young person and able to 'cope' with their complex care needs. In these rare circumstances, it may be the need for a safe environment (and the fact that no other provider feels able to take on the young person) rather than a requirement for specialist *education* that dictates a young person's placement in a residential setting.

3.3.4 In a very small minority of cases unsuitable placements are sometimes made. This can be due to the pressure on a local authority to find a placement, the pressure on independent specialist providers to secure enough placements to remain viable and/or the poor quality of pre-placement information available to colleges. This can be highly unsettling for the existing college community - and extremely damaging to the confidence and wellbeing of the young person who may have had to deal with multiple failed placements. These cases, however, are very rare.

4. The benefits and challenges of post-16 education in a residential specialist college

4.1. There are both potential advantages and disadvantages to residential education for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Natspec has previously commissioned a [survey](#) of the views of staff in member colleges to help us understand the issues better and enable members to maximise the benefits and address the associated challenges effectively. We believe that when it is managed and delivered well, the benefits of residential education far outweigh the drawbacks.

4.2 Some young people and their families actively seek out a residential placement in order to benefit directly from the residential experience. For others, the original driver may have been to secure the specialist support not available locally, but young people and their families still recognise the benefits of a residential placement.

We found it heart-breaking initially when we were told that Lauren's needs could not be met at the Barrow [non-residential satellite] provision as we had always just presumed

that she would go there. We weren't ready to let go and did not want Lauren to be away from us. However, her coming as a residential student has forced us to think about a lot of harsh realities we would have just put off and we are glad that she is learning to live and work with other people as we know we are not going to be around forever.

Lauren is much more independent at college, more so than at home because we are very aware that we are too soft with her and she relies on the fact that we will do everything for her. It is wonderful to see her doing things with her peers and being able to spend time with people of her own age. Where we live, there are not many young people, the ones who are there will run away from Lauren in fear or laugh at her when she vocalises to try and interact with them. We are glad that she is having the opportunity to do things with other young people as we could never have given her that experience at home, this has meant that she is now not as socially isolated and reliant on adults (carers/parents).

If it hadn't have been for Beaumont College Lauren would have fallen through the cracks.

Parents of a student at Beaumont College

4.3 A stepping-stone to independence

4.3.1 Residential education gives students the opportunity to learn independence skills away from home in a supported context, just as their siblings may be doing at a residential FE college or university. Students develop a broad set of independence skills including self-advocacy, decision-making, independent travel, managing a budget, managing their medication, personal care, and healthy-living as well as household skills such as cooking and cleaning. The residences allow them to develop and practise these skills in an authentic way; rather than learning how to make a hot drink in a classroom or teaching kitchen, they learn how to make themselves their morning cup of tea.

4.3.2 Learning these skills away from home is a critical factor for some learners, as they progress towards adulthood. It is also very significant for parents. Seeing that their child is not just managing but actually thriving outside the family home gives them confidence in the young person's capacity to forge out a successful adult life for themselves – and enables parents to allow their young people to take some of the necessary risks associated with moving from childhood to adulthood.

Parents are overwhelmingly positive and many report significant improvements in independence, maturity and communication as well as having a better understanding of possible options for the future. One parent described the impact of the college experience as giving her son a 'voice' for the first time in his life.

Cambian Lufton College Ofsted report, July 2016

Learners gain in confidence and make steady progress in acquiring independence skills such as travelling unaccompanied or driving. All learners have an independent living skills programme and they learn successfully how to shop using a budget and prepare healthy food. Parents are extremely positive about the college and many report better than expected progress in learners' maturity, independence and attitudes to learning.

Cambian Wing College Ofsted report, November 2016

4.4 An opportunity to be 'normal'

4.4.1 Students sometimes describe being at a residential specialist college as the first time they have really felt 'normal' rather than 'special'. They find themselves in an environment where their disability does not set them apart and where others, staff and students, understand what it's like to be them. Some students reflect on the fact that the residential experience has finally enabled them to build up a strong friendship group, have girlfriends or boyfriends, and the opportunity to go out and socialise with people with similar life experiences, like the young adults that they are. Finally they feel included, rather than excluded.

4.4.2 Sometimes young people who began as day students elect to become residential students as they get closer to the end of their time at college. In these circumstances, the funding for the residential aspect is not easy to source, and some families have self-funded a couple of nights a week, while for others part-time funding has come from adult services.

Moving from day to residential provision

Beth started at Queen Alexandra College as a day student. During her second year at college she had formed firm friendships with a large group of students who were living residentially. She began to visit them occasionally during the evenings and, the more times she visited, the more she began to realise that a residential place might really suit her.

As Beth still lived at home it was difficult for her to carry out social activities on the evenings, like her friends were. Beth also saw her friends' development in terms of their ability to cook meals for her when she visited, organise their own activities around their hobbies and interests, and manage their own social life.

Beth applied for funding in her second year and was granted part time funding (Monday-Friday) from Birmingham Local Authority. Beth took a little while to settle into residential life at first but after that she flourished. Her confidence grew hugely and her social life was very busy!

Beth has now been offered a place at university. The skills she learnt whilst staying residentially opened many doors for her as she now feels confident to be able to live semi-independently in a community setting.

4.5 A holistic education

4.5.1 Learning in a residential setting allows colleges to plan and deliver a holistic education for young people. There is an opportunity for young people to transfer skills from the classroom to the residences (and vice versa) and for staff to develop and apply a consistent approach to teaching and support across all aspects of a young persons' day-to-day life.

Learners practise domestic skills in their residences and learn to be more independent. Learning targets are shared across the college and residences so that learning and the development of communication skills are reinforced across the provision

Condoover College, Ofsted Report 2014

Students increase their independence and improve their daily living skills because education and residential staff work together very successfully.

Priory College, Swindon, Ofsted Report 2016

Teaching and support staff know and understand the learners well, and interact with them very well, whether in the residences, the classrooms, the internal work placements, the farm, the horticulture area or in the community. This means that, in effect, the curriculum is 24 hours per day for the majority of learners, as staff in the residences reinforce learning as well as support learners' well-being and enjoyment.

Young Epilepsy St Piers College, Ofsted Report 2014

4.5.2 Many colleges employ support staff as dual professionals, providing both care and personal support to students, working across both college and residences. Natspec commissioned a [study](#) of this practice in 2012, and identified multiple benefits for students.

Consistency of support enabled greater consistency in behaviour management as members of staff who were very familiar with an individual student and had developed creative and positive ways of working were able to share these with tutors in a classroom setting.

Dual role support staff, who were able to observe learners in a range of different settings, enhanced the potential for seeing learners' strengths and assessing their abilities. Learner potential which had not always been observed within a classroom or other formal learning setting, was often perceived by staff who saw the learner in a range of different settings. This could then be fed back to the tutor who was able to adapt his or her perceptions and aims for the learner.

Staff carrying out a dual role covering both learning support and care duties, 2012

4.5.3 Residential specialist colleges often have an extensive range of staff from multiple disciplines who work together to offer each young person a personalised, seamless package of education, therapy and care. Staff from the different disciplines learn from one another, thus increasing their capacity to offer students a high-quality learning experience.

A wide range of multi-disciplinary professionals collaborate effectively with teachers and support staff to provide the best possible learning experience. For example, speech and language therapists work successfully alongside teachers in modelling strategies that help to develop learners' communication skills.

David Lewis Centre, Ofsted Report 2013

The dedicated room for therapeutic activities together with the improved integration of therapists, education and residential staff has resulted in a more coordinated approach to meeting the needs of learners and staff developing skills and techniques that make learning more effective... Due to the good sharing of the notes from the therapy team's weekly meetings, all teaching, support and residential staff understand each learner's progress and development needs, as well as barriers to their involvement and learning.

Farleigh FE College, Ofsted Report 2015

Therapists work alongside teachers to integrate strategies and therapy resources so enhancing students' skills very well. Following an extensive therapeutic programme across the education and care setting one student is now able to stand upright for the first time in eight years.

Royal College Manchester, Seashell Trust, Ofsted Report, 2013

Education, residential and therapy staff communicate effectively. All staff contribute to a single document that assesses the daily progress each learner makes in their behaviour and skills development and how well each is adapting to new or more demanding challenges.

Sheiling College, Ofsted Report 2013

4.5.4 Colleges actively plan for what is sometimes referred to as a '24-hour curriculum', maximising the learning opportunities across the full day.

The residential curriculum at Queen Alexandra College

We provide a 24-hour curriculum for our students. The educational experience does not finish at the end of the college day. This is achieved by creating a designated set of person-centred SMART targets, led by each student. Each student has a designated key worker in their residential home who focuses specifically on these targets, and the steps needed to achieve them.

The service is broken down into the following key areas:

- Personal care (e.g. morning routine, medication administration)
- Independent living skills (e.g. cooking, money management, travel training)
- Emotional and behavioural support
- Social and leisure (e.g. developing peer-to-peer relationships, reading social cues, leisure activities.)

Numeracy and literacy skills are also embedded into the residential curriculum (e.g. through working out how to share costs for a group activity), as is the ability to live in a communal setting which is largely achieved by student-led house meetings, which are chaired and minuted by students themselves.

Skills are passed through both the classroom and the residence with the residential service helping to put into practice theoretical skills learnt during the day. Staff from both services keep in close contact to monitor the progress of each student.

4.5.5 The capacity to meet young people's complex health needs on-site, so that their learning is not interrupted, is also a key benefit.

On-site Nursing at St Martin's Centre

Health outcomes are excellent for our young people, e.g. a number of students have been supported to have injections/bloods taken on site with support from our Lead Nurse and staff who know the students well. This has meant they don't have to attend hospital

appointments (a big saving for the NHS). The wrap-around provision and on-site nursing enables students to stay out of hospital because their health is closely monitored by our nursing staff and physiotherapists.

4.6 Addressing the challenges of residential learning

4.6.1 Specialist colleges are aware that there are potential drawbacks of residential education for young people and their families. Living and learning away from the family home can make it more difficult for young people and their friends and family members to keep in touch. Colleges work hard to ensure that these relationships are maintained, for example, through facilitating Skype and phone calls, family events and encouraging regular return home visits. They also have strategies for keeping families informed about their young person's progress and involved in decision-making.

The Royal College Manchester, Seashell Trust – Keeping in touch with families

Every young person has a family link worker. They plan with the family to help their young person to settle in, e.g. through weekly visits home at first. Bedrooms are decorated with photos and items from home. If students are homesick, sensory 'memory boxes' may be created with familiar things such as music, photos, a scented cushion, an old toy.

The college agrees with families how they would like to be updated on their young person's life at college. They share a home-college book and student diaries with lots of photos – and many parents receive a weekly email or a nightly phone call from a keyworker. Families are also asked about how they would like to be informed about behavioural incidents or accidents, which are rigorously recorded.

Person-centred planning is used to ensure that students can keep in touch with people who are important to them. This includes gathering 'social circle' information. The Trust has a network of volunteer befrienders who visit regularly to build relationships with young people who would not otherwise be visited, although this is rarely needed. Skype is used widely to keep in touch with families, as well as FaceTime and less commonly, phone calls, emails and texts. The college has a bank of iPads, accessible in every house (many students have their own iPad). E-safety training is regularly provided for staff and students.

The college has an open-door policy, so parents can visit at any time. There is a family flat which can be booked. Each student has a calendar in an accessible format, showing key dates such as family visits and holidays. The college and the Seashell Trust organise family events throughout the year, so families can get to know staff and other families and learn about topical issues. Parents/carers can join a closed Facebook page, providing a forum for information-sharing, advice and support.

4.6.2 Preparing for transition to employment or suitable housing in their home area is also potentially more complex if it is being done from a distance. However, Natspec colleges have a range of strategies in place to deal with these challenges.

Securing positive post-college housing options

At Foxes Academy, we have a dedicated Transition Team who work closely with social care, parents, the young person and external agencies to ensure the move into sustainable employment and supported independent living is integrated, and therefore leads to a successful, long-term outcome.

This September we will be holding a Futures Day for families of students in their final year, where we plan to introduce them to national housing organisations such as Golden Lane Housing, make sure they know what questions they should be asking of their local authorities, where to find information, and what their rights are. We see ourselves as empowering the families to get good housing outcomes for their young people – making sure they get started early so that transition out of college is well-planned.

4.6.3 Some colleges target national businesses for work experience or supported internship opportunities, so that students may be able to progress onto a local branch/outlet of the same company. They also place students in job roles which are commonly available across the country. Some colleges support parents to help set up local work experience for their young people during the holidays.

The college works very effectively with large national businesses to support students' transition into employment in the students' home areas. For example, two students had work placements with a large supermarket chain while at college. They moved into full-time employment in branches of the chain close to home on leaving college.

Another student is on work experience as a porter at a hospital based near the college. He collects and sorts blood samples and ensures that they are despatched to the correct department. As a result of his excellent skills development, he now works as a 'bank porter' at his local hospital in the college holidays, with the aspiration to continue there when he leaves college.

Derwen College Ofsted Report 2016

4.6.4 Colleges report that maintaining links with local health services can be problematic. While students are often registered with a GP close to the college, they almost always access hospital services in their home local authority and information-sharing by health services is often poor.

5. The student experience in residential specialist colleges

5.1 Student enjoyment

Students are overwhelmingly positive about their experience of residential specialist colleges. They do identify some drawbacks, such as missing parents, siblings and pets, however, [Natspec student surveys](#) routinely find high levels of overall satisfaction amongst students. They are appreciative of the support they receive from staff, proud of the progress they are making and forthcoming about the fun they have, as can be seen in this video made by students at Queen Alexandra's College.

5.2 Social life

5.2.1 Students are offered a wide range of extra-curricular activities, both on-campus and in the local community. They are encouraged to make choices for themselves about which and how many social activities they engage in. Many colleges have excellent sporting facilities such as gyms with specialist equipment, sports halls, swimming pools and tennis courts, and performing arts spaces. Students use these facilities individually or to take part in classes, such as yoga or dance, or clubs such as boccia or archery. They also have well-equipped student common rooms where they host social gatherings such as parties and quiz and movie nights. Many have a student committee which determines the programme of social activities.

5.2.2 Much of the extra-curricular activity takes place off-site with trips to local pubs and restaurants, shops, leisure centres, swimming pools, cinemas, ice rinks and bowling alleys. Depending on their level of independence skills, students may be accompanied by support staff or accessing these facilities independently, usually in friendship groups. Students also go on organised visits to the theatre, concerts and music festivals, zoos and theme parks. Some students belong to local youth groups. Colleges often support individuals or small groups of students to take part in activities to match their specific interests, such as horse riding lessons, fishing, belonging to a local orchestra, fund-raising for a charity or taking part in disability activism.

Students enjoy a range of enrichment activities at weekends and evenings, with a strong focus on student choice and a link to their personal interests. These activities include regular gym sessions, mountain biking, 'open mic' nights, bingo and fishing. One student regularly visits a small, local airfield cafe. This builds his confidence, social skills and improves his knowledge of aeroplanes.

Glasshouse College, Ofsted Report 2016

5.2.3 St Martin's College supports Bradley and two other students to play in the South West Open Youth Orchestra. He talks about the orchestra, the technology involved and the impact of his involvement in this short video.

6. Safety, care and well-being of students

Students' safety, care and well-being are top priorities for residential specialist colleges, almost all of which are subject to inspections by both Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

6.1 Safeguarding

6.1.1 Safeguarding includes training and support for students in on-line safety, safe sexual practices, and protection from discrimination, hate crime, bullying, exploitation and radicalisation (under the Prevent agenda). Natspec ran a conference last year to support member colleges and the wider sector to develop accessible Prevent resources and approaches for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

6.1.2 Colleges have rigorous policies and procedures in place to ensure that they are providing young people with a safe place to live and learn. They also train staff in child (and vulnerable adult) protection, including awareness of signs of abuse and how to respond to disclosure or suspicions that a student may be being abused or at risk, including students with complex needs who may be non-verbal. They have close relationships with their local safeguarding boards.

Recruitment checks are thorough and policies on safeguarding are regularly reviewed and include a policy on the 'Prevent' agenda. Managers train staff well so that they have a good understanding of their safeguarding responsibilities and reinforce learners' understanding of how to keep themselves safe.

Managers and staff have created a strong culture of safeguarding throughout the college. Learners report they feel safe and know whom to contact if they have any concerns. They are well informed about internet safety. Staff are sensitive to the needs of learners and work hard to prevent situations escalating by working in a calm manner.

Oakwood Court College, Ofsted Report 2016

The college has a strong focus on safeguarding and appropriate systems are in place. A trained social worker leads on this work for the college, and staff training ensures staff are clear about roles, responsibilities and reporting systems. Appropriate links are in place with external agencies.

David Lewis College, Ofsted Report 2016

People were confident about how to stay safe; they had been equipped with the skills to recognise and cope with discrimination and to report suspected abuse. They knew how to make a complaint and had a lot of opportunities to feedback to staff about their experience of living at the college. Outstanding systems were in place to support people to raise concerns, to stay safe and to learn how to manage their anxieties and emotions. People were supported to be as independent as possible, taking responsibility for their medicines, and learning new skills.

National Star College, CQC Report 2015

6.2 Care

Care for students is provided in a person-centred way to ensure that young people's preferences are taken into account and that their dignity is respected. Staff are trained in understanding and applying the Mental Capacity Act and Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards, so that students are the key decision-makers about their care wherever possible, and that, when necessary, best interest decisions are taken on their behalf appropriately. Natspec runs a care forum for its members to ensure they are aware of the latest legislation and regulations, and to share good practice in providing high-quality care to students.

We observed staff showed patience and gave encouragement when supporting people. Staff were respectful and caring when helping people with complex needs. People who lived at the college told us they had an excellent relationship with the staff and management team. Our observations confirmed there was a strong, visible, open and inclusive culture at the service. Staff were fully committed to support people to live an independent life as much as possible both at the college and in the community.

Beaumont College, CQC Report 2015

Learners were treated with kindness, compassion and reassurance. Their privacy and dignity was respected by staff who promoted their individuality. Creative methods of

communication enabled learners, no matter how complex their needs, to be involved in their care and support. Learners felt involved and empowered to learn and try new things. Learners were able to test and try new opportunities to explore areas of independence they had previously not considered.

St John's College and School (College View residence), CQC Report 2016

6.3 Wellbeing

6.3.1 Colleges take a whole-organisation approach to promoting physical and emotional wellbeing. They provide healthy meals and varied opportunities for physical exercise including involvement in disability sport within and beyond the college, for example through membership of local football leagues. Natspec has recently introduced an annual competitive inter-college sports event, building on the success of previous events organised by colleges, for example Seashell Trust's popular [inter-college sports day](#). Colleges support students to understand how to maintain good physical health and to make healthy choices.

6.3.2 In order to support emotional wellbeing, colleges have developed an ethos of acceptance and respect for individuals, encouraging open discussion of mental health between staff and students. They are putting good mental health³ on the same footing as good physical health, for example through taught sessions on achieving and maintaining emotional wellbeing and developing self-esteem and resilience, as part of tutorial time or a personal development module, prominently displaying accessible information about positive mental health, and providing social and leisure activities to support mental health. Many colleges employ specialist staff to lead their work on emotional wellbeing, including educational psychologists and mental health nurses.

6.3.3 Colleges also support students to recognise and report disability hate crime, and to build up an emotional resilience to exposure to this kind of crime. They are giving students coping strategies to be able to deal with abuse along with individualised support, should they encounter abuse, so that students have the confidence to carry on and cope with any future situations.

7. Quality of education and learning support for students in residential specialist colleges

7.1 Staff skills, expertise and experience

7.1.1 Teachers and learning support staff in residential specialist colleges have a high level of expertise and a great deal of experience in working with young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Staff are dedicated, highly skilled, ambitious for students' success and work tirelessly to ensure that all students achieve the best possible outcomes in skills and knowledge.

Derwen College, Ofsted Report 2016

Teaching and residential staff are highly skilled. They have a very well-informed, detailed understanding of learners' skills and needs. They set wholly appropriate individualised targets and devise excellent learning activities that increase learners' abilities.

³ See <http://www.natspec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Natspec-response-to-Health-Committee-mental-health-enquiry.pdf> for more information on our colleges' work to support emotional well-being

7.1.2 They bring together their detailed knowledge of specific conditions or impairments and of teaching, learning and support strategies, with their skills in using particular approaches or equipment, such as assistive technologies, communication methods or behaviour management strategies.

Behaviours that challenge

Many learners join the college displaying various levels of challenging behaviours. Highly personalised and well-judged behaviour support plans are very effective in providing learners with the strategies and individual support needed to reduce or minimise the occurrence of these behaviours. One second year learner made great progress in engaging in learning, having previously been barely able to participate in any activities.

Sheiling College, Ofsted Report 2013

Specialist multi-disciplinary working to implement individual communication and behaviour strategies is very effective. The majority of teachers and support staff are highly skilled and enthusiastic, with high expectations of what students can achieve.

Portland College, Ofsted Report 2014

Technology

The use of assistive technology to improve students' communication is very good and often innovative. For example, students with highly complex communication needs worked with a support assistant to read a GCSE English text on genetics. The assistive technology enabled students to communicate their answers clearly. Managers work with specialist support teams to devise bespoke technology for students, such as developing a simple adapted tool to enable students to send messages using social media for the first time independently.

Treloar College, Ofsted Report 2016

Innovative use of adaptive information and learning technologies and assistive technology enables all students to engage in learning, communicate very effectively or to manage their environment well.

Henshaw's Specialist College, Ofsted Report 2015

Use of assistive, augmentative communication (AAC) at St Martin's College

We use AAC to support our students to communicate. We have highly skilled speech and language therapists and technicians with specialist knowledge of AAC on site who support education, therapy and care staff and students to ensure that the ability to communicate is always available. Many of our students have complex physical difficulties, learning disabilities and health needs and require us to be at the forefront of the latest technology, e.g. eye gaze devices are used for communication and environmental control.

One young man aged 21 who is using eye gaze technology is developing his literacy skills and since being at college, he is now able to read and spell at a level that enables him to access his areas of interest which he was previously unable to do. His IT skills have improved and he can now independently use Word, PowerPoint and Excel to produce spreadsheets and graphs. This has greatly improved his quality of life and self-esteem.

7.1.3 Staff establish close working relationships with their students, partly because of the amount of time they spend with them. This allows teachers and support staff to observe students very closely and hence to understand their potential and identify their barriers to learning. They then work with students to address these barriers, build on strengths and give them new ways of working. Staff learn how to interpret students' behaviours, gestures and vocalisations and build their trust and confidence. Many young people arrive at college with very low self-esteem and low aspirations for the future. The work done by staff to address this is critical to the young person's future success.

Intensive observation by staff

Staff have watched Nick [who has cerebral palsy, is non-verbal and uses a wheelchair] and noted all his skills, all his interests, all his strengths. How he ticks, what he enjoys, how he expresses himself. They have watched which direction he wants to take and which door he wants to go through! By the end of the first term of college the therapists, educationalists and residential were all working in harmony to help Nick go beyond where he had reached and I am here to tell you he is moving on!

He might be taking very small steps or turns of his wheelchair wheels but he is moving onwards and upwards. Never before have we seen him so happy, so fulfilled and so determined. The staff are all so focussed and detailed in their approach with Nick, it seems they are able to make each student feel they are there just for them.

Parent of Student at Royal College Manchester, Seashell Trust

7.2 A well-planned curriculum

7.2.1 Students' individual study programmes are designed to help them develop communication, independence and employability skills, as appropriate to their needs, interests and aspirations. English and maths skills are typically embedded across the curriculum. Programmes may also include specific vocational or academic content. They are usually highly personalised, often with a strong focus on developing learners' confidence and self-esteem. Learning takes place in the classroom or workshop, in the residences, in the community, in social enterprises and in the workplace.

Mary's individualised learning programme

Mary is a student at Henshaw's Specialist College. She was born with severe physical disabilities and visually impaired. Her holistic timetable at college is based around communication. She uses a voice output communication aid (VOCA) to communicate. It has been customised to her individual needs by the therapy, educational and sensory support team who worked with Mary to set up new words and layouts and a switch which she can access independently by moving her head. Everyone who works with Mary is fully trained in relation to the VOCA, enabling her to develop her ability and confidence in using her VOCA to communicate across all sessions.

As well as intensive language therapy sessions, Mary is learning vital skills to help her fulfil her ambition to become an Avon representative. Her curriculum is geared towards this aim, from learning to pick up small objects to adding up the cost of an order.

7.2.2 Many specialist colleges offer supported internships in partnership with employers. They are a type of study programme for young people aged 16 to 24 with an Education Health and Care plan, who want to move into employment and need extra support to do so. Most of the learning takes place in the workplace with the support of a job coach.

Supported Internships at National Star College

National Star College runs a range of supported internship programmes including one based at energy supplier, EDF, in Gloucester. This particular internship programme is for young people with disabilities who are interested in a career in administration and already have English and maths at Level 2 or above. Interns have included people with visual impairment, cerebral palsy, autism, an acquired brain injury and learning difficulties.

The programme runs four days per week for one year, term-time only. Most of the interns' time is spent in the workplace with the support of a tutor and/or job coach. They are also assigned a job buddy, an EDF colleague, to support them. Interns study towards a Certificate in Employability Skills and/or an NVQ in Business Administration, as well as English and maths qualifications if applicable. At the end of the programme interns are supported to search for jobs, apply for jobs and attend interviews.

Currently, 70.5% of National Star College's interns have moved successfully into paid jobs.

7.2.3 Most students in specialist colleges will undertake some form of work experience, enabling them to develop employability skills in an authentic workplace setting. Some students will work in the college's own social enterprises (e.g. cafes, shops, print works) either on-site or in the community, while others will undertake external work experience with local employers.

St John's College's Work-based Curriculum

At St. John's we feed our learners and staff, we maintain our buildings and grounds, we supply materials for our classrooms and offices, we fix our computers and printers. We do a lot to make sure our school and college provides the best possible service it can. However, we believe that this feeding, maintaining, supplying, fixing and doing can not only be carried out by our staff, but by our learners as well.

This is where work-based learning comes in. It links the curriculum and the learning that we provide every day with the central functions and services of our organisation. Learners are not simply doing a cooking lesson, they are preparing lunch in Scrummies Cafe. They are not having a woodwork session - they are building shelves for Foundations, the college maintenance team. They are not just in an art lesson, they are producing designs for Inklusion, our printing enterprise.

By learning in this way, learners are acquiring vocational and practical skills for their future life in real working environments, not just in the classroom.

7.3 Organisational values and their impact

Just as important as the skills and knowledge of the teaching and support staff is the core set of values that underpins their work. Residential specialist college staff typically have high aspirations for their students. They believe, and encourage students and their families to believe, that with the right support the students can achieve ambitious goals. They are committed to a person-centred approach, to giving students a voice to articulate what and how they want to learn and to listening and acting on what students say.

The second Jack met a member of staff from the Royal National College for the Blind (RCNB), he felt like his blindness took a back seat. The college is not about adaptations and 1:1 support, it is about enabling blind students to find their place in a seeing world. Despite being a place for the visually impaired, when you hear what the students are doing every day, how they are studying, the work experiences and sporting opportunities, they do not sound like disabled students.

The difference is the students are working with adults who know what it means to be visually impaired, who understand their challenges, but who also know that there cannot be excuses and shortcuts. They don't say 'no' or 'you can't' - this is what Jack heard in school towards GCSEs and beyond, he needed to meet someone who said 'you can be anyone you want to be' and who believed in him - RCNB is full of people who say this to all the students and who push them to reach their potential.

Parent of student at Royal National College for the Blind

I am impressed how quickly they got to know Nick, the person. We came to an information session soon after he started and spoke to the two ladies who organise the work experience placements. It sounded great and I politely asked, "But how does this apply to Nick?" She replied Nick could work – this was news to me. She continued, "He could work as a greeter at a company". I realised that in a short period of time they had nailed Nick. I couldn't have imagined a more suitable role for him.

Parent of student at Royal College Manchester, Seashell Trust

8. Quality of outcomes for students in residential specialist colleges

8.1 Residential specialist colleges focus on the four preparing for adulthood outcomes set out in the SEND Code of Practice: employment (or further/higher education), independent living, community inclusion and health. College staff support students to work towards and achieve their individual goals under each of these headings. The increased focus on outcomes in the SEND reforms and within the Ofsted inspection regime has further encouraged colleges to concentrate their efforts and resources on helping students to achieve ambitious post-college

goals, rather than seeing the learning programme and time at college as an end in itself. Many colleges now have dedicated transition teams whose primary role is to secure successful - and sustainable - post-college outcomes.

8.2 Increasingly colleges are beginning to monitor student destinations, including over time, as a means of evaluating the effectiveness of their provision and to enable them to set quality improvement targets. Some are using reunion events as a means of collecting data; others make phone calls or send out pre-paid postcards to families requesting updates on the young people's progress. Many families voluntarily stay in touch with the college long after their son or daughter has left. It would be helpful if destination data collected as part of the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) returns was published in more depth and detail to create effective benchmarks and help improve outcomes further.

The college is highly effective in preparing [students] for future life and encouraging them to lead healthy and safe lifestyles. The quality of provision is outstanding because of the exceptionally good specialist care and support that students receive to enable them to participate in learning. Outcomes are now outstanding.

National Star College, Ofsted Report 2012

Students' destinations are good. Last year every student moved on to their preferred destination, which includes further study at local colleges, volunteering and community and social enterprises. Several students successfully maintained the work placements they had started at college and one student secured a shop-fitting apprenticeship on leaving Strathmore.

Strathmore College, Ofsted Report 2015

On leaving the college, a high proportion of students move into employment, further or higher education, voluntary work or training. In addition, many of these students are able to live independently or in a supported living environment. Many students sustain these destinations over time.

Governors, along with leaders, are fervent and proactive in improving the life chances of students. For example, they have recently instigated an additional six- and 10-year review of students' destinations so that they can accurately measure the impact of Treloar College and how they might even better support students' preparation for progression.

Treloar College, Ofsted Report 2016

8.3. In this short video, Eddie, a former student at The Fortune Centre of Riding Therapy, describes his life after college including his job, accommodation and charity work.

8.4 Independent living outcomes

8.4.1 There is a huge emphasis in residential specialist colleges on developing the skills students need to live as independently as possible. Students are supported to understand the different housing options and to express their preferences about how and where they would like to live after college. Many students progress into independent or supported living.

Progression particularly into independent or supported living is outstanding. The college transition team are highly innovative in developing friendship groups of learners who would like to live together and then in working with partner organisations to identify appropriate accommodation and the necessary support.

In 2015, nearly all leavers achieved their preferred housing goal. Over two thirds of the 38 leavers progressed to supported living accommodation. This was a very good increase on the 2013 figure. This improvement is despite the increasingly complex nature of the disabilities and learning difficulties of learners and some parents initially preferring their son or daughter to return home for financial reasons.

Cambian Lufton College Ofsted Report 2016

Learners leaving college make good progress into... supported or independent living arrangements. Learners have good practical support in daily living, both as residential and day learners. As a result, they are more likely to progress into independent or supported living arrangements. They learn to housekeep in the college houses, for example understanding the importance of keeping fridge doors closed and cleaning work surfaces properly. Learners become better equipped to live successfully in the local community.

Fairfield Farm College Ofsted Report 2015

Living independently after college

Jon spent three years at Farleigh Further Education College as a residential student. During that time staff worked with him to develop his independence skills and to try to turn his love of bikes into a potential career. He undertook a day-per-week work placement in Halfords in Frome, building on a short period of work experience he'd already done in a branch of Halfords near his home. He also did some work experience in a more customer-facing role in a shop to build up his confidence in interacting with the public.

Jon is now in a sole-occupancy flat in Gloucester. He is settling in and making new friends. He keeps in touch with students from Farleigh and stays over with their families occasionally.

He is on a supported internship organised by Gloucester College, working at Halfords in Cheltenham 3 days per week and going to college one day. He plans to move to The Bike Project in Gloucester in early March and to get a paid job thereafter.

8.4.2 Some young people choose to stay in the local area and live with friends they have made at college, rather than return home, just as other young people do after leaving university. Despite their right to do this, as set out in the Care Act, some local authorities are resistant to supporting young people who choose not to return to their 'home' local authority.

Former Foxes Academy students, Thomas, Sebastian and Archie are in their 20s. They live together in Somerset in supported housing, which the Academy helped them source.

When we first moved into our home we wrote down what we wanted from sharing a place together. We want to be a healthy, hard-working, independent team to share good times and the bad. Living our lives within the community in which we live. We want to look back on our time here with pride and a mountain of happy memories.

We're having a great time. We really like this house, we have fun and get on great with the staff. It's about team work, we all have chores to do, go shopping and help prepare the food. We've got to know the people in the shops, they're nice. It's good to use the skills we learnt in college and build on them.

Some of our friends live close by and we have started getting together at each other's houses, and sometimes have a barbecue. We're going to be doing more of that next year.

8.4.3 While some students do progress to the housing option of their choice, this is not true for all. This is a frustration for all involved, where students have developed the skills while at college to live independently or in supported accommodation but then find themselves back in the family home. The main reason for this is a lack of suitable accommodation or support in the learner's home area.

Students are prepared very well for life after college, developing the skills and confidence to live more independent lives on leaving college. However, the restricted availability of appropriate support and accommodation, in some parts of the country, results in too many students having to return home following their time at college.

Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education, Ofsted Report 2014

The good practical support provided helps students progress towards independent living. The college supports students in identifying options they wish to pursue after leaving college. A number of students progress toward independent living options... On leaving college too many students still return home when supported accommodation is their preferred choice; however, this is beyond the control of the college.

WESC Foundation - The Specialist Centre for Visual Impairment Ofsted Report 2015

8.4.4 Some colleges, or trusts to which the college belongs, have developed their own independent living options (to complement their educational offer) to address the lack of suitable provision in the students' home areas.

WESC Foundation's supported living accommodation

WESC has set up a range of supported living accommodation for seven ex-students, providing them with high-quality, adapted accommodation. The young people have access to the local community, regular social contact with peers and further support

where necessary from the extended visual impairment specialist services team. This successfully addresses a major problem that they had identified: that too many of the planned destinations for students were unsuccessful due to a lack of specialist support in the students' home authority.

8.5 Qualifications and further or higher education outcomes

Where appropriate, students are entered for qualifications, general (such as GCSEs or A levels), vocational, functional skills and sometimes in aspects of personal and social development. Qualifications tend to be used where they will support the students' progression onto a further or higher education course, apprenticeship or into employment. Qualification achievement rates are generally good or better, with the majority of students reported by Ofsted as achieving their qualifications. Where students are not entered for qualifications, they are set challenging personal goals; progress towards these and achievement of them is rigorously monitored through a quality assured process such as Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA).

Students capable of further or higher education progress onto a range of courses at general FE colleges, into university and onto apprenticeships.

From work experience to apprenticeship

Beth, a student at RNIB College, Loughborough, had said right from the start she would like to work in an office. When it came to work experience, an interview was arranged at EMH Homes in Coalville in their customer experience team. After a successful interview, Beth was invited to shadow for a day when she learnt about the role. She undertook a placement for a week in July, receiving calls from tenants and dealing with their repair requests

Beth went on to do a further six-week placement in the college marketing department, where she and a fellow student contacted potential referral bodies within the East Midlands. Upon completion of her college programme, Beth secured a full-time apprenticeship at EMH Homes where she had been on work placement.

8.6 Employment outcomes

8.6.1 Less than half (48%) of disabled people are in employment compared to 80% of the non-disabled population, while just 5.8% of adults with a learning disability known to local authorities are in a job. Residential specialist colleges are highly creative in the ways in which they are trying to address this enormous disability employment gap and against this background, they are having some success. Young people, for whom a job is a realistic aspiration, are progressing into supported and open paid employment, and also into voluntary work.

The large majority of students develop the necessary skills to progress to the next level of study or into employment. The increased number of substantial work experience placements internally to the college and in the wider community, as well the varied practical skills courses within college, provide students with a wide range of opportunities to build confidence and to try new ways of working and problem solving.

Ruskin Mill, Ofsted Report 2015

Progression into employment or further training is good. Staff encourage learners' individual interests and learners are keen to develop their careers further. In the last three years most students progressed onto some type of employment, voluntary work, further education or supported living.

Oakwood Court College, Ofsted Report 2015

From College to Work

Claire has Down's Syndrome and communication difficulties. She completed the Living and Work Programme at Derwen College in July 2015. During this time, she developed her hospitality and housekeeping work skills as well as her independence skills. As part of her work in Hospitality and Catering Studies, Claire undertook work experience with Premier Inn.

Derwen College has an excellent relationship with Premier Inn who have recently opened a training centre at the college, using it to train learners to the hotel group's exacting housekeeping standards. Whilst at college, Claire took part in this programme and then travelled by train once a week to work at a Premier Inn near Chester.

During her last term at Derwen, the college approached Premier Inn about transferring Claire's placement to Worcester, Claire's home city, for her return home when she leaves college. The hotel group were enthusiastic in their support for this initiative. Within two weeks of leaving Derwen, Claire had been accepted at Premier Inn, Worcester, for one day a week with the potential for more work once she was familiar with the new environment. In November 2015 Claire was offered a formal contract with Premier Inn, working two paid days a week. Claire has also moved from her parents' house to a new home where she is putting the independent living skills she has learnt to use.

8.6.2 A small number of specialist colleges has achieved a *very* high employment rate, with 85% of Foxes Academy graduates last year moving into a job. Some of their ex-students have also sustained paid employment over many years.

10 years' service

Jane Beresford, graduate of Foxes Academy, works in the kitchens at Eton College, where she was recently presented with an award to celebrate 10 years' service. According to her boss, catering manager, Ian Warwock, "Jane is an important member of the college team and we enjoy her good humour and dedication to her job."

Jane's mother shared the news of the award with the Academy, writing to staff to say, "As a result of Jane's training at Foxes Academy she was set up to be able to meet the high standards expected of her at Eton... where she has enjoyed working in a close team, she really is respected for her 'dedication' to her work and her own contribution. It has given her enormous fulfilment in her life."

8.6.3 There is further work to be done to increase the numbers of young people with a learning difficulty and/or disability gaining employment. Natspec is supporting the Disability Confident Scheme and Foxes Academy has achieved Disability Confident Leader status. We are working with the Department of Education to advise on implementing the recommendations of the Maynard Review to open up access to Apprenticeships for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Colleges are introducing or expanding supported internships and attempting to source more and better quality work experience. Natspec runs an employability forum for members to enable them to drive up standards and exchange effective practice in this curriculum area.

8.6.4 Not all the changes needed are in the hands of colleges, however. In our [response](#) to the DWP Work, Health and Disability Green Paper, Improving Lives, we have called on government to improve the employment support available to young people at the point of transition out of college. We have also recommended that they provide more information about supported internships to employers and establish a recognisable brand for this provision, make Access to Work funding more easily accessible, and offer Job Centre-based support to employers taking on disabled employees.

9. Conclusion

9.1 Natspec believes that residential specialist colleges make an invaluable contribution to the post-16 education and training of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The residential experience is part of a holistic learning programme that enables them to develop independence and self-advocacy skills, demonstrating their capabilities to themselves, their families and potential employers. It also gives young people the chance to discover who they are as young adults and what they want to become.

9.2 Residential provision is not for everyone; nor in a time when there are multiple pressures on public funding is it feasible for all young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to access this type of education. For a small number of young people, however, it represents the best – and sometimes only – option. We would, therefore, like to see this provision routinely presented to young people and their families, alongside other options, so that they can make an informed choice about the type of environment they feel will best meet their needs. In addition, we would like to see consistent, fair decision-making across local authorities in the allocation of the high needs funding that enables young people to access specialist provision.

9.3 We leave the last word to disability activist, Corey, a former Hereward College student, Natspec student ambassador, and a member of The Council for Disabled Children's EPIC group, who advised the government during the development of the SEND reforms. In this video he explains why young people with additional needs should be given the option to attend a residential specialist college.