

# SEND Learner Voice: support for LV practitioners

**Research conducted by Natspec  
and the National Union of Students**

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## 1. Introduction

In November 2017 Natspec<sup>1</sup> and the National Union of Students (NUS)<sup>2</sup> submitted a successful proposal in response to a mini-tender issued by the Education and Training Foundation. This tender sought to commission research exploring the roles of staff with responsibility for learner voice. Between December 2017 and April 2018, Natspec and NUS conducted the research and this report presents the findings.

Natspec, the membership body for organisations which specialise in working with SEND learners, and the National Union of Students (NUS), the voice of students across the UK, have been working in partnership to ensure that the voice of students with SEND is heard. The work drew on the strengths of both organisations – Natspec as the experts in specialist further education provision; NUS as the experts in learner voice.

Throughout this research, Natspec and NUS have used well established relationships with learner voice practitioners (LVPs) and managers in mainstream and specialist providers to develop lines of communication and insight. Using shared experience and relationships, this research has led to a deeper understanding of learner voice in a SEND setting.

## 2. Summary of findings

The research involved a desk review of online resources, a survey, webinars and interviews.

The response rate for the online survey was excellent, with 148 responses received from across the sector. Direct consultation then took place with survey respondents as a follow up to discuss the issues in more depth, via 2 webinars and 14 telephone interviews.

This section comprises a brief summary of findings which has been updated after first being submitted to the ETF separately in March 2018.

### 2.1 Current online resources

- There are relatively few resources online across the sector that helps to inform practice. Many of the resources that are available are quite dated.
- Perhaps the best and widest set of resources available are held by the Learner Voice Practitioners Network (LVPN) on their site<sup>3</sup>. However, users of these resources must be members of the network and permission must be sought to use them; and they do not necessarily relate to SEND.
- The introduction of the Learner Voice Framework (LVF)<sup>4</sup> – launched by NUS in November 2017 – will see the creation of shared online resources in relation to learner voice from across the sector which will undoubtedly include SEND. The LVF is a sector agreed set of principles and so the resources should be shared across the sector. In the months ahead, this should become the most prominent source of up-to-date and useful material across the sector as NUS looks to collate resources, briefings and case studies of existing practice.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://natspec.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nus.org.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lvpn.co.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.learnervoiceframework.org.uk/>

- Very few Ofsted reports on high needs provision mention learner voice in any detail – unless it is particularly impressive, innovative or impactful. Reports that do highlight learner voice activities with SEND students represent useful examples of practice.

## 2.2 Involvement of students with SEND

92% of survey respondents said that students with SEND are involved in learner voice activities at some level (dropping to 76% when specialist providers are excluded from the sample), but only 32% (24% without the specialist providers) included at least one role on their main Student Union to represent students with SEND. With survey respondents being some of the most engaged staff, it is assumed that these percentages would be much lower across the sector as a whole.

Providers have developed a variety of methods to involve students with SEND, the most popular being specific SEND student councils or elections to select a student with SEND for specific responsibilities. Other methods include specific meetings and a variety of feedback techniques.

## 2.3 Issues raised

The issues raised by practitioners in the interviews and in survey responses centred around the following four themes:

1. Struggling to involve less able and / or non-verbal learners to have their views heard and articulated.
2. Not being able to find the time to involve SEND students, either due to the increased time needed to consult with SEND learners or the logistical difficulties of transport arrangements straight after college finished, leaving no time for extra-curricular sessions.
3. Too many learners wanting to be a learner voice representative, and not being able to find ways to keep them all involved.
4. Difficulties with meetings or the format of consultation methods: lack of knowledge of non-text based methods of consultation, and lack of staff training, equipment or resources results in SEND learners not having the means to be involved in consultation or meetings.

## 2.4 Training needs and best practice examples

Only 33% of respondents – and 10% of respondents in non-specialist settings - said that they had specific resources for training staff or students about engaging learners with SEND in student voice activities. This is a significant gap in provision.

Survey respondents and interviewees identified their training needs and reported what worked well for them:

- there is a need to create better links between specialist providers and mainstream further education colleges.
- Ideas provided by interviewees for future practitioner CPD included courses on autism awareness, Makaton, British Sign Language and deaf awareness.
- The interviews included some interesting conversations around managing elections processes in a SEND setting for student leadership roles.
- Other conversations and topics included training tutors and the need to include modules on SEND in all future PGCE courses to build basic understanding for all teaching staff.

- There was universal praise from interviewees regarding the importance of speech and language therapists in supporting learner voice.
- Many examples of best practice were identified, with the key principles being the need for SMT support, ensuring learners were given time and different types of activities to keep them engaged, lots of feedback and the use of different consultation methods. Examples of practice are contained in section 6.

### 3. Methodology

Various methods were used during the research to ensure that a wide range of examples of practice were gathered effectively.

- Desk research was undertaken to look at existing resources that are available to LVPs including:
  - a review of websites such as the SEND Excellence Gateway and those of AoC, Natspec and PfA.
  - a review of Ofsted reports for relevant providers to understand if and where there are commendations for learner voice in relation to SEND.
- An online survey was distributed, targeted at all types of providers, exploring questions which were identified in the brief from the Education and Training Foundation. The survey was distributed across a wide range of Natspec and NUS networks.
- Webinars with LVPs and other stakeholders created an online space to have general discussions relating to learner voice in relation to SEND. It was hoped that these webinars, along with the online survey, would help to identify participants who would be happy to take part in a more in-depth interview.
- 14 telephone interviews were conducted to gain further, deeper insight into existing good practice, and covered both specialist and mainstream providers.
- Vignettes have been produced which demonstrate effective practice (see section 6).

### 4. Research findings: existing resources

This part of the research explored existing online resources and publications to understand what is currently available to support LVPs in relation to learner voice and SEND.

#### 4.1 Online resources

There are very few resources available online in relation to learner voice which have a specific focus on SEND.

Whilst the SEND Excellence Gateway<sup>5</sup> is a valuable resource filled with useful content relating to various aspects of SEND provision, there is very little that focuses on engaging learners in the learner voice processes, the activities of Student Unions, or support specific to the LVP role.

At the time of writing, the *Learner Voice* section of this site contains three resources. The first is a case study and related resources on the implementation of learner voice practice. The others are

<sup>5</sup> <https://send.excellencegateway.org.uk/supporting-learners-and-learning#voice>

videos that were created through the wider SEND work of the Education and Training Foundation. These feature learners with SEND from mainstream and specialist colleges suggesting how improvements could be made based on their experiences and the impact that current provision has on their lives.

Other sites across the sector such as the SEND pages of the AoC's website<sup>6</sup>, Nasen<sup>7</sup> and Natspec<sup>8</sup> all contain a significant amount of information on SEND provision, but as with the Excellence Gateway, there is limited information on learner voice and a lack of resources that can help inform practice.

This is an area which Natspec are currently seeking to address but more can be done. The establishment of the Natspec Student Voice Parliament has allowed practitioners to learn from each other and to deepen their understanding of learner voice from a learner perspective. Through this, and NUS' Learner Voice Framework, there will be an opportunity to develop a bank of resources that could be used by the sector.

### 4.3 Ofsted reports

There is generally little comment made in Ofsted reports regarding learner voice for SEND students. Where mention is made, this is due to outstanding and impactful practice being recognised. These reports therefore have the potential to provide a valuable insight into which providers are delivering positive learner voice practices.

By conducting searches for the reports of colleges who are known to deliver very positive and successful learner voice processes, and by asking current LVPs for their input, it has been possible to identify a number of reports which can be used to demonstrate learner voice good practice. This includes outstanding provision at National Star College (Jan 2018) which made reference to the national Student Parliament as well as the outstanding practice within the college:

*"Students' involvement in influencing the work of the college and contributing to national activities is outstanding; for example, NSC students helped to establish the student parliament for members of the specialist colleges' representative body Natspec. They work closely with the National Union of Students, giving advice on how to involve disabled students more effectively. The student union provides very good representation for all students and makes a strong contribution to improving the college. For example, members of the union contribute to the induction of all new staff. They explain what life is like at the college and ask new staff how they will help students to be successful."*

Similar praise was included in the 2016 report for Derwen College<sup>9</sup>:

*Students demonstrate a high level of respect for each other, staff and visitors. They develop excellent communication skills through 'learner voice' meetings with staff and governors. The college supports the vast majority of students to engage fully and vote in both national and student union elections. The college's student union proposed a motion at the 2015 National Union of Students (NUS) conference to enable students who have special educational needs or disability to have a voice within NUS structures. This motion was carried unanimously. The college has won the NUS disabled students' further education union of the year award.*

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.aoc.co.uk/term/send>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nasen.org.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://natspec.org.uk/leadership-and-management-2/student-voice/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report/provider/ELS/133173>

There are a number of reports which mention specific elements of learner voice, or good practice in establishing student unions:

- "An advocacy service makes sure that student voices are heard in college decision-making processes. In particular, staff support students with non-verbal communication well to communicate their thoughts and feelings and raise any concerns". (Young Epilepsy, St Piers College, Nov 2017)
- "There is a considerable student voice that can influence the running of the college and their day-to-day care. This is achieved in a variety of ways, including the student council, residents' meetings, and consultation about work placements and daily conversation with staff." (Communication Specialist College, Doncaster, March 2018)
- "Staff support and encourage students to become active citizens through the discussion of topical issues such as 'Brexit' and by learning how to vote. The student council helps students to understand their democratic right to have a voice." (Mount Camphill, Jan 2018)
- "The student council is highly effective and central to the students' voices. Students are elected to the student council by their peers. They have a good understanding of how to raise concerns through this forum and feel that their voices are represented and heard. They make representations confidently to the board of governors, and the 'you said we did' board shows highly positive outcomes from concerns raised by students." (Seashell Trust, Royal College Manchester November 2017)

Reports for GFE colleges are less specific, without as much reference to students with SEND, but highlight good practice in terms of listening to students and ensuring that the information gained is used positively in the college to support decision making. This includes the March 2013 report for Walsall College<sup>10</sup> which stated that:

*"the college listens to learners to, and makes very good use of, students' views to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and to enrich their overall experience of college life. Students are well informed of the college's response to their comments and suggestions through a feedback process known as 'you said, we have..' and college managers take great care in evaluating the impact of the actions taken."*

This report highlights the way in which colleges are taking learner voice seriously and using it to develop college-wide provision.

In the 2017 report for Canterbury College<sup>11</sup>, there was a great deal of content which discussed the way that the college provided for learners with high needs. This included comments on how learners *"felt safe in college ... [and were] confident to speak in front of their peers and staff members"*, which indicates the way in which the college worked to create an inclusive and respectful environment.

A final example is from the 2016 inspection of goes into more depth around actual practice:

*"Students demonstrate a high level of respect for each other, staff and visitors. They develop excellent communication skills through 'learner voice' meetings with staff and governors. The college supports the vast majority of students to engage fully and vote in both national and*

<sup>10</sup> <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report/provider/ELS/130483>

<sup>11</sup> <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report/provider/ELS/130730>

*student union elections.. The college's student union proposed a motion<sup>12</sup> at the 2015 National Union of Students (NUS) conference to enable students who have special educational needs and disabilities to have a voice within NUS structures. The motion was carried unanimously. The college has won the NUS disabled students' further education union of the year."*

What should be noted with these reports is that whilst examples of good learner voice practice are mentioned, they very rarely focus on SEND – unless in specialist settings. Reports also tend to highlight where good practice happens and the impacts this has, but not necessarily the details of the actual practice itself.

## 5. Research findings: Survey, Webinars and Interviews

The **online survey** ran for a total of 16 days in January 2018 and received a total of 148 responses. These responses came from a variety of stakeholders based in a range of providers from across the FE sector. Of these respondents, 78% stated that they would be willing to be further involved and that they were happy to be contacted for an interview.

The survey contained 12 questions in total and each was designed to gain deeper understanding into current practice relating to learner voice and SEND.

**Interviews** were held throughout February and March 2018. They were designed to act as an in-depth follow up to the answers provided in the online survey. Questions focussed on investigating current practice, identifying – and overcoming – barriers, thoughts on CPD, and general advice that individuals wanted to share with their peers across the sector.

Several issues resulted in **the webinars** not drawing as large an audience as was initially hoped, including issues with technology when a number of participants couldn't get microphones working, and lack of availability of staff to participate.

A list of those consulted individually are listed at Appendix A.

### 5.1 Breakdown of consultees and respondents

The 148 responses to the on-line survey have been broken down by type of organisation as follows:

GFE College	84	58%
Independent Specialist college (SPI)	42	29%
Sixth Form College	11	8%
Land based college	5	3%
Local Authority Provider	2	1%
Other	2	1%
Specialist designated institution	2	1%

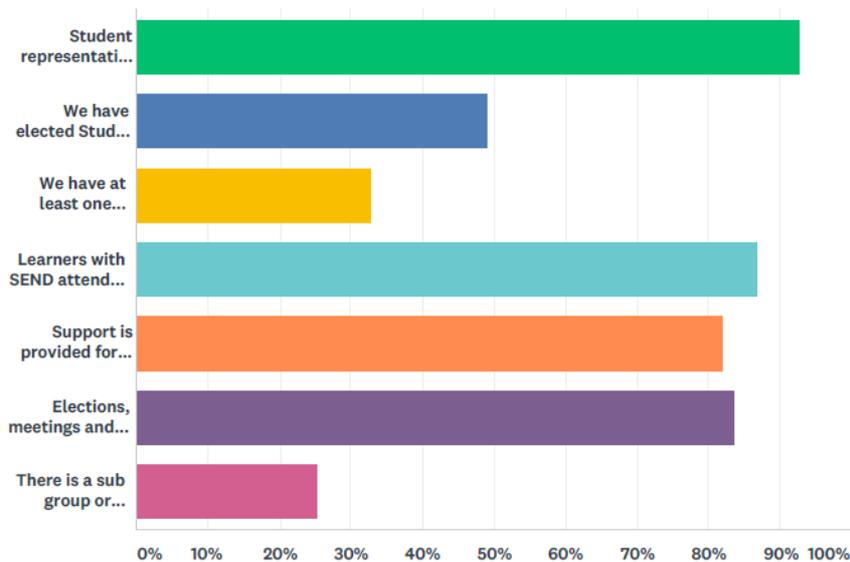
<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vplBDyTf3Sc&t=22s>

The responses were drawn from a range of role:

- 42% of respondents identified themselves as a “Manager”
- 17% identified themselves as a “Learner Voice Practitioner”
- 7% were student representatives
- 33% identified as “Other”, including roles such as:
  - CEO, Principal, Vice Principal, Assistant Principal, Interim Principal or Director (15 people)
  - Student Union or student liaison roles (15 people)
  - 4 teachers or tutors

## 5.2 Involvement of learners with SEND

Respondents were asked to state whether students with SEND were involved as student representatives, and how they were involved. The results are presented below.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Student representatives at any level (e.g. class/tutor group) include students with SEND	92.62%	113
We have elected Student Union representatives with SEND	49.18%	60
We have at least one specific role on the Student Union to represent learners with SEND	32.79%	40
Learners with SEND attend student councils or forums	86.89%	106
Support is provided for learners with SEND to attend meetings, forums, or to run for election	81.97%	100
Elections, meetings and other student voice activities are all accessible for learners with SEND	83.61%	102
There is a sub group or specific forum for learners with SEND to express their views	25.41%	31
Total Respondents: 122		

Over 92% of respondents stated that student representatives did include students with SEND, and a clear majority had learners with SEND involved in many of the roles. However, the respondents are the most engaged of LVPs, and over a quarter of respondents were from specialist colleges, so it is to be expected that the percentages in the data above would be very high. This percentage drops to 76% when specialist providers are excluded from the sample.

It is perhaps more concerning that amongst such an engaged group of respondents, only half have any type of elected student representatives, and only 32% have a role on the Student Union to represent students with SEND. This falls to 24% amongst non-specialist providers.

The interviews and webinars explored these methods of involving learners more deeply.

## 5.2.1 Student Councils

A lot of activity is developed around students' unions and/or councils and these are seen in many providers as *the* primary mode of delivering learner voice. This is because these structures have additional benefits. Not only do they enable providers to gather learner voice, they also help to empower students and to help them develop additional experience and skills. There was agreement from many that students' unions "made learners voice fun!"

During the second webinar, the LVP at Hedleys College explained that despite their special educational needs and disabilities, the learners at the college were supported and empowered to run their own student council, meeting every week. It is this council which is a key driver of learner voice in the college. Due to the success of the council, there is now a formal part of the council members' timetables which has helped to overcome the barrier of consistency and frequency of meetings.

The LVP told the group that the current council members have a wide variety of SEND, many with high needs. Participation in the council has been a huge confidence boost for these learners and is seen by the college as one of the additional benefits of it – aside from the insight gained surrounding learner voice.

It was also discussed within this webinar that not all learners with SEND realise that they have a voice that can be used to influence the provision at the college and their all-round college experience. This is because many simply echo the voices of parents and carers and it was agreed that some learners have a fear of getting in to trouble for voicing their opinion.

By giving learners a voice, it is possible for them to develop their own language skills as well as an understanding of how to debate and compromise with peers and senior managers.

In many providers, learner voice is led by college tutors who meet frequently with learners to discuss various aspects of college delivery and experience. However in almost all interviews, participants discussed how learner voice should be seen as a college-wide responsibility which all staff should be involved with, SMT should be involved, and that learners should be supported to engage with it.

## 5.2.2. Elections

There were different approaches regarding the process to elect or decide a students' leadership team, council or union.

Some colleges, for example St. Johns in Brighton, have found that elections are a process which can lead to negative experiences for their students. Election processes were described by some as "disenfranchising" and there was a belief that for some learners, the impact of the disappointment

of not being elected by peers is reason enough to not do elections. For example, where learners lost elections they sometimes then distanced themselves from learner voice process and other such activities.

Other participants discussed how elections were used as a development tool to support their learners in understanding that they won't necessarily succeed at everything they try to do and that it was okay to fail.

Where learners have SEND that make communication difficult, Landmarks Colleges support election candidates to make videos of their election manifestos so that their message is made clear to those who will potentially vote for them. To ensure that learners are supported whether they win or lose their election, the college write letters to them highlighting the pride the college has in them for standing for election in the first place. For those that lose, there is an additional point made in the letter regarding how their voice will still be important and how their views will still be heard.

### 5.2.3. Meetings

At Aurora Boveridge, student-led student meetings are held to ensure that students have a voice and to ensure that students understood it was 'their college'. These meetings are supported with 'scaffolding' to ensure that they run smoothly and meet the desired aim. This includes supported scripting for the Chairperson of the meeting until their confidence is developed, and recording the meeting so that conversations can be recorded and typed up after the meeting.

It was positive to find that in many mainstream colleges, it is the learners with SEND who are the most vocal and the most forthcoming in meetings. There was frequent mention in the interviews of how student leaders who do not have SEND offer support to those who do to ensure that their voices are heard. This is perhaps the reason why so few mainstream colleges have a specific role within their student leadership teams for learners with SEND.

## 5.3 Effect on non-SEND learners

Findings from the research has shown that involving students with SEND can have a very positive impact on students without SEN or disabilities. Comments from respondents on this point included:

- "Learners feel confident discussing their views with their peers. Learners meet with the learner voice representatives and discuss their thoughts, suggestions and recommendations openly. Students are comfortable and confident with discussing their learning programme with the learner representatives."
- "Students representing other students is empowering for all involved. They are involved in the redesigning of questionnaires (easy read and symbol formats)."
- "Students appreciate being able to see college from another point of view."
- "Having an active student council has allowed the students to build their confidence and realisation that they have a voice that should be listened to. Seeing their peers make a difference in college often inspires other students to want to be on student council."
- "It has given the students confidence, helped raise issues that would potentially not be addressed."
- "Gives a broader spectrum at student parliament"

- “Has been of benefit to the wider student body as they have raised opinions that others haven't thought of”
- “Broadened awareness and improved equality. The widened integration has led to some great cross departmental group relations beyond the typical health and social care for example, sports students lead activities. Similarly, public services students have involvement.”
- “Builds confidence and self-esteem in learners, with more experienced learners providing a role model to new learners with regards to the student council. Learners develop understanding of expectations upon them in council meetings and develop their formal and informal speaking and listening skills in the process.”
- “Made them more aware and helps battle unconscious bias.”
- “It has raised awareness & encouraged understanding of others”
- “It improved their understanding of the diversity of our cohort”

## 5.4 Barriers and issues

Throughout the research, consultees were asked to identify what issues they had encountered when trying to ensure learner voice processes and structures are inclusive of students with SEND.

**The issues identified can be grouped as follows:**

### 1. Struggling to involve less able and / or non-verbal learners to have their views heard and articulated:

- “Our least able learners may be overshadowed by higher functioning/more verbal learners”
- “Ensuring that learners with profound or multiple and complex needs have their voices heard as equally well as those with fluent expressive communication.”
- “Disengaged students sometimes not forthcoming with expressing their views. Students with more complex needs often have their voice lost amidst the voices of parents, carers and specialists”
- “Reminding staff who work with learners with SEND to allow them the time or opportunity to express their own choices. Students can spend their lives having things “done for” or “done to” them without them being consulted”

### 2. Not being able to find time:

Finding time to work on student voice activities for learners with SEND was a challenge that many participants identified. During the interviews, it was highlighted that there is a need to ensure timetabling works not for the college but the learners, giving adequate time to allow learner voice activities to take place. There was concern from some of the participants that despite learner voice being supported, it was still too low down the order of priorities for some colleges. With transport an issue after college, participants felt that timetabling specific learner voice opportunities during the day was an important method of overcoming this. It was agreed that this prioritisation should stem from senior managers which it appears is unfortunately not always the case.

Comments from the survey on this issue included:

- “the issue of time; anything we do with our students takes a lot more time than it would with mainstream learners, something that doesn't get accounted for all the time,

particularly when working with outside agencies. Because of this, people can sometimes be tempted to do things for the learners to save time or circumvent consultation altogether”

- Barriers/issues - “having regular meetings and for student reps to have meetings outside of lessons. Finding the time for discussion in timetable”.
- “having the time to deliver training; curriculum requirements/timetabling do not allow time for personal, social and political development and, given many of our young people require a slower pace in terms of their learning and need a consistent approach it can be difficult to provide them with all of the knowledge and skills they need.”
- “Because they come to college on specialist transport, they have to leave promptly at the end of the teaching day and therefore there is no 'after school' opportunities to work with them either”.

### **3. Too many learners wanting to be a learner voice representative, and finding ways to keep them all involved:**

- “We explain that all of our learners have a voice and can share their views at any point of their programmes, they don't need to specifically be a representative to share their views.
- “As a specialist college we make sure ... that all campus activities have a student voice input via SU, group rep and residential reps, advisory boards (staff and students) and student governors”

### **4. Difficulties with meetings or consultation methods:**

Interviewees, webinar participants and survey respondents highlighted that there is a need for all staff to be more flexible with learners with SEND compared to those without.

Being able to tailor whatever is being delivered to the individual with SEND, rather than the wider cohort, was identified as a key barrier to overcome. Comments from the survey on this issue include:

- “Students with SEND can struggle to communicate their ideas in a way that is well-received by senior leaders, sometimes making formal 'boardroom' style meetings can be a barrier”
- “Surveys and forms more often than not are inaccessible, and then when a member of staff needs to support the learner to complete the form, you can never be sure that the learner has been completely honest, or if their answers have been skewed by a need to please the member of staff”
- “We have problems with certain documents using words that we don't really understand.”
- “Sourcing accessible and age appropriate materials - we have tended to create these ourselves”
- “Ensuring the process and how the various levels of feedback filter upwards to governor level events so that they are not confusing”
- “Visual prompts for students are difficult as we need to ensure they understand the question first. Students often go for the smiley face icon as that is the most appealing. Different formats have to be found and simplified wording of questions and information. It is not enough to transcribe the written information into symbols.”
- “It is really important that learners understand the process they are part of to avoid tokenism.”

- “Making sure we have the right balance between pictorial resources and using simple language e.g. in meeting minutes”
- “We struggle to produce material that works with full spectrum of SEND students”

## 5. Lack of knowledge about students with SEND

An issue that arose several times from mainstream interviewees was the lack of clarity they are given as to the details of the SEN that a learner may have. Sometimes, students do not disclose at all upon induction as they believe this will impact their opportunities at the college. Whilst they obviously have a right not to disclose, this has proven to make it extremely difficult for staff to offer appropriate and timely support.

Working with – and relying on – speech and language therapists was mentioned frequently throughout the interviews. The need to be able to communicate in a variety of ways to ensure that learner voice is universal is often a barrier and there was huge praise for these therapists who are often the mechanism for overcoming this.

An interesting discussion with interviewees focussed on the topic of parents/carers as a barrier to learner voice and as a “competing voice” in the day-to-day life of the learner. Dudley College discussed how they have worked hard over the years to build strong relationships with parents which has led to the establishment of a club for the parents of learners with SEND. This gives the parents a space to socialise and discuss issues they may be having a safe space whilst their children are learning and socialising too.

### 5.5 Training needs

The findings of the on-line survey indicate that not enough staff and students receive training:

- Of 91 respondents to this question, only 36 (39%) said that induction training for elected student officers includes information about SEND. This fell to 24% amongst non-specialist providers.
- 64% of all LVPs and staff who work with student representatives, and 32% of staff in non-specialist providers, receive training on supporting learners with SEND.
- Only 10% of non-specialist providers, and 33% of all respondents, stated that specific resources exist for training staff and students about engaging learners with SEND.

Several survey respondents felt that it would be useful for mainstream and specialist colleges to work together on Student Voice activities.

Other comments from the survey regarding specific training needs included:

- “Awareness of Equality Act and reminders on Inclusive practices.”
- “Accessible materials would be useful that would allow training packages to be differentiated for learners with SEND. Also preparing students with SEND for meetings.”
- “Equality & diversity training. Communication & therapy training. Counselling training.”
- “Supporting and engaging learners with SEND consistently at all levels of learner voice.”
- “Specific learning needs e.g. Mental Health, Attachment disorders, Communication, Autism, Deaf awareness”
- “Further training on positive reinforcement and language.”

- “Sign language skills / basic Makaton”
- “Understanding of supporting autistic learners, especially around processing times for information and the way that information is presented to these learners.”
- “Training in not speaking for those learners but instead facilitating them having their own voice”
- “Tailoring materials so that they are accessible to a multitude of SEND students”
- “To enable them to communicate more effectively with a wider range of people with additional needs through the use of symbols, signing and ESOL.”
- “Accessibility of written materials is a concern for me. Making materials meaningful and independently accessible.”
- “Raising awareness of accessible training for SEND learner representatives”

The issue of training was summarised by this response:

“LVPs require an understanding of their Students' abilities and skills. They need to develop skills around breaking down language levels and enabling Learners to have an awareness/understanding of democracy and their right to have a voice and impact change. They need to have skills to enable their Learners to engage at levels that are meaningful to them, to inspire and support them to realise that they can impact change. They need to be committed to driving forward change for their Learners and to celebrate success however small!”

Interviewees raised many of the same points describe above. In addition, they highlighted the following points relating to CPD needs:

- mainstream providers highlighted that whilst they had access to a wide array of CPD opportunities, very little focussed on SEND
- it was noted that a lot of existing CPD was informal and gathered through general day-to-day experience, for example some practitioners are taught things such as Makaton or BSL by their students
- the need for more opportunities outside formal courses, such as shadowing peers in other colleges, the development of informal communities of practice and networking opportunities – both physical and virtual
- the need for online spaces to share resources - this is perhaps something that could be supported by NUS through the LVF as previously mentioned
- there was universal agreement that certain courses and CPD offered across the sector can be dated - more needs to be done to ensure that any training which is made available is accessible to all practitioners - and is relevant.
- current training of teaching staff and current teaching qualifications do not involve enough learning in relation to SEND. A number of interviewees agreed that if these training courses included more in relation to supporting learners with SEND it would be a huge benefit to staff who later find themselves working with these learners

## 5.6 Advice for peers

Interviewees were asked a specific question regarding what advice they would give to others in the sector. Some of the points raised are summarised below:

- Working in the local community was a key theme discussed by practitioners, especially those based in specialist colleges. An example was given by the staff member from St. Johns who expressed how students from their college in Brighton where learners with SEND are made to feel part of the community and where their achievements are celebrated more broadly.
- Perhaps the most frequent piece of advice that interviewees would give to peers was around not being intimidated, nervous or afraid of working with learners with SEND. It was agreed that it could perhaps be a daunting prospect due to the fear of making mistakes but that this should not be an issue.
- Another piece of advice was to ensure that learner voice was a 'physical' activity rather than becoming a cyclical paper-based one. This then proves to be more engaging and learners can express themselves more clearly.
- One area of practice discussed across mainstream participants was how learners with SEND are often treated 'differently' and that this is often to the detriment of the learner. Many of the practitioners from specialist providers agreed that whilst additional steps must be taken to safeguard the health and wellbeing of each learner, there should be an understanding that treating them *differently* is not necessarily useful or conducive to their learning.

## 6. Examples of practice

The examples of good practice in this section have been drawn from the survey responses, the interviews and written follow up from selected providers.

Aurora Boveridge college	Student meetings/staff support to enable them to have a voice and processes in place (example safeguarding/advocates/pastoral support). Student meetings are supported with 'scaffolding' to ensure that they run smoothly and meet the desired aim. This includes supported scripting for the Chairperson of the meeting until their confidence is developed, and recording the meeting so that conversations can be recorded and typed up after the meeting.
Bridgend College	Direct communication via text with the student. Bridgend College always try to look for opportunities rather than seeing barriers which leads to a more positive environment for working with learners with SEND – important to have an overarching philosophy.
Carlisle College	Smaller group meetings so they feel comfortable to talk. The local EHCP Coordinator helping to facilitate sessions
City College Norwich	Having a School Council for students with SEND works well as it allows them to have a forum where they can bring up issues other students may not face.

City College Southampton	Differentiated surveys and "you said..." feedback posters, support at meetings
City of Liverpool College (Formerly Wigan & Leigh College)	Meeting with students individually can help them shape their feedback in preparation for meetings with other parties.
Communication Specialist College Doncaster	<p>The student council has a strong voice in making changes. It is made up of students from each of our tutor groups. The tutor groups (no more than 10 students) are students who have similar interests and personalities to support interaction where ever possible. Each group decides in their own way who should represent them.</p> <p>We find it really important for Senior Managers to be involved with the suggestions and thoughts of the students to ensure their views are taken forward. To make sure their views are listened to and acted upon, we take the minutes to governors to openly discuss. We also try to go to into tutor groups following discussions to let them all know their ideas and views have been taken forward and if we are not able to the reasoning behind our decisions.</p> <p>The lead of the student council emails out actions as soon as they have been suggested to us, we also have a you asked / we did board.</p>
Derby College	All students are asked to fill in a variety of online questionnaires about their views on the College and their learning experience from Induction to End Review. Some SEND students will need the questionnaires differentiating but their views are recorded and all take part. Our Student Union President has a learning disability and is a great Ambassador for all students.
Derwen College	<p>Derwen College has a Student Union Board of 18 Representatives and Deputies who represent Students from all areas of the College. Derwen also has a Client Forum to enable their voices to be heard.</p> <p>Having a Learner Voice provision that is 'owned' as an organisation. Communication between the Learner Voice Team and the rest of the College is excellent.</p>
Dudley College	Staff in the department here at Dudley are really supportive which helps a great deal. The biggest breakthrough occurred after we set up the social group 'We Socialise Too' and ensured trips were more accessible. This really allowed us to have much more interactions with learners and their parents.
Expanse Learning	<p>Learners complete surveys that inform us to whether each of our learners are happy and enjoying their programme. Surveys are completed at start, mid and end points of the programme.</p> <p>We also have a structured system of monthly student reviews – also the Annual Review process provides an opportunity for each learner to discuss their programme and identify "next steps".</p>

	<p>Other techniques: Monthly Newsletters / Daily session evaluations/feedback / RARPA Reflection Log / Afternoon tea with SMT (We arrange this) / Identified Learner Ambassadors / "You Said, we did" display</p> <p>All learner voice activities, discussions, minutes and feedback are discussed by SMT directly to our board of governors. Once actions have been discussed a follow up meeting is then arranged with the learners to update them of the outcomes.</p>
Gateshead College	Student Class reps from all courses are encouraged.
Heart of Worcestershire College	Learners with SEND are represented at all levels of learner voice activity including governors' events. This wasn't always the case, but we changed our approach a couple of years ago and moved away from segregated learner voice SEND forums, to the benefit of all students.
Heart of Worcestershire College	The inclusive approach. Our non-SEND students are excellent at supporting their peers who need support and there is an excellent culture of equality.
Hedleys College	All of our students have the opportunity to stand for election. Usually the higher level learners apply and are elected. To cater for other students and the PMLD cohort, the student council run tutor group rep meetings where students from every group have an opportunity to meet with the student council and let them know what they are doing and tell them about anything that is going well or needs to be better. The students also have a presence on the governors via video. They collect the information from the tutor group rep meeting and record it on film which gets played at the governors meeting. The governors then send a representative to report back to the students after the meeting.
Hereward College	<p>All of our students take part in an annual online survey and this results in the production of a report that is used in SAR development.</p> <p>An annual learner voice conference is planned this year and it is anticipated that this will provide an opportunity for more of our learners to meet with senior managers and to have their voices heard.</p> <p>Each class has a Course Representative who meets with their Pathway Leader (Head of Dept) 2-3 times per year as part of a quality assessment process encompassing a 'you said - we did' approach.</p> <p>Student Union officers are elected annually by the student body and roles include Day and Residential Welfare Officers who are responsible for raising concerns raised by students.</p> <p>We have two student governors; one is the President of the Student Union and the other takes on the role through an application and interview process supported by the careers/Job Coach team. The student governors attend meetings of the Corporation 6 times per year and meetings with the senior leadership team 5 times per year as part</p>

	<p>of a Student Exec. Members of the Student Exec also include 2 student union officers, one Course Rep from each Pathway and 2 of the college Peer Support Team (student mentors). Two of our students are also Student Ambassadors for the National Student Voice Parliament and students from Hereward also represent the voices of young people with SEND at the Local Authority Disability Advisory Panel chaired by a local councillor.</p>
Hereward College	<p>The work around participation and involvement at Hereward has developed in a number of ways over the last three years, not least through wider links with the city community. For example, through participation in local authority democracy events, two of our learners now sit on the Local Authority Disability Equality Advisory Panel (DEAP), attending strategic meetings where citywide matters that affect the lives of people who have additional needs are discussed and local authority actions agreed. A number of specific initiatives have stemmed from our learners' attendance at those meetings, including a Local Authority review of the unsafe practices of some of the City's taxi cab drivers, including 'sting operations' and a retraining programme for driver in relation to the correct procedures for securing wheelchairs.</p> <p>With their improved understanding of democratic processes, some of our learners have involved their local ward councillor in order to improve the availability of resources in the community. When a local sports centre failed to renew the broken swimming pool lift that enabled people with disabilities to enter the water safely, students contacted the councillor, inviting him to a meeting with the sports centre management team. The new pool lift is due to be fitted on 21st May.</p> <p>A larger project undertaken by our learners this year has included the Hereward Pavement Parking Campaign. Concerns about the problems caused by inconsiderate parking in the city were raised at a DEAP meeting and the Hereward representatives decided to act. They applied for Big Lottery funding and enlisted the support of local businesses to fund a citywide poster competition, with the winning posters used around the city and on social media asking motorists to 'think before you park'.</p> <p>Strengthening links with the wider community has enabled our learners to develop democratic life skills and experience the benefits of collective action. Through participation and involvement, our learners make a difference to the things that affect their lives now and in future.</p>
John Leggott College	<p>Having a SEND representative in our Student Leadership Team focusing on raising awareness of SEND and charitable fundraising. Having a confident and articulate student in this role encourages other students to interact and engage with SEND awareness campaigns in college.</p>
Landmarks College	<p><b>Election process</b></p>

	<p>This year the Learner Council was introduced to learners as part of induction and it's also referred to in the Learner Handbook. I went into sessions to speak to learners about what the Learner Council is, what it would involve and how to register interest. If a learner showed interest, I'd arrange to meet with them to record a short video where the learner explained why they wanted to be a representative on the Council.</p> <p>After this I put all the videos together in a file which was distributed to tutors (further education session leaders) and facilitators (day services session leaders) along with a voting form, which was divided into three sections – further education, further education from satellite sites, and lifelong learners (day services). Learners had to vote for one person in each section.</p> <p>At the end of the two week election, votes were counted. I made a letter for successful applicants and unsuccessful applicants and met with each learner who recorded a video to speak about the result. I reassured unsuccessful applicants that their voice is important, I appreciated their interest in making the college a better place and that they should still make sure to share their ideas.</p> <p><b>Action Cards</b></p> <p>All members of the Learner Council have differing academic levels and it's important to make sure that it's accessible to everyone. One way we do this is to hand out 'action cards' after each meeting, which are roughly A5 sized pieces of paper which detail what the actions are and who they may need to speak to, and these cards are symbolised if needed. Tutors and LSAs are asked to support the Learner Council with their actions and help them to record how they have completed the action.</p>
Loughborough College	SEND Learner attend and contribute to the E&D Strategy Group and Learner Voice activities
National Star College	As a specialist college we make sure this is at the forefront of any planning and that all campus activities have a student voice input via SU, group rep and residential reps, advisory boards (staff and students) and student governors with SEND.
New College Durham	One to one's before meetings to ensure that if students miss things the staff supporting can assist in addressing issues.
New College Stamford	SEND students mirror each position in our Student Union and attend the monthly Student Council Meetings
North East Autism Society - Thornbeck College	The student council involves 4 roles: President; Vice President; Treasurer and Student Welfare Officer - all of which are held by learners with SEND. All learners are provided the opportunity to: learn about the roles during tutorials; run an election campaign for any role they wish to take; vote in the student ballot; be part of and contribute to student council meetings; and add to council meeting agenda's through making suggestions in a designated suggestion box. Learners

	<p>also complete a range of differentiated surveys regarding the college timetable and sessions they would like to be removed or added on to it, including what they would like to be included in their own personal timetable.</p> <p>Other activities: Suggestion Box; Council Meetings; Timetable surveys; Student designed newsletters; Sessions that explicitly teach the skills for expressive communication in a range of formal and informal sessions; opportunities for learners to learn, practice and rehearse speaking and listening skills across their learning programme and in functional situations; learners are able to make suggestions for changes in college, resources they would wish college to purchase and activities they would like access to through the suggestion box.</p>
North Shropshire College	Prior preparation for learners, based on training, where learners come to meetings with notes/ideas already discussed. Where relevant LSAs attend learner voice meetings with SEND learners to support
Northampton College	We have a one page profile system built into our transition activity for students on mainstream courses.
Peterborough Regional College	Separate learner forum and training for Entry level learners (ESOL and SEND). Using technology to provide all with a voice, and providing multiple mechanisms to feed back.
RNC	We have an all inclusive college, every student has the opportunity to take part in learner voice activities. All documents are on the VLE and are also available in Braille
St Elizabeths College	Ensuring learners have time to consider issues that affect them and that they have forums to discuss in their residential, bring back to College and formalise their views.
St Martin's	Our students with SEND often need a longer period of time to express their views and if they are in a situation with other students who have no difficulties then meetings need to be managed to allow them time to respond or to give them the areas of discussion ahead of time if that is appropriate. Many of our students use high tech communication aids to communicate.
Stratford Upon Avon College	They are given the opportunity to feed back separately so their opinions do not get lost within the wider student rep system
Strode's College	We encourage our Student Union Exec to sit with each table & encourage participation by all around the table - not just the confident ones - and praise them all for comments made.
The Oldham College	Good support from curriculum staff who work with SEND students

## 7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of the research:

1. Further opportunities to share practice should be created, particularly in local or regional networking meetings which provide the greatest opportunity for continued contact between colleges at an informal level.
2. The examples of best practice identified in this study should be published on-line and promoted widely.
3. A best practice or top tips document/ handbook should be developed, bringing together the principles upon which providers should base their learner voice activities, for example:
  - Sharing practice with neighbouring providers, particularly where a mix of different types of provider is involved
  - Giving learners the opportunity to spend time with all members of SMT to discuss their views
  - Allowing or creating sufficient time for learner voice activities
  - Emphasising the value of learner voice, particularly to those who lose elections, and creating opportunities for all students to express their views, not just student representatives
  - Using a mix of techniques, including making videos and other non-text based tools, and making use of one-to-one meetings and feedback sessions
  - Giving learner voice representatives roles at a range of events including open events, activities in the community and opportunities to get involved in local democracy
  - Training a variety of staff, not only learner voice practitioners
  - Preparing a range of visual resources to support communications and using assistive technology
4. New CPD and training opportunities should be developed, based on the list of training needs identified in section 5.5 of this report.

## Appendix

The people-centred qualitative research was conducted via online survey, webinar and telephone interview.

148 practitioners responded to the online survey with almost half agreeing that they could be contacted for further, more in-depth questioning.

We would like to thank those practitioners below who took time to join our webinars, be interviewed for the purpose of this research or who have supplied information to inform the examples of best practice.

Samantha Gunnarsson	Bridgend College
Sarah Elliott	New College Durham
Jess Nicholson	Hedleys College
Lynn Ritchie	Hereward College
Jo Lawrence	Coventry College
Tony Payne	East Kent College Group
Sarah Laszlo	Derwen College
Sophia Daly	Dudley College
Hilary Moore	Technical Skills Academy at Barking & Dagenham College
Stephanie Howard	Expanse Learning
Vicky Hodgson	Activate
Vicky Myko	Homefield College
Stacey Betts	Communication Specialist College, Doncaster
Lydia Roberts	Aurora Boveridge
Jean Bankhead	St. Martins
Simon Charleston	St.Johns
Katie Koszegi	Landmarks College
Paula Miller	Newcastle College Group