

SEND Engagement – utilising technology

Title: Using digital technology to engage with young people who have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

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1. Introduction

This report provides Thurrock's SEND operational group with an insight into the experiences had by young people with SEND who have been utilising technology to access their academic studies.

2. Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way in which businesses, services and academic settings operate. For many with SEND and their families, the new landscape has proven difficult and daunting to navigate. It is therefore vital that the SEND service continues the engagement work it had in place prior the Covid-19 restrictions.

Face to face engagement opportunities are not possible to run for the foreseeable future and therefore consideration on the use of technology with young people has been explored to establish benefits and challenges.

3. Feedback from stakeholders

As settings are utilising technology for students to continue their academic studies, it was felt best to ask staff of Beacon Hill, Treetops and Thurrock Sensory Service to collate feedback from staff, students and parent carers around the successes and challenges of using technology with SEND.

The key messages are:

- Adapting to remote sessions takes time and adjustment
- There were some students that settings assumed would not be able to access remote sessions but have been pleasantly surprised by the uptake
- For those students and parent carers who have been able to use technology, they report having recognised and gained benefit from remote contact
- For some families, the costs associated with technology presents financial challenges

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- Students have required adaptations or further equipment in order for them to access learning being taught online. For example; linking devices to bigger screens/ TVs, linking hearing aids to computer sound via blue tooth, specialized switches and individual technology set ups, text to speak software etc. etc.
- Technological support is vital to support families as well as leading on remote engagement.
- Signal strength and reliability of internet connection often presents challenges
- Remote engagement takes place using Zoom, online communication such as email, closed Facebook groups, FaceTime and WhatsApp video calling
- Use of Microsoft Teams for online learning can prove difficult for individuals with Visual Impairments (VI) and can lead them to feel rather uncomfortable.

Use of technology

Each of the settings cater for different disabilities and or impairments and therefore their approach to the use of technology during the COVID-19 Pandemic differs.

- Treetops
 - Purchased the 'intouch' application which provides an opportunity to share relevant information including; learning resources, staffing updates, news and story time video.
 - A school's Facebook page is used for parents and staff to keep in contact and weekly challenge videos, sing & sign videos and training videos are also uploaded.
 - For those that are able to use technology, online lessons via Microsoft Teams take place. For those not able to use technology, work is sent out to parents in packs for them to home-school their child
 - Weekly support videos are shared on YouTube by staff which are viewed by a number of parents. Question and answer sessions are set up to be delivered via Zoom but unfortunately these are not well attended
- Beacon Hill
 - Weekly virtual activities including dance, SALT, support for parents, Attention Concentration and Engagement (ACE), music and yoga.
 - Story telling via the school's closed Facebook page
 - 1:1 Speech and language sessions
- Sensory Service – St. Claire's resource base
 - Use of technology has always occurred in the resource base.
 - Learning takes place using various pieces of software – text to speak, voiceover
 - Laptops and a Mac suite are available onsite. Students have received laptops to continue working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic
 - Students have still had their support worker attend their online sessions.

4. So what does this tell us?

- Engagement level, type and format will need to be tailored towards disability and impairment
- Not every student will feel comfortable or confident engaging via a digital platform
- Parent Carers, setting staff and young people require training and ICT support
- Not every young person will have access to technology at home
- The deaf community would really value use of the video BSL translation service

It would appear from conversations had with staff at Beacon Hill, Treetops and Thurrock Sensory Service that the use of technology to access education and remain engaged with the setting community, has been received and used positively by pupils, their parent carers and staff.

It must be acknowledged that disabilities and impairments vary and there is no one-size fits all approach. The reader will note above that all three of the settings have used technology in different ways to engage its pupils and there are a number of key messages to consider when creating digital engagement opportunities for residents in the local area.

Additional information:

- Thurrock Sensory Service informs me that they have previously offered to delivery training to the SEND team around sensory/deaf awareness.
- The digital world is fast becoming inclusive. A Speech and Language teacher at Beacon Hill pointed me in the direction of this consultancy company – [Access Global Group](#)

5. Next steps

In order to drive forward an inclusive, holistic engagement framework, the following recommendations to the Operational Group should be considered:

- 5.1 SEND Caseworkers and managers to undertake training in sensory and deaf awareness
- 5.2 Co-produce approaches to engagement with settings, working with them to overcome barriers

Appendix 2

- 5.3 Consider scope of engagement and how to approach in accordance with information and data already available. There must be 'buy in' from all parties with a vested interest
- 5.4 Consider the relationship between deliverer and pupil; young people will open up when they feel safe and there is agreed trust