



Quality Times

December
2019

Welcome to the fourth issue of our quality-focused newsletter

This is our first issue since the implementation of the new Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (EIF), and we are delighted to be able to share with you the positive experience of Works 4 U, one of the first specialist colleges to be inspected under the EIF. Horizons College describes how they were able to make significant progress following a disappointing first Ofsted inspection, while the principal at Heart of Birmingham Vocational College shares the hard work it took to enable the college to hold onto a 'Good'. We hear from Young Epilepsy how taking a more student-centred approach is helping them to improve quality, while Natspec board director, Ruth Thomas, offers advice on strengthening governance. Kirsten Jones, Natspec board director and vice principal of Coleg Elidyr, considers how Welsh colleges can turn ALN reform from threat into opportunity. TechAbility assistive technologist, Neil Beck, introduces a new set of AT standards, and Kate Williams from NASS, describes how independent specialist schools are working to strengthen the quality of SEND provision across the whole education sector.

Learning from peers is central to our approach with Quality Times. Please follow the example of our excellent contributors to date and share your ideas and experiences, including your triumphs and lessons learned, for the benefit of others. We would be particularly interested to hear about your experiences of inspection under the new Ofsted framework, any curriculum development and review activity and your approach to staff development. We would also like to extend the focus of Quality Times to include not just the quality of education but also of care, so please think about practice or processes from this area that you might be able to share.



Finally, we can't finish without reminding you that the [Natspec Awards](#) are open for applications from full Natspec members until 19 February, 2020. If you have high quality provision to shout about in any of the six categories, then don't be afraid to blow your own trumpet!

Tracy Gillett – Director of Quality

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New inspection framework, new attitude and approach



Wendy Mackie, principal of Works 4 U, offers her perspective on inspection under Ofsted's new Education Inspection Framework

For the second time in three years, we found ourselves subject to a full inspection by Ofsted right at the start of a new academic year. This time, not only were most of our post-16 students new starters adjusting to a new environment and several of our staff new to the college, but we were also being inspected under the brand new Education Inspection Framework! The good news was that the lead inspector was a member of our previous inspection team and therefore understood our provision – and crucially knew in what areas we were required to improve from the previous inspection.

Also new, from the initial phone call and throughout the three-day inspection, was the attitude and approach of the inspection team. In previous inspections we had found the atmosphere adversarial, with a strong emphasis on finding and highlighting the things we were **not** doing well and only a passing acknowledgement of our good points. This time around, the inspectors, one of whom had a counselling background, were far more eager to let us showcase our strengths and to explain in detail our curriculum and delivery model and how and why it was different from mainstream FE provision.

A great deal of discussion on the new inspection framework took place and we were given ample chance to explain how we thought we met our learners' needs and how our leadership and management had improved since the last inspection. As the inspection progressed, the inspection team were very open and honest about their findings and allowed us to address their concerns and explain in detail our continuous quality improvement process and how we thought our plans would lead us towards outstanding provision. I wouldn't get as far as saying the inspection was enjoyable (there was still plenty of stress involved!), but it was a positive experience overall.

The timing of the inspection definitely added to the stress. We were only in the second week of the year and yet inspectors already wanted to see detailed timetables for every student and extensive information on each student's initial assessment – which was still ongoing. We were able to point out why this information was difficult to provide at this stage of the year, explaining for the first of many times during the inspection how the approach of a specialist

college differs from mainstream FE. The good news was that the inspectors really listened to our explanations.

It was definitely an intense experience. Despite being a fairly small specialist college (we have around 60 students) we still had three inspectors on site for three days. The inspection proper started at 8am each day and finished at 7pm on the first and second days, leaving the senior staff mentally and physically exhausted. Inspectors made a lot of demands on staff, several of whom were new to our organisation and several of whom were observed working with students on all three days.

We were delighted at the end of the inspection to be graded Good, having previously been Requires Improvement. We think there are three key things that helped us improve:

- a very intensive and comprehensive staff development programme, including sessions on the Ofsted inspection framework
- an absolute understanding by all staff of our purpose and mission and what we are trying to achieve with each learner, coupled with the ability and confidence of staff to explain that to anyone willing to listen, including Ofsted inspectors
- the message from our leadership team that an Ofsted inspection is always potentially only 48 hours away and therefore we always need to be prepared. To this end, we had in place 'evidence' files for each of five Ofsted judgement areas, showing how we had improved and how we felt we were meeting the relevant criteria.

If we had one suggestion for improvement for Ofsted, it would be that inspectors with a mainstream FE or general education background probably need more guidance and support to truly understand the needs of learners with significant barriers to educational and/or social inclusion, in particular around complex mental health needs – an area that most of us need to better understand.

A recipe for rapid improvement



Genti Mullaliu, Principal of Horizons College, explains how he and his staff were able to use a disappointing Ofsted inspection as a catalyst for rapid improvement.

Horizons College is a non-residential independent specialist college for young adults with special educational needs and disabilities, based in the Wiltshire town of Swindon. It opened four years ago and has grown from a small, local learning centre to a medium-sized college with a regional outlook, with learners coming from five different local authorities.

We had our first full inspection in May 2018 and were judged as 'requires improvement' across all areas. It was a bitter blow, given how hard we had all been working, and very difficult to tell the learners, parents and staff. We all knew that we were only at the beginning of the journey towards making the college good and yet initially, it was still discouraging to be told that we were not yet there.

It took us a few days to accept that Ofsted had only reflected back to us what we already knew and were already trying to fix. The judgement was based on a snapshot of where we were and was not our destiny. Ofsted had seen that we had the capacity to improve and our trajectory had an upward trend. Three days later, once that had sunk in, we picked ourselves up and there was a great response from all college staff who were willing 'to fall forward not backwards'. We agreed that we had to dig deep, be even more determined, and press on with our journey to making the college good.

We set about putting together an improvement plan, making the most of the very open and honest discussion we had had with the Ofsted inspectors. We used the inspection findings to underpin our improvement plan and decided to think of the Ofsted visit as free consultancy through which we had been gifted a detailed and comprehensive evaluation from four experienced inspectors!

The main areas for improvement related to teaching, learning and assessment. We were not using a robust enough system of initial and diagnostic assessment to establish clear starting points for learners. Monitoring of teaching and learning and strong performance management had not yet secured the desired improvement; as we had recently let go three key specialist staff and had not yet recruited replacements. The college was not meeting the needs of the learners with the highest of needs, especially in the area of therapy provision and independent

advice and guidance. In addition, we had only just started offering stepping-stone qualifications in maths and English and could not yet show good outcomes for learners.

We wanted to turn things around fast, and I realised straightaway, that this was not something that we could do by ourselves. Picking yourself up after a disappointing inspection can be a difficult and lonely business and at times like this, support from professional relationships and networks means a great deal. We swiftly increased the capacity of the senior leadership team (SLT), appointing a vice principal responsible for teaching and learning who would also act as an assessment champion for the college.

We reached out to Natspec who offered expert help with assistive technology and in putting together a quality improvement plan. We also make optimum use of the great training opportunities offered by Natspec especially in the areas of quality improvement, monitoring of teaching learning and assessment, and measuring progress. Also due to an effective regional network of colleges, we were able to seek support from two other specialist colleges nearby in the areas of identifying suitable baseline assessments.

Over the next nine months, we revamped the curriculum and the way we measured progress and integrated therapies. Observation of teaching, learning and assessment became the norm, with learning walks and health checks by the CEO, SLT and governors. Our aim was to create a culture of continuous improvement where *everyone* was striving to do better. To achieve this, we regularly shared the improvement plan with all staff during Review and Improvement Days (R.A.I.D). Everyone had to identify where they saw their contribution in this plan, highlighting areas that directly applied to their performance. At every teachers' meeting, staff development session and twilight training, we showed the progress made as a result of the steps we had taken and observed how the colours in our RAG ratings against each aspect of the plan had changed.

At times it felt like being in the bomber command control room reporting on our advances! However, this really inspired staff as they could see the progress made and also directly recognise their own contribution. Locating the SLT office downstairs on the "dance floor" had a huge impact on staff and learners. They knew we were in this together.

The recognition of the hard work came 12 months later. In the first monitoring visit since inspection, the college was judged to have made significant improvement in most areas. The inspectors congratulated us on the extent of the improvements achieved in such a short space of time, which made us even more determined to continue.

So, what enabled us to turn things around so quickly?

1. Re-vamping the college SLT structure appointing a vice principal whose sole responsibility was teaching, learning and assessment, and introducing senior tutors and course tutors
2. Increasing the rigour and robustness of our monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning and putting an assessment, recording and reporting schedule at its heart
3. Successful recruitment of four new specialist staff and a supportive and comprehensive induction programme in the "new" college practice and systems
4. Introducing a new baselining system and close monitoring of learner progression with EHCPs and long-term goals at the heart of it.
5. Extensive support from Natspec, attending quality improvement days, principals' forum and networking with colleagues from the two nearby colleges
6. A comprehensive and ambitious CPD programme, including active and evidence-based learning, ingredients of great learning, systematic instruction, intensive interaction, observing and annotating learner progress, differentiation and assessment, and stages of development
7. Commissioning a new therapy service and implementing the integrated service in teaching and learning
8. Creating a culture of continuous improvement by enabling staff to take the initiative, try new things and think outside of the box.

It would be great to say that we have arrived, and our job is complete. In reality, we are not there yet and we will never reach an end point, as there will always be room for improvement. As we go forward, our message to staff is that we need to continue to improve and we can't afford to sit back. Our work now is more of an evolution rather than revolution: achieving incremental changes by doing the small things right to achieve exponential growth; continuing to maintain rigour and robustness; and falling into rhythms and cycles of embedding new processes. It is about 'brilliant basics'; being consistently good will lead to outstanding outcomes and that takes time and hard work. We are inspired by the words of Clare Howard, chief executive of Natspec, who recently reminded us that it is about "being fascinated by the concept of things bending outwards, being able to go on and stretch without quite reaching, always developing and creating something beautiful."

Making quality the first priority



Emma Clark from Heart of Birmingham Vocational College shares her experience of taking on the principal role at a college where the quality of provision was not quite what she had been expecting.

Before I became principal at Heart of Birmingham Vocational College (HVBC), I had spent several years in a general further education college in the Midlands, first as curriculum manager and later as development manager with responsibility for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Whilst at the college, I lived through the rollercoaster ride from good to requires improvement and back to good, not one for the faint-hearted! These few years gave me a great foundation to transfer to the role I am in now at HVBC. It meant that I knew what good looked and felt like, and how hard a college has to work to get there. Of the many lessons I learned, probably the most important was that good quality teaching and learning does not happen in a week, a month or sometimes even a year!

I took up the principal role at HBVC in 2016, keen and eager to lead the team at this small college, already judged as 'good', on the next stage of their journey. But when I arrived, good was not what I saw or how the college felt... Rapid action was needed to raise standards to get them back to good again, and it was my responsibility as principal, to lead it.

The governors had commissioned two education consultants to work with HBVC, to develop a comprehensive improvement plan, highlighting areas of development to be worked on, and to support the team in raising standards that would ultimately enhance the quality of education. This work was certainly needed but I felt that the consultants recruited did not share the vision of the leadership team and they were not having the rapid impact on quality that was needed. Still very new in role, I made the brave decision to challenge the governors and asked them to replace the consultants with SEN specialists with an FE background.

In early 2018 our new consultants joined us, both with a wealth of experience of working in and knowledge of the FE sector, and with particular specialisms that supported our vision as a team. With their coaching, support and guidance, we have been able to develop and improve at a much faster rate. Keeping a clear vision, implementing new strategies and procedures, and raising whole college expectations, allowed us to turn things around and ensured the college remained good in our June 2018 inspection.

So, what do quality arrangements look like now at HBVC?

Lesson observation

We have a lesson observation team who conduct learning walks and formal lesson observations. Each tutor and learning coach has two formal lesson observations each year, judged under the OFSTED EIF. Various themed learning walks are carried out throughout the year, which include questioning, inclusive practice and use of resources, functional skills, and differentiation.

Monitoring of support staff performance

Support teams also undergo thorough development and coaching and their performance is monitored. The pastoral team are judged on overcoming barriers in communication, personalisation, differentiation, working with internal and external agencies and standardisation of recording documents and procedures. The employability team are judged on the meaningfulness of the work placements, the reasons why students are on a particular work placement, whether students know where the work placement is leading to and what skills are they learning, and how well they assess if learners are being appropriately challenged.

Staff appraisal and development

All staff are given clear and concise appraisal targets through BlueSky. Quality of education is threaded through these targets to promote continual development of all staff, specific to the employee and their job role. Sufficient staffing levels are maintained in all departments to ensure good quality teaching and learning is provided, and activities set are undertaken to a high standard.

Quality assurance of RARPA

We operate strict quality assurance procedures when analysing RARPA targets and progress. The first is an internal audit that is conducted by the teaching and learning co-ordinators. This is carried out straight after baselining is completed to ensure all targets adhere to college RARPA policy and then again throughout the year (twice half-termly) to ensure targets have been tracked accordingly, and accurately. The second quality procedure we adhere to is an external quality assurance audit. This is carried out by our Chair of the Governors who is the Headteacher in a SEND school who actively use RARPA. The final quality assurance we undertake is an external RARPA moderation day which is held once a year. Five SEND colleges participate and assess each other's RARPA targets and quality assurance procedures. The colleges then create a report highlighting strengths and areas for improvement.

Quality assurance for external qualifications

More recently, HBVC has provided the opportunity for its learners to gain accredited qualifications. This is through functional skills and supported internship courses. This means that we have had to introduce a system of quality assurance relating to external accreditation. The IQAs conduct a pre-course verification to assess if the assessments are fair and appropriate for individual learners. IQAs then conduct an internal sample to see if the Open Awards guidelines have been met and feedback is also given to the tutor. Finally, the authorised internal verifier then sample course runs following completion, prior to the external verifier completing their final QA.

College wide quality improvement

Each team at HBVC develops its own Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) that drops from the whole college QIP which is audited monthly. These plans are further enhanced by using feedback from external advisers, an evaluation report completed by staff and students within each team and any additional areas for development noted by the college co-ordinators. This helps ensure that education, work placements and supported internships are person-centred and ultimately benefit all of our students' aspirations and outcomes.

It has taken a lot of hard work to get us to this position and we'll need to keep at it to maintain our 'Good' status and move towards 'Outstanding'. It's my job as principal to lead this work and, as anyone who knows me will tell you – I'm up for it!

Taking a more student-centred approach as a way to improve quality



Richard Gargon, Principal, and Naomi Bradley, Vice Principal, at St Piers School and College (Young Epilepsy) share their new Learning Journeys approach.

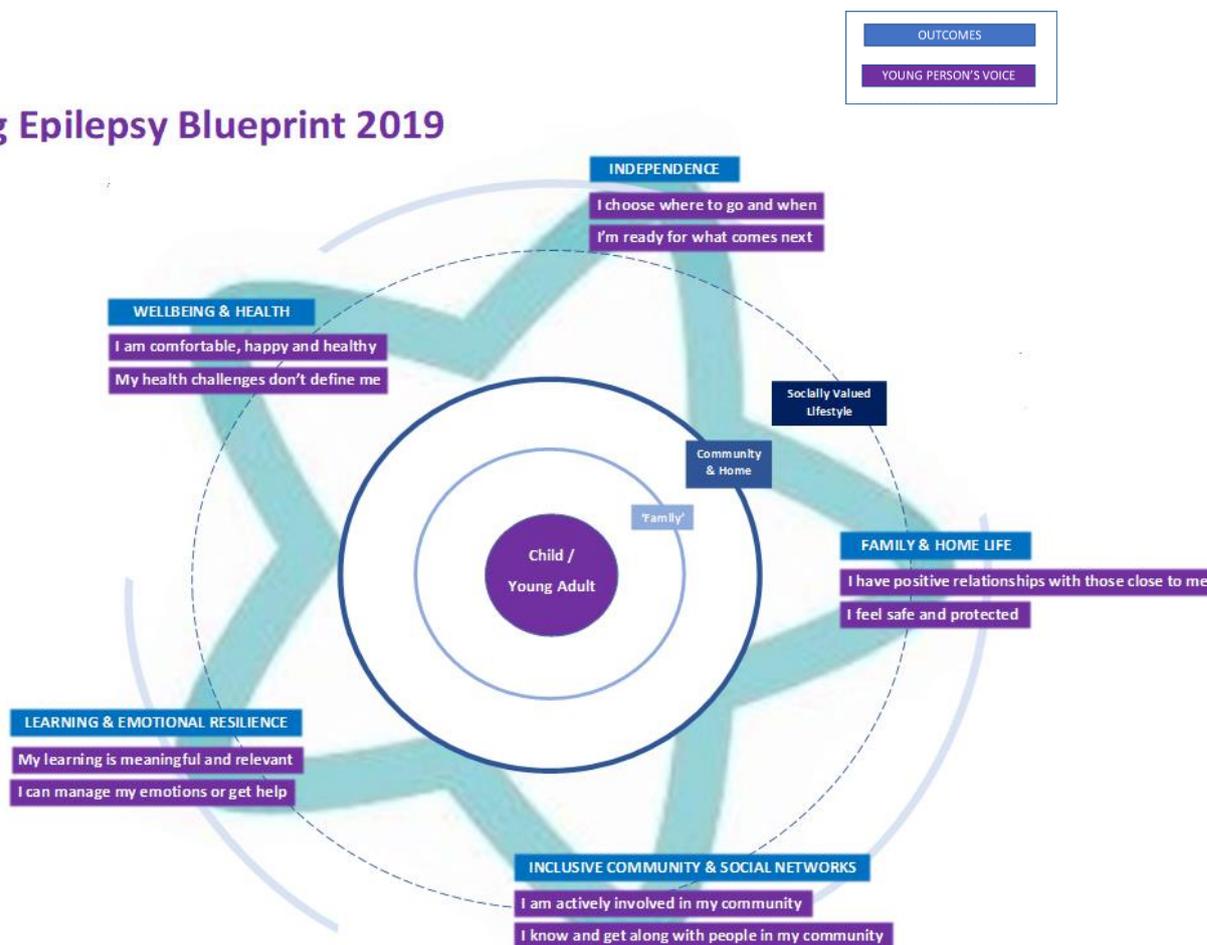
We have been committed for some time to improving the quality of our education provision through greater personalisation of our students' learning. Being 'young person-centred' is one of our organisation's core values, alongside partnership-working and ambition and courage. We have been guided by all of these values in taking this work forward.

By the summer of 2018, we had reached a point where we realised that we would need to go beyond the traditional approach of our structured learning environments, if we were to achieve our aim of increased personalization through relative and meaningful learning offers. We began to explore with staff the idea of introducing a number of different 'learning journeys' which would enable us to shape our curriculum across both school and college to meet the needs of our students in a more focused and personalised way.

We presented some initial ideas to the staff team and asked them to come up with suggestions for what each journey could look like and how we could structure the learning across these. This led us to identifying three distinct learning journeys, each shaped according to the target learners' cognitive abilities: Learning for Life; Skills for Life; and Specialist Skills. All three learning journeys are built around five key outcomes:

- learning and emotional resilience
- wellbeing and health
- independence
- family and home life
- inclusive community and social networks.

Young Epilepsy Blueprint 2019



Each learning journey is underpinned by a central approach to teaching, learning and assessment across school and college, which consists of communication, independence, life skills, health and wellbeing and physical and social skills for those students with complex physical, medical and sensory needs. These are incorporated in the learning journeys and embedded through the personal EHCP targets. All students access a diverse range of learning opportunities on site and in the community to achieve their personal goals.

The curriculum model varies, however, across the three different Learning Journeys.

Learning for life

This group of students have the most complex physical, medical and sensory needs and follow a non-subject-specific curriculum. We assess each student’s responsiveness, discovery, anticipation, persistence, initiation and investigation.



Skills for life

Students study a semi-formal curriculum, focusing on learning essential skills through a range of bright and varied learning opportunities. Additional areas of learning include personal and social development in life skills, functional skills and work-based learning. We make use of some qualifications alongside non-accredited learning.



Specialist skills

Students follow a subject-specific curriculum, enhanced by accredited and non-accredited learning. Areas of learning include functional skills, personal and social development in life skills, employability, and work experience. Trained job coaches assist students on internships, as and where needed.



Students on all three learning journeys enjoy a broad and ambitious range of activities, with access to our Outdoor Woodland Learning (OWL) provision, life skills bungalows, Vocational Hub (including Tea Room, Textiles and Multi-skills), horticulture and farm areas. Our staff teams have been working to ensure that by taking a personalised approach, all students across the learning journeys are able to work together on innovative projects, each gaining skills relevant to their own needs and ambitions. Our 'Fleece to Fibre' project (Textiles), developed by a college lecturer in the farm area, is a wonderful example of this. It is very much a collaborative effort across the learning journeys with students producing pieces to sell on and off campus. This autumn our textile pumpkins proved so popular the students had to make a second batch to meet demand!

Each individual student's curriculum within a learning journey will be different. Close liaison with our admissions team, who already carry out detailed initial assessment and baselining of students, and use of information shared with us by local authorities and previous providers, has allowed our class/tutor teams to shape the curriculum to meet the needs of each individual.

Collaboration has been central to implementing our new learning journeys. Being true to our core value of partnership-working has certainly helped us. We have begun to use the term 'transdisciplinary' (rather than 'multi-disciplinary') to describe the way in which our education, therapy, nursing, research and residential teams now work together. We think it is a better way of describing collaborative practice that puts the young person at the centre of everything.

Over the next few months we will be evaluating the impact of our new approach and expect to make adjustments based on what we find. We are quietly confident, however, that taking a student-centred approach is driving up the quality of our provision.

Strong governance; strong provision



Ruth Thomas, Natspec board director for leadership and governance, explores the role of college governors in quality assurance and improvement

I have worked in post-16 education for thirty plus years, both in mainstream and specialist colleges institutions, including 25 years in senior management roles. I am now coming into contact with other providers through providing support to new Natspec members, running workshops and talking to staff across the SEND sector. It strikes me that four interlinked issues around governance have been around in our sector, albeit in different guises, throughout the whole of this time.

- In a sector where change is endemic, the burden on governors¹ not to just to keep up, but to lead change and cope with the pressures it brings is enormous.
- Our colleges are often subject to regulation or audit in one form or another by multiple external agencies, such as the charity commission, local authorities, ESFA, Ofsted, Estyn, CQC and CIW. Governors have to understand the sometimes overlapping, sometimes varying requirements of each.
- Recruitment of governors with the time, commitment and knowledge to support and challenge specialist FE providers is an uphill struggle and a never-ending task
- Not all providers have a clear understanding of what makes for good governance or of how to improve in this area.

So what *can* we do?

First all, I recommend you take a look at some recent Ofsted reports on other specialist colleges, scanning for any references to governance. Frequently in reports where colleges have been graded 'requires improvement', you will find statements such as:

- 'Governors do not challenge and support college leaders and managers effectively to bring about improvements rapidly.'

¹ Throughout I use the terms 'governors' and 'board'; they may be trustees or directors rather than governors in your setting and you may have a management group or committee rather than a board. The advice in this article applies equally, regardless of governance arrangements.

- 'Senior leaders and governors have not developed a sufficiently clear vision and strategic direction for the college'
- 'Governors need to develop swiftly their understanding of, and their responsibilities for, the further education and skills provision.'

If these statements strike a chord with you then you need to act. Positive judgements are equally useful. You can use these to measure yourself against and consider what you might need to do if they are not yet true of your provision. Try these as a starter:

- 'Leaders have recognised and responded well to the need for a separate governance process for the College. They have defined specific roles for new governors and are clear about the responsibilities under the new governance arrangements.'
- 'Leaders and governors make very effective use of high-quality management information to set ambitious targets for the college, review students' progress and monitor the performance of staff.'
- 'Leaders and governors make very effective use of high-quality management information to set ambitious targets for the college, review students' progress and monitor the performance of staff.'

Secondly, I suggest you invest in your board. Provide targeted development opportunities, for example, training in how to frame questions so that professionals at all levels feel respected. Consider opening up existing staff development to governors. Make time in your own busy schedule to grow governors' knowledge and understanding of your provision. Investing time is almost always rewarded by a return on your investment.

Next, consider your board culture. Do you show that you value your governors and welcome their contributions; do governors feel able to challenge and not just support; are you open to new thinking; are your meetings focused on strategic discussion – or only about operational decision-making? An unhelpful culture will almost certainly limit the effectiveness of your board.

Ensure there is a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, including setting out the difference between leadership and governance. You may need to correct some misconceptions, for example if governors have traditionally seen their responsibilities as limited to fiscal matters. Make sure all governors are clear about their shared responsibilities and the specific defined roles of individual governors. You will need to monitor these to ensure that they are effective.

Build a board with a balance of expertise, working to attract diverse, representative, high-quality and engaged governors who can think strategically and creatively and are able to support and challenge leaders and managers. Then utilise their expertise effectively, getting the best out of individuals. Critically, ensure that the chair of the board is someone with the ability

to develop a high performing culture and who is passionate about improving performance of both the college and the board. Think of the chair as a key improvement partner and work closely with them outside of board meetings.

Directly involve your governors in the activities within your quality cycle. They should play a key role in the college's self-assessment and in putting together a quality improvement plan. Make sure they have all the data they need to analyse performance and take the time to walk them through it. This will put them in a better position to hold leaders to account.

Finally look after your governors and make them feel valued. Give them access to any staff wellbeing support; make them guests of honour at student celebrations. They are doing a difficult job with no financial reward; to hold onto them, we need to make sure they find the role rewarding in other ways!

Where does ALN reform in Wales leave specialist colleges?



Kirsten Jones, Natspec's Wales Policy Director and Vice-Principal of Coleg Elidyr, reflects on what ALN Transformation in Wales means for specialist colleges and Welsh students with more complex needs.

The Welsh Government is transforming provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 creates a new bi-lingual statutory context for children and young people aged 0-25 with additional learning needs (ALN). This replaces the special educational needs (SEN) framework and the assessment and planning for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) in post-16 education and training. ALN Transformation is occurring alongside significant education reform in Wales that sees a move away from a subject-based curriculum to six 'areas of learning and experience'. Aimed at reducing attainment gaps through skills and competencies-based outcomes, the reforms are intended to promote collaboration and cross-disciplinary curriculum development and design.

While the Act is driven by the principles of inclusivity and being person-centred, it would be foolhardy to pretend this is uncontested good news for young people with high needs and their families. A lack of independent advice and guidance, the devolution of the funding of placements to local authorities and an under-developed emphasis on the quality of provision will be all too familiar to readers experienced in English SEND reform. We can now see these issues reflected as risks in Wales. Our fears are that despite its aspirations, ALN Transformation will, in reality, promote an inequitable system for post-16 education and training opportunities for Welsh young people. We also fear the doors will be widened for scarce resources to be drained by legal costs as those parents resilient enough to challenge inequalities do so.

While implementation of the ALN reforms has been put back to September 2021, it certainly is not going away. So, as specialist providers of further education and training, we must accept that change is coming and focus on determining what our role should be in supporting successful ALN Transformation. For example, how we can support local authorities who have historically had no responsibilities in this area to develop an understanding of post-16 options over and above those of mainstream further education colleges?

Moreover, we must be able – in necessarily cost-driven climates – to demonstrate the quality of outcomes local authorities can expect from their investments and show how placements with them ultimately reduce costs to the public purse. This will undoubtedly be of interest to budget-holders tasked with managing limited resources. The more we can do to evidence value for money and challenge misconceptions of specialist providers as expensive and detached, the better. If we can better inform decision-makers, whether collectively or as individual organisations, this will no doubt be of benefit to the life chances of young people with autism and learning difficulties and disabilities. Thinking about how we can evidence associated social returns on investments will be equally important. This includes reductions in stress for young people and their families, increasing parents' availability for work, enhanced well-being outcomes including reductions in hospital admissions and improved physical and mental health.

We could also be promoting a more fair-minded understanding of what is meant by 'inclusive education'. Inclusive education does not necessarily mean that all recipients of education and training attend the same institutions. It is important that we work with local authorities so that they can see the quality of specialist provision and how the holistic person-centred outcomes we offer enable individuals to live more inclusive adult lives. Unless we do so, there is a real danger that specialist colleges will be seen as excluding young people from their communities.

Equally we should demonstrate how many of the young people we work with have already experienced exclusion and that the inclusive approaches we use, such as Total Communication environments and on-site multi-disciplinary interventions, lead to levels of inclusion that many may have never experienced. We need to clarify how the provision of safe and trusted environments where young people learn to self-regulate and manage sensory-processing challenges, can revolutionise individuals' understanding of themselves and their engagement with others. Specialist colleges must be able to demonstrate to local authorities that they have a strong track record of providing individuals with the skills they need to purposefully plan and prepare for their own futures. Critically, we must be able to show impact and outcomes.

Unless we are able to put forward clear evidence that specialist provision can make a positive difference for young people that cannot be achieved elsewhere, there is a danger that local authorities may cease Individual Development Plans (IDPs) at the point where a mainstream Further Education College says it cannot meet individuals' needs. In effect, young people will be denied further education because their needs cannot be met by a mainstream provider. By promoting our positive outcomes, we can play our part in ensuring the life chances of some of our most vulnerable young people are not limited in this way.

By working collaboratively and identifying and articulating our services and unique specialisms, we can encourage local authorities to see us as a resource for not just one local area but nationally. We must help local authorities to see that young people's choices should not be

limited to what is available in a young person's domicile local authority, as is happening in some areas in England, but should be driven by the individual's wants, needs and aspirations, in line with the spirit of the ALN reforms.

There are other ways in which we can position ourselves as positive contributors. We could do more to support progression-planning and to ensure that local authorities are fully informed of individuals' achievements, wants and needs, which is likely to lead to more positive long-term outcomes for young people. (This would also help us face down the criticism that placements at specialist colleges take people away from their communities and make their re-integration difficult.)

As mainstream further education colleges accept young people with higher needs than they may historically have done, our sector has much to offer them. If we take a smart approach, we don't need to sell – or give away – the family silver; instead we can collaborate in a way that is mutually beneficial. For example, we might share our expertise to help build common assessment mechanisms. These would support all stakeholders and help identify when a specialist college is best-placed to meet individuals' education and training needs. We could also lead work on a shared approach for benchmarking pre-entry level learners, allowing us all to better measure progress made by individuals through non-accredited learning. This kind of contribution can only bolster specialist colleges' reputation as leaders in person-centred approaches.

While the challenges are tangible and significant, nonetheless, we have before us a very real opportunity to support the Welsh Government in the achievement of its aims of an inclusive, person-centred and bi-lingual system to support children and young people with additional learning needs. Importantly we share the common purpose of improving outcomes and increasing life chances through leading more inclusive lives. We can and should embrace the opportunities that these changes bring and ensure that we assert ourselves as key players in the new ALN landscape.

TechAbility Standards: a route-map to excellence in assistive technology



Neil Beck, assistive technologist at TechAbility and National Star, explains how the recently developed standards can help providers ensure that their learners are making the most of assistive technology.

What is assistive technology and why is it important?

When we talk about technology, people often think 'cables and complex elements' and that can be a turn-off, so I always prefer to talk about what technology can do for an individual, rather than what it is:

- a student writing poetry using their voice
- another reading emails for the first time, using a screen-reader and proudly replying
- a young person making choices to look through family holiday photos with switches
- a woman recovering from a stroke regaining lost independence: being able to communicate and return to work.

In our field we focus on assistive technology that improves educational and therapy outcomes for learners. It is a diverse field and covers everything from literacy tools to eye-gaze.

Where did the standards come from?

In the years that Fil McIntyre, my fellow assistive technologist, and I have been working for TechAbility we have found a wide unmet need around assistive technology. Support for assistive technology has come in waves for the specialist FE sector, with pockets of excellence and outstanding professionals driving this forward. We realised how important it is that colleges are able to take responsibility themselves for making effective use of assistive technology and for continuous improvement in this area, rather than relying on external support. Our focus has always been on making learners independent; now we realised we needed to improve the independence of colleges.

So, in the way that [another Beck created the London Tube Map](#) to simplify navigation, we decided to create a map to show how to navigate the technology out there – and the plethora of considerations to getting excellent outcomes. We wanted to demystify assistive technology

for colleges. Our aim was to create a resource, available to everyone, that would lead to lasting improvements across the sector.

What are the standards?

The standards are a series of categories, which are then broken down further into specific recommendations with resources to help meet them. Let's take an example:

The assessment standard recommends:

- trained staff
- standardised assessment
- review point
- appropriate environment
- accessible documentation
- appropriate equipment.



It then develops each of these points to explain how to achieve them and provides useful resources.

The categories cover everything from access skills to transition and are written to assume no prior knowledge.

Technology advances quickly, but the standards aim to provide guidance around the infrastructure and tools that have remained common.

How can the standards be used?

- as a self-audit tool
- to identify training needs
- as a guide for inspection
- to identify areas for improvement

Can I contribute to the standards?

Yes! The standards have been authored by Fil McIntyre, Rohan Slaughter and me, with the support of a wide range of groups and individuals who have contributed their feedback. We plan to update the standards periodically, so please send us any suggestions for improvements or additions, along with links to additional resources you think we could usefully reference. I'm also happy to field any questions you may have about the standards.

Where can I find the standards?



The standards were launched at the recent TechAbility Conference 2019 – Raising Standards, and are available on the [TechAbility website](#).

What next?

We will consider if there is a demand to tailor this resource to fit mainstream education and if there are any omissions. We will also look to turning this resource into a specific online audit tool in future should there be call for this.

I hope the standards help you and that they give us all a platform to build from.

You can get in touch with Neil at neil.beck@natspec.org.uk

Improving the quality of the national SEND offer



Kate Williams, Deputy CEO at NASS, sets out how NASS is supporting its member special schools to evidence and share their successful approaches, to contribute to quality improvement in SEND across the education sector

In the special school sector, we're often so focussed on improving quality for the children and young people within our settings, that we don't stop to think about the contribution we could be making to those with SEND in less specialist settings. As specialist colleges, you may well find the same is true for you.

I thought about this a lot when based in a special school for young people with autism, where we often had referrals for 16 or 17 year olds who had been through three, four or even five previous school placements, none of which had been able to meet their needs. 'I wish we'd met you sooner,' I used to think so often, of young people who had been so traumatised and excluded by the school system that, of course, they wanted nothing more to do with it!

There is now a growing national recognition that the wider SEND system is in crisis. This does not come as a surprise to those of us who work in the sector, or to the young people and families navigating it every day. But it does increase the impetus on our member schools, at the most specialist end of the special school sector, to be part of the solution for young people in the broader SEND system, and not just for those children that get placed in our schools.

The recent National Audit Office report told us that over 80% of local authorities overspent their high needs budgets in 2017-18. The Education Select Committee's report into SEND also highlights the funding gaps, but is clear that funding alone will not fix 'a system in chaos'. The Lenehan report, 'Good intentions, good enough?', talked about the need for more flexible use of our current resources, to meet children's needs earlier and closer to home.

At NASS, we are working to support our members to reflect on how they can develop and adapt their schools and services to rise to these challenges. One of our current strategic priorities is to become 'a powerhouse of sharing 'what works' for children with SEND'. We know that outreach services, and partnerships between mainstream and specialist providers are not new, and that lots of mainstream settings provide excellent SEND input. However, we also know from the alarming exclusion rates of children with SEND from mainstream schools, that the specialist

input these young people need isn't reaching them routinely. We want to play our part in fixing that.

So, we developed a programme called the NASS SEND Incubator, which we run in partnership with the Young Foundation (who are famous for inventing the Open University and Which?). Incubators are essentially accelerated development programmes, which use expert input to turn promising ideas into fully-fledged 'services', with a compelling evidence base, and, ultimately, routes to share the service or approach to reach a wider audience.

We are currently working with nine of our member special schools to develop their evidence bases for the interventions or approaches they use that show real progress and impact for young people with SEND. We are also helping them plan how they can reach more young people, earlier in their journeys, rather than just those that are placed with them.

Example projects include:

- a set of resources and training on relationship and sex education for young people with PMLD and complex medical needs
- an adaptable set of assessment criteria, lesson plans, and a progress-tracking system covering work/adult life readiness for young people with autism and SEMH
- a set of practical resources to reduce self-harm and suicidal intent for young people with hearing impairments.

The Incubator offers intensive support over eight months, with further support over the following year, and beyond as needed. The support includes:

- six full-day workshops over the first six months, which cover everything from developing your evidence base and articulating what your intervention is, to researching the best routes to share and scale your approach, to project planning and potential funding sources
- 1:1 coaching support for the school staff leading the development of the intervention, to help build resilience and provide space for reflection
- Specific mentoring from experts as needed, for example on intellectual property or developing the IT aspects of the services
- Support to broker relationships with schools or local authorities that might want to use the approaches or services, and potential funders.

The intensive eight-month period ends with a 'Dragon's Den' style event, where our nine participating schools will have chance to 'pitch' their service or approach to a room full of education and SEND sector big-wigs, potential funders, and other schools. We're all learning as



we go with this, and it's a long and bumpy road. If we achieve our aims, we will be adding to the collective evidence base of 'what works' for children with SEND, and ultimately more children with SEND should benefit from the specialist approaches used in our member schools, whatever school they go to.

In keeping with the theme of this article, we'd be happy to share our thinking and learning with interested colleges, or to learn from you if your college has been working on anything in this space! So please feel free to get in touch with me at kwilliams@nasschools.org.uk.