



Quality Times

Issue 6, January 2022

Welcome to the sixth issue of our quality-focused newsletter

In this issue, you'll find our broadest range of articles to date as we explore quality in the context of care, residential accommodation, governance, work placement, technology, therapy and progress-monitoring. You will also get to meet one of Natspec's key partners at AoC and hear his reflections on achieving quality outcomes through partnership-working.

Unsurprisingly Covid continues to rear its head. Contributors to this issue describe how they have responded to the challenges it has thrown up, the changes of plan it has caused and the extra workload it has created. But they also explain how it has prompted useful reflection and provided the impetus to innovate.

Underpinning all of the articles is a determination to maintain and improve quality in order to serve students well. We hope you'll be inspired by the practice described in this issue to keep going on your own quality improvement journeys. Thank you to all our contributors who made time to share their experiences with the rest of the membership, despite the continuing challenges the sector faces.

Ruth Perry – Senior Policy Manager at Natspec

Tracy Gillett – Director of Quality on the Natspec board

Contents

Welcome to the sixth issue of our quality-focused newsletter	2
Maintaining a quality service under pressure	3
Why improving residential accommodation is much more than a prettying up job	8
Good governance in specialist colleges	12
What makes for a high-quality work placement?	15
How Covid-19 actually changed some things for the better	18
Does having a named AT lead really make a difference?	21
Establishing a new baseline for all students	24
Meet David Holloway, Senior Policy Manager for SEND at AoC	26

Maintaining a quality service under pressure



Lou Harman, Natspec Director and Head of Learner Services at St John's School and College, explains how over the last two years promoting staff wellbeing has become a critical factor in maintaining the quality of their provision.

As a social care workforce, we are well used to putting the wellbeing needs of our residents and service users before our own. At the beginning of the pandemic, we saw teams of social care staff galvanised, pulling together to meet the needs of their residents, moving away from their homes and families and into the homes they worked in or hotels to ensure that the needs of their residents were met and that they were safe.

Fast forward to the present day, when we are seeing exceptional levels of staff vacancy rates in the sector, because staff have suffered burn out and compassion fatigue. If we are going to continue to deliver quality services, we must invest in our biggest resource – our staff teams. Although this is not a new concept, the focus of this investment has had to change rapidly during the pandemic. Previously, when we spoke of 'investing in the workforce', we were talking about providing our staff with good quality, regular supervision and opportunities for CPD. Now we have an additional area of focus: staff wellbeing.

I remember very early on in my career one of my managers telling me, "You can't look after others, if you don't look after yourself." I believe that the past 19 months has proved just that. However, now I am myself a senior leader, I am also hugely aware of the organisation's responsibility for **enabling** staff to look after themselves and for creating an environment that makes this possible. In a MIND-commissioned poll in 2013, 60% of employees say they'd feel more motivated and more likely to recommend their organisation as a good place to work if their employer took action to support mental wellbeing. It has become increasingly obvious that unless we take action to keep our staff motivated, healthy and feeling supported, we simply will not be able to maintain the quality of our provision.

There are many work-related issues that can trigger stress, burn-out and other mental health difficulties such as:

- staff shortages
- lack of resources (physical resources, training to have the skills to perform in role, and a skilled staff team)
- tiredness

- increasing demands
- working long hours and not taking breaks
- poor communication
- lack of support.

All the above triggers are well-known within the care sector and therefore we are at greater risk of staff experiencing burn-out and being unable to perform in their roles which undoubtedly will impact the quality of support and care.

What can colleges do to promote staff wellbeing?

In short, we need to put in place adequate support for our staff teams to give them the tools they need to cope. There will always be factors that we cannot control that may impact on staff wellbeing but there are areas we can control and it's these that we need to focus on.

The Health and Care Professions Council has published [guidance for supporting staff during the pandemic](#).

Their tips include:

- ensuring that good quality communication and accurate information updates are provided to all staff
- partner inexperienced workers with their more experienced colleagues – this helps to provide support, monitor stress, and reinforce safety
- initiate, encourage, and monitor breaks
- implement flexible schedules
- ensure staff are aware of how to access support services and facilitate access to such services
- be a role model for self-care strategies.

What have we done at St John's to support staff wellbeing?

We worked with a team of positive psychologists to **embed the PERMA model** across all areas of the charity.

The PERMA theory of wellbeing is based on five areas that make up wellbeing. Those areas are:

- **P**ositive emotions – feeling good
- **E**ngagement – being completely absorbed in activities
- **R**elationships – being authentically connected to others

- **Meaning** – purposeful existence
- **Achievement** – a sense of accomplishment and success

Each residential team has completed a wellbeing mat facilitated by a member of the senior leadership team (SLT). Teams were asked to score and discuss each of the PERMA areas in relation to their work. We found several similarities across the teams, for example:

- meaning was consistently scored high
- engagement can be difficult due to the nature of the role and time constraints
- when talking about achievement, teams focused on big achievements rather than the small day to day successes which impacted on the scores.

Facilitating these PERMA sessions, supported us to engage directly with the staff teams, listen to what they were saying and implement long-term and short-term actions that the team can undertake to improve scores, helping the teams to understand that we all hold a level of responsibility for our own and others' wellbeing. It also enabled us to gain an overview of the issues that impact wellbeing across all teams and implement actions organisationally.

Some of the short-term changes we made were to:

- introduce end-of-shift checklists to encourage reflection on the day, what has been difficult, acknowledging it and letting it go, identifying three things, that went well, checking in on colleagues and knowing who to contact should you require support
- have one team meeting per term that focuses on staff wellbeing where we return to the wellbeing mat.

Longer term actions include:

- reviewing provision of food and refreshments for staff on shift
- reviewing rota patterns including weekend working hours and patterns of days off
- looking at a four-day working week for support staff.

We introduced **monthly occupational health clinics** and the **development of wellbeing plans**. The clinics have been used to proactively support team members who may be experiencing mental health and wellbeing difficulties. They discuss concerns with a member of the occupational health team who then advise the organisation on what actions to undertake to further support the individual. These have included flexible working, increasing support for staff who have caring commitments, and as far as possible reducing changes to location of work and client group. From this, wellbeing plans have been created and at times, self-referrals to the employee assistance programme.

We have employed a qualified coach to offer a programme of **coaching** to the SLT and middle managers, as well as wellbeing coaching sessions for individual staff members. These sessions are all individualised and can range from one session to several. The aim is to support staff to develop their own strategies and approaches to manage and improve their own wellbeing.

We have committed to **communicating openly and honestly with staff** about the challenges we are facing and sought their input into potential solutions. This has been achieved by undertaking the aforementioned work on the PERMA model, as well as regular attendance at team meetings and in the residential houses generally. This leads to informal conversations and a greater awareness for senior leaders of the day-to-day challenges faced, as well as enabling staff teams to understand the challenges that the wider organisation and sector as a whole are facing.

We have also **improved working conditions** for staff, based on their feedback. For example, we have

- moved to a more flexible approach towards the development of rotas, including part-time working and fixed rotas
- increased salaries for support staff
- given all staff two paid wellbeing days each year in addition to their holidays
- ensured the budget for food in each house is enough to enable staff to eat with the residents.

What impact have we seen?

Communication within multi-faceted organisations is always going to be difficult and we know there is still some way to go. However, in areas where good quality communication and information has been achieved, we have seen increased engagement from teams, more open and honest conversations, focusing on wellbeing strategies and staff being more willing to approach managers and senior leaders to discuss any concerns. The focus on wellbeing has also impacted on the psychological and emotional vocabulary of the staff team which in turn has had an impact on their ability to empathise and offer high quality support for residents. Although some of the actions may seem small, the impact that these have had on the staff teams is immeasurable, for example, the small adjustment of making sure staff know that a meal is provided for them has made them feel valued and that their needs are also important to the organisation.

Reflections on what we've achieved to date and where we go next

Addressing staff wellbeing has not been an easy task. For this work to really have an impact, we needed managers on all levels to buy in to the concept and commit to a change of approach. This is particularly challenging when they are under great pressure and already working extremely hard. It has also been difficult for managers to be role models and show their vulnerability, moving away from the 'stiff upper lip' and 'carry on regardless approach' that is engrained in many of us. However, for any wellbeing initiatives to be successful, the buy-in from senior leaders and managers is essential. Staff will often take their cues on how to behave from their leaders. Simple acts of openly talking about mental health or encouraging colleagues to take a break, can have a huge impact on staff morale and engagement.

We still, however, have more work to do to consistently embed this across all areas of the organisation. We are also looking to work with a local group of coaches and facilitators who have all worked in the not-for-profit sector and who focus on building resilience, offering practical strategies to enable this. We are hopeful that this, coupled with the PERMA work, will help staff take control of their own wellbeing, understand the importance of it and learn practical skills which will aid their growth as individuals and professionals.

Why improving residential accommodation is much more than a prettying up job



Alexis Johnson, Executive Principal at Communication Specialist College Doncaster, shares his experience of improving the quality of the student residential environment and the positive impact of this major refurbishment.

When I took over as Executive Principal of Doncaster Deaf Trust in 2019, one of the key priorities for me was to improve the residential facilities in the college so that the quality of the environment matched the already outstanding care that was being provided within it. Our team deliver a first-class learning journey for our students, but I could see that the physical environment was letting this down.

Residential students at Communication Specialist College Doncaster (CSCD) live on site in Darley Lodge, a building developed in the late 60s. While it has undergone various transformations over the last 60 years, by 2019, it was in great need of improvement. Internally and externally, it had become tired and in much need of refurbishment to ensure it was fit for purpose and mirrored the fantastic standard of care.

Students from across England choose to learn at CSCD. We currently have residential learners from Kent, Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, East Riding, Leeds, Doncaster, and Blackpool and this is also a key growth area for the Trust. Having the best possible accommodation for our students is a critical part of looking after their wellbeing, promoting independence, and setting them up to make the most of their time at college.

One of my first actions as Executive Principal was to create a five-year strategic plan, running from 2020 to 2025, which sets out six strategic priorities, including one focused on quality and one on environment. Our vision for quality is that we strive to be outstanding through continuous improvement of systems, people, and habits. Our strategic priority for environment is to develop accommodation that provides outstanding facilities for learning, living and work that is sustainable and environmentally friendly. Improving our residential accommodation clearly meets both of those priorities.

We explored various options for Darley Lodge and ensured that our students were part of these conversations. Consideration was given to knocking the building down and rebuilding it but then Covid hit and made us rethink our plans. After consulting with our students, families and staff and having already explored other premises offered by educational organisations, we decided

on a refurbishment to improve the building and meet the now pressing current needs, but also the future needs of those living at CSCD.

The immediate priority as we shifted from 'rebuild' to 'fully refurbish' was to re-design the building to enable us to operate hubs and keep our students safe from the virus, while enabling them to continue with their learning and minimise the impact on mental health should a student or group of students need to self-isolate. This meant the entire lodge wouldn't have to isolate when Covid arrived, which, of course, it did. This has worked well in protecting our students, their wellbeing and education and helped us remain open throughout. It also replicates the post-college living arrangements that students might move into and therefore prepares them better for life after college.

With the project fully priced up, the next challenge was raising the funds needed to make these improvements. This was not an easy challenge as the Trust is not yet geared up to fundraising and the time investment to work with businesses and target grants is considerable. Some £68,000 was raised via various funding streams including members of the team and me taking part in the Doncaster 10k; despite being done in isolation due to the pandemic, this helped to raise the profile of our mission.



External improvements have included a new roof and new windows in all bedrooms which have resulted in better insulation and ventilation. Inside, we have installed a new shower area for students with mobility issues. We have replaced the old carpets worn threadbare by years of heavy footfall with new carpets chosen by the students. We were extremely lucky that our local Ikea, with whom we work closely, donated lots of soft furnishings which have helped create a homely, warm and inviting feel to the lodge. A further £4k was raised to improve the garden area outside of the lodge including new covered outside seating areas and a space where students can grow their own produce which will be a real boost to their wellbeing and mental health.



The feedback from students and staff has been overwhelmingly positive. Comments have included: "I am loving the new things and I want to say a massive thank you and it looks better than before", "Lodge feels more homely", "Shared kitchen and living room are good – feels like

at home”, “Better quality of furniture and accessories – bins, frames, blankets, pillows”, “Quality of carpets feel more like a home”, and “Boosted morale within the teams.”

This has been much more than a lick of paint and a prettying up job. It has been a total change to the look and feel of the facilities and critically it provides an obvious visual indicator of the quality of our provision and the pride that we all take in what we do and what CSCD offers its students. The students themselves have gained from their involvement in the project. They are proud of their home from home, and this is now the first area that we show to potential families when they visit us.

We will be measuring the impact of our improved residential facilities via student, family and staff surveys and focus groups but already we are seeing that it has had a positive impact on our students’ wellbeing. The new set-up has helped to create strong bonds between our students and they hold games nights, social events, and interact more than ever before. It is fantastic to see this level of camaraderie which is making the site feel like the student campus area we envisioned when we set out on this journey. We will also be looking to see if there has been any impact on students’ learning and achievement.

Measuring if the facilities play a part in attracting more residential students is something we will be looking at over the next academic year. We’ll be showcasing our current students in their residential settings and others will be able to hear from them, their families, and our staff about life at Darley Lodge. We are confident that by sharing lived experiences, more students will want to make the move to CSCD.

If you would like to come and have a look around or see us on a virtual tour, please contact Sharon Rhodes on sharon.rhodes@cscd.ac.uk or call 01302 386700.

Good governance in specialist colleges



Natspec board member and principal of Homefield College, Tracey Forman, offers some advice on establishing high quality governance in a specialist college context – and highlights some resources to help achieve that.

Wouldn't life be simpler if there was absolute clarity around the right governance structure for our college life? I can't be the only one who has had that passing thought. Many Natspec members find this aspect of their work confusing as there appear to be a plethora of different constitutional formations. We know this because members regularly ask for advice on this topic or suggest it as a topic for conference workshops or training sessions.

Indeed, at our last national conference in May 2021, we held a well-attended workshop in which participants raised common concerns and questions including about structure and governance, recruitment of the right people, and how governance might feature in an Ofsted inspection. How much easier it would be if Natspec could just recommend a particular approach to governance and so answer all these questions in one fell swoop! But like Ofsted, Natspec does not do that – because one model could not fit the huge diversity of organisations in our sector.

Rather than prescribe a particular model of governance for colleges (which may be a good or a bad thing depending on which way you look at it), Ofsted specifies in the Education and Inspection Framework (EIF) that those who are responsible for governance should:

- know the provider and understand its strengths and weaknesses
- support and strengthen the provider's leadership and contribute to shaping its strategic direction
- ensure that the provider meets its statutory responsibilities
- provide challenge and hold senior leaders and managers to account for improving the quality of learning and the effectiveness of performance management systems.

Section 265 EIF 2021

Natspec therefore starts by advising members that Ofsted will expect to see the **impact** of whatever governance structures you have in place. So, for instance, those organisations which sit within a group structure with an overarching board will need to ensure they have made clear

how responsibilities are delegated and the impact that the overarching board has upon the education provision.

In my own college, Homefield College, which is a charity, the board of trustees delegates the regular oversight of the quality of the education provision to a sub-committee called Teaching, Learning and Assessment. Important documents such as the college self-assessment report, the quality improvement plan and the annual safeguarding report are discussed in detail by the sub-committee before being sent to the full board for approval. In essence, this sub-committee carries out the day-to-day governance activities and reports back to the board for their oversight. Getting this working in practice takes time and constant review. And it seems that just when you get it right one of your key governors will invariably decide to leave!

Many members have expressed concerns about their ability to recruit people who together have the right balance of knowledge and skills to be able to provide the required level of oversight. Ofsted require 'evidence' of the impact of those responsible for governance providing 'confident, strategic leadership and accountability' for the educational performance of the college. Getting the right people on board is therefore critical.

Recruiting potential governors should be approached in the same manner as you would your paid staff. A job description and person specification are a good starting point, as is thinking about how you will attract the sort of individual that you are looking for. Most of us will just be grateful if someone actually applies to become a governor, but you should ensure that there is a proper process in place. It is important that you do not appoint someone who is unsuitable just because you need an additional person. Some organisations will go so far as to use a recruitment agency to source governors, or even place media adverts.

Governance will undoubtedly feature in an Ofsted inspection as it features throughout the Education Inspection Framework. It is vitally important that your governors understand the framework and are able to articulate how it relates to your provision. **All** inspections will involve discussions with those responsible for governance, so it is absolutely essential that your governors are able to speak to inspectors about the college at the depth required.

Current discussions about standards in public life have drawn me back to thinking more broadly about college governance. It is important to remember that our colleges are in receipt of public funds. Part of the function of college governance is to ensure that those funds are used appropriately and for the purposes for which they were intended. We won't go far wrong if we stick to the Nolan principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness and honesty.



Resources and support

While Natspec can't offer up all the answers, we can support members to find their own solutions to achieving good governance. We have created a [dedicated area on college governance within the resource pages on our website](#). It includes general information about key areas that we know members need help with and links to resources produced by other organisations, such as the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and the Association of Colleges (AoC). AoC has created a [code of good governance](#), a really useful tool when looking at the role of governance within a college and considering what constitutes good practice. We have plans to add further information to these webpages soon.

Natspec is also developing its capacity to provide tailored support for member colleges who need it through associate consultants. At our National Conference 2022, we have included a workshop on the role of governors in supporting the quality of provision, led by one of our associates. [Why not find out more about this workshop, explore the full conference programme and book your place now?](#)

What makes for a high-quality work placement?



Raph Taylor, Employability Curriculum Manager and Careers Lead at Camphill Wakefield, reflects on how providers can shape work placements so that they have the best chance of leading to paid work for students.

I received a text a couple of years ago, from a graduate student who suggested that I visit them at work to make a video to show that, “Even when you’re not here to support me, I can maintain the work.” That got me thinking about what the journey was to this point for the individual, what had made it a successful one, and indeed what factors lead to any student or learner achieving and sustaining paid work. And what values, what ethos do we as providers need to make such a journey successful?

It’s easy enough to reel off the myriad challenges. Anyone involved in setting up work placements has heard the full gamut of employer excuses and the parent/carer concerns. In some settings, colleagues also struggle to garner all-staff commitment and support, including sometimes from the senior leadership team – and costs are often a factor. However, in building and maintaining a quality provision for work placements and supported employment, these challenges **can** be met and overcome. For every challenge we face, there are successes, and often a challenge surpassed becomes a success, in turn developing a new method or approach for future use.

While we haven’t completely cracked it at Camphill Wakefield, we have done a considerable amount of work to develop a strong pathway which we call the Access to Community and Employment – ACE – pathway. I wanted to share with you here some of the features that we have built into the ACE pathway to help secure student success, based on what we’ve learned from our own experience over time and through partnerships and networking with other practitioners.

Critical success factors

The **core values** of supported employment are at the heart of the pathway. This is probably most important of all. We joined [BASE](#) (the British Association for Supported Employment), which has helped us embed these core values firmly into the pathway and signalled from the outset that we intend to provide supported employment placements for our students.

The work placement programme has the full support of the SLT team. The pilot ACE pathway was backed from its inception by a senior leadership team (SLT) member with experience and a passionate belief that our students could gain part-time paid work. It has continued to receive this support.

Work placements are based on a partnership between employers, college, learner and parents/carers – with all stakeholders feeling that they are at the centre of the process.

Work placements meet a recognised need for the employer, as well as providing a learning opportunity for the student. Even when lockdown forced us to resort to internal placements only, we applied the same ethos – placements had to meet a college need and internal enterprises had to generate some income.

Employers have an opportunity to develop an understanding of the learner and the ethos of the programme before the learner starts their placement. We aim to bring all new employers and businesses onsite for a tour of the college where they get to see our students at work. Often, they have engaged with trepidation, but following a visit they leave full of enthusiasm and positivity about building a partnership.

Each individual student gets the right placement for them through matching their existing and emerging skills with the workplace responsibilities. Even for our internal placements, we undertake job analysis to help match student to role.

The experience of gaining a work placement mirrors the job search and application process for obtaining paid work. We advertise around college for internal work experiences and enterprises and expect and support students to complete an application form and arrange to meet with a job coach.

Placements are job-carved where appropriate. We also model this in our own practice for internal placements.

The student is supported by a job coach with the necessary skills and training to provide individualised on-the-job support. We had to fund-raise to get our first job coach but the value they added was really worth the effort.

The student is stretched and challenged within the role, with the job coaches working with both student and employer to ensure opportunities for development are there. These range from small-scale additions to the role through to developing independent travel to and from work.

In-work support tapers off over time as the student's independence develops.

Student progress on placement is carefully monitored and placements reviewed and adjusted where necessary. Reflective practice and critical review are paramount for us. We do a

thorough annual review of the whole ACE pathway and an annual report for staff, senior leaders and trustees, which provides feedback against the aims and targets for the pathway.

The Camphill ethos in relation to work placement

I thought it worth mentioning here how the ethos at Camphill Wakefield influences the ACE pathway. We have a strong holistic focus on developing 'Thinking, Feeling and Willing', common across other Camphill communities internationally. These three domains of learning will be familiar to many of you. You may know them as 'cognitive, affective, and psychomotor' or 'head, heart and hands'. I feel that these domains apply across a successful work placement programme in terms of recognising and developing quality.

At the **head** lies planning and strategic management, and here we engage with policy and procedure, SLT involvement, and Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) outcomes and college targets. Strategic management is my responsibility: setting aims and targets; ensuring procedures are in place and followed; leading on quality assurance and review. I rely on proactive SLT engagement, which enables strategic developments to be actioned and moved forward.

The ACE team plans and delivers the pathway, much of which comes under the heart and hands. The **heart** of the pathway is the key to success and quality, and it is here where the strengths and qualities exist. Creating and developing partnerships relies on the enthusiasm and intent each individual shows, and how they transform this into practice. Being flexible, adaptable and cooperative are key strengths at the heart of our approach. Understanding, experience and knowledge informs all involved when to change and adapt. This is equally true whether it be student, employer, job coach or parent/carer, and we as practitioners do well to learn and recognise how and when this requires management and support. At the heart, also lies the reflective practice, where we review progress with all stakeholders, and reflect on all elements of the pathway – from individual placements through to the annual report.

'Hands-on Learning' is our ethos, tagline or motto at Camphill Wakefield. The **hands** are where the students' abilities are celebrated. We empower students to recognise their skills and abilities – practical and 'soft' employability – through work review, tutorials, and for some, vocational profiling. This helps students to transfer practical learning into a workplace.

I will leave you with the important observation that I did not find this all out in isolation. I was given high-quality support to set up an aspirational pathway, and I took this on and developed it by accessing various networks and partnerships. I know, too, that there is still more to learn. I am always happy to share my learning and learn from others. I'm available at raph.t@camphill.ac.uk if you want to discuss this fascinating topic further.

How Covid-19 actually changed some things for the better



Two therapists in different specialist colleges reflect on the way that changes in approach forced upon them by the pandemic have led to improved practice.

Stephen Haylett, Music Therapist at Orchard Hill College and Danni Egan, Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) Manager at National Star, talk to Ruth Perry, Senior Policy Manager at Natspec.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that Covid-19 was an unmitigated disaster for young people with special educational needs and disabilities. They've been subject to a huge range of constraints and denied the variety of social and learning opportunities that make further education such a rich experience and so effective in building a pathway to adulthood. But it's not all been bad. Out of the most difficult of circumstances, new and exciting practice has emerged – and where professionals have had the time and capacity to reflect on the past eighteen months, positive learning has been extracted which is having a continuing impact on their practice. It struck me in conversations with therapists in member colleges, that nowhere is this more true than in the context of therapy.

Stephen Haylett is a music therapist at Orchard Hill College where, until March 2020, he delivered all his sessions face-to-face. He describes how things changed for one particular student when lockdown hit, what he learned from the experience and how applying that learning is continuing to enrich his interactions with the student now she is back in college.

"I'd been working with Katya (not her real name) in college for a while before Covid arrived. Unfortunately, her health needs meant that she had to remain at home during lockdowns. We met via Zoom for a number of sessions and her Mum provided a great deal of support both within sessions and more generally at home. The Zoom sessions required a slower pace and more thoughtful, reflective musical approach to my work, and this served to enrich the musical-therapeutic relationship between Katya and me.

"We continued on Zoom while Katya was transitioning back into college for a short while, before resuming face-to-face sessions on-site. It would have been easy just to revert to the way things were before. But instead, I have kept the slower pace and greater reflection and continued to evolve this way of working. I have also gradually introduced a more tactile, playful approach to

shared interaction which Katya's mum used intuitively – and with great effect - in the online Zoom sessions.

"The addition of a more sensory-based, tactile approach has clearly brought benefit to the sessions. Katya is engaging in more sustained and richer episodes of interaction with me, as the therapist. A particularly rewarding outcome of this has been the increase in spontaneous vocalisations in which she conveys her pleasure in tactile musical play."

Danii Egan manages SLT provision at National Star. This meant that she not only had to make swift decisions about how best to provide remote therapy to students, but also, along with colleagues, how to ensure that multi-disciplinary working could be sustained with large numbers of staff now working remotely. Multi-disciplinary working is critical to National Star's approach, as it is in most specialist colleges, and the college had typically relied on lots of face-to-face meetings, as well as impromptu conversations between different professionals involved in supporting a student. The challenge now was how to achieve a similar standard of join-up in very different circumstances. Danni reflects on how they went about it and what learning they have taken from it.

"For some students, the provision of remote therapy delivery has resulted in increased therapeutic engagement. Though we can't know for certain, this appears to be associated for some with a perception of reduced task demands, expectations or pressure to succeed or do well. For others who struggle to access multiple environments across campus, the reduced transitional requirements were a real bonus. The positive relationships built with SLT staff during this period and their change in attitude towards the therapy in itself has meant that some students who had previously struggled with face-to-face therapy are now getting far more out of it. We have definitely observed increased functional communication skill development and generalisation across the waking day curriculum.

"In working with students remotely, we were heavily reliant on facilitator involvement within sessions. We needed them both to facilitate resource/equipment set-up and support needs within therapy tasks, for example augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) modelling. Getting more involved in this way provided opportunities for contextual staff training and role modelling. It also resulted in increased staff confidence when supporting student-specific communication skills and strategies. They now have a much greater awareness of the purpose and rationale for specific communication strategies, which makes their support more focused and, in turn, more effective for the students.

"During the period where we worked remotely, we also noticed an increase in staff proactively approaching SLT colleagues to ask questions about student-specific systems, to share feedback with us on student progress and challenges, or to make suggestions to us, for example on AAC programming needs. They were also cascading this knowledge to their residential colleagues.

As a result, we are now considering the introduction of 'Specialist Facilitator' roles within residential areas, to ensure an integrated model of communication support throughout the waking day curriculum."

Trying to do your best in a bad situation is a good starting point in relation to quality assurance, and certainly that is what these two therapists are describing here. But they have also gone one step further by reflecting on what they learned during these testing times and how that might contribute to the quality of therapy going forward. Finding the nuggets of positivity amidst the trials of a pandemic and looking for the opportunities to do things even better is quality improvement in action.

Does having a named AT lead really make a difference?



Fil McIntyre, TechAbility Manager and Assistive Technology Lead at Natspec, explains why having a named AT lead helps increase the impact of technology in college.

Specialist colleges often tell us that having a named staff member responsible for Assistive Technology (AT) has a real impact. They see having someone in this role leading to increased staff and learner knowledge and confidence with technology, as well as greater everyday use and application. At TechAbility and Natspec, we have seen evidence of this with our own eyes too, but up until recently, so far, so anecdotal.

Prompted by a request from the Department for Education in early 2021, [TechAbility](#) partnered with [Ace Centre](#) to create a survey of Assistive Technology use in specialist settings. This gave us an excellent opportunity to gather some data to back up our collective experience. We sent the survey to specialist schools and colleges across England and Wales and received responses roughly reflecting the balance of organisations in the two countries.

The questions

We asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with a range of different statements such as:

- I know how to use technology to adapt teaching to individuals needs.
- I know how to use the accessible features built into non-specialist devices and software.
- I can choose the right AT tools for learners.
- I understand how AT can be used in formal assessments (e.g. exams).
- Learners in my school/college have their AT needs assessed appropriately.
- The IT team in my organisation respond to AT needs.

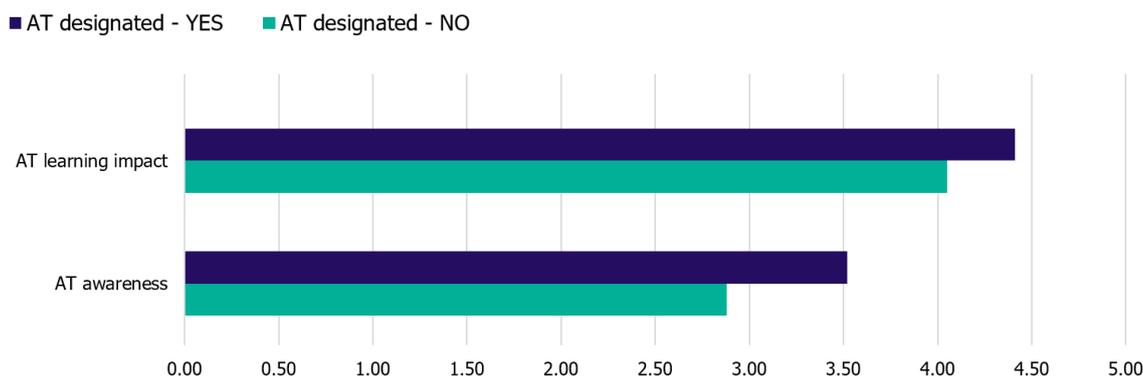
In addition, questions were asked about specific technologies and, more importantly, whether they were used regularly and if staff have the skills to assess and support usage. Respondents were also asked to rate the impact assistive technology had on their college or school in areas such as learner behaviour, attainment, engagement and transferrable skills.



Critically, we added the question, “Do you have a named member of staff responsible for Assistive Technology?” This was to allow us to compare the responses to all the other questions from settings with and without a person in this role to check for any significant differences.

The results

When we analysed the responses, we found there was a difference in two key areas – AT learning impact and AT awareness – between organisations with and without a named lead for AT. The perceived impact of AT on learning was slightly greater where there was an AT lead, while the level of AT awareness was significantly increased, as shown in the graph below.



I can’t say that we at TechAbility were surprised by the survey findings, but it is always reassuring when the data confirms a well-founded hunch.

Impact on quality

Our experience in working with colleges has been that those who employ an Assistive Technologist or give dedicated time and resource for AT to a member of staff are most able to identify direct impact on outcomes. If someone has the skills and experience to demonstrate the positive impact accessible technology can have, they can promote that at all levels within a college. That person is also identified as a point of contact for staff and students to approach when solutions or support is required with AT. An Assistive Technologist also acts to improve quality by ‘horizon-scanning’ for new ideas and technologies, bringing innovation into college by integrating into groups such as the [Assistive Technology Network](#).

Of course, assigning responsibility for AT to one person will not solve everything! All staff have a role in the effective use of AT. As a minimum, they should all know about [accessibility built-in to tablets and computers](#), and [tools built into phones](#) which learners can use for free. But having on-site support to deliver ad-hoc training and answer queries will undoubtedly help build their confidence and make integration of these tools the norm.



There are further knock-on benefits of achieving impact through AT. Sharing your work in this area can be a great way to promote and publicise your college, in particular demonstrating how your approach is cutting-edge and embraces new developments. At the recent TechAbility Conference in November, five of the fourteen workshops were delivered by AT specialists from Natspec colleges. They showcased excellent practice and described the impact assistive technology had for learners at their colleges, increasing not only their own reputation but that of our sector more broadly.

We recognise, though, that many colleges just do not have the resource to allocate a full or even part-time role to Assistive Technology. That's where the TechAbility Champions scheme comes in. Its aim is to provide a network of support, so good practice can be shared between colleges and more in-depth support provided by TechAbility. You can find out more about it – and other forms of support from TechAbility – by contacting techability@natspec.org.uk.

Establishing a new baseline for all students



Tracy Gillett, Principal at Condoover College, explains her decision to implement a large-scale 're-baselining' of students in the light of the pandemic.

Towards the end of the last academic year, we decided to re-baseline all our continuing students alongside the usual baseline assessment of our new starters. Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on each individual would allow us to check if we were still focusing on the right things for each student's individual learner journey. It would also help us plot out a more accurate picture of their progress during their time in college and the impact of our provision, by taking into account any stalling or regression – or even unexpected gains – caused by the pandemic.

Because all students, new and continuing, would be going through the baseline assessment process, we redesigned the curriculum plan for September to ensure that all timetabled activities would feed into this assessment activity. We planned a staged approach to include curriculum area themes week by week, with communication as an overarching theme.

Our intention was for students to spend time with a wide range of tutors, staff and therapists during this period to give us a holistic and multi-disciplinary view on their progress. As with so many things during the pandemic, Covid meant not everything went to plan, as during the second and third week of September we had cases in college and had to go back into temporary bubbles within tutor groups. However, by the end of September we had gathered a lot of information about all of the students. For continuing learners, the staff then set about revising their baseline assessment summary report and used the information to adjust and, in some cases, significantly rewrite each student's learner journey.

We had already recognised anecdotally that some students had really struggled during the lockdown period and lost a number of skills, in particular communication and interpersonal skills. Many students struggled with heightened anxiety while others found it hard to adjust back to having a wider range of timetabled activities and more challenging learning goals and tasks. Less predictably, some students grew in confidence during the pandemic. They benefited from working in smaller groups, less varied learning environments and having a more predictable timetable.

A horizontal decorative graphic consisting of a series of overlapping arrows pointing to the right. The arrows are colored in a sequence: teal, dark blue, magenta, light blue, yellow, and teal.

Reviewing baselines was critical to capturing all of those changes and making sure that these new 'starting points' for our students informed what happened next. Some goals and targets were stretched to be more challenging in skill areas where students had excelled, and others had to be pared back to allow them to take the additional time they needed to regain skills. Undertaking this task meant quite a lot of additional work and pressure on the tutors and learning support staff, but by the end of the process we were confident that we had reset our targets, goals and aspirations for the students to reflect the impact that the last academic year has had on them.

Meet David Holloway, Senior Policy Manager for SEND at AoC



David Holloway joined AoC in March 2021 and works closely with Natspec to help ensure policy makers understand the value of further education for learners with SEND. Here he responds to questions from Ruth Perry, Natspec's senior policy manager.

RP: How has your journey in education led you to your current role?

DH: Well, I started my career in education teaching maths to students on vocational courses, and trying to find ways to make, say, decimals tolerable to students who hadn't much liked them in year 7 and had liked them less with every passing year. It was exciting and I started wanting to teach other students who really struggled with the subject. So then I worked with offenders with learning disabilities in a secure unit. I taught a man to count! It was like a miracle. I really saw the impact that education can have on someone's life and that had an impact on my life too – I saw the difference I wanted to make and that led me to other roles in SEND.

RP: Looking back on your own career in FE, what are you most proud of?

DH: I think the thing I'm proudest of is something I grew and championed rather than introduced myself, which was discrete provision for young people with mental health conditions in a mainstream setting. In comparison to many other types of SEND, mental health conditions are unusual in that they can be quite temporary. So, in a way, separate provision is the last thing these young people need. But college is a journey not a place and lots of young people told us that they wanted mainstream but weren't ready, so my wonderful colleague, Gemma, had the idea of a one-year course, with small classes and a nurture group ethos but on a busy mainstream campus. Some of the students were referred by CAMHS from hospital schools, some were NEET, and some self-referred because they heard about the programme.

We had amazing results, with almost all the students going on to BTECs, A levels, and university. I think it worked for two reasons – a really personalised approach to quality and the amazing support students gave each other. Strangely enough, my washing machine broke down last spring, so I called the company and they sent an engineer. He turned out to be one of the ex-students from the course – now nearly 30 and much taller. He did a great job and then said, "If it hadn't been for your team, I really don't know what would have become of me – and also your washer would still be broken."

RP: What do you think colleges are doing really well when it comes to meeting learners' needs?

DH: Colleges are really good at planning backwards. By that, I mean that colleges are great at asking, "What do you want to do when you leave? And what do you need now to make that happen?". We tend to see the college sector as smaller than the school sector – last year there were 8.9 million school pupils and 1.7 million college students in England. But college students leave all the time! I think the number of school leavers and college leavers in any given year is probably pretty similar. Our students are never far from their last day – and that fact soaks into the way we think about learning.

RP: Are there any areas where you think improvements might be needed?

DH: One thing I think some GFEs could be better at is making reasonable adjustments for students with visual impairments – not just on academic courses but in vocational learning too. We need to make better use of technology to deliver accessibility for students and we need colleges to have better access to qualified teachers of people with vision impairment (QTVIs) to help guide staff. The government has really pushed universities on this, and some schools are getting great input from QTVIs but I think that's left some colleges needing to catch up. At AoC we're working with Guide Dogs and the Thomas Pocklington Trust to improve things. And we want the shortage of specialist services to be addressed through the SEND Green paper.

RP: How do you think partnership-working between general and specialist FE colleges could contribute to quality improvement?

DH: That's the only easy question you've asked me! We don't need to speculate to answer it because a Natspec and AoC programme launched last September, which has paired general and specialist colleges, and the partnerships are already starting to show what's possible. For example, by drawing on the specialism of Orchard Hill College, Crawley College is going to be able to meet the needs of young people with pretty complex health needs. As a result, they are going to be able to do level 3 courses in mainstream classes. But the exchange runs both ways so Crawley College will be offering training and support to improve Orchard Hill's delivery of English and maths. Everyone is benefitting – especially the students. I'm really confident that we'll see a whole range of great outcomes from the other partnerships in this project, too.

RP: If you were able to sneak one proposal into the forthcoming SEND Green Paper to help improve the quality of the FE learner experience, what would it say?

DH: I can't possibly narrow it down to one – so I'm going to give you two. One would be fair funding for students who don't have High Needs, including those without EHCPs. Of course, funding can't create quality – but lack of funding can demolish it. It's completely illogical that schools have a 'notional SEND budget' whereas GFE colleges have no income specific to SEND



(apart from High Needs income). When low levels of support are unfunded it's not surprising that there's growing demand for high levels.

My second proposal would be about transitions into college – let's have a method of making everyone, that's schools, colleges and LAs, stick to the timelines in the Code of Practice so students, and their families as well, have time to make informed choices and take the stress out of transition.

RP: What four words would you use to describe top quality SEND provision for FE learners?

DH: *Owned by the student.* That applies whether we're talking about a student with a PMLD communicating via Eyegaze or a student with dyslexia studying a degree course in a college. Learning is something students do! All quality can do is create the conditions. A college can provide a great quality wok but it's the student who makes the stir-fry.