



# Quality Times

Issue Nine



# Introduction

## Welcome to the ninth issue of our quality-focused newsletter

A run of inspections and monitoring visits in member colleges and a series of training sessions from inspectors has resulted in Ofsted inspection being very much the focus of this issue of Quality Times. Three senior leaders reflect on their experiences from very different viewpoints: as a new head of college inheriting a college with an Outstanding grade; as a principal (initially interim) charged with turning round a college graded Inadequate and as an experienced nominee prepared to challenge Ofsted misperceptions mid-inspection. I also share the learning I took from attending all three of the 'Understanding Ofsted inspection' events over the summer term.

In addition, we hear from a graduate of the [Natspec SEND leadership programme](#) on how the confidence she gained from the course has resulted in improvements in the quality of the pathway she leads. The head of an SEMH specialist college explains how becoming trauma-informed has enhanced the support they offer their learners. And we introduce you to the Natspec team's latest recruit who shares her vision for our new [Centre for Excellence in SEND](#) which she will be leading.

We hope these articles provide you with food for thought and inspire you to continue on your own quality improvement journeys with renewed energy and enthusiasm. 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, whether that's in relation to education, care or health, 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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## 10 key learning points from the Understanding Ofsted Inspection training for Natspec members




Over the course of two weeks, Ruth Perry, Natspec's senior policy manager, attended the same 'Understanding Ofsted Inspection for Specialist Colleges' training three times in three different locations. By the third event, she was still learning! Having had time to reflect on everything she heard from the HMIs presenting and the Natspec members attending, she now shares 10 key learning points from the training.

- 1. Ofsted considers the nominee to be part of the inspection team.** The nominee is the in-house expert on the provision and the learners. Ofsted is looking to draw on that expertise to help ensure they carry out a thorough and meaningful inspection, based on a wide range of relevant evidence, which concludes with an accurate set of judgements. The nominee is – and needs to see themselves as – much more than just a 'link person' running around at Ofsted's beck and call.
- 2. A confident, assertive nominee is a good nominee.** 'Don't just be present; have a presence'. The nominee should feel able to challenge inspectors' views during the inspection and guide them towards evidence that refutes any misapprehensions the team may be forming. The nominee should make suggestions of who to speak to, what to look at, and even go as far as framing questions or suggesting terminology to use that will elicit relevant information from learners. If your current nominee is not naturally assertive, perhaps some assertiveness training might help. It may even be worth considering if this individual is best placed to be your nominee; perhaps there's someone else with equally good knowledge of the quality of provision but who is naturally more assertive who could take it on.
- 3. You can't know the FE and Skills Inspection Handbook inspection handbook too intimately.** Knowledge is power! Make yourself familiar with all sections, including the code of conduct. Know what inspectors should be doing so that you can question them if they don't appear to be doing this. Take the handbook with you into all meetings. It's especially important to have it at your side in the grading meeting so you can track Ofsted's feedback / thinking against the judgements in the handbook, and be ready to challenge if you see a mis-match. Although I wouldn't normally recommend printing off a huge

document like this, a paper copy will allow you to make notes against the framework so it could be useful.

4. **Ofsted begins every full inspection looking to see if the provider is Good.** They are looking for evidence to refute or confirm that the provider is good. As the evidence builds they consider whether the provision exceeds 'Good' or doesn't come up to standard. This feels like a positive starting point and less threatening than what providers might imagine inspection to be all about (e.g. finding fault, searching out where the bodies are buried). Knowing this is how Ofsted begin an inspection may help staff confidence.
5. **There is some flexibility in the arrangements for inspection.** It is worth asking for some things that would make your life easier – even if not all are granted. For example, lead inspectors are open to having more than one initial planning meeting and to having present whoever the nominee wishes to invite. Lead inspectors are also willing to taking follow up calls if the nominee wants to query anything or provide additional information. They want the nominee to feel confident and ready for inspection by the time the inspection team arrives. Documentation can be shared via Sharepoint rather than the portal. The timings for morning KITs and end-of-day meetings are negotiable. You can make requests in advance of inspectors, for example asking for their photos for use in social stories or posters to support learner understanding of what is going on during inspection.
6. **The sooner the planning call takes place, the better.** After receiving the admin call announcing the inspection, some colleges delay the planning call thinking they need time to prepare themselves for it. However, the time between the planning call and Ofsted's arrival is much more useful to colleges. The sooner you have the team briefing letter in your hands, the more effectively you can prepare.
7. **Being told your short inspection is being extended / or converted into a full inspection is not a cause for panic.** When short inspections are extended, that is not an automatic indicator that your grade is going down. You might remain good or outstanding or improve from good to outstanding. If you are currently graded 'Good', keen to push for an outstanding grade and due a short inspection, then the best way to signal that to inspectors is to upload a SAR in which you self-assess as Outstanding and remind the lead inspector of that in the planning call. You aren't guaranteed a full inspection even then, but it will improve your chances.
8. **Appointing a shadow nominee makes a lot of sense.** It's not mandatory to have a shadow nominee but it can be very helpful. You can use your shadow nominee as chief notetaker in daily team / KIT meetings as they aren't permitted to speak. That frees up the nominee to actively listen, ask questions, and challenge if necessary. It's also good succession planning. A first-time nominee who has never witnessed the 'back office' during an inspection is far less likely to be the confident, assertive nominee you need.

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- A horizontal bar composed of several overlapping arrows pointing to the right, in shades of teal, purple, pink, blue, and yellow.
- 9. Don't let inspectors finish the day thinking you're happy with the way things are going if that's not the case.** If you think their perception of your provision needs challenging, plant a seed of doubt in inspectors' minds during the end-of-day meeting. You want them to go away thinking about what else they might do or look at the next day to test out what you're saying. Offer suggestions about this if you have them. Inspectors may or may not take you up on your ideas but it's definitely worth a try. If you leave it until the KIT the next day to raise a concern, you're already on the back foot.
  - 10. Building an internal quality assurance approach that mirrors a deep dive gives you triangulated evidence of what's working and what's not.** Using a variety of different quality assurance activities (e.g. lesson visits, conversations with learners, work scrutiny, progress record reviews) gives you a rounded picture of your provision. As a bonus, it will also get staff, learners, governors, families, employers and others used to being asked questions about their practice or your provision, so they are not so daunted when quizzed by inspectors.



## Challenging Ofsted inspectors



Lisa Hart, Deputy Director of Henshaws College and Ofsted nominee, explains how she successfully challenged inspectors' views on the college's approach to Prevent during their inspection and offers advice to other nominees on challenging effectively.

The latest inspection of Henshaws College took place in early May when the press was full of negative stories about Ofsted and the impact of inspection on schools – and headteachers, in particular. It seemed to me that Ofsted were very conscious of this backdrop as they went about their inspection of our college. I have been involved in nine previous Ofsted inspections, two as nominee and this one definitely felt different. My wellbeing was checked in a way that felt sincere. Don't get me wrong, it was still very stressful but I felt welcomed, as the nominee, by the inspection team as a participant with the right to be there, as the person with the greatest knowledge and understanding of our college, its provision and students.

I want to share with you in this article a particular example of how I was able to use my place in the inspection team to address their misunderstanding of our provision and to provide them with evidence to challenge a mis-placed view that they were starting to form. I have also included some reflections on what it takes in more general terms to challenge inspectors, as a nominee.

Inspectors assured themselves fairly quickly that safeguarding was effective (good news for me as I am also Designated Safeguarding Lead). From there they began to focus on the curriculum and the case study students. It was then that we had what I'm now referring to as 'the Prevent conversation'. Whilst the inspectors had seen British Values being fully embedded throughout the college, they said that there was little evidence of Prevent awareness amongst the students. As nominee, I explained that there *was* evidence but perhaps not in the form they might be looking for, as we needed to deliver Prevent differently in specialist education. I asked permission to present a position paper to explain how we deliver Prevent in the college in a way that is appropriate for our students.

Then the evidence gathering began! This included an email to Natspec to help me locate [a report from a 2019 project](#) we had participated in where we explored how delivery of Prevent-related learning needed to be adjusted for specialist teaching. I drew heavily on this in my position paper, in which I explained how as a college we openly discuss events happening in the world, such as the Manchester bombing. I also explained how we cover radicalisation and extremism in our curriculum but not necessarily in the same way that inspectors might see in mainstream education. I told them that rather than discussing 'coercion', we talk about 'what to do if somebody is trying to make you do something you don't want to do'; rather than using the word 'radicalisation', we help students understand 'what to do if someone is making you do

something that you think is wrong'. I also described how we invite emergency services into college (with photos included) to discuss with our students what to do if they feel scared or under threat in the community. Once the inspectors had had time to consider the position paper, they adjusted the questions they asked of our students, and the evidence that we *were* delivering Prevent began to emerge in the classrooms and around campus.

This was all done in a positive and collaborative manner and the lead inspector was happy to discuss further and receive evidence. We were delighted to receive an overall Good grade and to be graded Outstanding in personal development.

This experience has made me reflect on the importance of having the confidence as nominee to challenge Ofsted inspectors when necessary. I have pulled together some top tips to help other nominees challenge effectively if the need arises.

## 1. Positive partnership

We are subject to Ofsted inspections and in this world of education, we have no choice. So, embrace the process and try to see it as a positive chance to show the world how good your school or college is. Exploit your place on that inspection team!

## 2. Strong evidence

You are the one in the firing line, so if you are going to challenge an inspector make sure you know the evidence you are using to challenge Ofsted is reliable and the challenge is justified and appropriate. Trust your team to help generate that evidence – but make sure they are right!

## 3. Be respectful

The inspection team can refuse to accept more evidence – so be firm but respectful when asking. I asked for permission to present an alternative picture on Prevent in the form of a position paper, and this was granted. We also knew inspectors had made another decision about our provision without looking at our MIS or data. So again, I asked permission to show the team more information. This was permitted and our team received very high praise in relation to this aspect of our provision in the final meeting.

## 4. It's your college

You know your college, so be confident. When you go into the grading meeting, have an idea of the grade *you* think should be given for each area and why. Take in a copy of the framework and make notes and have tabs to relevant areas. You have one shot during this meeting to negotiate, so have everything at your fingertips. Practise with a colleague beforehand if it will help.

## 5. Stay calm

As nominee, you need to be calm. Your colleagues are looking to you as the leader who is in charge. The inspectors need you to be organised and fully prepared – even if you don't feel it! I have a small group of trusted colleagues that I can be 'not ok' with because sometimes you need to talk about how things are *really* going – but as far as everyone else is concerned, the inspection is calm and organised. Also accept that the lead inspector makes the final decision so have your say but don't turn it into an argument. You can always use the complaints procedure but hopefully you won't need it.

## 6. Look after yourself

There is a lot of pressure on the nominee. You need to be thinking of the five next moves ahead, whilst still being in the present. The new shadow nominee role is a real advantage as you can check your understanding with another person going through the same experience. Choose your shadow nominee carefully – there must be complete trust, transparency and a strong working relationship. Make sure you also eat, keep hydrated and all of the other self-care aspects. And pace yourself!



## Woman becomes programme leader – shock!



Donna Fenley, Programme Manager for the Personal Development for Active Citizenship Pathway at National Star College, explains how tackling imposter syndrome head-on during the Natspec SEND leadership course has led to improvements in the quality of the provision in the pathway she leads.

“Woman Becomes Programme Leader” doesn’t sound like a very intriguing headline, unless you know the woman and her backstory. I came into my role in specialist education management in a way that I now recognise is not unusual in this sector. I was a care-support worker on a 100 hours per year contract, who gradually worked their way up. Before I started on the [Natspec SEND leadership programme](#), I thought I was the only person who secretly thought they didn’t deserve to be a manager, that they weren’t a *real* manager, just someone who somehow managed to fool a panel of interviewers into believing that they could do the job. Until recently I had been metaphorically peeking over my shoulder, waiting for someone to realise that I’m a fraud, a terrible leader and quite clearly in the wrong role. Yes, I was a victim of impostor syndrome!

The leadership programme gave me a sense of a shared ‘career-heritage’. Many of us on the course echoed each other’s paths. We were like-minded travelling companions, together on a journey which could be the career equivalent of walking the Camino trail to Santiago de Compostela. Certainly for me, the course was a pilgrimage, a journey of self-discovery and enlightenment. That probably sounds like I’m over-pitching it, but it really has had a huge impact on my view of myself and how I work. And that has undoubtedly had a knock-on impact on the quality of the programme that I manage.

I started within National Star as a ‘bank residential facilitator’ in 2009. I had little experience in the care sector, and no experience of working with people with disabilities. I needed a part-time job that I could fit around single-handedly raising my three children. I really loved working with our learners, but it was clear to me fairly early on that I was not cut out for care-giving. But I was very keen to stay within the organisation. I was fortunate enough to have a wonderful leader who suggested I explored the teaching qualifications offered for staff development at National Star, a gift I grabbed with both hands, working my backside off as facilitator during the day, caring for my family at home and spending my nights studying. Over the next few years, I progressed from QTLS-qualified tutor to a senior tutor role, then curriculum manager and from there to my current position as programme manager.

The qualities that had served me well as a team member (although which might have also been annoying to some!) needed to be harnessed and refined if they were going to help me as a programme manager. I am a stickler for doing the right thing, afeared of making mistakes, doing everything to the absolute maximum of my ability, working spectacularly hard to achieve anything I want to achieve. I want everyone to be happy and feel supported and empowered. I hate disappointing others and conflict, and I over-think everything. The leadership course has helped me rub the burrs off the rough edges and polish up the useful elements of these drivers. If you know your resilience and transactional analysis drivers, you'll be able to work out pretty fast which are mine!

Three things I am now (as a direct result of the leadership course): more reflective; more confident; a leader among leaders. What does this look like? I reflect more, I think more deeply, I respect the differing perspectives of others. I take guidance from others without feeling this makes me look weak or foolish. I allow time to ruminate rather than feeling the need to fix the problem, cross it off my to-do list and move on. I take people seriously and see the bigger picture – and if I can't see the bigger picture but think there probably is one – I ask more questions and think on it more. I run my reflections alongside and intertwined with my values and beliefs, the vision and mission of my organisation, and the needs and aspirations of the learners whose lives I have the responsibility of shaping.

I am more confident to be me. I learn from my interactions with others, but I don't need to "be" someone else; it's okay to be me. I trust my judgments because they come from my instincts, my lived and professional experience, my knowledge and from my reflections, values and beliefs. When I have an opinion, I am confident to share it, whilst welcoming and respecting conflicting views. I am confident to step back and empower others. I don't need to do everything myself to make sure it's done.

Sometimes in my role I have to deliver information that might not be well received. For example, whilst carrying out our Curriculum Quality Assurance (CQA) processes I may have to deliver feedback to staff where the CQA has identified areas of concern and where we need to put in place plans for improvement. Nobody wants to receive that type of feedback and until very recently I wouldn't want to be the person delivering it. Before the leadership course I would lose sleep over this sort of situation but now I have the confidence to manage it well. I can deliver feedback effectively by reflecting on the other person's frame of reference, the type of person that they are, what drives them, their resilience (transactional analysis), how they see themselves within the organisational culture, and by considering how I myself might like to be supported through such a process. Delivering this type of feedback clearly and in a supportive way is enabling me to make a stronger contribution to improving and assuring the quality of provision within the pathway I lead.

When I say I'm 'a leader among leaders' that might sound like I have ideas of grandeur. I really don't. I mean that I know now that I am not an island. I am a member of a diverse and interesting group of people, all with a shared purpose. When I was first a manager, I was terrified of the responsibility as if I might easily curate a catastrophe as a result of my lack of



knowledge, confidence, experience, courage, experience, and innate management skills that all other managers magically possess. Thanks to the team around me at work, and my cohort on the Natspec SEND leadership course, my own practice as a manager and leader is improved; I have been able to support the improvement of the team I lead and, because of that, the provision for our learners is improved.

It's all a work in progress of course, a journey, a metaphor for life but I can honestly say now that I really love my job. There have been, and I'm sure will continue to be, some challenging and difficult moments, and there have been dark times which I'm not going to touch on here, but I am more resilient now. I know I can continue to improve the learning experiences of our students and that, as a result, their outcomes will improve exponentially. Impostor Syndrome, get your coat!

## Maintaining high quality provision



Ben Bastin, Head of Treloar's College, shares a little of his journey of joining a very established college as a new leader, keen to maintain high quality. He reflects on how his approach to quality improvement practice has developed to where it is today.

I joined Treloar's in June 2021 in the second half of the summer term. This was at the end of the pandemic and after a period of significant change for the entire world, let alone for Treloar's. We were still under a range of Covid measures to support the needs of our students and ensure our staffing levels were appropriate. Understandably, the fatigue of the previous years was evident in the staff team.

Treloar's sits under several inspection frameworks as we have a school, a college, a school residential provision, an adult residential provision, future living and onsite healthcare and nursing. When I arrived, Treloar's was rated 'outstanding' in all areas. Some of these inspection regimes were very new to me, and that added to the pressure. I was conscious, as a new leader, of the need to uphold the exacting standards I was inheriting, but it also raised a question for me of how I was going to assure myself of where we were at and what we needed to do next.

My first step was to immerse myself in the self-assessment reports of recent years. I was fortunate that my deputy head had worked at Treloar's for 25 years. So, for every question I had, I was able to get a potted history of how we arrived at this point. It is difficult to come into a new organisation and take on board its history as quickly as you want to. But it is vital to do this work as that is the lived experience of your team. We have all had that new boss that comes in and changes everything without a real understanding of what has come before. I can't claim that I did none of that but I hope I really tried to get as much context as possible. I am sure that some of what my team and I have done has been done before. I know we are not re-inventing the wheel, but hopefully we are giving it a good tune up.

What quickly became clear was that change and quality improvement in an organisation with almost 900 employees needed careful consideration. There was a range of practices which appeared ripe for rapid change and an increase in efficiency, but careful consideration revealed that there would have been unintended impact on teams without the capacity for the additional workload. At first this was disheartening as I wanted to have impact, but I came to realise that real improvement needs to be sustained. To have most impact I needed to identify the areas in most need but that could also be supported to improve. I had to accept that it might take some time to identify those areas.



The writing of my first self-assessment report (SAR) here came very quickly after my arrival. This showed me the importance of engaging as many stakeholders as possible in the self-assessment process, particularly my deputy and head of quality. They were instrumental in that first report, not just looking at the areas for development but clearly articulating what we were doing well. This helped me to remember that quality improvement is not just finding out what needs to be better, it's also about identifying strengths that can be built upon.

The staff team were very aware we were in the window for inspection, and this gave inevitable rise to questions about preparing for Ofsted. I wanted to avoid the feeling of any change being solely to meet the needs of an inspection framework. We needed to make sure that what we were doing was to benefit our learners in our context, then show any external observer why that was an effective use of our time and resources.

Taking our SAR and the looming inspection forward into our quality improvement plan (QIP) was an interesting process for me. We are extremely fortunate to have a lot of resource to put towards improvement practice but as the year went on, I felt that I had made the QIP too large. I was finding it difficult to coordinate all the different areas we were developing. For the following SAR and QIP, my intention was to be more judicious in selecting what we would work on and how we would prioritise. To do this, I needed a way to frame priorities. Obviously impact on students and their outcomes is key but this can often be tangential impact. Improvements in recruitment and retention of staff can lead to improved student outcomes for instance. I turned to our organisational values to guide my thinking and have included below how our values relate to our quality and improvement practice.

<p><b>We strive for excellence</b></p>  <p><b>We always try our best</b></p>	<p><b>We are inclusive</b></p>  <p><b>We help everyone join in</b></p>	<p><b>We act with integrity and respect</b></p>  <p><b>We are friendly and kind</b></p>
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## We are inclusive

When it comes to quality in this domain, I ask myself, 'What barriers are present for students or for staff? Which are causing the biggest obstacle for progress and how can we address them?' I am also constantly asking myself about workload. I know all my staff work incredibly hard and are enormously committed to their role. But I do not want to take that for granted or to exploit their passion. So, whilst we want to change the world, we have to be reasonable in our

expectations of staff. Finally, I check if have I captured all stakeholder opinion. It is not sufficient for me to only record my own thoughts or of those I work with most closely. Students, families, governors, and all staff need to have a meaningful voice in this process.

## **We act with integrity and respect**

This links to the stakeholder engagement I mention above. Taking onboard all feedback and not ignoring anything which does not fit with my own narrative ensures we do not miss anything. I am committed to developing an open and honest culture which promotes transparency so everyone can be supported. I found this helpful when reviewing what to prioritise as I need to feel confident that we have the capacity to deliver on what we say we will do.

## **We strive for excellence**

Linking to this value alleviated some of my concerns about comparing the college today with the college in the past. We will always do the absolute best we can in any circumstances, be that global in the sense of Covid, organisational in the sense of staffing pressures, or individual.

This value was borne out in our most recent Ofsted inspection. Our judgement was not just an expression of how the college was during that period but an assessment of our ability to continue to develop and maintain the provision overtime.

This in many ways brought me full circle in my thinking. Quality is not something you do on one day and forget about. It is something that must be done every day, and a culture of not only continuous improvement but continuous curiosity must be maintained. I am grateful to have a staff team who will not settle for less than the best and can hold me to account for what they know our students need.

If I have one piece of advice for others it would be: be led by your values, always come back to the why of what you do and remember who you do it for. The students are in the middle of it all and impact on their lives is the product of our work.



## Taking a trauma-informed approach



Victoria Elliott, Acting Director of School Improvement, describes how their multi-academy trust (which includes Trinity Post-16 Solutions) has introduced trauma-informed approaches to strengthen support for students with SEMH. She explains how building the approach into their quality improvement plan and into their quality assurance activities is helping them identify its impact and the effectiveness with which staff are applying trauma-informed strategies.

The vision of Trinity Academy Newcastle Multi-Academy Trust is to create confident, competent and kind citizens of the future. In order to support the children and young people we work with, all of whom have social, emotional and mental health needs, to the very best of our ability, we decided to take a trauma-informed approach across our settings. We believe that embedding trauma-informed practices makes us better able to provide a supportive and inclusive environment for our students. Early-life trauma can have a significant impact on a student's social, emotional, and cognitive well-being, which in turn affects their ability to engage in education and to learn. And whilst not all of our students have experienced early-life trauma, we feel sure that trauma-informed practices can benefit all of our students.

Evidence suggests that trauma-informed strategies can improve student outcomes, including academic achievement, attendance, and classroom behaviour. When students are offered a safe and supportive environment, they are better able to regulate their emotions, form positive relationships, and engage in learning. We are seeing a positive impact for students across our settings, including our Trinity Post-16 Solutions Ltd students, but this has been a journey for our Trust (one that we are still on) and our approach has adapted over time.

As we emerged from Covid-19, we focused our intentions on supporting students to reintegrate back into 'normal' life. We adopted a recovery curriculum, designed to allow students to process their emotions and make time to process change. Dedicated time in lessons to stop, pause and be mindful (including in lessons delivered through Teams) provided us with positive student feedback. They were calmer, more focused and despite the disruption to education, there was excellent rapport between students and staff. We incorporated these elements into our quality assurance processes. On our learning walks we looked to see if students were being given opportunities for 'brain breaks' and we asked about the effectiveness of these strategies in our stakeholder surveys.

Using the expertise of our Trust Parenting Lead, we incorporated the ongoing development of a trauma-informed approach into our quality improvement plan. This then filtered down into our subject development plans, ensuring that our tutors were driving the approach. We adopted the

framework of Protect, Relate, Regulate, Reflect which gave us a method to measure our progress and identify our next steps. Making trauma-informed practice a priority for improvement, raised its profile for all staff. It acted as a clear signal that the adoption of this approach was as important as any curriculum change. We put in regular high quality CPD to guide leaders and staff in making changes to the environment and in our approach with students. The hard work of the college was recognised earlier this year when we achieved the Trauma Informed Schools UK Award.

The biggest challenge we faced when creating this change was the word 'trauma'. The connotations of the word trauma can alienate some people. Parents in particular can feel that the approach is not relevant to them or their child. However, we have found that we have been able to address these concerns through providing a calm and honest explanation of what these practices are and how they work in our environment. We encourage visits from prospective students, parents and professionals to build their understanding and explain the benefits of these approaches for everyone involved.

Originally, we also faced the same concerns from staff. They worried that this approach wasn't relevant for their students. Early CPD highlighted the universal benefits of a holistic trauma-informed approach; the training was carefully designed to build on the care already shown to students so that staff were able to see it as a natural extension of their existing approach. The feedback from staff on the CPD has been overwhelmingly positive; staff can see the benefits of this approach with their students and, in some cases, they have reported that this approach has informed the way that they interact with their own families. New staff joining the provision often have the same misconception about the relevance and value of a trauma-informed approach. We now include a session on it as part of our induction day for new staff which has helped mitigate this issue. A differentiated approach to CPD also ensures that those who require more support with implementing the approach receive it. We have a Trust-wide focus group with delegates from within each provision and these staff are able to support their colleagues on a day-to-day basis.

Trinity Post 16 Solutions Ltd has transformed since the pandemic. We have re-designed the communal area into a calm, inviting space which brings elements of the outside in, with plants which students help care for. There are colouring books to support mindfulness, comfortable seating, and positive affirmations, and we decorate the area to reflect a seasonal theme. The onsite farm, used within all subjects, gives students an opportunity to connect with nature and develop their empathy with our animals, including goats, ponies and alpacas. This year, we have introduced horticulture Fridays to give students a tranquil way to end their week. In our recent Trauma Informed Schools award audit, staff relationships with students were identified as a strength with the auditor commenting that, "the level of care observed from staff was extremely high; the young people really do matter to them." The most common feedback we receive from all of our visitors is that our areas are calm.

The way we view our provision has also developed, with every aspect now viewed through a trauma-informed lens. The CPD that senior leaders have received ensures we can confidently



reflect on our provision through a trauma-informed mindset when we complete our self-evaluation. We expect to see the trauma informed approach across all aspects of our provision and are looking for the evidence of its impact in learning walks, work scrutiny, deep dives, stakeholder surveys and external feedback.

Achieving the Trauma Informed Schools Award is not the endpoint; we continue to strive to improve our practice further. Our CPD programme has been expanded to ensure staff train in a variety of mental health interventions so we can better support our students. Our robust self-evaluation cycle ensures we monitor our environments regularly and adapt our practices in line with emerging evidence-based research. The Trust has also created an assessment tool which tracks the progress students make towards becoming more confident and kind. Having demonstrable evidence of the impact of our work helps strengthen our resolve to continue to improve the lives and outcomes for our students.

## How do you take a setting from Inadequate to Good?



Adele Audin, Head of Livability Nash College, describes the five-year journey which saw the college convert its Ofsted 'Inadequate' grade to 'Good'. In the absence of any magic bullet, she explains how a carefully-paced, steady approach led to incremental, sustained

improvements.

According to [official statistics](#), between 1 September 2021 and 31 August 2022, 79 providers that that were previously judged as requiring improvement (RI) were subject to a full inspection. 62% of these improved their grade to good or outstanding, contributing to the total figure of 82% of all FE and skills settings graded good or better.

Nash College sits a term or so outside that timeline – but will be included in the next data set as a setting that made that step. I don't know the starting points of the other settings, or what their improvement journeys looked like, but it would be interesting to put the leaders of those who have successfully tamed the Ofsted behemoth in a room and see what we might come up with as an 'instructional guide' for the 18% graded RI or inadequate.

Of course, all settings are different. Natspec colleges have the added factor of the complexity of our young people, with no one college facing exactly the same challenges as another. That makes any one-size-fits-all approach redundant. However, it is likely that some aspects of our process will be of interest and value to others on a similar journey to the one we have made. This has been our recipe!

First, take two development plans – and rewrite them. Conjure up three self-assessment reports, 14 new job descriptions and undertake 73 interviews. Stir in two restructures, one or two compliments and more than a pinch of complaints. Add three monitoring visits, two inspections and more 4am musings than anyone would choose – and then wait.

Of course, if you put any of the above in the wrong order, add one complaint too many or too serious, or write a self-assessment report that misses the point, the outcome you achieve may not be much further than your starting point.

So, what is the secret ingredient that pulls together these components? As leaders we all know the constituents. Any graduate of the NPQH program is surely equipped to set that all important strategic direction, whilst simultaneously establishing and supporting effective teaching. Easily able to sustain high quality planning, delivering learning within an environment that evidences safe, inclusive practice...? The question is easy to ask. And, although the answer is definitely

not a magic bullet, I do think some magical elements, a bit harder to pinpoint, are necessary for the full recipe.

Nash College was judged Inadequate in 2018. By 2023, we officially regained an Ofsted 'Good'. The College had been Good before, and a not insignificant number of staff had been part of the team then. They had seen changes in leadership, inspection frameworks and government priorities. They had watched the impact of decisions about resource allocation and direction over a number of years. They had enduringly supported learners with complex needs and in 2019 when I arrived, were still distressed about the judgment and, in many cases, unclear about the reasons why.

It meant people were disheartened and, to a large extent, left feeling let down. Some couldn't quite believe the judgement was accurate, and others felt that improvement wasn't their responsibility. Few could specify any one cause, but it was clear the college needed to regain a sense of teamwork and purpose. The leadership team had been depleted or, more accurately, was non-existent. The label on my pigeonhole clearly read '**Interim** Head of College' - for all to see.

The turnaround wasn't sudden, miraculous or easy. It came in the following days, months and, ultimately, years, long after I was fortunate enough to be able to lose that interim title. Slowly, the team began to believe the path we were following was the right one. It was based on the ingredients described above, but the not-so-secret key was unlocking our staff's absolute passion for changing the lives of the young people who came to us. It was always there, but the keyword 'change' had become buried under a confusion of identity and process.

Nash College always cared. It cared superbly well. Students were safe and looked after. However, once everyone understood the place learners held with us was their last chance at learning and we could change their future with the work we do, our individual goals became more united. Our daily work became about learning outcomes; our systems became focussed on evidencing progress which had to be authentic, intentional and appropriate.

On my office wall, I have a 'Compass for Life'. I wrote it in 2019 during an INSET day delivered by a former SAS Officer. The idea was to create a road map of the route to our 'Big Ideas'. Our goals were signposted with the tools of values, strengths and actions. We were asked to write down our values and I wrote down the organisational values of Livability, the charity which runs the college: We strive to be Enabling, for Openness and Inclusion. And to be Courageous.

Although all of the factors above were definitely needed in turning the college around, the most significant aspect of the Nash College magic is its courageous staff and their desire to change the lives of those they work with. Once their passion for achieving this was reignited, we were en route to being able to say once again, 'Nash College is a Good College'.

## Meet Jane Ragless, Head of Natspec's Centre for Excellence in SEND



Jane Ragless, the newly appointed Head of Natspec's Centre for Excellence in SEND, talks to Ruth Perry about her ambitious plans for sharing practice, building networks and improving the learner experience across the breadth of the FE sector.

### 1. What is your experience of SEND in FE?

I have worked in SEND in FE for more than 25 years, most of which was spent as Deputy Head of Learning for Foundation Programmes with Chichester College Group. Before I entered the world of education, I was an aircraft dispatcher at Heathrow Airport, working for British Airways. I was responsible for coordinating on-time departures and efficient aircraft arrivals. I feel that many of the customer services skills learnt at the airport are highly transferable to education and SEND!

I saw the Chichester College Group grow from just the one college to a group of seven. I have had the opportunity to work with each college joining the group to share good practice and develop provisions which offer the best possible learning experiences for our SEND learners. I have also worked with Natspec as a Transform Associate for six years. I started delivering training on RARPA, where I have a deep passion for the process and effectiveness of managing a non-qualification led curriculum. I now work closely with a small team of associates delivering a suite of RARPA modules, both online and face-to-face. I have also been fortunate to be involved in the excellent Natspec SEND leadership programme as a leadership coach.

These various roles and responsibilities allow me to tap into our extensive Natspec network of providers to enable our Centre for Excellence to offer professional, appropriate advice, guidance and support.

### 2. What are you hoping to achieve through the Natspec Centre for Excellence in SEND?

I am passionate about our learners. I have been from my very first day as a work experience coordinator at Kingston College. Through this new Centre for Excellence, I want to ensure that FE providers offer appropriate learning experiences which will enable and educate young people with SEND to be the best they can be and to live meaningful, successful lives.

I have had personal experience of the positive difference education, advice and guidance can make to a young person with SEND, the feeling that you get when a learner achieves their



goals, be it going onto a cross college programme or into employment through a supported internship. I recently led a programme for learners who needed more bespoke education programmes and who were not ready to study on a full-time education course, even within Foundation programmes. I drew up a plan with each learner and their family which could start with as little as an hour visit once a week to meet for coffee before gradually working up to fulltime – this may take up to a year! Often these young people have been out of education for several years for any number of reasons and it is so fulfilling to see them making friends, becoming more confident and successfully progressing onto a fulltime programme. I'm hoping our Centre for Excellence will enable more young people to experience success that is meaningful for them.

### **3. How do you think the Natspec Centre for Excellence could contribute to quality improvement across the sector?**

We have a unique selling point as a Centre for Excellence that is also a membership organisation with over 100 specialist college members. We should be able to identify what type of support and guidance is needed by those who approach us and then source the best match from our experienced pool of specialist colleges nationally. That is a huge resource!

I am particularly looking forward to our communities of practice where professionals will be able to network, sharing experiences and journeys, reviewing and reflecting together to help develop excellent practices, processes and procedures. This can only result in improved confidence for staff and in the quality of our national offer for learners with SEND.

With the live events, I am really keen to not just display effective practice but also to offer advice, tools and resources to show providers how they can work towards achieving the ambitious standards on show. I think it can be overwhelming otherwise. If you cannot work out what the journey from your particular starting point is going to look like or what your first step might be, then it is not always easy to see the relevance of practice that comes from a college with years' more experience, or an organisational structure or culture different from your own.

### **4. Are there aspects of provision where you think FE providers particularly need support?**

We have already been talking with lots of providers and they have flagged up various areas where they would welcome support. High on their list was making effective use of technology as means of learner support. We launched our Centre for Excellence with a live online session on this topic at the end of June and had over 160 people attend, so there was certainly demand for that one!

With general FE colleges increasingly taking on more learners with a PMLD label, they are keen for advice on working effectively with this learner group. They have also asked for a session on



building a curriculum without qualifications, a practice that is more established amongst specialist colleges and which can be critical to achieving more personalised learning. Linked to that, they would like more guidance on using RARPA. Supporting learners with behaviours of concern, SEND pedagogy and effective initial or baseline assessment have also been proposed. We are currently planning how best to offer support in all these areas, whether that is through a community of practice, a live online session or through a peer review.

## **5. What support will be on offer this year from the Natspec Centre for Excellence in SEND?**

We will shortly be publishing our plan for the rest of this financial year, so watch this space. We remain open to suggestions for themes for 2023/4. Feel free to contact me at [jane.ragless@natspec.org.uk](mailto:jane.ragless@natspec.org.uk) with your ideas for future sessions, or to put yourself forward, as a specialist college keen to support the work of the Natspec Centre for Excellence in SEND.