# Linkage
# Effective Practice in Learner Support

## Background

Linkage College is part of Linkage Community Trust, a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. The Trust was established in 1976 to meet the needs of young people with learning disabilities who require further education, support and training in order to realise their potential for independence. Linkage College provides residential and further education for individuals with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The mission of Linkage College states; "Linkage College will deliver excellence in education and training to learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities, which promotes independence and employability."

In their last Ofsted report, Linkage was described as 'an outstanding college' where 'the achievement levels and quality of learner's work are outstanding. Standards have been maintained over time and are rising'

## Introduction

Linkage has a team dedicated to Learner Support which is the largest team within the organisation; which emphasises the importance placed upon providing our students with the support they require both within the education and residential settings.

This team facilitates students to be involved throughout their college experience. Over the years Linkage found that Learners with a range of LDD required a holistic and concentrated level of support to enable them to achieve their goals and aspirations.

To this end, the Learner Engagement Manager was asked to develop an appropriate new role and responsibilities for a Student Representative post, initiating a Job Description as seen at Appendix 1 and Person Specification. The roles and responsibilities of this key position were fostered around key areas of learner involvement and voice including the most current views and issues that learners described when entering college for the first time.

### Student comments

- 'It would have helped to have another student to ask about things when I first came to college'
- 'There was already someone from my last school when I got to college and he was able to show me where to go and who to ask for help'
- 'I didn't know anybody in college when I joined and it was real scary to start with'

## The Role of Student Representative

It was decided together with learners, that the post of Student Representative should only be open to ex Linkage students as they would have the knowledge and experience of what it is like being a student with Linkage, which would have provided them a valuable insight and that understanding

that new learners would accept as they had ‘gone through it themselves’. Two candidates came forward and both were invited and attended a formal interview with a panel.

### Introducing Our Student Representative – Neil McPhee

The successful candidate at interview was Neil; he had been a student at the Toynton Campus between 1990 and 1992 and had then gone on to live within Linkage’s Care Services and gained both external and internal employment through our employment team. Neil secured this position through his own efforts with very little support from his support worker. Neil currently lives in his own flat semi supported by Linkage staff. He makes his own way to work where he is supported by one of the Learner Engagement Team.
Neil has a number of responsibilities in his role including, working with managers and teams in developing college practice and provision, to oversee the Student Union, to act as an advocate for the learners and represent their views at a number of meetings.
Neil sits within the Learner Engagement Team, LET, and is line managed by a Learner Services Manager, LSM. The LSM supports Neil in managing his time; prioritising his workload; guiding him and helping him promote his own advocacy; to ensure that he can keep his mind focussed on work and home life separately.

## Student Buddy System

Due to continual feedback being sought and received by learners and ex learners, it was decided that the implementation of a ‘Buddy System’ would aid transition into the college for new learners and also act as a vehicle for confidence building, developing relationships, honing interview and application techniques, accepting responsibility and being a role model for the Buddies themselves.

Neil, in conjunction with the Learner Engagement Manager, developed the process of the Student Buddy System as described below. The design of all the relevant paperwork was led by Neil with technical guidance provided by the manager. Things that had to be taken into consideration when producing this paperwork and developing the role included; buddy job description (see appendix 2) what makes a good buddy, what exactly the buddies’ responsibilities should be; how will they be supported in undertaking the role. Neil also had to consider the logistics of combining both the application of the role and the support / supervision time they will need with the education time.

It was important that those students chosen to be buddies received the right level of support to ensure that they could offer the new students sufficient support to make the system viable, that they didn’t find themselves in situations that they didn’t know how to handle and that there was a parity of support and guidance being given to new students as a cohort. Additionally we wanted to ensure that the outcomes of the practical application were measurable to enable effective evaluation of the system to inform future planning and improvement.

The Buddy System allows each new student to be paired up with an existing student who can support them into college during the first term. The aim is to take the worry out of joining a new college as for many of our student this will be their first time away from home for a protracted period.

The process of getting the Buddies in place begins about 6 months prior to the September intake, although students that join the college outside of this normal entry point are also allocated an existing buddy when they join the college.

To become a Buddy any student that has been with Linkage for over one academic year, either volunteer themselves or are nominated by a member of staff. The names are collated by the Student Representative and a series of interviews are set up. Each Buddy is then interviewed by

the Student Representative and a colleague from the Learner Engagement Team. Each candidate is asked a series of questions to determine their suitability for the role.

### A selection of interview questions & responses

**Q** 'What made you put your name forward to be a Buddy?'
**R** 'I think I can help somebody because I know what it's like to be new'

**Q** 'What skills do you think you have…?'
**R** 'Kindness, talking to people, good at listening'

**Q** 'What do you think is important to new students?'
**R** 'It is important for the new students to settle in to the college, to be shown where to go and where the staff are'

**Q** 'Can you tell us what things you expect to do as a Buddy?'
**R** 'Show where classes are, share your circle of friends, teach them the ropes; how to and not to behave. To make the experience an enjoyable one.

Those successful candidates are then informed by letter which serves, along with the interview process; to show the Buddies that the whole role and its responsibilities are important and seen so by the college and is an excellent experience for their CV and future life and work experience.

Each Buddy has a guidance pack, appendix 3 refers, which provides them with guidance, information and contact details of those team members allocated to support them in this role. It also has a diary page in which the Buddies can log any discussions they have with those students they are supporting and record any queries that come up that they need to take back to their support person. Personal details and timetables are also included to assist the Buddies to become more familiar with the students they are supporting. Buddy stickers are provided so that all new students can recognise who else is a Buddy and approach them if their own allocated Buddy is not around.
The key to the success of this system is the tiered support that is in place; the Learner Engagement Team support the Student Representative who supports the students in being Buddies and the Buddies in turn support the new and existing students. This cyclical approach means that the system provides continuous support to iron out any problems that may be encountered by the Buddies whilst offering advice and guidance as part of ongoing confidence building and enhancing all of their learning experience. This integrated support is essential; if one cog is missing then the whole system will cease to function effectively.

LINKAGE
Community Trust