

Overview and introduction

Research, commissioned by Natspec and the National Union for Students (NUS) in 2018 identified that learner voice related activities often excluded learners with significant communication difficulties. It also found that the number of learners wishing to sit on Student Forums or Councils was often greater than the number of places available. Since then, a commitment to learner voice activities that are fully inclusive and have a pan-college reach has grown.

Supporting learners to advocate for themselves and for their peers contributes to the development of a range of abilities including social and communication skills, understanding of citizenship, problem solving, team working and recognising the needs of others. It also increases self-esteem, confidence and raises aspirations. It is increasingly common for colleges to identify a staff member to serve as a Learner Voice Practitioner (LVP) who has a lead responsibility for developing and implementing dedicated learner voice related activities within education programmes and across wider college experiences.

The aim of this resource is to support the development of high-quality approaches to developing the learner voice for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities in further education. It draws on practice-based examples from existing Learner Voice Practitioners within Natspec member colleges. Three overarching principles are offered that activities should be inclusive, purposeful, and meaningful.

A best practice checker will support you to develop quality assured learner voice activities to meet the needs of your learners' unique circumstances.

By committing to all your learners having the ability, through the support you provide, and the opportunity, through the space you make, to have their voices heard, you will enable the learner voice at your college to flourish.

For more information...

Learn about the role of Student Representatives at National Star College, in the webinar, *'Are we hearing the learners' voice?'*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kw3S9YoaJm0>

Hear how Coleg Elidyr's Learner Forum included learners across the college during lockdown in the webinar *'The Student Voice, Total Communication, in lockdown and beyond.'* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSTYLuy-vbY&t=2326s>

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Inclusion

A challenge for colleges collating evidence of the learner voice is to ensure the voice of learners with significant communication challenges are heard and not lost or drowned out by more able and confident peers.

Reflecting on methods of listening and considering ways to make activities more accessible is key to ensuring all learners have the ability and opportunity to contribute. Some colleges choose to create their own formal Learner Voice strategies and promote them across their organisations to raise the profile of the learner voice with colleagues and wider stakeholders.

Planning approaches and resources to ensure the inclusion of learners with the most complex needs not only ensures their voices are heard but often supports the understanding and engagement of all learners and so in turn, the accuracy of the information gained. Taking a multi-disciplinary approach with the support of speech and language therapists and/or staff with responsibilities for total communication or occupational therapy for many colleges supports the development of person-centred practice and inclusion.

Learner voice activities often centre around an identified group of individuals who have been given a specific learner voice remit. This could be through a dedicated Student Union or Forum/Council where representatives from different parts of the college serve in specific roles and speak on behalf of their peers. Members could represent specific cohorts or courses or other groups such as day or residential learners, ethnicities or sub-cultures including lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gender learners.

Forums/Councils meet regularly and often within the college weekly timetable. Representatives may also be offered the choice to participate in cross-college working groups or committees. For example, by sitting on a Safeguarding Committee. Some colleges also have a student representative or alumni representatives on their Boards of Governance.

To promote inclusion, some colleges focus on supporting the learners on Forums/Councils to play leadership roles in actively seeking the views of all the young people they represent. This could involve learning to use total communication approaches and using assistive technologies to develop accessible resources.

Alongside establishing councils or forums, extending activities to ensure all learners have the ability and opportunity to contribute to curriculum planning, and the assessment of their college experiences, increases the reach and influence of learner voice activities. One college, for example, uses short daily

video diaries of learners' views on how they feel their lesson and/or day has gone and uses the data gained to inform quality improvement planning.

Formal consultations such as annual learner surveys, as well as encouraging indirect and 'open door' informal feedback, are other ways college seek to learn about the views and preferences of their learners. Ensuring that all learners voices can be heard can often means adapting approaches to data collection and the table below offers examples of how colleges have sought to be more inclusive.

Adapting approaches

Approaches to developing the learner voice and seeking views or preferences	How can this exclude learners or limit the accuracy of information?	How to be more inclusive
<p>One to one questioning. E.g. interviews/questionnaire</p>	<p>questions can be too text-based.</p> <p>questions may be too complicated.</p> <p>learners may say 'yes' to please the questioner.</p> <p>learners may feel anxious and/or pressured or have inadequate processing time.</p>	<p>Simplify questions and reduce response options as appropriate.</p> <p>Consider if colours e.g., traffic lights or number ratings such as from 1 to 5 will support understanding.</p> <p>Use simple concepts in the present tense.</p> <p>Allow for the inclusion of sensory information.</p> <p>Learner Involvement E.g. through peer to peer questioning and supporting learners to develop the questions.</p> <p>Share questions prior to any interview or need to complete a questionnaire.</p> <p>Use Total Communication resources to support understanding and allow adequate processing time.</p>
<p>Asking for a show of hands</p>	<p>learners may mirror behaviour and not understand why they are raising their hands.</p> <p>learners may not be physically able to raise their hands.</p> <p>learners may not be given adequate</p>	<p>Plan to use a visual resource tailored to individual needs.</p> <p>E.g. A ballot slip or a Talking Mat</p> <p>Involve more able learners in the development of resources they can use to seek the views of their peers.</p>

	processing time to understand the choices.	
Seeking informal feedback. E.g. a suggestion box	A reliance on text-driven communication excludes learners who have difficulty reading and writing.	Person-centred approaches such as using sensory feedback, photographs and video or creative art-based activities such as music and dance. Observations and monitoring of behaviour.



Using drawings to communicate and contribute at Natspec Student Parliament 2019

Purposeful activities

The purpose of developing the learner voice in your college should be to empower learners through providing appropriate ways to listen to their concerns, preferences, and needs.

That learner voice activities have purpose is our second overarching principle.

Learner voice activities should contribute to the development of individuals' skills in preparation for their post-college lives and not simply tick a box for your quality improvement cycles.

To that end, within any framework you create should be the space for learner-led projects and issues to emerge. Importantly, your planning should be flexible enough to accommodate your own agendas being scuppered by learner-led initiatives!

Learners should be supported to understand the purpose of what they are doing including any anticipated outcomes. For example, if your council/forum has a role in implementing and/or evaluating your annual learner satisfaction survey, members should be supported to understand the relevance of what they are doing to the college's self-assessment processes. On an individual basis you can also support learners' understanding of how their specific roles are building their own skills and knowledge.

There follows, three snapshots of learner voice practices from different colleges that all have a clear purpose.

The first is a learner-led activity seeking learners views on how loud lawn mowers on the college site made them feel.

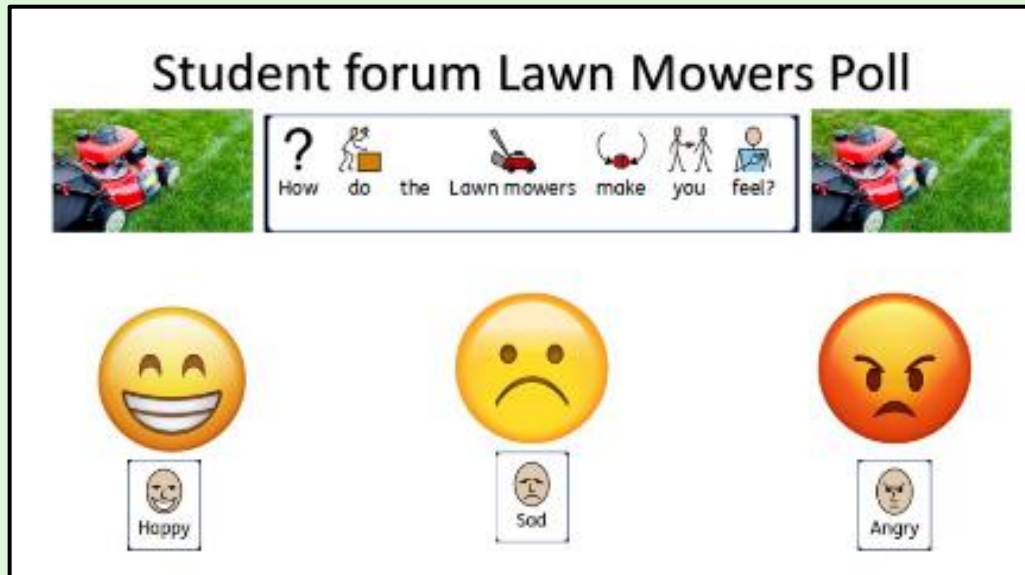
The second seeks to learn how learners feel about their physical college environment and the third shows how a Student Forum has been involved in identifying and addressing Health & Safety related issues on the college campus.

EMPOWERMENT

***your planning
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Lawn Mowers Poll

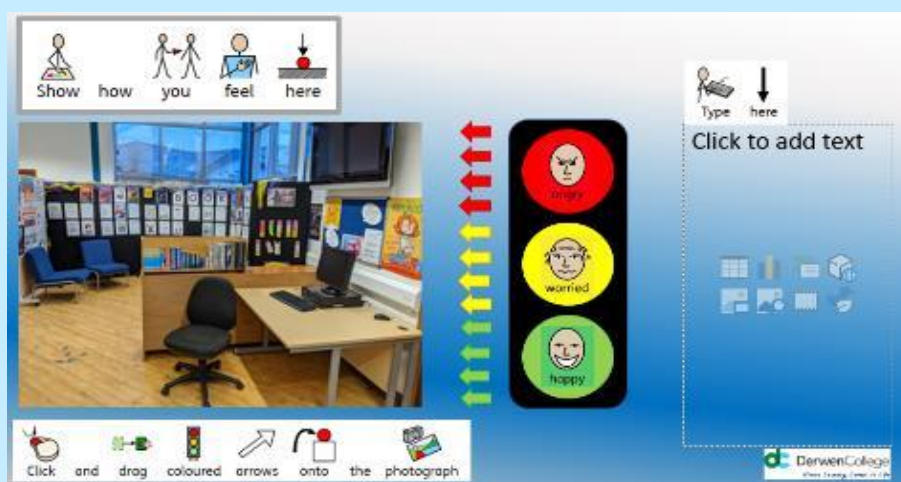
Inspired by discussion in their Student Forum meeting that lawnmowers on the college site were very loud and could be upsetting, a poll was designed to consult the wider student body to seek their views. Learners were played a video clip of the lawnmowers in action and asked how they felt. Their collated responses were sent to the Senior Leadership Team who are considering the issue.



*For illustration purposes only. The use of images is in accordance with the college licence.

Feeling safe

Here is an example of how a college drew on a concept called 'mapping' that links how people feel with specific physical locations. They consulted with learners to learn how their college environment made them feel. They were asked to click and drag colour-coded arrows to indicate how they felt about particular areas/objects within photographs of parts of the college.



*For illustration purposes only. The use of is in accordance with the college licence.

Learners who wished to explain their responses in more detail could type in the Text box. Responses were collated and discussed in Student Council meetings where they identified common issues and sent their findings to the Senior Leadership Team.

Health and Safety

Through Student Forum meetings that involved all the college's learners using online meetings during lockdown, learners were encouraged to identify issues around the campus to be raised at the Health & Safety Committee and to take photographs of findings.



Learners were then supported to share ideas on how issues could be addressed. For example, what work was needed? Could learners help or did a Maintenance Team Request Form need to be submitted?


What needs to or could be done to solve the problem?

Problem:

1. Steps behind hall dangerous (*this is a fire escape*)
2. Steps in front of hall slippery
3. Drains covers are slippery
4. Floor in foyer slippery

We could solve the problem by:

1. Extended depth of steps and add handrail (*or a slope or removable slope*)
2. Add handrail
3. Paint with anti-slip paint
4. New anti-slip mat



Learners then shared their progress at the next College Health and Safety meeting and were part of discussions on how the issues they raised would be addressed.

Meaningful outcomes

Listening and responding to the learner voice is equally as important as gathering it in the first place and ensuring that learner voice activities have a purpose. Learners should be supported to see the outcome and impact of their collective or individual voices.

The impact of the 'Feeling safe' example above has been well received by the college's Senior Leadership Team who are keen for the Student Council to undertake similar research across the college campus. They are also planning a whole college 'Safety Week'.

Some colleges implement a **'You said... We did...'** approach to giving feedback to learners on how they have responded to the findings of learner voice activities. They may produce posters or other visual resources to demonstrate the impact of how their voices have been heard. For example:

You said.....	We did.....
Lunch break was too short.	Lunch break has been extended by 15 minutes
You wanted to go fishing	A fishing club has been set up

It is here that the 'buy in' of staff and college leaders is important. Sharing what you want to achieve with staff and in particular those in senior positions is likely to improve your ability to demonstrate to learners that their voice has been heard.

Measuring the impact of learner voice activities should inform your quality improvement planning.

For example, you can consider how to measure the impact of the implementation of learner-led changes. In relation to the *'You said.. We did..'* scenarios above, you could think about how to measure if an extended lunch hour has increased social interactions and the development of friendships. Similarly, you could also assess if the fishing club increased opportunities for peer-to-peer communication or the development of problem-solving skills.

Linking learner voices to your self-assessment and quality improvement processes supports your ability to demonstrate to learners that you have listened to their voices and acted on what they have told you.

The best practice checker that follows will help you plan how the learner voice in your college can be enhanced.

Best practice Checker

This checklist will help you judge the extent to which activities aimed at increasing the learner voice in your college are inclusive, purposeful and meaningful.			
Write your planned activity here:			
Assess your planned activity against the criteria below. In some cases, you may decide that it is not relevant that your response is 'No'. In others you may want to reflect on how the criteria can be met and the strength of your learner voice enhanced.	Yes	Somewhat	No
Inclusion			
Will all learners in the group/class/year/college be involved in this activity?			
Have learners been involved in the planning?			
Will learners be involved in the delivery?			
Will learners be involved in the evaluation of this activity?			
Purpose			
Will all learners benefit from this activity?			
Can the activity/activities support the development of individuals' skills?			
Does the activity include individual or overarching learning intentions?			
Will learners be supported to understand how the skills they are developing can be used in their future lives?			
Meaning			
Will learners be supported to understand the meaning of the activity?			
Do you have a plan for how the learner voice will be listened to and responded to?			
Will the anticipated outcome of your activity enable positive change or improvements, and will learners know about such changes?			
Do you know how you will assess the impact of this activity?			

Learner Voice Network and Student Parliament

If you are interested in knowing more and working with like-minded colleagues across the sector join our Learner Voice Practitioner Network by contacting our Learner Voice Co-ordinator Andrew Evans Andrew.Evans@natspec.org.uk.

You can also learn about our national Student Voice Parliament at <https://natspec.org.uk/student-voice-parliament/> and annual Student Voice Award at <https://awards.natspec.org.uk/award/categories/#student-voice>

Acknowledgements

This resource guide represents a coming together of the expertise of Learner Voice Practitioners (LVPs) across the Natspec member colleges:

Beechwood College

Coleg Elidyr

Coleg Pengwern

Derwen College

Henshaws Specialist College

Hesley Group Colleges

Homefield College

Landmarks College

National Star College

Treloars School and College

Natspec is continually seeking to support and inform members to improve quality of provision. If you think you can make a positive contribution to this resource, please let us know.

References

Natspec and NUS (2018) SEND Learner Voice: support for LV practitioners. Available at: https://natspec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Natspec-SEND-Learner-Voice-research-report_FINAL.pdf