

Annual Report 2024–25


Natspec

The voice of
specialist further
education



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“ Outstanding flow of information that is current, clear and time-saving. Thank you. ”

Welcome



It has been an honour and a pleasure to represent Natspec colleges and providers again in 2024–25. Each time I visit a member organisation I am impressed by the dedication, commitment and resilience of the staff in specialist FE, and the life changing opportunities provided for learners.

This report showcases our activities during the membership year, which ran from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025, and outlines what is next for your membership body.

It was a year of change politically, with a new government and promises to solve the SEND crisis, but no end to the relentless challenges of restricted funding and barriers in the system. There were new challenges such as the VAT on school fees policy and rising costs due to National Insurance contributions and living wage increases. Despite this, the Natspec network continued to flourish, providing mutual support to member colleges and improving the quality of provision. We grew membership numbers and the scale and scope of our activities, welcoming 13 new members, taking the number to 139 (up from 100 3 years ago), and 15 new affiliates, taking the total to 39.

This annual report covers our lobbying and policy activities, our membership services, support to improve quality provision, and

training and consultancy for members and non-members across the FE sector, including the Centre for Excellence work.

The report contains the detail, but highlights include a successful national conference, despite a fire at the original venue in Stratford only weeks before the event forcing a wholesale move to Manchester at very short notice. The TechAbility Conference in November was also a highly valued event. We recruited additional team members, increased our lobbying work and produced additional outputs such as the comprehensive research report on post-16 transport. Other highlights included another year of extensive training across Transform and TechAbility, supporting the SEMH needs of learners, and a new training resource for LSAs.

Natspec strives to be a responsive and influential organisation which focuses on your immediate needs whilst looking to future challenges and setting a clear direction for specialist FE.

I hope you find this report useful, and I look forward to continuing to support your colleges in 2025–26.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Clare Howard".

Clare Howard, Natspec Chief Executive Officer



Our vision

Natspec's vision is for all **young people with learning difficulties and / or disabilities** to **access high quality education and training**, which **meets their individual needs and supports their aspirations for work, skills and life.**

Our objectives during 2024-25 were:

1

Policy: to influence SEND / ALN policy and act as an advocate for specialism in FE, creating a system that works for learners

2

Quality: to improve quality of provision for learners in Natspec colleges

3

Training and staff development: to train staff in specialist FE to improve quality of provision for young people with LDD



What did we achieve in 2024–2025?

We delivered a highly successful national conference despite a fire at the original venue in Stratford only weeks before the event, which required moving 300 delegates, all speakers and exhibitors to Manchester at very short notice.

We recruited new staff and brought in additional external support for lobbying, policy, research, quality improvement work, and events administration.

We negotiated a new deal with Microsoft, saving £1,000s for Natspec colleges.

We expanded our lobbying and policy work, with significant activity on:

- the lead up to the July 2024 General Election
- the VAT on school fees policy
- the impact of increases to National Insurance contributions and living wage
- a comprehensive research report and campaign on post-16 transport.

Natspec Innovation Awards



The **Natspec Innovation Awards** recognise and celebrate innovative practice in the specialist further education sector. They shine a light on initiatives that have clearly resulted in improved outcomes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.



"The panel was very impressed at the range and diversity of projects, which covered all aspects of the provision. In particular the strong connections with communities, partners, other agencies and experts was very impressive. Without exception, all of the shortlisted projects will make a significant difference, not only to the lives of young people in your colleges but potentially to others across the country. The Further Education sector as a whole should learn from these shortlisted projects."



Jim Aleander, Chair of the judging panel



The Natspec Innovation Awards trophies were designed and made by students at **St Piers College**



Our award winners



Curriculum innovation



Treloar College won for their successful student-led business to assess accessibility in other organisations.

Innovation in student voice



the Deaf Academy won for increasing deaf awareness and securing traffic calming measures outside their college.

Innovative routes into employment



Digital Independent Specialist College (DISC) won for their professional digital agency, giving students industry experience.

Innovative specialist / mainstream partnership



National Star College won for a dynamic partnership to create new specialist provision at a GFE college.

Innovative approach to equality, diversity and inclusion



Petty Pool Vocational College won for their neurodiversity at work conference which is shaping employer attitudes.

Innovative interdisciplinary working



Condover College won for their fun and engaging integrated therapy approach to supporting learners' needs.

Innovative approach to mental health and wellbeing



Chadsgrove Educational Trust Specialist College won for improving wellbeing and outcomes using a blend of sound and hydrotherapy.

Congratulations to all our winners!



A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is wearing a black top and a lanyard with a badge. She is seated in a yellow chair at a conference or event, surrounded by other people in the background.

“Being a member of Natspec has shaped my leadership, supported the growth of the college and allowed me to have access to the best in the business to learn from.”

Our policy work



The 2024–25 membership year brought us a general election and a new UK government and Education Select Committee to influence. We made effective use of our recently launched 2024 manifesto in the lead up to the election, raising awareness of specialist FE amongst MPs and prospective parliamentary candidates. Meanwhile in Wales, we maintained a constructive relationship with the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) implementation team in Welsh Government.



2024–25 also brought us extra capacity in the policy team in the form of policy officer, Will Marshall, enabling us to increase our level of political engagement.

Parliament and Welsh Government

- We worked with Baroness Monckton who secured a House of Lords debate on the contribution of specialist colleges in which several peers highlighted the important work done in our sector.
- As post-16 aspects of the reforms are rolled out in Wales a new Cabinet Secretary for Education commissioned a legislative review of the ALN Code. We directly fed into the review through the Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance.

- We submitted evidence to two Education Select Committee inquiries, one on Solving the SEND crisis and one on FE and Skills. We gave oral evidence twice: senior policy manager Ruth Perry explained the risks to young people with SEND of defunding BTECs while CEO Clare Howard was questioned on the challenges facing the post-16 sector in relation to SEND.



- We submitted evidence to the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee's inquiry into education reform implementation and responded to their consultation, jointly with third sector organisation consortium (TSANA) on routes into post-16 education and training.

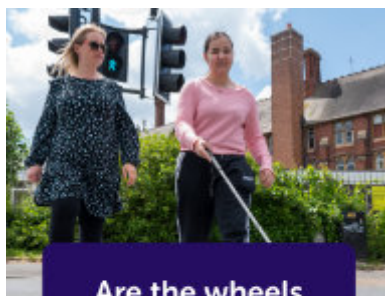
Consultations

- Nine [consultation responses](#) were submitted including a response to Ofsted's Big Listen proposals for 'Improving the way we inspect education', submitting evidence to the Curriculum and Assessment Review and responding to the Treasury's proposed 'VAT and business rates changes affecting private schools'.

Influencing policy

We continued to work closely with the DfE to ensure new policies worked effectively for learners with SEND, securing:

- flexibilities for learners with EHCPs in relation to the English and maths condition of funding
- support to specialist FE colleges to compensate for the rises in national insurance contributions
- more clarity from HMRC and the Treasury in proposals for charging VAT on private school fees, and better support for members as a result
- support for our campaign on post-16 SEND transport, following our [research and report](#). We undertook



Are the wheels falling off?

The state of post-16 transport for learners with SEND



collaborative lobbying work on this issue with families charity, Contact, and worked with Jen Craft MP who is championing our call for fair access for post-16 learners.

We kept post-school SEND in the minds of policy makers through articles and our website:

- a series of five [Rethinking SEND articles](#), jointly published with AoC to help underline our [shared vision](#)
- a response to the ISOS report, 'Towards an effective and financially sustainable approach to SEND in England' and to the Public Accounts Committee report 'Support for children and young people with SEND'
- we guest-blogged for Special Needs Jungle and FE Week
- we refreshed the policy pages on our website, publishing a set of [position statements](#), and launched a new regular policy newsletter, '[Policy Watch](#)' to help members keep abreast of political developments.





“I must say a thanks to you all at Natspec, as the networking, events and information you provide have all really helped to inform much of what we have embedded, so thank you.”

Improving quality

This year we have consolidated Natspec services to provide a more holistic quality support offer.

The Transform, TechAbility and Centre for Excellence teams worked closely together to review the services offered, considering the needs of individual member colleges and the sector, together with external factors, and our findings are informing future developments.



- **69 senior leaders** at Principals Forum discussed partnership working and the importance of increasing understanding of the role of specialist FE provision.



- We started **new networks**, bringing the total to 19. The Quality Network was introduced at the end of last academic year, sharing information and ideas such as the structure of self-

assessment reports and quality improvement plans, and RARPA.

- **312 attendees** at Peer Exchange Week across 12 online sessions on a wide range of topics. 100% rated the sessions excellent or good.



- Around **70 college leaders** attended our annual quality event at Conference Aston, focussing on developing and implementing an ambitious college curriculum with presentations from 4 colleges and lots of networking.
- In September 2024, we introduced a new look [Quality Times](#), with a quality focused article shared each month. Contributions from members have covered a range of topics including transition, the leadership of college improvement, quality assuring FE, learner voice, and CPD to support quality improvement.

Quality Times



Natspec National Conference 2024

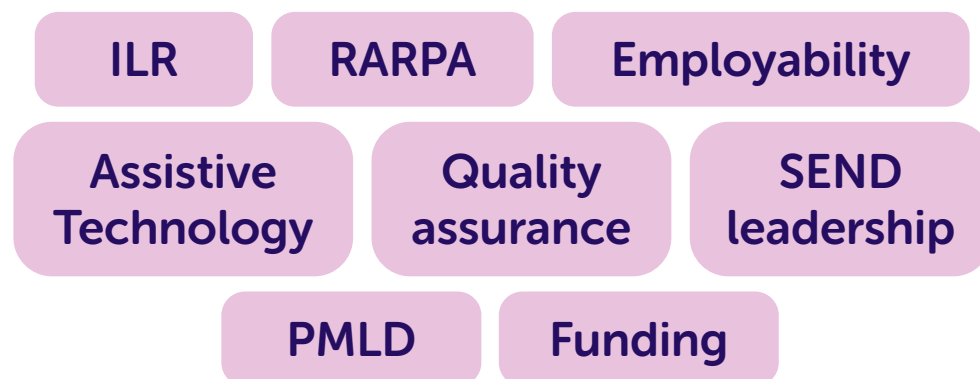
We delivered our biggest ever National Conference despite a fire 5 weeks before forcing a move to a new venue in Manchester. Delegates told us that the speakers, breakout sessions and student involvement were particularly well received.



Training

We redesigned our website, bringing together all our staff support services and showcasing the [training on offer](#).

- We offer training on:



- In response to college demand, we wrote three new courses in 2024-25: [age appropriateness](#), [improve your evaluative writing](#), and [quality assuring specialist FE](#)




Quality assuring specialist FE provision

Learn how to build a rounded, accurate picture of the quality of provision with different quality assurance activities. This two-part training gives you a chance to put theory into practice and reflect on what works for your provision.



Improve your evaluative writing

Improve the quality of your reports and evaluations by developing your evaluative writing skills.



Age appropriateness in post-16 SEND provision

Explore the challenges that can arise in providing age appropriate learning opportunities learners with a complex need or PMLD label.

- Over **3400 attendances** by members at our events, training and networks
- 19 courses** delivered in house to colleges
- We also launched a new training resource for [Learning Support Assistants](#), divided into three themes:

Theme one: the LSA role in your setting.

Theme two: the learning challenges facing young people with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Theme three: practical approaches and strategies to support the learning of young people with learning difficulties and disabilities.



Professional Development for Learning Support Assistants

Theme 1: the LSA role · Theme 2: understanding differences · Theme 3: support strategies

A resource bank for Further Education (FE) settings to facilitate in-house training for staff supporting the learning of students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

What is this resource and who is it for?

Consultancy

- **44 consultancy projects** were delivered, ranging from health checks for new providers, to bespoke consultancy, funding and compliance reviews alongside our college improvement partner service.
- We commissioned a review of our consultancy services that included interviewing member colleges and associates. The recommendations have been (or are being!) implemented to ensure you receive the very best quality and value for money.
- We introduced a new offer for **external governance reviews** – a bespoke package, proportionate to specialist provision, which recognises the importance of external board reviews and the impact these can have.



“ Dawn was inspirational. Communication throughout the whole [consultancy] process was effective and timely. The report was comprehensive and highlighted next steps which we have started to implement. ”

Nine online sessions

Three Communities of Practice

Five provider reviews

Two case studies

750 attendances from **290** providers, 91% rated good or excellent.

TechAbility Conference 2024

With **165 delegates** and **16 exhibitors**, TechAbility24 in Leeds had the highest attendance of any TechAbility Conference so far.

The programme of 12 practitioner delivered sessions had topics ranging from Switch Access to VR experiences and Assistive Technology policy and research. In addition a keynote and Hot Topics discussion were highly rated by delegates.

93% of delegates rated the conference as Excellent or Good and 89% said they were "Very Likely" or "Likely" to apply learning from the conference to their work.





“Excellent training and great content.
I have learnt so much.”

“Fantastic training, resources and
organisation. One of the most engaging
trainings I have been on online.”

Student events



Natspec Games

350 students from member colleges took part in a range of activities and sports such as football, cricket, tennis and Boccia. Thank you to Seashell Trust, Treloar College, Hereward College and Landmarks Specialist College for hosting the 2024 Games.



Student Voice Parliament

157 students from 28 colleges at two Student Voice Parliament events throughout the year, with discussion on learners views on how best to support them with life after college, best practice examples of educating the wider community on disability, the impacts of the proposed Government benefit reforms and Accessibility and Assistance for All, a campaign that aims to increase access to assistive technology across further education colleges as well as raising awareness of how to make resources accessible by design so they are compatible with assistive technology.



Looking forward

During the coming year, we want to focus even more on **helping member colleges improve and develop their provision**, especially in the face of challenges such as **changing student cohorts** and **potential SEND reform**.

Our objectives remain to promote, support and develop specialist FE:

- 1 Promote:** we will represent our members through a new campaign to raise awareness of their work, whilst continuing to influence relevant government departments, officials and parliamentarians in England and Wales
- 2 Support:** we will support specialist FE providers improve the quality of their provision, by improving and extending our QI offer and supporting different types of member college according to need. A new Senior Quality Manager will lead this work
- 3 Develop:** we will develop FE professionals across the sector through a high quality learning and development programme to improve SEND in FE, reaching more of the sector

The Natspec Board



Natspec is governed by a **board of directors**, 8 representing each of the regions and 7 directors who lead on areas of national policy.



This year we said goodbye and thanks to the outgoing Chair, Lynette Barrett, who has stepped down following 4 years as Chair and 9 years on the board. Lynette's experience and expertise, drawn from over 25 years in the sector in a variety of roles from care assistant to Chief Executive at National Star College, has been invaluable. Lynette has been instrumental in helping to diversify the sector, and has taken Natspec through some challenging times, including the pandemic. She has balanced her college roles with representing specialist colleges at national level and overseen the growth of the

organisation with unwavering dedication and commitment to specialist FE.

Paul Cook MBE also stands down from our board as his term of office as Policy Director for Employment comes to a close. Paul has done a tremendous job over 6 years and has been instrumental in raising Natspec's profile in relation to disability employment.

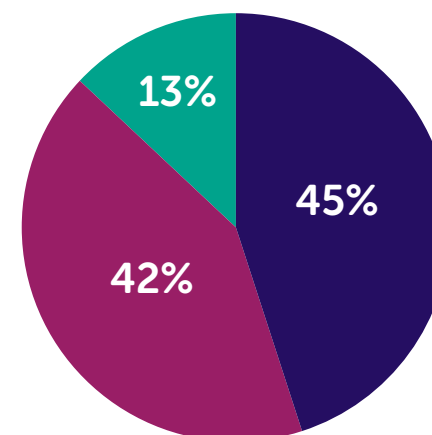
For 2025–26, we welcome a new Chair of Natspec – Ben Bastin, Head of College at Treloar's. Ben was once a professional jazz musician, and has always had a passion for supporting young people to ensure that they lead happy and fulfilling lives.



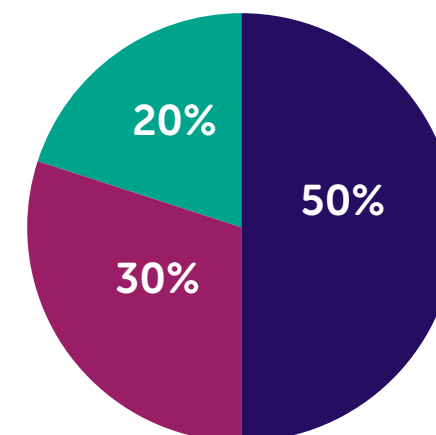
Financial report

Income	Budget	Actuals year end 2025
Member support, networks and events (including national conference) ¹	168,000.00	138,375.00
Training, CPD and consultancy for members and non members ²	399,311.00	451,927.18
Company infrastructure ³	427,050.00	482,602.15
Total	994,361.00	1,072,904.33
Expenditure		
Member support, networks and events (including national conference) ⁴	191,000.00	206,107.96
Training, CPD and consultancy for members and non members ⁵	302,805.00	311,543.39
Company infrastructure ⁶	500,379.00	527,136.42
Total⁷	994,184.00	1,044,787.77
Surplus / deficit	177.00	28,116.56

Income 2024–25



Expenditure 2024–25



- Member support, networks and event
- Training, CPD, consultancy and projects
- Company infrastructure

¹ Mainly conference income from 2024. Also Principals forum and Ofsted/quality events

² Transform and TechAbility events and consultancy performed better than budgeted; ETF grant for Centre for Excellence increased

³ New memberships, higher than expected

⁴ Conference costs significantly higher than budgeted due to move to Manchester

⁵ Increased expenditure in line with increased income on training, consultancy and ETF project

⁶ Costs higher than budget due to increased staff and office costs

⁷ Surplus greater than expected, largely due to increased income from memberships, training, consultancy and SEND centre for excellence



The Natspec team is here to help.

Get in touch with us if you have any questions about your membership and what we can do for you.



Find out more about Natspec's work:

 www.natspec.org.uk

 [@Natspec](https://twitter.com/Natspec)

 [@Natspec_](https://www.instagram.com/Natspec_)

 info@natspec.org.uk

 [Natspec](https://www.linkedin.com/company/Natspec)

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