

## Making the most of a specialist post-16 provision health check



Gulsharan McDermott, Deputy Head Teacher at Routes4Life, assesses the value of a Natspec health check and the role of the Natspec associate as 'critical friend'.

We had our first Ofsted monitoring visit at Routes4Life in April 2021 and inspectors identified that our post-19 specialist knowledge required development. We are a small specialist independent college in the London Borough of Havering which has grown out of a special school, so post-19 provision was new to us, even though we were very familiar with the severe, complex learning needs and/or disabilities with which our learners present.

To help us develop our understanding of post-19 provision and identify what we needed to do to improve, we commissioned a quality health check from Natspec which had been recommended to us as new members. Whilst we understood it was by no means a 'Mocksted', we hoped the process would help us prepare for an imminent Ofsted inspection and provide us with guidance on how to improve the provision for our young adult learners. We were told we were on a waiting list due to the backlog incurred from the pandemic, but the wait was short. We were quickly introduced to Natspec associate, Lynn Reddick, and a date went into the diary.

Lynn's experience and wealth of knowledge was evident from when we first met her, and she put us at ease straight away. She explained that the quality check was to be advisory and supportive for us - we weren't being monitored, it was an opportunity to ask for guidance and that is exactly what happened. We understand that colleges are usually asked to complete a self-assessment tool in advance of the visit but due to a communications mix-up that didn't happen. We think that actually worked out very well for us. It meant that we answered questions and gathered information during the visit as and when needed. While it definitely wasn't a dry-run for Ofsted, we welcomed the thorough analysis of the provision and the format in which it was delivered and it left us feeling better prepared for inspection.

Initially Lynn focussed on the experiences of learners attending the provision: what it was like for them, did they enjoy the experience and more importantly how do we know? When and how do we seek their opinions and consider their views when planning the curriculum? How do we reinforce skill development?

We felt confident that we had an inclusive approach, but Lynn helped us identify areas for improvement. Following her advice, we introduced a tutor time where learners are able to reflect on what they have learnt and what they would like to do next. This was coupled with the implementation of a "Wow moments" diary to capture incidental progress - those wonderful moments that make us turn to colleagues and say, "Did you see that?" and "Did you hear that?" whilst grinning like a Cheshire cat. It's so easy to leave these achievements out of formal recording and yet they are so important. We have definitely refined our practice around learner-led teaching as a result of the health check; our formalised approach is more holistic and is providing more opportunities to better involve learners around their transition and next steps.

Throughout the two days Lynn provided simple achievable solutions. She would make a recommendation and then follow it up with, "Let me share an example." and that was invaluable for both guidance and modelling. It also meant that we did not have to start from scratch or reinvent the wheel. We talked through the exemplars and considered together how we could adapt and use them in our setting. One particular document was an example of a self-assessment review. The template was easy to use and it gave us an aspirational insight for next steps in terms of expansion and a wider offer for the future. This led to discussions around employability and what we could do locally for our current cohort. We have since contacted our local Chamber of Commerce and asked them to put us in touch with employers who can support personalised work experience placements for our next cohort.

Lynn also suggested that we might use a flow chart to illustrate our processes and systems for target setting, curriculum and recording progress: a simple yet genius idea that could be shared with a variety of audiences. This led onto us refining our CPD calendar to include quality assurance reviews; they were taking place but were not as clear as they could have been.

The final report was completed and shared within a week of the visit and as Lynn had promised, it contained no surprises. It painted an accurate picture of our provision and offered helpful recommendations that were achievable for a small college like ours. We had already had in-depth conversations about how to implement the recommendations and Lynn had helped by suggesting visits to other provisions, documents to read and websites we could look at along with relevant Natspec Transform courses.

Lynn left our team with a renewed confidence that we could flourish as an independent provider and encouraged us to think big. We developed a plan and worked towards the actions straight away. Which was just as well, as three weeks later Ofsted arrived to carry out a full three-day inspection! The inspectors were impressed that we had initiated a quality health check and sought external advice; they even recognised as good practice some of the newly implemented changes such as the inclusion of quality assurance reviews into our CPD calendar.



We are a very small provision with a limited budget, but we believe the quality health check was worth every penny. We highly recommend the format, approach and style of reporting to all colleges. It's like asking your best friend, "Be honest, does this outfit suit me?". I am certain if I had asked Lynn that question, she would have answered it without missing a beat with professionalism and integrity - and probably recommended a sample of alternative outfits to boot!