

Inclusion in Further Education and Higher Education

Derwen College

Derwen College, near Oswestry, in Shropshire, is a national specialist further education college for young people aged from 16 to 25. We currently have 143 residential and day students with a wide variety of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including autism, communication difficulties, challenging behaviours and profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD).

Our strapline is 'a place of possibility'. While we focus on employability and development of independent living and social skills, each student's expectations and outcomes are bespoke and based on supporting them to achieve the very best they can and raise their aspirations.

Students are based at the college's main site in Gobowen, near Oswestry, and at three smaller satellite sites at Walford, Ludlow and Telford. Learners follow vocational pathways in Hospitality and Food, Horticulture, Retail & Enterprise and Performing Arts. Most recently, the College has launched a bespoke Nurture programme which caters for students with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD).

Everything that we do at college is built around inclusivity. There is a sustained commitment to offer students with SEND at the very least equal opportunities to those that any mainstream student should expect. In many instances we believe we go way further.

We are passionate about enabling students to communicate their feelings and opinions, and incredibly proud of our powerful Student Voice initiative that pushes barriers to ensure that every student's views and opinions are heard. The College has an active and powerful elected Student Union Board, with representatives from each programme area, as well as for freshers, satellite sites, day students, LGBTQ+, BAME and Welsh students. Student Voice continues to evolve to reflect changing times and a changing cohort of students. Our practices are constantly evolving to offer the very best opportunities.

Our **Safe Places project** demonstrates our commitment to broadening participation in Student Voice activities so that we can involve the larger student population.

Using a variety of communication tools, student representatives were equipped to

support their peers to identify College areas where they felt 'safe', happy and comfortable. A 'safe' environment is one where students can access what they need without barriers. Students learn and progress better in all aspects of their lives, when they feel safe and happy.

Derwen recognised the need for students – especially those who lack self-confidence or are non-verbal – to be able to communicate where they feel safe, and when they feel anxious or uncomfortable, so that College could make adaptations to make everyone feel 'safe'.

Evidence of going above and beyond

Derwen's vision for Student Voice is to enable students to be heard, and issues discussed and negotiated. It was identified that, whilst some students thrive when enabled to express themselves, there was a risk that students lacking confidence or communication skills, were not being heard.

Inspired by a previous research project, College Autism Advisor, Helen Evans, worked with the College Student Union Board (SUB) on our innovative 'Safe Places' project. The project identified areas around campus where students felt safe and happy, as well areas that made them feel anxious or uncomfortable. A crucial element of the project was to enable our Student Union Board to effectively communicate with every student to gain a college-wide picture of Safe Places, and to give every student a voice. To include each and every student meant using a variety of different communication tools. We also had to work around Covid restrictions.

The project began life virtually during the pandemic, to minimise contact and include all students, even those isolating in residences or at home. Workshops and discussions on what 'safe' meant, and how to communicate this to others, were held online.

As Covid restrictions were lifted, students moved onto using 'Photo Voice', where they were given cameras or used tablets to photograph areas all around campus where they felt safe. They were also asked to describe and comment on how these areas made them feel. The photos collected were collated into a College 'map' for all to see.

Innovation

The Safe Places project allowed students to support other students to have their say. We empowered students on the Student Union Board (who, by self selection,

tend to be the more confident and articulate students) to empower all students to have a voice.

Helen was asked to work with the Student Union Board to hold workshops on what 'safe' meant to them. Board members then visited peers in each department, to explain the project to them. It was crucial that all students were involved in the project, and that it was inclusive and as accessible as possible.

Virtual workshops were held for the College's Student Union Board, to explore and understand what feeling 'safe' means, as a concept.

Helen produced a 'click and drag' activity on PowerPoint where students could identify how they felt about different areas of a communal building. They were able to drag a coloured arrow to a specific area of a photograph depending on how they felt about that area of the photograph.

Once back on campus, the photo voice element of the project could commence. The method was trialled by the student council group first, and then they were encouraged to think how to approach their peers to make sure they could understand and communicate feelings.

The Student Union Board invited the speech and language staff team to a group meeting to ask for support in creating an information sheet and to teach them the relevant Makaton signs to better support peer to peer communication.

The Student Union Board supported peers in taking 86 photos of areas thought of as 'safe'. One student pointed out that she felt safe walking unaccompanied from College Reception to the day student house. We realised that routes between areas were also important.

The project was a positive idea to identify 'safe spaces', but also identified areas deemed 'unsafe'. The reasons for students' feeling this around specific areas were then clarified, and action taken to address the underlying reasons and issue. In this way, no area of the College will be considered 'unsafe' by current and future students.

Students contacted all the peers in their area eg. the Horticulture rep was responsible for explaining the project to his/her work peers. Students also contacted all relevant support staff to ensure that students were supported to not only take photos, but to then upload and send them to the right person.

The photographs and comments were collated into a 'map' of the college and displayed on the Student Union building. Results were presented by the group to the College leadership team and governors. These findings could be used to help action changes that students considered important to make around College.

For this project, Student Union Board members learnt skills in teamworking, discussion, presentation and leadership, while all students were empowered to have a voice.

Through the initiative, we became aware of 'barriers' that we were previously unaware of, and could see instantly the wider value of the project.

Issues about several areas – including a specific toilet and doorway – were raised by many students. A toilet, which is accessed from a classroom, was seen by some as not sufficiently private ('other students might hear me or know where I'm going'). A doorway which was sometimes locked and sometimes accessible frustrated some. Oliver, a motorised wheelchair user, identified a lip under a doorway which made his wheelchair 'jolt' when he used it. Jake, who also uses a wheelchair, communicated that he was unable to visit our Woodland Walk due to narrow gateways. College is removing gates and widening pathways so that he can enjoy the same outside experience as his friends.

Evidence of Sustainment over two years

The Safe Places project is ongoing. As our student cohort and use of areas around College change, it is important that we know that our learners feel 'safe', and able to learn effectively.

The information gleaned and skills learnt are sustainable, and will be updated regularly through work with our Student Union Board.

The board are now working with Senior Leadership to modify and adapt areas deemed 'uncomfortable'. Issues about several areas were raised by many students. Increased privacy, busy or noisy environments, and unpredictable or uncertain circumstances were all raised as barriers of learning for some students.

Student Jake, who uses a wheelchair, communicated that he was unable to visit our Woodland Walk due to narrow gateways.

College is removing gates and widening pathways so that he can enjoy the same outside experience as his friends.

Independence Manager Helen Owen says:

"This has been such a valuable piece of work. We created a photomap of College, which clearly shows that students feel safe in most areas. However, issues came up that hadn't previously been raised, because the question had never been specifically

asked. Issues that staff were unaware of, or just thought of as mild annoyance, proved to be severe barriers for some students.

“Students who were previously unable to communicate feelings of discomfort or anxiety have become empowered to have their say about College.”

The initiative has also further encouraged students to support and help each other in a truly positive and enabling way.

Project leader Helen Evans, has been sharing her ideas of how to support all students to have a voice with Natspec – the membership association for organisations which offer specialist further education and training.

We look forward to sharing our expertise with students with SEND from across the UK.