



Review of the Natspec Year 2020 to 2021

Annual report to members

The tumultuous events of this past year will never be forgotten; the pandemic has meant that Natspec members have had to respond to unprecedented changes in all aspects of operation including curriculum, communications, teaching methods and, above all, safeguarding. Keeping staff and students safe has been a challenge to which members have responded with determination, resilience and stamina.

2021 will continue to challenge our thinking and our ways of working. Natspec is your membership body, and its strength is based on the individual and collective power of our membership.

This paper summarises our activities since the start of the membership year in April 2020.

Natspec activities this year have naturally focussed on supporting members and working with DfE and the Welsh Government to smooth the way as much as possible, with regular briefings (daily or several times per week during much of the lockdown period) and meetings, webinars, and one to one contact with many members.

We have worked to move all our regular forums and events online and have developed a full CPD and training programme so that members do not miss out on Natspec services.

Members can also access all board minutes which are held in [Natspec Knowledge](#) on the member section of the website. If you do not already have an account, you can set one up on the [log-in page](#).

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1. Member support and quality

Natspec now has 106 members, an increase of 7 since April 2020. All new members are offered a Quality health check (10 took place this year), and we have also run two 'new to the FE sector' training sessions for individual members of staff, or colleges, that are new to specialist FE.

To support members through the COVID-19 pandemic, we collected data from member colleges in March, May and January. This was used to give members who completed the survey some reassurance and benchmarking in relation to their activities for home learning, safeguarding, admissions, testing, the financial impact of the pandemic and working with LAs.

All the member-only events and forums have now moved online and have been so successful that we have decided to retain this format for the majority of events in the future. Attendance has risen at all events.

A new activity of "**national conversations**" was introduced as a response to some of the issues caused by the pandemic. Sessions were held on planning for September, use of catch-up funding, staff well-being, and developing a roadmap out of lockdown.

Member-only forums that took place this year include networks for staff responsible for HR, Learner Voice, Finance, Care, Employment and Publicity. Discussions included how colleges are dealing with staff anxiety, setting fees, working with LAs, home learning, and a range of other issues.

Natspec has also facilitated or promoted other member forums run by colleges – for example the Admissions Forum, developed and facilitated by Sue Jeffries from National Star College.

The **Principals' Forum** took place in October, with sessions from DfE on the SEND review, and a consulting on the LA commissioning project. We also had a wide-ranging discussion on the trends in provision. Feedback was very good, and although the online format and breakout groups worked well, we aim to re-introduce at least one face to face meetings for principals in 2021-22.

Therapies: following the audit relating to the use of therapies in Natspec colleges, a group of therapists from across member colleges have worked together to produce a toolkit to support the measurement of therapy outcomes for students in specialist colleges. The results of this work will be showcased in a workshop during our conference week in May.

Quality: Our annual quality improvement event moved online in March 2021, with a focus on "maintaining quality during a pandemic". The session supported members with putting together a self-assessment or self-evaluation report for 2020/21, how to check that learners are making progress, and members discussed how they might need to adapt their quality cycle this year.

[Quality Times issue 5](#) has also been published this year.

ILR: We have increased the amount of support given to member colleges on completing the ILR. There are now at least 5 ILR training sessions per year, each with a different focus – from beginner to more advanced, with a drop-in session added before each ILR return. Members who found that they had lost money due to the condition of funding requirement were also given free consultancy support to appeal.

The [ILR top tips document](#) is updated regularly on the Natspec website.

Regions: all Regional Directors have kept communication open for members during the pandemic, and regional meetings have moved to MS Teams or Zoom. This is one of the most valued aspects of membership, as the meetings enable Heads of College to network at a regional level and provides mutual support.

Welsh member colleges have had access to additional support through Kirsten Jones, who started in post as Welsh Policy Officer in September 2020.

Learner Voice: we have appointed Andrew Evans, from National Star College, as learner voice co-ordinator and he has facilitated two LVP practitioner forums. In addition, Helen Evans from Derwen

College has been undertaking research which will result in an LVP resource and training guide, to be launched at our conference in May 2021.

Member e-forums: Documents from our member events are now regularly added to [Natspec Knowledge](#), including HR policies and financial modelling examples.

Chat forum –use of our [member forums](#) continue to grow steadily. For help accessing the member area, please consult our [guide](#).

2. Advocacy, influencing policy, lobbying

Our policy and lobbying work in 2020-21 was dominated by COVID-19, but we also worked on significant policy reviews in England (the SEND review) and Wales (ALN reform).

There are a number of key policy “asks” that remain consistent and are currently held on our website under [Our policy priorities](#).

COVID-19

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, we moved quickly from reacting to DfE guidance to being involved in the drafting of it – this started with the residential settings isolation guidance and then onto the SEND risk assessment guidance and the wider re-opening guidance. Over Christmas and into the New Year, we were heavily involved in advising DfE about the testing regime and supporting colleges to stay open in the third lockdown.

Our COVID-19 web pages were set up in late March 2020 to summarise all the policy and guidance that is relevant to specialist colleges. We have since taken these down and used member briefings to update colleges on a more regular basis.

We undertook member surveys in March, May and January, with two thirds of members involved, to give us a broad picture of the ‘state of play’.

Natspec colleges had to move much of their curriculum online, and in May 2020 we quickly set up some task and finish groups to look at aspects of learning. The result was our [home learning website of resources](#) - a big success in terms of providing a means by which colleges could think about quality of resources when adapting the curriculum for home learning.

We used the SEND Reference Group, attended by the DfE, as well as regular email updates to DfE officials, to highlight the need for a continuing funding guarantee. We also fed back on drafts of the specialist settings guidance to ensure that social care, not just high needs funding, was covered. Additionally, we wrote to ministers on the subject of funding, and later on vaccinations.

The directive to local authorities to continue both funding streams is included in the DfE specialist settings guidance. However, the continuation of funding is dependent on the maintenance of quality provision and we may encounter some debate about this between LAs and colleges.

In Wales, letters from the Education Minister in June 2020 and January 2021 confirmed that funding for specialist placements will continue.

Specialist FE colleges in Wales have not been included in COVID-19 related guidance. We have been raising this matter since March 2020 through our ongoing meetings with Welsh Government’s Support for Learners Division. We raised this point to the Senedd’s Children and Young People Committee in December 2020. It was also raised directly through a letter to the Education Minister in December and indirectly through our representation on the Wales Third Sector Additional Learning Needs Alliance (TSANA) in a letter from the group to the Minister.

Welsh Government acknowledge that specialist colleges have been excluded from guidance to date and have informed us they are working with colleagues to address the matter. In the interim they have told us a ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ document will be published that will address key concerns we have raised.

SEND Review

The work of the SEND Review re-started partway through 2020 after being delayed by the pandemic. Natspec and AoC are working together to try to ensure that post-16 provision is properly considered within the review. Natspec is also seeing it as an opportunity to firmly establish specialist providers as key contributors to a reformed SEND landscape.

We have met with DfE and the SEND review team on a number of occasions, including one meeting with a wider group of FE stakeholders. We shared findings of joint LGA/Natspec/AoC research into planning and commissioning of high needs provision post-16 with DfE officials and SEND Review.

We prepared a [paper on the role of specialist colleges](#) in a reformed post-16 system and circulated it to DfE officials and SEND Review team members.

We explored one aspect of our proposed role (joint providers of programmes) with delegates at AoC SEND Conference and will be taking this further at AoC Conference workshop in February.

ALN Reform (Wales)

The ALN Transformation timeline has not been significantly delayed by the pandemic; the ALN Code was approved by the Senedd (Welsh Parliament) in February followed by a Plenary in the Assembly on 16 March. Our key concerns remain focused on:

- accountability measures for LAs choosing to end the Individual Development Plans (IDPs that are comparable to EHCPs) of young people leaving special school whose needs cannot be met at local further education colleges
- how local authority representatives will be supported to understand what FE means for young people with complex needs
- how post-16 information, advice and guidance will be provided
- the need for a clear steer on what constitutes a 'reasonable need' for education and training.

The timeline for the devolution of funding for specialist placements from a centrally administered fund to local authority control is scheduled for implementation from September 2021. Welsh Government have acknowledged concerns raised from stakeholders across the board that the impact of the pandemic will adversely affect local authorities' ability to fulfil their statutory obligations and an announcement on how this will be addressed is awaited.

We continue to raise our concerns on how young people with complex needs will be disadvantaged by the ALN reforms with Welsh Government. We plan to lobby Members of the Senedd (MS) prior to the laying of the Code and in anticipation of the Senedd elections in May.

Our new policy officer for Wales, Kirsten Jones, has also been working with Estyn and a range of other stakeholders to cement Natspec's position as the voice of specialist FE in Wales.

Qualification reform

We responded to the government's call for evidence to help shape their thinking on qualification reform at Level 2 and below. While some colleges are concerned that qualifications they see as vital to the success of their students may be removed, others see this as an opportunity to gain greater credence for non-accredited learning.

Arrangements for awarding qualifications in summer 2021

We have submitted a short response to the Ofqual/DfE joint consultations on the awarding of A levels/GCSEs and vocational qualifications, focusing on the equality impact questions. We stressed the need for flexibility and accessibility, calling for Ofqual to require awarding organisations to be responsive to requests for reasonable adjustments.

National Strategy for Disabled People

Also disrupted by the pandemic, work has re-started on this wide-ranging Cabinet Office-led strategy. We are currently exploring ways to bring more learner voice into our consultation responses/policy work more generally. Working with our new learner voice coordinator, we will be considering whether we can capture some student feedback on the issues they identify as most important to their quality of life. We would then contribute this to the UK Disability Survey set up by the Cabinet Office.

Local authority commissioning

Our [joint research report](#), commissioned by Natspec, the Association of Colleges, and the Local Government Association, was published in December 2020.

Independent Advice and Guidance

Following a survey of parents and carers in England and Wales, we [published a damning report](#) into the quality of IAG in February 2021. Two thirds of respondents rated the overall quality of the IAG that they or their young person received as poor, and 58% of parents said that discussions about post-16 options came too late. Only a quarter of families had been offered information about several different post-16 providers and supported to understand the difference between them.

Member promotion

We continue to publish our monthly roundup of stories from the sector in our [Natspec Highlights](#) as well as promoting members' stories and key information on our social media pages.

The new [Natspec Directory](#) is now published and all members should have received a box of hard copies.

[The Natspec Awards](#) saw 47 entries from 25 colleges. [Shortlisted entries were announced](#) in March 2021. Winners will be announced at our Awards Ceremony during our conference week in May.

3. Wider Sector CPD, training and projects

Natspec Transform

The pandemic forced all Transform events online, and we invested in creating new content and/or changing content to suit an online format.

Members can access Wednesday webinars free of charge and receive discounts on chargeable content. "**Person Centred Planning in lockdown and recovery**" was the first chargeable webinar we organised for Transform, and it has been followed by new courses on PMLD training, new modules for Supported Internships including the highly popular Introduction to Job Coaching, and new courses for RARPA and Monitoring the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and support.

A new Leadership programme has been developed in response to the need for colleges to develop their leadership capacity at all levels. The first cohort, reserved for Natspec members, started in January 2021. The objectives of the programme are to develop participants' leadership skills, in the context of SEND/ALN provision in their own organisations and within the wider context working with stakeholders and partner organisations, and to provide a supportive learning environment. We aim to enable participants to build and maintain a supportive peer network of senior leaders working in the specialist FE sector, so that they can become leaders in the wider SEND/ALN system, leading to longer term change.

The next stage in the development of the Transform service is to draft a quality framework for delivery of services.

TechAbility

Since the TechAbility service was created in 2017, it has grown considerably and has now supported over 60 Karten Centres and Natspec Colleges with consultation visits identifying how they can effectively use the hardware and software they own and the professional development needs of their staff teams.

Over 1,000 people have attended TechAbility's live webinars, delivered on a wide range of topics, but always focussed on supporting the development of staff teams around adults with disabilities. All webinars can be viewed [on our YouTube channel](#).

The TechAbility Conference in November 2021 was a great success, with 142 participants. It was [an extensive programme](#) and feedback has been excellent.

In addition, TechAbility staff campaigned for better support for learners with disabilities through the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology (APPGAT). This lobbying informed the Department for Education policy which in turn led to the creation of the [DfE EdTech Demonstrator Programme](#) that is supporting schools and colleges across the country, using the TechAbility Standards.

TechAbility worked with other sector organisations to widen the reach and impact Assistive Technology can have. These organisations include: The Karten Network, JISC, The Association of Colleges, Dundee University and the Royal College for Speech and Language Therapy. A [TechAbility article for the AoC](#) has now been published as an ebook as well as online articles.

The success of TechAbility led to a second application to the Ian Karten Charitable Trust for funding, which has now been agreed for a further year. We have therefore appointed Fil McIntyre as TechAbility Manager and Neil Beck as Assistive Technology Projects Lead. Neil and Fil will continue to support Natspec members throughout 2021-22.

Projects

We delivered a new course "Everything you need to know about SEND funding" for the Education and Training Foundation, to over 400 participants between December 2020 and March 2021.

Another ETF project resulted in Natspec associate Franki Williams re-writing the RARPA guidance, which has now been updated and [published on the SEND Excellence Gateway](#).

Events

Please see appendix for the full list of Natspec events and delegates attending in 2021-21. We ran 79 events and reached 2,195 attendees, not including those who watched back later [on our YouTube channel](#).

4. Organisational Development

We have seen an increase in Natspec staff capacity in 2020-21, with new additions as follows:

- Kirsten Jones, Policy Officer, with a focus on Wales, started in September 2020.
- Yola Jacobsen, Transform Manager, moved from an associate to a permanent, 3 day per week contract in January 2021.
- Fil McIntyre and Neil Beck are both now employed full time by Natspec TechAbility.
- Chennour Wright, Office and Events Assistant, has just joined Natspec from April 2021.

At board level, Bernie White from Seashell Trust completed her term of office as Natspec chair and was succeeded by Lynette Barratt from National Star College. New board members joining this year included Tracey Forman, Kelly Phillips, and Tony Brown.

The board endorsed the actions recommended by the [Black FE Leadership Group](#) and made a commitment to address issues of racial equality in the central organisation and member colleges.

We refreshed the Natspec website in the summer of 2020 and launched in September.

The TechAbility website has also been refreshed and we will be looking to expand the Home Learning website into a broader portal for members.

The BBC One Documentary "**Katie Price: Harvey and Me**" helped to promote the Natspec website, with the number of users on the site up by 166% in the following week. Visits to the college search page were up by 250%, and several individual colleges saw a boost to traffic on their pages as well. We encourage all member colleges to update their web page on the portal.

Appendix: list of Events 2020-21

Event	Date	Delegates	YouTube views
Employment issues for specialist colleges	14/04/2020	42	21
Remote teaching	21/04/2020	51	499
Promoting physical activity and sport for disabled students in FE	22/04/2020	28	77
Introduction to Databridge Goat	24/04/2020	21	190
TechAbility drop-ins and updates	27/04/2020	25	18
Medical Device Regulations: what's changing?	29/04/2020	10	78
Accessible e-books	05/05/2020	14	n/a
Virtual care forum	12/05/2020	24	n/a
Remote therapy	14/05/2020	53	740
TechAbility drop-ins and updates	18/05/2020	6	n/a
Bringing more learners back to college: Planning of on-site provision	20/05/2020	24	n/a
Using yoga within occupational therapy for young people with autism	20/05/2020	31	149
Providing learning materials, monitoring progress and giving feedback	02/06/2020	30	63
Providing therapy and wellbeing support for learners at home	03/06/2020	27	92
Microsoft Teams as a virtual learning environment to deliver remote learning	04/06/2020	105	457
TechAbility drop-in and update	08/06/2020	20	37
Transition into and transition from college	09/06/2020	36	132
Finance Managers Network	10/06/2020	22	n/a
Supporting families to play a role in home learning	11/06/2020	22	60
Staff Wellbeing and mental health in the context of Covid-19	16/06/2020	9	n/a
The impact of positive behaviour support on learning	17/06/2020	63	385
Training and information day for ILR and quality leads	18/06/2020	14	n/a
Person centred planning in lockdown and recovery	24/06/2020	78	n/a
Natspec Awards – Virtual Ceremony	02/07/2020	93	122
Natspec Therapy Conference: Therapy in the specialist college context	06/07/2020	78	85
Training and information day for ILR and quality leads	07/07/2020	17	n/a
The fundamentals of safeguarding	08/07/2020	7	194
Focus on Assistive Technology for Parents and Carers	09/07/2020	13	87
Introduction to Mental Health and Technology	14/07/2020	33	195
Introduction to Accessible Gaming	16/07/2020	20	51
Natspec Publicity Forum	21/07/2020	4	n/a
Q&A Webinar: Planning for September	22/07/2020	20	n/a
Q&A Webinar: Making effective use of catch-up funding	08/09/2020	17	n/a
Person-centred conversations for the new college year: getting back to learning in college	17/09/2020	13	n/a
New providers information day	22/09/2020	52	n/a
Natspec HR forum (incl. employment law update)	23/09/2020	36	n/a

Event	Date	Delegates	YouTube views
Employment issues for specialist colleges	14/04/2020	42	21
Natspec finance managers network	29/09/2020	10	n/a
Training and information day for ILR and quality leads	01/10/2020	25	n/a
Natspec Principals Forum	08/10/2020	63	n/a
Natspec Employment Forum	14/10/2020	39	n/a
Learner voice practitioner network	15/10/2020	21	n/a
Introduction to job coaching	20/10/2020	27	n/a
Natspec Awards winner series: Camphill Wakefield – Pathways into Employment	21/10/2020	13	113
TechAbility Conference 2020: Access to a digital future	03/11/2020	142	n/a
Natspec Award winner’s webinar: Ambitious College – Wellbeing and Mental Health Award	04/11/2020	6	52
Introduction to job coaching	17/11/2020	23	n/a
Assistive technology training: what is available?	17/11/2020	14	300
Interdisciplinary working with learners with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties	18/11/2020	6	124
Monitoring the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and support for learners with SEND (MQTLAS) - 1	19/11/2020	18	n/a
Natspec Care Forum	24/11/2020	15	n/a
Natspec Awards 2021 webinar	25/11/2020	4	62
ILR Drop-in Q&A Session	26/11/2020	13	n/a
Publicity Officers Network	01/12/2020	17	n/a
Captioning	08/12/2020	16	n/a
Monitoring the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and support for learners with SEND (MQTLAS) - 2	10/12/2020	14	n/a
Training and information day for ILR and quality leads (Beginner’s session)	12/01/2021	13	n/a
The Student Voice, Total Communication, and lockdown and beyond	13/01/2021	12	262
Monitoring the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and support for learners with SEND (MQTLAS) - 1	14/01/2021	21	n/a
Finance Managers Network	14/01/2021	20	n/a
Digital mental health	19/01/2021	8	71
Introduction to job coaching	20/01/2021	27	n/a
Natspec HR forum (incl. employment law update)	26/01/2021	25	n/a
The impact of COVID-19 on securing employment for young people with autism	27/01/2021	9	111
Monitoring the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and support for learners with SEND (MQTLAS) - 2	04/02/2021	22	n/a
LVP forum	04/02/2021	39	n/a
Using apps to support students into work	10/02/2021	20	72
Claro writing helper	23/02/2021	4	16
Monitoring the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and support for learners with SEND (MQTLAS) - 1	25/02/2021	25	n/a

Event	Date	Delegates	YouTube views
Employment issues for specialist colleges	14/04/2020	42	21
Pedagogy in remote learning: creating a balanced digital diet for learners with SEND	03/03/2021	13	22
Community partnerships, work experience and a vocational curriculum	10/03/2021	21	32
Ofsted update on Spring activities	12/03/2021	38	n/a
Introduction to job coaching	16/03/2021	23	n/a
Monitoring the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and support for learners with SEND (MQTLAS) - 2	18/03/2021	22	n/a
Publicity Officers Network	22/03/2021	37	n/a
Setting up a supported internship programme	23/03/2021	26	n/a
Maintaining quality during a pandemic (annual quality event)	24/03/2021	43	n/a
Developing a college roadmap out of lockdown	26/03/2021	18	n/a
Post-16 specialist education: essential information for anyone new to the FE sector (day one)	30/03/2021	32	n/a
Post-16 specialist education: essential information for anyone new to the FE sector (day two)	31/03/2021	33	n/a