



Quality Times

Issue 7, July 2022



Welcome to the seventh issue of our quality-focused newsletter

In this issue contributors from six different member colleges across England and Wales share their quality improvement stories. You can read about the development of new PMLD provision, going beyond compliance in relation to safeguarding, and maintaining the quality of learning programmes through staff development. A recent graduate of the Natspec SEND leadership course explains how it empowered him to lead curriculum improvements, while a recipient of a Natspec health check reflects on its impact on the quality of their provision. Our latest 'Outstanding' college shares their remarkable journey from 'Requires improvement', and we offer you some reflections on what Ofsted appears to be looking for in a specialist college curriculum.

We hope you enjoy these articles and that they help you to continue to improve your own provision. Don't forget that we are always on the look-out for contributors to Quality Times. If you'd like to share your quality improvement story in a future edition, please do get in touch.

Ruth Perry – Senior Policy Manager at Natspec

Tracy Gillett – Director of Quality on the Natspec board

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From 'Requires Improvement' to 'Outstanding'



Bec Gayden, Vice Principal at Chadsgrove Educational Trust Specialist College, shares the quality improvement journey that took them from an RI Ofsted grade to Outstanding in all areas in just three years (two of which just happened to include a pandemic).

In February 2019, Chadsgrove Educational Trust Specialist College had its first Ofsted inspection and was graded 'Requires Improvement'. The college had opened five years previously to meet a gap in local educational provision for young adults with physical disabilities and/or complex medical needs. As they came to the end of their time at Chadsgrove School, these young people simply had nowhere to go, so a new trust and college was established in a small self-contained building on the school site. What no-one had realised was how very different a special school and a specialist FE college need to be.

Ofsted's key finding was that the college did not reflect a further education provision. Swift action was required to ensure it was not essentially an extension of school. Inspectors said that leaders and directors were heavily invested in plans to develop the provision to improve facilities, however, more scrutiny was required with a focus on the quality of education. Curriculum, quality assurance and performance management all needed development and the governance needed strengthening to ensure the board of directors had appropriate expertise, experience, and information to enable them to support leaders in running an FE setting, and to hold them to account.

The principal of the college, Deb Rattley, who is also the headteacher of Chadsgrove School, recognised that a staffing restructure was required. Following the inspection, staff morale was low. Many of the staff had moved from school to work in the college to support this much-needed venture. They had worked hard, and the inspection was gruelling with an outcome no-one wanted to hear. Following the inspection, staff were given the option to transfer back into school if they wished to. Some did just that, others left for pastures new, and a very brave few stayed on!

This was where my journey begins...

I was happily sat in my small office planning for my post-16 class in school, when Deb popped in to see me and gently sounded me out about the idea of teaching in the college. Having had the seed sown in my mind, after some thought and several discussions, I felt ready to begin a move to what I knew was going to be one of my biggest challenges and steepest learning curves in my teaching career. I was appointed as vice principal of the college in March 2019.



We were advised by other specialist FE professionals to join Natspec, and when we did, we immediately we found ourselves part of a support network of like-minded people. I attended many Natspec network meetings and training sessions. This is where I met Franki Williams, SEND consultant and thankfully, after a very brash move on my part at the end of a Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) training session, now our chair of directors. Franki has been pivotal in the development of the college. Her knowledge and support have been extremely valuable, and I have much to thank her for.

Just over three years later, following a monitoring visit in October 2019 and an interim visit in September 2020, Ofsted returned in March 2022. We have finally shrugged off that RI grade and are extremely proud to have been awarded Outstanding in all areas.

So how did we make that journey from RI to Outstanding? Well, there were some critical issues that had to be tackled as a priority. Student funding was a major cause for concern. We had been subject to a school funding band system which was generating nowhere near sufficient income for us to deliver an outstanding Preparing for Adulthood (PfA) curriculum. In particular, staffing ratios needed to increase. We began to work with Worcestershire Local Authority to negotiate an increase in fees without risking a breakdown in our existing positive relationship.

Following a staffing restructure and the recruitment of additional learning support assistants, staff at all levels were provided with increased opportunities to undertake relevant training. Two members of staff expressed an interest in completing the Diploma in Education and Training and are now both level 5 tutors. Increased investment in staff training has provided staff with a platform to excel in what they do. As leaders, it demonstrates that we have high aspirations for staff and this threads through, ensuring all staff have high expectations too. CPD offers opportunities to support other staff by disseminating training and skills across the staff team, leading to better outcomes and increased job satisfaction.

We ceased delivering accredited courses and moved to the RARPA approach. Bespoke study programmes intensified, and our specialist therapy team was further enhanced. Access to the community became high on our agenda. Link projects for school pupils entering the college and college students moving onto social care provisions have both been a real success. For almost all of our students, our 19-25 college provision is their final educational destination. With this in mind, it was extremely important to us that our vision was based around the PfA framework. The whole curriculum was revamped and a new syllabus was implemented for each of our two pathways. Both syllabuses are based on PfA and support the development of comprehensive transition passports for each student to support them when they move on. We purchased the Evidence for Learning (EfL) app and started to capture meaningful evidence to support student progress against their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) outcomes.

When Ofsted came back for a monitoring visit just eight months later, they judged that we had made significant progress in improving the quality of education. Health, independent living skills, community and relationships, and employment were all evident across planning and assessment. However, we were advised to ensure there was as much evidence for maths/thinking skills and English/communication, even though they were already embedded across the curriculum.

Our bespoke curriculum requires flexibility and a staff team that works collaboratively. Everyone must understand the aspirations of the students and what they are working towards. It can be a real challenge to ensure that every student's goals are met when they are so diverse and numbers on roll (we have 12 students in total) mean they do not have a wide variety of different sessions to attend. However, staff work hard to personalise the learning so that each student gets the opportunities they need to develop the skills that are relevant to their needs and aspirations. The satisfaction from seeing the students achieve, and families sharing success stories about how students are transferring new skills into the home, makes it all worthwhile. We have been capturing these in case studies to help us demonstrate the impact of the work we are doing with our students.

Work-related learning and community goals have created opportunities to make new friends and increased community involvement. Through learner voice activities, students have communicated that they are happy to attend the college and proud when they succeed with their personal learning goals. Engagement with community stakeholders is now embedded in the college offer; we seek, record and collate stakeholder feedback to help ensure our partnerships are mutually beneficial.

Building up a strong team of therapists to support our students to maintain good health and well-being is a clear positive of following the PfA framework. Our students access a range of therapies that are embedded in their study programme to ensure they are comfortable and ready to learn. The whole staff team works collaboratively with therapy staff to plan targets and deliver interventions that support learners to maximise their progress across the whole curriculum.

One of the most significant changes we made was to drop our five-day provision. We saw this as essential to encouraging students and their families to be ready for transition out of education. But it was a real challenge. Families expected their young people to be at college five days a week, just like they had been in school. They did, however, understand our reasons for making this change. Students now have four days in their first and second year, dropping to three days in the third and final year of their study programme. Transition is now strong, families thank us, and students are smoothly transitioning into their next destination with a minimum of a year attending a dual placement funded by both social care and education.

Professionals are working alongside each other to eliminate the 'drop off a cliff' scenario and are sharing skills and training, whilst building relationships and gaining a better understanding of each student. Through a well-planned process, parent carers are supported with transition, which is reducing their anxieties. Signposting to social care and encouraging parent carers to get on board more quickly has given both students and their parent carers the confidence and skills to enable them to move on.

Strengthening our board of directors has been essential in providing guidance, support and, most importantly, challenge. This is something that we did not rush into and took our time to ensure we had the right people with the right expertise. My advice would be, if you see the right person, don't be afraid to ask, let them see your passion and hopefully they will come on board. It certainly worked for me!

Feedback from students, parent carers, staff, stakeholders and external professionals helps us to continually improve and further develop our college offer. Evidence is now collated throughout each student's study programme demonstrating their learning journey and the progress they have made. Learner voice ensures students are working towards their own aspirations and goals, and transition data demonstrates how students are successfully reaching their planned destinations.

We were really confident that our provision was much improved after three years of hard work. So, when the Ofsted call came through, we decided to send as much as possible via the portal to give them all the supporting evidence we could think of. Be warned, if you have big files this takes time; you'll need to separate documents into small zip folders. Spending time preparing case studies prior to the call enabled me to have a really good oversight of each student and their progress, and it helped to tell the learning journey of each student during their time at college. The inspection itself was relaxed, supportive and quite enjoyable. As leaders, I felt our role during inspection was to stay calm and support our small staff team on the ground who really bore the brunt of the pressure.

My advice when you get that 'call' is not to panic, but to be proud of all the hard work you have put in and get ready to show it off in whatever way you can!

Setting up a quality provision for young adults with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD)



Bev Simmonds, Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD) lead at Derwen College, draws on her recent experience of establishing a new stand-alone offer for young people with PMLD to share five top tips for ensuring the quality of such provision.

Having spent time planning with local authorities and families, we launched our new PMLD day provision in 2021 during the pandemic. It's based in our new Nurture Centre which was refurbished specifically with PMLD students' needs in mind and designed to provide a welcoming environment where students can enjoy meaningful, interactive learning and be at the heart of every single decision made.

Top tips for achieving quality in PMLD provision

Setting up PMLD provision is a huge undertaking and there is no simple recipe to follow but, for anyone thinking of doing the same, these are my five top tips to bear in mind.

1. **Get the intent right from the start, and the rest will follow.** One of the first things that we did was to ensure we had a robust intention for our curriculum and provision. We started with a strong framework of exactly what preparing for adulthood and quality of life looks like for young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities. Making it clear at the start has led to a good ethos amongst the new staff team and more importantly, has kept the students at the centre of anything we have developed or implemented.
2. **Advocate for what is right for the students,** even when this looks very different from what is right for other students at college. The college was clear from the outset that the Nurture Programme may need to look radically different from other pathways in the college. I was given the freedom to change templates and processes to implement the curriculum in a way that allows us to successfully plan and record the small, incremental steps that this cohort of students makes.
3. **Seek out excellent support and expertise.** There are more and more opportunities for people with extensive experience of PMLD education to share their good practice. Since starting my role, I have been able to attend expert-led PMLD conferences and be

part of the Natspec PMLD forum. I had the huge honour of contributing to, and attending, the new training course from Natspec, "Developing the PMLD curriculum for learners aged 16-25". These opportunities have enabled us to include high quality activities in our sessions and have given us a chance to hear others sharing their outstanding practice.

4. **Pace yourself – it won't all happen at once.** We used the [Developing a PMLD provision in the FE and Skills sector](#) guidebook, produced by Natspec for the Education and Training Foundation to review what we had in place and what we needed to develop next. I have carried out an audit using the self-assessment tool in this document each term. Seeing the number of areas move from 'red' to 'green' has helped to keep the team motivated. Setting up during the Covid-19 pandemic caused some frustrating delays on the delivery of key equipment. That meant some elements of our technology and physiotherapy provision that we knew we needed was not up to scratch as early as we wanted. Creative and positive thinking from the wider college team meant that we were able to achieve quality outcomes, in line with the students' long-term goals, in the meantime and it was a great feeling when we were able to tick them off as achieved, following delivery.
5. **Be creative about what transition looks like.** For our young people who can often have life-limiting conditions, transition won't always be about moving into an independent living placement. But that doesn't mean we can't be ambitious and imaginative about what the students can work towards. For example, a good outcome for a student may mean being able to cope with increased spontaneity whilst still living in the family home. We would support this student while at college to develop their ability to manage an increase in change, including through organising their learning so it takes place in different activity bases each day. Every student is an individual, however, and that means shaping the learning experiences of each to match their individual needs and ambitions.

Our provision is only nine months old, so clearly it is early days for us in terms of evidencing outcomes, but we have already had some real successes. We have seen a student regain the standing and walking skills that they had lost due to a sedentary Covid-19 lockdown through a comprehensive and coordinated physiotherapy and hydrotherapy programme. Another student has learned to focus on the screen of his eye gaze to request his favourite song via an Alexa device.

We plan to build on our early success with the day provision to introduce the option of residential placements for PMLD students next year. We will be continuing to learn from our students and respond to what they are telling us, creating new ways to help them to



communicate their likes and needs, and control their own environments. Derwen College describes itself as 'a place of possibility' and this has been - and will continue to be - the guiding principle behind our PMLD provision.

If you want to know more PMLD provision at Derwen College, then visit the College website at www.derwen.ac.uk or email Bev Simmonds at bev.simmonds@derwen.ac.uk.

Leading curriculum change 'from the middle'



Bradley Kendrick, Senior Tutor at Employ My Ability, explains how the learning he has taken from the Natspec SEND Leadership Programme has empowered him to lead a comprehensive curriculum improvement programme.

I have recently been fortunate enough to complete the Natspec SEND Leadership Programme, which took place across the academic year 2021/2. It has been a really powerful learning experience. Most importantly it has shown me that I can make changes even though I only sit in the middle of the organisation.

The course brought me into face-to-face contact with colleagues from other colleges and felt like a step back to reality after almost two years of working with people at a distance. Alongside the full group sessions, we worked in online action learning sets, small groups of colleagues who could bounce ideas off one another, learn from each other's experiences and share good practice. We were also assigned a coach to work with through the year on any difficulties, projects or situations that arose and support us with how to deal with them. Initially I thought that coaching would be about helping me improve skills I already had; in reality it was very different. My coach for the programme, Jane, wasn't there to tell me what to do but instead she provided me with the platform to explore my thought processes and my own journey when it came to solving problems and implementing changes within our education provision.

I started to view things differently. Previously as a tutor my focus was simply what was happening in the classroom and not the bigger picture. The coaching and the action learning sets enabled me to talk through my ideas with others from different environments and hear about their experiences. Having this amazing support network gave me the confidence to lead significant changes at Employ My Ability. I'd had ideas about improvements that might be needed but the leadership programme gave me the impetus to follow through and take action. Already I've led the successful implementation of a universal form of standardisation including lesson plans, schemes of work and group profiles and I've introduced a peer collaboration programme, none of which was really in place before. I now lead on the writing of courses as well as supporting education and work experience staff to begin writing their own courses.

Going forward into the next academic year we will be changing how we deliver our curriculum and ensuring that what is covered on site is more in line with the skill development that happens on our internal and external work experience placements. We have often discussed as a team how the learning outcomes on accredited courses don't provide our young adults with

what they actually need to gain employment after they leave us. We are now creating our own in-house vocational courses that will ensure the skills covered link to what employers are looking for. We will also be changing the way in which we deliver our own in-house courses. Using the Preparation for Adulthood model, we will be incorporating a number of sessions into one that provides opportunities for students to meet goals that our previous curriculum was not supporting them to achieve. We will now be focusing on the specific areas of learning relevant to our students and identifying the essential practical skills each will need to have the best possible chance of progressing within the course and meeting their outcomes. We will then be able to plan the delivery of Functional Skills to link in with the vocational courses and the new in-house course to ensure the skills are transferable and relevant.

This new way of working has been greatly influenced by feedback from our student council on the curriculum. They have told us what they do and don't enjoy, and we have been able to use this information to guide the change in our curriculum. They wanted a bigger focus on practical learning in the classroom and a better link between the classroom and the workplace. I think we will be delivering exactly that once the change programme is fully implemented. All of these changes amount to significant quality improvement of our provision. I believe they will ensure that when our young adults begin seeking employment, they will have a wider and more relevant bank of skills, giving them a greater chance of getting work.

As a result of the SEND Leadership Programme, I felt able to lead curriculum improvement from my middle manager position. Whilst it may seem like a cliché, the programme has given me the confidence to make decisions, deal with hurdles that arise and be more reflective in my role.

Find out more about the [Natspec SEND leadership programme](#) here.

Building a culture of enquiry into safeguarding practice



Ben Baxter, Head of Safeguarding at Treloar's, explains why you can never ask the question, 'Do you feel safe?' too many times.

A prospective parent stopped by my office while on a tour of Treloar's shortly after I started at the college. They asked me a question that has stuck with me ever since: "How do you, as Head of Safeguarding, know that students who come here are safe?"

The easy answer is that we undertake quality checks for compliance. Specifically, we make sure our policies meet the standards set out in Keeping Children Safe in Education. Every year at Treloar's I review the latest document, update our practice and complete our [LSCB Section 14B Safeguarding Audit](#). Last year's publication of NICE guidance on [safeguarding adults in care homes](#) also added further criteria to review. But does this really answer that parent's question? Does having appropriate procedures and practice in place actually *guarantee* student safety?

We also routinely present to managers, governors and regulators key evidence in relation to the quantity of referrals or safeguarding incidents recorded. That certainly comes closer to answering the parent's question as the data we gather directly relates to students and their welfare, particularly in times where there has been concern. But this raw data alone lacks context and it's not always easy to draw useful conclusions from it: is a low number of safeguarding referrals a sign of excellent preventative practice or of under-reporting and complacency? Is a high number a sign of an unsafe environment, or of enhanced vigilance and support? It may also represent a poor overview of student safety, given the established understanding that abuse is often under-reported and under-identified, especially for those with disabilities¹.

If we are to understand how effectively safeguarding in our settings is working for our students, we need to move beyond compliance. We need to look at improving the underlying quality of safeguarding practice by asking questions and building a culture of genuine enquiry and

¹ McElvaney, R. (2015) [Disclosure of child sexual abuse: delays, non-disclosure and partial disclosure. What the research tells us and implications for practice](#). Child Abuse Review, 24: 159-169.

Allnock, D. and Miller, P. (2013) [No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse](#). London: NSPCC.

professional curiosity around our work. Evidence shows that this approach does more than help us martial data to report on; it is an underpinning building block to creating a culture where those who aren't safe are able to talk².

At Treloar's we do this by directly asking students, families, professionals and staff about their own feelings about safety, and about their understanding of who they would speak to if they did feel unsafe. Their responses give us a far better sense of how those we care for are feeling, and also lets us target support in any areas where students either don't feel safe, or where they are less confident about asking for support.

We ask these questions routinely and regularly, with a wide variety of people posing the questions through a range of different formats and in lots of different environments. Of course, we use the usual parent and student surveys but equally it might be a governor or trustee on an unannounced visit who asks the question through direct conversations with students. This normalises "Do you feel safe?" as a question. It also allows for the possibility that the answer might well change depending on who asks the question, when they ask it and under what circumstances.

Simply asking the question and listening to the answer, though, is not enough. The impact on the quality of our safeguarding comes from how we react to what we hear. For example, we need to be just as inquisitive in the event that all students say they feel safe as we are when a student reports feeling unsafe.

At Treloar's our Head of Quality, Jo Cox, looks in detail at any feedback on safeguarding given by students, staff, families and other stakeholders. She then produces both internal action plans and external responses to comments and concerns raised. Internal actions might involve, for example, adding extra e-safety lessons for a class where a student is worried about online harms or putting on additional training for staff if there are worries about a particular safeguarding theme. Our external response is built around a "You said, we did" model. We provide direct feedback to the individual concern, normalising the act of speaking out, and visibly demonstrating to stakeholders that when people talk to us about feeling or being safe, we take action. Each time we ask, and each time we respond, hopefully we make our students (and staff) a little safer, and a virtuous cycle of quality improvement is enacted.

So, coming back to the original question, 'How do I know that students here are safe?', I suppose the answer ultimately is that I don't. And that's why I keep on posing the questions and ensuring that doing so is an entrenched part of our practice here at Treloar's. That way, we

² Brennan, E., and McElvaney, R. (2020) What Helps Children Tell? A Qualitative Meta-Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure. *Child Abuse Rev.*, 29: 97– 113. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2617>.



have frequent, multiple opportunities to identify any improvements that we need to take to safeguard our students.

Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSiE) advises all staff working in schools and colleges to “maintain an attitude of ‘it could happen here’”. If we are to genuinely safeguard our students, and to learn from serious case reviews and reports such as the IICSA and [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/421212/Review_of_sexual_abuse_in_schools_and_colleges_-_GOV.UK_(www.gov.uk).pdf) then I would argue that we need to change that attitude to one of, ‘It probably is happening here, has happened here or if it hasn’t yet, it likely will happen in the future’.

Presuming that we haven’t yet detected it, rather than that it isn’t happening, helps us to be proactive in our safeguarding practice rather than being reactive after the event. It also helps us to build a culture of continuous improvement in the way we safeguard our students. Finally, it brings us closer to being able to reassure parents that although we can never guarantee that their young people are safe with us, we really are doing our utmost to keep them from harm.

'Grow your own' tutors



Karen Ford, Assistant Principal and Head of Education at Pengwern College, explains how they turned a potential shortage of teaching staff that threatened the quality of their provision into an opportunity for career development.

In rural North Wales, as across much of the UK, we have a shortage of teachers and cover tutors, in particular, with experience in specialist education and of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. Given that the quality of our provision is completely dependent on the quality of those delivering it, the availability of suitably qualified and experienced staff has recently become a real issue. Shortages of such staff not only risk class cancellations and disruption for our learners, they also threaten our attendance and learner achievement data, and potentially the ability of our learners to achieve their planned outcomes.

At the same time as we were facing this staffing shortage, anecdotal evidence from learning walks and from existing tutors suggested that we had very capable support staff on site with an interest in continuing professional development. We therefore decided to offer interested staff a City & Guilds Level 3 Award in Education and Training - free of charge. The course was delivered by the head of education over 16 twilight sessions. This in-house delivery model meant we were effectively growing our own tutors in a specialist context that is often brushed over or ignored in comparable programmes.

The benefits of this approach for learners and the college include:

- wider consistency of professional practice
- increased CPD opportunities for staff
- increase in skills for course participants
- enriched support for students
- onsite cover for tutor sickness/absence
- sustained quality learning experiences for students.

The process to be approved by City & Guilds to deliver the course was straightforward, if a little time consuming but worth the effort as it focussed on policies, qualifications of the people delivering the course and financial viability. An external moderator visited to review all the documentation and questioned the main facilitators.

The first cohort was small, with two support staff participating, one of whom already had a degree and the other had a part completed degree. After the course they both went on to complete PGCEs and became full-time tutors at the college. The second cohort comprised three support staff who had existing health and social care qualifications. One went on to become residential team leader and two continue as support staff and are able to step in if a cover tutor is required. The third cohort included five staff, three from other Cambian sites plus a data analyst and a support worker from our own college. The data analyst went on to lead on ICT and the support worker is now able to act as a cover tutor when needed.

The next course commences in September 2022. Building on the success of this project, we have plans to deliver a level 3 Award for Learning Support Practitioners as part of our induction for support workers. We are also planning a level 4 progression route. This will help us build knowledge and understanding of learning support and lay the foundations for ongoing continuing professional development.

It hasn't all been plain sailing. Leading the course meant a considerable increase in workload for me, on top of the existing demands of the head of education role. Finding staff cover to allow participants based in the college's residential setting to join twilight sessions and access virtual learning environments was also challenging. But it has definitely been worth it. The success of the project has been recognised by the directorate of the organisation as an example of good practice and was presented at the national Heads of Education conference in 2021.

There has been a tangible increase in the confidence of the staff involved in the course. They have enjoyed the breadth of topics covered in the micro-teaching sessions and appreciated being able to get to know each other a bit better. They have worked with people they wouldn't ordinarily work with, and this has had a positive impact on relationships between the residential and day staff. Participants' prior knowledge and skills were a revelation to everyone. We learned we had a qualified hairdresser, a locally renowned Northern Soul DJ, an expert in Tudor history, someone with knowledge of story sacks in pre-school education, and a qualified geography teacher - who knew?! And who knows what use we may be able to make of these talents to the benefit of learners in the future?

Since the course started, participants have covered some classes and their availability has offered us the opportunity to release personal tutors during teaching time to attend review meetings for learners. This flexibility also means tutors can be more involved in the assessment process for pre-entry assessments. Participants have had a structured introduction to teaching and learning and in turn, tutors have been able to build their professional experiences – all leading to an improved offer for learners.

Participant feedback has been very positive. There was a general consensus amongst all that they had a better understanding of what was expected from teaching roles and that having this

increased knowledge made them more able to support the learners effectively. Comments included, "Wow, I didn't know there was so much to it!" and "Gosh, there's so much to think about!"

The feedback from the initial quality visit from the awarding body was also very encouraging. One comment that really resonated with me was, "I've not seen quality like this since the 70's, be careful you don't ask too much of them." To which I replied, "I want a quality experience for the learners in the college so I will be expecting the best from each cohort!"

'Growing our own' really has proved to be an effective solution to a staffing situation that clearly isn't going to ease any time soon. We have turned something that presented a real risk to the quality of our provision into an opportunity to develop staff skills and build career progression routes. At the same time, we have ensured that our learners continue to enjoy ambitious and meaningful personalised programmes of learning.

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!

Curriculum: what is Ofsted looking for?



Almost three years on from the introduction of the Education Inspection Framework, Ruth Perry, Senior Policy Manager at Natspec, has been poring over recent reports in an attempt to figure out what Ofsted is looking for in a specialist college curriculum.

In launching its new inspection framework, Ofsted was especially keen to emphasise the increased focus on the curriculum. Soon we were all talking about the three Is: curriculum intent, implementation and impact. We understood that Ofsted would be interested in why a college's curriculum looks the way it does, how it is delivered, and how well it supports learners to achieve and progress on from college. But what would that look like in practice?

In recent months, Ofsted has been playing post-pandemic catch-up. They seem to have been everywhere, all at once, and the reports have been flooding in. It's been hard to keep up at times. Reading the inspection and monitoring reports on specialist colleges, clear themes are emerging and there is consistency in the use of terminology in relation to the curriculum. This is often being deployed to describe effective practice but, on the flipside, also to record its absence.

Ofsted appears to be identifying the following features as key ingredients of a successful curriculum in a specialist college, whatever the type of provision, size or student profile. Where the quality of education is being graded as less than good, these same features are noted as lacking or inconsistently present across the provision.

Intent

- Leaders and managers set the overall curriculum approach and have oversight of what is happening on the ground. They know the specific contribution of their college to the local offer and / or within their region.
- The curriculum is carefully planned to support the full range of different learners in the college to make a successful transition to adulthood. It is equally ambitious for all.
- The curriculum is broad enough to cover the diverse set of knowledge and skills learners need to develop. All learners experience that breadth; for example, no-one is excluded from experience of the workplace or from sex and relationships education.
- While the curriculum may be organised into pathways for different cohorts of learners, each learner will have an individualised experience of it that reflects their particular needs and aspirations - and the corresponding sections of their EHC Plan.

- Everyone in the college understands why the curriculum looks the way it does, from governors to support staff, and each knows their responsibilities in relation to the curriculum.
- Learners also know why they are learning what they are learning and how that will help them get to where they want to go.

Implementation

- There is a rich variety of activities which learners enjoy and find stimulating. Effective partnerships are in place to broaden the range of learning experiences, particularly of the workplace.
- Learners' overall experience is of a coherent programme, not 'a bit of this and a bit of that'. English and maths are largely embedded across the curriculum. Therapies also are often integrated into classroom/workshop activities, with therapists providing teaching and support staff with relevant CPD.
- The curriculum is logically sequenced so that learners build on and reinforce prior learning.
- It is individualised to take account of their various starting points identified through initial assessment.
- Learners have a manageable number of targets which they and their tutors and support staff are familiar with – and to which the learning in their various sessions clearly relates.
- Teachers and support staff have a clear sense of individual learners' progress in their sessions, while leaders and managers have a good oversight of how well learners are progressing overall.
- Learners understand what progress they are making and what they need to do next to improve further. This is facilitated by timely, relevant feedback from staff including new challenges when appropriate. Staff are careful to encourage but not over-praise. They correct errors in written work so that learners know how to improve spelling or punctuation.
- Support is focused on building independence, not doing things for learners.
- Leaders and managers have a good grip on how well staff are delivering the curriculum, including where sub-contractors are involved, and take action (including offering support/CPD) to address any quality issues.
- Governors are asking challenging questions of leaders and managers to ensure they are held to account in relation to the curriculum.

Impact

- Learners are making progress on course, sometimes quicker than expected. They are growing in confidence and independence.
- Where learners are entered for qualifications, these are relevant and stretching and learners are achieving them at an appropriate level.
- Learners are successfully moving on to meaningful destinations, whether that is to employment, a specialist care setting, further education or training in a new setting or active participation in their communities. These destinations represent ambitious next steps for the individual students, with no 'default route' typically taken by most or all learners, for example to social care provision offered by the college.
- Where learners progress to a further course within the same college, this is part of a staged plan to achieve ambitious post-college goals, rather than a way to extend their time in college or because they have not achieved intended outcomes.

For colleges due an Ofsted inspection or monitoring visit soon, my advice would be to consider your curriculum against each of these effective practice characteristics and ask yourselves:

- How true is this of our college?
- How could we improve where this is not yet the case?
- How likely is that Ofsted would draw this conclusion about our curriculum?
- How can we help ensure this is the impression inspectors get when they visit?

While there is a lot to chew on here, at least we are now building a clearer a picture of what Ofsted is looking for. That should help colleges in their self-assessment and preparation for the next time an inspector calls.