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Successful Participation for All: Widening Adult Participation Stocktake at 18 Months

Final Report

Aims and Context

1   This research was commissioned from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) National Office in May 2005. Some eighteen months since the launch of *Successful participation for all*, the LSC strategy for widening adult participation in learning, the time was judged right for an examination of its impact on local LSC operations and provision, and a look ahead to the future prospects for furthering its wider aims. Implementation actions had had time to bed in and show results; at the same time, the policy climate had continued to evolve rapidly since publication.

2   The project spec. was informed by discussion between LSC National Office, the LSC Widening Adult Participation Local Contacts Group, and NIACE. The aims were agreed as follows:

- To examine the nature and impact of local, regional and national activity initiated in the wake of *'Successful participation for all';*

- To highlight factors that hinder activity to widen adult participation

- To consider how widening adult participation sits with more recent strategies and priorities; and

- To revisit and update the aspirations in *'Successful participation for all'.*

Methodology

3   The core research component of this project was a qualitative study using focus groups, interviews and questionnaires to obtain the views of LSC staff and learning providers from Local Education Authorities, Further Education colleges and the Voluntary and Community Sector. In total 11 LSC staff (local and national) and 11 providers participated, meaning some 20per cent of the local LSC network was covered, with the sample covering a good geographical spread. Supplementary desk research among relevant strategic documents enabled a comparison between policy intentions and implementation. Drafts of the report were circulated for comment to all our respondents, to the LSC WAP Local Contacts Group, and to the LSC's Adult Learning External Advisory Group.

4   NIACE would like to thank everyone who contributed views and comments.

The Strategy Itself

5   *'Successful participation for all: widening adult participation'* was published by the LSC in September 2003, following extensive public consultation on a draft strategy launched in May 2003. Publication of the final version was delayed slightly to allow it to take early account of '*21st Century skills: Realising our*

potential', the first cross-government Skills Strategy developed over the summer of 2003. Besides this, other strong influences on the widening adult participation (WAP) strategy were:

- *Inclusive Learning* ('the Tomlinson report')
- *Learning Works* ('the Kennedy report')
- *Success for All*

6   The strategy grew out of LSC's concern that a significant number of adults did not pursue education and training beyond school, and the implications of this for individuals, the economy and wider social considerations such as crime, health and community cohesion. Educational opportunities, it argued, needed to be extended not just through an overall increase in numbers, but by ensuring new participants were from groups and communities under-represented in learning. The rationale behind the strategy's aspirations was that widening adult participation in learning would contribute to LSC's objectives for 2010, specifically:

- Meeting Skills for Life targets
- Meeting Level 2 targets
- Addressing the national skill's agenda
- Contributing to the social cohesion and social exclusion agendas; and
- Promoting demand for, and appreciation of, the value and pleasure of learning.

7   The strategy defined widening participation as: *"a process where education and training providers successfully adapt their programmes and ways of working to meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals and groups whose experiences or circumstances inhibit participation. It involves:*

- Attracting and engaging learners
- Identifying appropriate programmes
- Appropriate support for learners during their programmes; and
- Securing achievement.

8   The vision for 2010 outlined in the strategy was that:

- Adults from all social backgrounds will have the opportunity to engage equally in the learning and skills development available to them, in work and preparation for work

- Adults from all social backgrounds will be empowered to engage equally in learning that helps them contribute as active citizens, utilising and extending their talents to benefit themselves and their wider community

- Adults from all social backgrounds will achieve success and satisfaction from their learning

- Adults from disadvantaged groups will have the support to access and value the benefits associated with education

- Adults will have an equal opportunity to access education and training whatever their gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnic background, disability or age

- Adults will be able, in line with national Skills for Life targets, to acquire literacy, numeracy and language skills to a level that enables them to participate fully in modern life, in employment and recreational activities; and

- Adults, particularly those who experience economic disadvantage, will have opportunities to develop the skills to engage with information technology as a tool for communication, for business and for accessing learning.

Section One: The Nature and Impact of Local, Regional and National Activity Initiated in the Wake of *'Successful Participation for All'*

9   It was agreed not to adopt a 'pass/fail' approach based around individual actions and milestones in the strategy. Rather, impact would be judged by the commitment of LSC staff and providers and the extent of integration of widening adult participation concerns across the LSC 'system' – indeed the strategy points out that "it is essential that there is effective integration and coherence between the different aspects of the LSC's activities to support widening adult participation". Consequently we sought to gauge impact by looking at how the issue is supported through key LSC activities and processes such as:

- Business planning
- Communication within and beyond LSC
- Identification of priority groups
- Monitoring
- Management arrangements
- Funding arrangements

10   We also collected numerous specific examples of approaches that respondents felt were proving successful in widening participation.

11   Though the research was not explicitly structured around the strategy's 'Implementation and delivery plan', it is clear from respondents' and other evidence that much of its broad thrust has been acted on, addressing the milestones that commit LSC to ensuring:

- Measures to address under-representation and agree priority areas (2004)

- Tracking and monitoring systems to support detailed planning (2007)

- Provider base reflecting voluntary and community sector (VCS) contribution and innovative provision (2007)

- Powerful, supportive relationships with key statutory and VCS providers (2004)

- Widening participation included in providers' quality improvement (2004);

- WAP benchmarks as part of provider performance assessment (2004)

- Greatly increased role for employers in their employees' learning (2007)

- First Level 2 achievement a priority for funding (2004)

- National credit system in development (2007); and

- National and regional research programme under way (2004).

Overall Reflections

12   Two very positive points are worth making upfront. Though self-selecting as a group, there was clearly a deep level of commitment to the vision and rationale for widening adult participation among the respondents in this research – an impression reinforced by the level of frustration when setbacks occurred and concerns among some about the implications of the tightening of targets and budgets for adult learning. Asked what widening participation meant to them, respondents suggested:

- *"We're looking at widening participation in terms of changing a mindset. We're looking at changing people's concept of training".*

- *"To engage people into learning opportunities that will benefit them as life-long learners; or benefit the communities in which they live and to support them to become economically prosperous."*

- *"I think there are middle class people who are knowledgeable and they use national funding to fund their learning. And those who might not be as outspoken or outgoing have missed out. And we need to make sure we give them the opportunity."*

13   Moreover the view among LSC respondents was that WAP considerations were indeed integrated into the mainstream of LSC business, and that widening participation should encompass all areas of LSC provision for adults, not just to the first-step, non-accredited, non-vocational, community-based stereotype which is in danger of keeping the issue marginalised and vulnerable.

The place of the strategy itself

14   Interestingly, however, they did not see their work on widening participation as directly derived from, or referring to, the strategy document itself, at least on a day-to-day basis - not necessarily a bad thing if, as this implies, its messages are now part of everyday thinking. *"In some ways …. you could say anything is widening participation, you could say we're doing fantastically, but I don't think it's solely down to the widening participation strategy."* None of the providers said they had ever been explicitly approached by their LLSC to discuss the WAP strategy and the part they could play in implementing it.

15   The legacy of the Tomlinson and Kennedy reports, previous activity such as non-Schedule 2 pilots, and the extensive collaboration and consultation that preceded the strategy's delayed publication might go some way to account for this – an example of the process being at least as valuable as the 'output'. For the purposes of this research, though, this did make it difficult sometimes to extract information – for example, on resources devoted to widening participation – and to attribute action directly to the impact of the Strategy document itself.

16   Other factors that affect all such strategies may well have a bearing here too. The majority of respondents commented on the gap between national guidance and local implementation: *" … if you look at the items in it, they're very strategic and very high level. They're not very easily deliverable things".* Comments from one local LSC (LLSC) respondent elaborated this point, outlining the challenge of reconciling national policy with a messier picture at grassroots level where other pressures, tensions and even personalities have an influence. *"The closer you get to local issues, the very grass roots, that's where it becomes harder.... .I think the tools needed to make the policies work at local and sub-regional level do need to be refined."*

17   The sheer proliferation of strategies, initiatives and guidance were also cited by LSC and providers as diminishing impact.

LSC Business Plans and Other Documentation

18   The majority of local LSC respondents maintained that aims, objectives and activities around widening adult participation were embedded throughout business plans, which in turn linked into providers' 3-Year Development Plans (3YDPs) and to activities such as Strategic Area Reviews (StARs). Sometimes WAP featured more prominently in certain subsections, or subsidiary plans such as a specific adult participation plan. In at least one case widening participation was additionally picked out as a cross-cutting theme for monitoring, with explicit WAP targets for all providers: in another, the LLSC plan explicitly picked out a 'headline' on WAP this year (following pressure from the WAP lead in the office).

19   Specific examples of widening participation entries cited included:

- *"Priority 7 in our Local Activity Plan: "Prioritise support to neighbourhoods that consistently demonstrate lower than average rates of participation in learning or other relevant disadvantages"*

- "Pilot the delivery of Level 1 and Level 2 learning in VCS organisations under mainstream funding conditions"

- *"Have developed and signed-off a Joint Adult Participation Strategy with XXXXshire County Council and within this identified relevant CC support for adult learners and VCS organisations."*

20   That said, the absence of an explicit mention of WAP in the LSC's Annual Statement of Priorities was felt to have weakened its profile in local planning. The LSC's VCS and Equality and Diversity (E&D) strategies, which were included, were not an adequate or appropriate substitute, and their inclusion made the gap more marked. Despite continued strong pressure to keep the Statement "lean and focused", LSCNO has now secured agreement that the widening participation will be included next time.

21   One focus group pointed out the anomaly that LSC headline targets are mostly about achievement rather than participation (though one LLSC reported some volume targets under each of the different widening participation categories) and the continuing concern that some WAP activities are about 'soft targets' which do not lend themselves to numerical counting to judge effectiveness.

22   Respondents made the point that coverage of WAP in providers' 3YDPs was not always explicitly labelled as such: often it was bound up with initiatives or funding streams such as Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities (NLDC); Local Initiative and Development Fund (LIDF); European Social Fund (ESF); Voluntary and Community Sector Capacity-Building Funding (VCS CBF); Information Advice and Guidance (IAG). Suiting vocabulary to audience could also have a bearing – see 'Presentation and language' below.

Communicating Plans and Priorities for WAP

23   Typically, LLSCs felt that key LSC business documents and operations were the primary media for communicating messages about WAP, one respondent citing: *"local Annual Statement of Priorities; ESF prospectus; LLSC Annual Business Plan; 3 Year Development Planning with providers: VCS Implementation Plan and routine links with providers and partners"*. LSCNO would like to open more LSC internal guidance documents to external partners *"since we're all working together"*.

24   Internally, several LLSC WAP leads reported regular meetings with other teams in the office, as part of a wider system of cross-office KITs. Policy workshops for staff and cross-directorate groups were also mentioned. At National Office, WAP leads participate in 'learning lunches' and a short weekly meeting with the Communications team; the latter is seen as something they could make more of.

25   The Widening Adult Participation Newsletter circulated from LSCNO is often disseminated to external partners: one LLSC respondent forwards it to local Learning Partnerships (LPs) and Councils for Voluntary Service (CVSs) for posting it on their own websites. There was a feeling, however, that more could be done to publicise achievements and challenges in widening participation, at local/regional level: local newsletters and websites, regional celebration and practice-sharing events and consultations involving providers and 'stakeholders' were all suggested as likely media for this.

26   Providers' own recruitment and publicity play a big part in promoting wider participation in learning to individuals themselves, and they also tackle the issue collectively through provider forums and partnerships.

Presentation and language

27   Respondents frequently made the point that WAP aims can be pursued effectively without making it a headline message, by putting other priorities in the foreground and altering language to suit different audiences. For example, work-based learning can be a very fruitful context for drawing in new learners, but the language and approach used with employers has to focus on the business benefits of upskilling their workforce or solving their recruitment problems: *"You wouldn't use touchy-feely language with employers"*. Discussions with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were another forum in which leading with an economic argument could be more effective.

Multi-way communication – listening as well as broadcasting

28   LSCNO identified information-sharing between national and regional/local levels as an area for improvement for them (which arguably chimes with the reflections on 'strategising' above). Specifically, the aim is to change the focus *"so we have somebody who is more aware of what is going on locally and regionally and gets out there more and gathers information."*

29   LSCNO also discerns an appetite for more working between regions – or at least better direct communication links that can bypass Coventry and supplement the Local Contacts Group (LCG) meetings that happen two-three times a year. Some sort of electronic forum might be a quick solution.

30   LSC respondents at local and national level also regretted not having enough time and opportunity to listen to providers and, particularly, learners – something everyone would like to do more, since it brought their work to life and taught them a great deal in a short time. *"It makes it real. …………..You're with a group of people you've never met before and you find out more about what they're doing in … an hour or so."*

Priority Groups

31   Nationally, six or seven categories are defined, which can be added to by LLSCs to suit local circumstances. Most recent national priorities identified are older learners and offenders. Family learning is now sufficiently well matured and bedded in for particular categories (young parents, fathers, grandparents) to be prioritised under this overall heading.

32   Among all respondents, the most commonly-cited priority groups were:

- Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups - especially males

- Offenders;
- Older learners and workers;
- People with Language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) needs; and
- Travellers.

33   Also mentioned were:

- Males;
- People with skills below Level 2
- Long term unemployed people
- Single parents;
- Returners to work
- Learners with disabilities
- Learners with learning difficulties
- Learners with mental health difficulties
- Employees with low skills
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Rural areas and market towns; and
- *"All disaffected and disadvantaged communities".*

34   One LLSC respondent drew a clear distinction between the LSC's role in identifying groups of non-participants and low-skilled people, and providers' role in understanding the characteristics of potential learners – the reasons behind the lack of education, and therefore ways to reach and teach them. Similarly, another described supporting different providers to work with different groups with whom they had developed expertise and demonstrated success, such as people with mental health difficulties.

35   Unemployment is often not the biggest problem. Providers and LLSCs all highlighted as a priority people in work who lack basic and vocational skills at the levels needed in today's labour market, and outlined the different set of organisational and financial challenges this brings. For example, people may be liable for fees, however high these are in proportion to low incomes: *"people would think twice about taking a course if it meant spending the money on the course or spending it on their family. And as costs go up, I guess that group will find it more difficult."*

Identifying priority groups

36   The consensus was that until now "widening" had often been interpreted as "increasing", with additional numbers being achieved through the easiest means and leaving the 'hardcore' of the most marginalised groups untackled – an understandable approach given the drivers and levers in the system. In Skills for Life (SfL), for example, targets are being reached but there are signs that that the requirement to do so may have distracted some attention and effort away from the genuinely hardest to help with whom the Moser committee was concerned. This creates a strong case for 'smarter' and more directive use of data by LLSCs. As one respondent remarked: *"I think even the term 'Widening Participation' is now*

actually wrong. We don't want widening participation, we want… …targeted participation."

37   However, several respondents reflected on the difficulties in identifying people most in need. Small pockets of learning deprivation do not register in national measures and are harder to pick up and tackle locally – a particular problem in apparently affluent rural areas. Small, scattered numbers of people from black and minority ethnic groups too are harder to notice and work with. Though belonging to a BME group is not automatically synonymous with being 'hard to reach', and in some areas young white males show much lower rates of participation.

38   The main sources of information cited for identifying priority groups were:

- The Individual Learner Record (ILR). One LLSC lead noted that they had worked hard to get providers to record data accurately (postcodes, for example, and level of provision) in order to be able to pinpoint trends and gaps. The LLSC was now working on a database which would track the distribution of funding by provider, geographical area and learning level

- The Index of Local Deprivation (used to identify communities to benefit from NLDC)

- The national census (used to identify pockets of deprivation and demographic makeup)

- Providers' performance against Equality and Diversity Impact Measures (EDIMs);

- StAR evidence on VCS organisations; and

- Original research and surveys - judged expensive and difficult, but valuable. One LLSC mentioned extensive research among learners and non-learners, the latter category proving particularly challenging until they drew on user and non-user groups established by a provider.

39   Several LLSCs talked about moving to define target groups in a more sophisticated and specific way and write these into provider contracts. There are signs that this clear steer would be welcomed by other providers: one commented that their LLSCs' intentions on WAP were not always clear, and that although the local office had collected a great deal of data on the local population *"they don't really have much of a strategy yet; they just have data and maps. We have a sort of meeting where we all get around, a bunch of providers, and that's meant to be the forum where they check the strategy but there isn't one."*

40   LSCNO outlined the 'Participation Index' developed by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and piloted by LLSCs in the East Midlands, intended as a tool to inform local offices' planning and gauge the effectiveness of widening participation activity. As piloted, the Index assembles data on learners

across work-based learning (WBL), further education (FE) and adult and community learning (ACL) broken down by gender, age, ethnicity and ward level and maps these onto 2001 Census data, then compares local results against regional and national breakdowns to show expected rates of participation. Evaluation of the pilots made the point that local knowledge (for example. about transport, availability of childcare) is still needed in interpretation of the data and decisions about resulting action, and also recommended:

- Using socio-economic group and/or workforce status (employed unemployed; economically inactive; and so on) as indicators
- Adding qualifications studied for
- Taking account of Travel to Learn/Travel to Work patterns – inflow and outflow from LLSC areas
- Adding Higher Education (HE) and employer-funded learning
- Analysing by cross-regional LLSC cluster groups; and
- Enabling providers too to use data for EDIM planning.

Monitoring Progress Towards WAP Goals

41 This was highlighted by LLSCs as a difficult area. Mechanisms/vehicles cited (most common first) were:
- Reviews of provider 3YDPs
- Reviews of LLSC Annual Activities Plan
- Reviews of Business Plan commitments
- Quarterly review of annual plan and adult participation plan
- Providers' own internal business plans and targets
- Monitoring performance, outcome and outputs of specific initiatives and projects; and
- Through financial data - where WAP leads or teams have their own discrete budget.

42   One LLSC respondent reported a clear link through her own personal work objectives to those of her team then to the LSC at local, regional and national level.

43   Providers saw ILR data as a key information source for measuring the extent and nature of participation and achievement: one reported that by producing data on recruitment, achievement and retention by areas targeted as priorities for widening participation, they could show that: *"50 per cent of our students are from widening participation areas; only 30 per cent of all local people are in widening participation areas. The effect has clearly had an impact."*

44   Inspection was also briefly mentioned in this context, as it examines the nature and quality of learning on offer, and quality control procedures.

Staff Resources and Management for Widening Participation

Locally

45   While no two LLSCs organise responsibility for widening adult participation in the quite same way, certain patterns seem to be common:

- A director or senior manager who leads or champions WAP (where time spent on this was estimated this ranged from 10 per cent-50 per cent); and

- A dedicated team or individual (depending largely on overall the size of the LLSC – 10 staff was the largest estimate); or

- An individual combining WAP with other responsibilities such as ACL, IAG, VCS, e-learning, regeneration (one estimate was 50 per cent spent on WAP).

46   One respondent described an Inclusion Team "*focussed on Widening Adult participation with remit for ACL, Offenders, SfL, IAG, Equality and Diversity, LLDD, the Vol Comm Sector and partnerships.*"

47   Whatever their local arrangements, all LLSC respondents emphasised that WAP was an issue to which the whole organisation contributed in some way. *"It's a holistic thing, that's what it's all about." "You know, it's just in all areas of the office."*

Nationally

48   Responsibility for widening participation sits with an eight-strong team at LSCNO. Data collection and analysis was identified as one of its strengths; communication as an area for improvement. Making better links with the skills and employers' agenda is also seen as a priority.

49   Along with other LSC advisory groups, the external group that oversaw the WAP strategy has now been reconstituted into a new Adult Learning External Advisory Group, with a refreshed membership intended to bring a new impetus to consultation and monitoring.

Among providers

50   Broadly similar arrangements existed as for LLSCs i.e. overall responsibility as part of a senior management role; dedicated team / individual or WAP as part of someone's overall role. Providers were emphatic, too, that contributions to WAP objectives came from across their organisation and beyond, among a sometimes extensive and complex range of partners, franchisees and sub-contractors, though one respondent described initial difficulties in winning over subject tutors to working with new groups of learners (a parallel with the challenge faced by some LLSC WAP leads). *"We try to explain to [the tutors] how it might be good for them and it opens opportunities for them and it can extend what they can do."*. LAs voiced unease about the implications for adult education generally of merging education and children's' services.

The regional dimension

51   LSCNO is keen to encourage a regional approach to WAP, and the Widening Adult Participation Action Fund (WAPAF) was recognised at both national and local level as an early vehicle for this - with slow but growing success. A deliberate move to regional LSC representation on the reconstituted group overseeing the VCS strategy had the same intention behind it, and Skills for Life has had a regional angle since it began. One LLSC respondent maintained that, through established groups, everything he was involved in already had some sort of regional context, and that *"it's interesting to see it with a regional focus because it puts more brains into the activities."* However one LLSC highlighted a general tension between moves to regional operations and their need to work flexibly with the five different Local Authorities (LAs) in their sub-region.

52   Perhaps because of the nature of the patch, in London there are signs of regional working in several areas. For example, a pan-London LSC group covers the VCS and WAPAF, with a link into the LCG convened by LSCNO. The pan-London Refugees and Migrants Qualifications Project, led by one LLSC, is integrated within a wider London Refugee Economic Action and the Fast Forward Grants programme brings the lead LLSC into a wider partnership including Government Office for London, the London Development Agency, and London-wide VCS bodies.

53   In the North West LLSCs works collectively on the VCS strategy (with links to the national LSC VCS Forum) and WAPAF, as well as supporting a WAP group under the wider regional Post-16 Network. In another region, a well-established, externally-facilitated network based around ACL effectively shares information about WAP.

54   Where providers commented, the signs are that any moves to regionalisation – as regards WAP – have yet to make themselves felt at provider level: *"Regionalisation: it's a bit like ……. they know they want to do something, but they don't know what they want to do."*

Funding To Support Widening Participation

LSC budgets

55   All found it impossible to put a firm figure on the amount or proportion of LSC funding devoted to WAP. Discretionary budgets are easier to track - nationally, there is, for example: £2m for VCS CBF; £2.4m for WAPAF; £11m for family learning, £26m for family literacy. Difficulties arise when trying to calculate how much of 'mainstream' funding contributes to WAP – demonstrated by widely divergent estimates by LLSCs:

- *"I suspect it's a huge amount. I suspect it's over 50per cent of our budget."*

- *"5per cent of our budget."*

- *"I would guess it's less than 10 per cent."*

- *"£2,982,066 currently supports WAP from development funding, 10.6 per cent of the budget."*

- *"For family learning and widening participation we've probably got about £1.5 million [out of] £25 million."*

- *"Approaching £5m supports VCS engagement activity, 90per cent of the £9m ACL funding is targeted to sub L2 adult provision and incalculable levels of FE, SfL and ESF resource supports WAP activity."*

- *"Difficult to determine but estimate: FE £1.26m; ACL up to £6m; LID £350k; NLDC £0.5m; WAPAF £80k; VCS CBF £45K; ESF £2m"*

- *If you look nationally, I think half of the money is spent in some way of supporting groups that you would say contribute to widening participation strategies."*

56   Two providers offered a guess:

- *"I think it's about 12.5 per cent of the total college [budget] that goes to 19+ and then what part of that goes to reach the difficult to reach population? It's not zero, but it's not much."*

- *"Approximately £150,000 for 2004/5 is directly allocated to WAP out of £15 million income. Core funding only."*

Other funding issues – flexibility, consistency, contracting

57   Both national and local LSC respondents made the point that, used creatively, relatively small quantities of funding could achieve a great deal - the £2m VCS CBF and WAPAF being examples. *"I think that's the thing about the funding, if it's flexible, it makes a difference. If you can give a small amount like £5000 to small organisation, it makes a huge bonus. To refurbish a reception area or give it a fresh lick of paint or put in a ramp somewhere for disabled access. Really small scale stuff that makes a difference. It gives out a positive message. ".* Sometimes a small amount of money is all that is needed, and indeed all that an organisation can realistically cope with - the success of the Global Grants programme (up to £10,000 for short-term projects by small community organisations) illustrates this.

58   Several LSC and provider respondents expressed a wish for greater stability and consistency in funding, arguing that this was possibly as important as levels of funding. Sustainability was also a concern – pilots are funded initially but then expected to maintain themselves – the national skills pilots with homeless people being a recent example – which is not always possible, resulting in setbacks and disappointments.

59   LSC procurement rules were identified as a hindrance to negotiation and contracting, especially with VCS groups which operate on very small margins (though VCS ways of working can often lead to slow responses on their part too).

Other funding sources

60   The few examples given of non-LSC funding sources contributing to WAP were:

- RDAs (Fast Forward Grants; funding for refugees and migrants)
- ESF
- European Regional Development Funding (ERDF)
- Urban II
- Job Centre Plus
- Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)
- Sports Council
- Market Towns Initiative; and
- ChangeUp.

Partners and Influences Supporting Widening Participation

61   While LSC systems and funding can of course influence provider behaviour with regard to WAP, focus group participants were keen to point out that other factors were significant to them too, such as:

- Their own mission statement or values
- *"the specific communities that we work with and serve";*
- Local knowledge, local priorities or gaps in learner representation and supporting existing provision which increases the learner base
- Practicalities - *"We did no adult work until 1998. Lots of capital investment sat there and did nothing and the principal thought we should use it";*
- *College governors*
- *VCS management committees; and*
- *Local Authority elected members.*

62 Providers also made the point that they could be a reciprocal influence on LSC, keeping widening participation on the agenda. One VCS representative emphasised that working strategically, initiating partnerships and communication channels between fellow providers and LSC, was also a very important aspect of her activity to support widening participation.

63 JobcentrePlus (JCP) was seen as a key influence on LLSCs, with overlapping agendas on welfare to work, IAG, basic skills, workforce development and apprenticeships. Despite the common ground, however, gaps in interpretation appear to crop up – for example, a concern was raised that at present JCP is assuming, mistakenly, that LSC provision is ready geared up to meet the needs of Invalidity Benefit claimants it is now seeking to bring back into the labour market.

64 Besides JCP, IAG and work-based learning brings LLSCs into contact with Trade Unions, learndirect, Business Link, employers, Connexions and the Probation Service, and the evidence demonstrates that people are increasingly routinely thinking of this wider range of contacts in respect of widening participation. Testbed Learning Communities (TLCs) have also encouraged wider links, including partners in adjacent spheres such as health promotion. LLSC respondents also identified Learning Partnerships and local regeneration bodies as having an influence on their WAP activity.

Activities to Widen Adult Participation

65 Focus groups and interviews revealed a wide range of activity contributing to widening participation among adults. This adds to evidence of effective practice from other sources, a recent example being the LSDA/NIACE publication '*Breaking down the barriers: Success in widening participation: a toolkit approach*' compiled to support implementation of the WAP strategy. Further examples are developing through WAPAF – also directly attributable to the strategy implementation plan.

66 Views on what was proving successful for WAP coalesced around the following:

- Partnership and collaboration – making best use of different areas of expertise – becoming more than the sum of its parts

- Embedding WAP – sharing responsibility across all areas of business and all providers – the 3YDPs being a useful vehicle for this; and

- Better data, and more intelligent use of it, to inform planning and refine targeting.

67   Despite their limitations, respondents remarked that short-term, 'offline' initiatives (WAPAF; VCS CBF) could be valuable in refreshing and energising people and practice.

Community venues

68   Several providers and LLSCs cited outreach through small community venues of all sorts as a key widening participation activity, using them as gateways to education for people deterred from learning by circumstance, geography or attitude (though another respondent reported a decrease in outreach activity). Provision was aimed at getting people engaged and achieving so they were ready to tackle higher level or more formal learning, and guidance was always an important element.

> *"For example Woodside, a very rundown area which is to be regenerated one community worker there started off a digital photography project -   they funded a photographer to go in for a little while so now they have there a group of people who are really inspired to do photography. One lady who has been in a factory job for 40 years, has just left it and is now going to be a photographer. They've got a big exhibition on. What they've found is as they take photos, they don't know what to write under the photos, so now they have a demand for basic skills to support what would have been quite 'soft learning'. So those individual people who are out there working with them, are targeting small …. hard to reach groups".*

Partnerships for delivery

69   Working through partner organisations is seen as sometimes the only way to reach certain groups of potential learners. *"There's a….women's training centre and it's for Muslim girls who wouldn't be going to the local college so what we're doing is '" putting something there that can … benefit that population." "With ….refugees, there are a lot of organisations that work alongside the refugee camps ……….and we sort of provide training with them. The college has to go around and make arrangements with the local agencies to facilitate that."*

70   Given the importance of partnerships, franchising and sub-contracting in WAP activity, several LLSCs talked about brokering relationships and actively facilitating coordination among organisations involved, with increased use of mapping information about needs and provision, though the feeling seemed to be that there was still wastage and overlap to be dealt with.

Supporting providers

71   Several respondents commented on the rising quality of VCS providers, and their varied roles as providers, hosts, supporters and signposters, and there

were also several examples of LLSC encouragement of and investment in VCS consortium arrangements:

"… what we have now established is a consortia of the four main voluntary sector agencies called 'Right People Right Skills', and on that we have …. people from each agency and also someone from each of our learning partnerships, with the idea that the smaller organisations can come together in a cooperative. To enable them to contact each other more efficiently. We also offer an 18 month core package – modules that help them deal with an inspection package."

"… we've not only funded our own staff, but we funded people in the VCS and although that doesn't mean a lot, the fact that people are more aware of diversity and things like that will make a difference to the way they approach learners so I think it will impact."

Information, Advice and Guidance

72   The emphasis on progression makes IAG crucial. As one LLSC respondent put it:

"We just said, it is integral to WP and to learning. If you've got a learner who's started on their journey, they are going to get lost very quickly without effective IAG. It's a very complicated pathway to progression. It's not just about widening access in the first place, it's about getting people in the 'family'…."

73   It was widely recognised too that boundaries between IAG and learning can – and should – be usefully blurred sometimes:

" ….if we don't have an IAG service to back it up then we need the IAG function to be embedded in the learning. There's an awful lot of …. tutors out there doing things in outreach situations that they need to be very, very skilled, more skilled than people think."

Addressing low numbers and retention

74   Running classes with low numbers is expensive but can prove effective in building momentum and reputation in a venue or community, and one provider had written some early 'loss-leaders' into their overall budget. One LLSC representative described a practical, robust approach to ensuring viability and retention*: "Try and get across to them that some of the effort also has to come from them to ….. get a viable group so that the providers then come out and even then, they might have to pay. When they do their prospectuses and they put their charges in, they put next to it …….what it really costs. People actually start to value it more. They're paying £30, but it's costing £200."*

Demand-led provision

75   One Local Authority (LA) representative described experimenting with a 'just-in-time', demand-led model: *"find out what's going on in their areas and then turn up with a package of offers and ….. hoping that people will turn up. …….find the students first and hopefully that will get them going. In March we had no programmes for September. We go and find the people and find out what kinds of things they want and then hopefully in four weeks time it will be there. Like I said, I don't know how this will turn out because we're not far enough in to it to know."*

76   However another provider highlighted the dilemma of feeling compelled to expand in areas the LSC wants – SfL was cited – rather than allowing the organisation to focus on what it perceives as its strengths.

'Dedicated' budgets supporting WAP

77   Directly spawned by the WAP strategy, WAPAF has developed momentum after a slow start and is producing interesting work bringing learning to new audiences in a variety of ways, such as:

- Projects working with the BBC encouraging marginalised groups of people to tell their stories on air (encompassing SfL, communication and technical skills)

- Exploring effective delivery of learning in remote rural areas; and

- Equipping grassroots VCS staff and volunteers to deliver quality-assured learning.

78   Projects were commissioned with a realistic eye from the start on the chances of sustainability and mainstreaming. The commitment of local/regional LSCs to the work was demonstrated in a very practical way by their finding funding to continue (most of) the projects after the central budget was withdrawn.

79   Family learning continues to be popular and successful, and has been running long enough to make it possible for providers to develop expertise, for sound evidence of effectiveness to be extracted and emulated, and for areas for deeper and more specialised investigation (such as the needs of families with disabled children) to be pursued.

80   Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities too, having been available for three/four years, has matured to spawn some diverse and innovative activity (illustrated in the recent publication *'Neighbourhood learning for regeneration: lessons and case studies from the Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities Fund'*) that adds up to a useful body of evidence, as well as demonstrating again the disproportionately big impact that small sums of money can make.

Employer Training Programme

81   The Employer Training Programme (ETP), enabling employers to support staff to achieve Level 2 or 3, was also identified as having potential to widen participation by LLSCs involved in the pilots. Early evaluation evidence from pilot activity suggested that participants had included people who were new to learning, and the arrangements address the difficulties of time, opportunity and cost that can deter low-skilled, low-income workers from undertaking education under their own steam.

Offender Learning and Skills

82   Several respondents cited this initiative, for which LSC took on responsibility in 2004, as giving new impetus and different perspectives to widening participation activity.

A sample of other activity

83   Other specific examples raised by respondents included:

- Using regional funding to run workshops on PQASSO (a VCS quality standard) for BME-led VCS groups which the LSC had found it difficult to get involved

- Providing learning focusing on farm diversification for farmers hit by Foot and Mouth Disease who have previously proved resistant to education;

- Developing a structure for involving learners and non-learners in the design and planning of ACL

- Listing specific priority groups to be targeted through Bite Size;

- Developing distinct 'sub-priorities within family learning, such as families who have children with learning difficulties

- Writing into contracts a requirement that providers made IAG available at the end of courses, to support progression

- Developing a website for learning materials accessible to UK online centres, libraries and colleges, for use with teacher / facilitator support

- Establishing a learning consortium include LEAs, colleges and VCS organisations

- Translating literature

- Running women-only classes

- Providing mobile classrooms with laptops

- Running open days and parent evenings in local communities

- Supporting a local college that has expertise in community development and regeneration; and

- Identifying and analysing successful and less successful WAP practice among VCS organisations.

Nationally/centrally led work

84   LSCNO cited the VCS strategy, revision of the quality improvement strategy and developments in IAG as key activities initiated at national level to support widening participation. The most recent IAG arrangements are meant to provide a universal entitlement so that every person over 20, whether employed or not, has access to the information and advice they require, though they are too new to give a verdict on effectiveness - some areas are delivering to the expected target numbers and audiences, others are not.

85   National Office has also commissioned research and development work from LSDA, such as the '*Participation Index'* mentioned above and *'Widening adult participation in learning: a systematic review of strategies'*, which synthesised previous written evidence on 'what works' in widening participation.

86   Information on WAP and engaging hard-to-reach adults is also included on the LSC-sponsored Skills and Education Network (though signs are that this website is not well known).

87   RARPA is now set for roll-out, providing for systematic recognition of non-accredited work, a development welcomed by LLSC and providers alike.

88   The Framework for Achievement (FfA) is also keenly awaited as a potentially very promising way of engaging and progressing wary learners, providing small steps that add up to bigger, more recognised qualifications. Pilot activity begins early in 2006. All our respondents were anxious for clarity about how RARPA and the FfA link up.

Section 2: Barriers to Widening Adult Participation

89   Some points of difficulty and potential areas for improvement are mentioned in the previous section. When asked specifically about barriers to widening adult participation, discussion coalesced around:

- Funding – levels, flexibility and consistency
- Progression – tracking learners and proving value
- Different interpretations of 'demand'
- Communication – consistency, clarity and transparency; and
- Misperceptions about the 'safeguard'.

90   The influence of other strategies and priorities, which also arose in this context, are dealt with in the next chapter.

Funding – Levels, Flexibility and Consistency

91   LLSCs and providers were keenly aware of the reasons behind the squeeze in funding for adult learning, and how this could hamper aspirations for widening participation. With discretionary funding dwindling achievement of targets – for example, on Skills for Life – has to be supported from scarce core funding, leaving people feeling that *"The government doesn't pay anything for us to do it.".* Support costs such as childcare are also proving more difficult to find, despite the crucial part they play in attracting adults to participate in learning. With the extension of the European Union, LLSCs also feared that ESF would drop "drastically", removing another source of funding for activity to widen participation.

92   Inconsistency in funding was seen as arguably a bigger problem than amounts available: *"Not only is there a shortage of funding, there is also an ongoing change of policy and change of emphasis which exacerbates the lack of funding …… the two of them together, tend to create an a tension within the sector.".*

93   Respondents emphasised the importance of dependable, long-term provision and providers in order to win the trust and confidence of wary learners*: "These things, they take time and we're talking about building confidence in learners to get them into learning and how can we do that without conveying a confident message to our providers.".*

94   There was also a feeling that both the value and the genuine costs of WAP activity were not properly acknowledged: *"We all know ………. it is going to cost money to genuinely widen participation, because people don't take straight fast routes into learning, they are hesitant to learn. ………. If we are genuinely trying to address the needs of those who aren't in reach, it's going to cost even more than*

just a little bit of extra money." The commitment of providers' staff – especially those working out in the community – meant they were devoting more of their own time and resources to ensuring the best possible experience for their learners than was ever registered through standard reporting and budgeting systems.

Progression – Tracking Learners and Proving Value

95   LLSC respondents clearly recognised the importance of progression for learners – by which they meant ensuring a sensible range of opportunities are available, with support to take advantage of them. Several said that they were increasingly placing a stronger emphasis on this in contracts with providers, even those running Bite Size, so that any learning experience could potentially be built on: *"No point in getting them interested in the course for a two hour session and then saying sorry, there's nothing else for you to do………….. There should be some provision for them to go on to that is more appropriate for them…….. It's not an ideal world, it doesn't happen every time but it's what we're trying to do."*.

96   One or two expressed misgivings as to whether provider-based support for progression could be truly impartial, given the desire to retain learners.

97   Progression was also seen as justifying the kind of first steps and non-accredited learning that can attract reluctant learners. LLSC respondents were convinced that this could provide valuable 'throughput' to more formal accredited learning as well as bringing about life changes in other areas. However they and providers all highlighted the difficulties of demonstrating cause and effect to an extent that could win over sceptics.

98   Some of this is to do with the separation of interventions and outcomes and the other factors in adult's lives. It is difficult to prove that having fun on a Bite Size taster was <u>the</u> deciding factor that led to someone signing up for college a year later, qualifying and getting a job. One respondent drew an analogy with advertising – they know 50per cent isn't successful but don't know which 50per cent. *"We can say … we brought an extra 10per cent of people in doing Level 2s, but we're not sure what did it. We don't know what made it more successful. We don't know what it is that changed their mind."*.

99   There is also the more basic logistical difficulty of tracking learners, particularly those in WAP client groups whose patterns of engagement with learning and providers are often more casual and haphazard than other students. Providers and LLSCs highlighted the inadequacy of current systems which prevent the transfer from one organisation to another of data on an individual (because if the Data Protection Act) and looked forward to the introduction of the long-promised Unique Learner Identifier as quickly as possible.

100   One or two LLSCs outlined long-term projects to following up samples or cohorts of learners, while making the point that this is an expensive exercise.

101   There was also a widespread feeling that the current approach to data collection was often not appropriate where attendance is short-term and relatively informal: *"I would say that providers are really trying, but when you've got a part-time evening course with a part-time tutor, people don't want to be filling forms, especially if they are paying for some of the course."* Respondents also queried the relevance of some of the information recorded, especially in view of the time it took up, suggesting that direct relevance to learners' overall experience was the only criterion by which to judge usefulness.

Different Interpretations of 'Demand'

102   Several LLSC respondents questioned whether the narrower range of options on offer would match up with the interests and inclinations of potential adult learners – particularly those who are 'harder to reach'. Would everyone without a Level 2 qualification want one, even if tuition was free? The strong emphasis on a linear 'upward' route being the only kind of progression valued was also queried: *"We need to respect the fact that people go in different directions after having done an introductory cake decorating, there's nothing stopping them going off and doing a child care course or a computer course or whatever."*

103   The potential mismatch was felt to be true especially for older learners and others not in, or aspiring to join, the labour market: *"They're not learning to progress, they're learning to maintain and preserve their faculties. It can be a social thing as well. It's the joining up of agendas really, because learning for people who are in retirement is about mental health and physical health, it is not about the economic benefits."*

104   Other comments from LLSCs linked learning to regeneration as well as health, while regretting that agendas would not be truly joined-up while funding was still, unhelpfully, in separate pots governed by separate agencies whose working arrangements and performance measures made it difficult to pool resources.

Communication – Consistency, Clarity and Transparency

105   While communication is an issue that applies more widely, it seems that hitches can be magnified, and their impact more deeply felt, when dealing with more sensitive and vulnerable areas like widening participation.

106   Several LLSC and provider respondents highlighted inconsistency of messages as a problem with serious repercussions. For example *"The local LSC produced the family learning strategy and then three weeks later announced the family learning budget was reduced." "A local …. college spent a small fortune on a marketing initiative on free IT courses. A week after, provision was slashed for that. So what did that do for that college's reputation?"*

107   LLSC staff in regular contact with providers had sometimes found themselves in an uncomfortable position due to an embargo on information from further up the 'chain of command', and would prefer a more transparent approach, even when the news is bad.

108   Providers also remarked on a lack of follow-up in dealings with LLSCs, recounting instances such as the following: *"We actually went to our nominated person in our county, phoned them up and discussed how that would work in our county and he said oh that's a good idea, you should try and do that…… and that was the point at which the communication dried up. So working for them can be good only when they follow through."*

Misperceptions about the Safeguard

109　LLSCs were anxious that long-awaited information about the 'safeguard' should be published as soon as possible, as the delay encouraged misperceptions and worry. One LLSC respondent was concerned that the use of language around the 'safeguard' and first-steps learning could be misleading*: "The fact that three quarters of the learning out there for adults is under the safeguard, they are saying that it is definitely going to be funded, but …….it's not safe-guarded, there's a certain amount that's safe-guarded, but it's certainly going to be less than a quarter or a third."*

Section Three: How Widening Adult Participation Sits With more Recent Strategies and Priorities

110   The learning and skills environment is hugely dynamic, and the wider context in which *'Successful Participation for All'* now operates has altered significantly since its publication. It therefore makes sense to examine how key developments sit with the vision for widening participation.

111   Chief among subsequent strategies and policies influencing LSC are *'21st Century Skills: realising our potential'* and *'Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work'*, the two cross-government Skills Strategies which are clearly central in determining LSC's spending priorities. Agenda for Change, launched last month (August 2005), is set to be a similarly strong influence across LSC operations, though its newness (and the fact that more information is yet to follow) makes it harder to judge its effect on widening participation as yet.

Skills Strategies I and II

112   It is not difficult to find entries in the two strategies that look helpful to WAP. The point is made that lack of skills and under-representation in learning is both an economic and social problem: *"When people are better educated and better trained they have the chance to earn more and use their talents to the full, both in and out of work. They are better able to use their skills for the benefit of their families and their communities. There is strong evidence to suggest that improving skill levels can reduce the risk of unemployment, and bring broader social returns in terms of reduced crime and better health."*

113   Concerns are expressed that learning is not reaching all sections of society and that many people do not see the many benefits of skills, training and qualifications: the government, it says, wants to increase skill levels among all under-represented groups, citing in particular low-paid women, labour market returners, ethnic minorities and lone parents. The difficulties for individuals of finding the right route for them and of fitting learning into busy lives are also highlighted.

114   The strategies also re-emphasise the place of learning for personal interest, active citizenship and community development.

115   Specific initiatives within the strategies which have the potential to widen adult participation include:

- Level 2 entitlement - with free tuition to take those lacking a qualification up to a level from which it's generally considered they can sustain further learning under their own steam;

- Basic skills – again, with free tuition and stretching achievement targets, and the addition of ICT which can prove a 'hook' for wary learners
- Employer Training Programme – expanding following the success of pilots which yielded evidence that new learners had participated (reinforcing similar findings from other activity such as the NHSU)
- Framework for Achievement – making it possible for learners to accumulate credits through flexible arrangements that fit with other commitments
- Review of IAG – including linked services and wider advice sources; and
- Testbed Learning Communities – encouraging multi-agency partnerships to combine learning with other activities for all in particular localities.

116   However questions remain as to whether the means are there to realise this potential as arrangements are operationalised. Tightening adult learning budgets, linked with performance targets, create the temptation to focus on the easiest to help, for example, and the scope of 'first steps' learning has yet to be determined.

117   Focus group participants and interviewees shared their own misgivings that widening participation and redressing disadvantage, though mentioned in the text, could be eclipsed during implementation, with operational arrangements not matching up to the rhetoric. Providers too pointed out the scope for interpretation and re-interpretation by DfES, LSC National Office and LLSCs, with the possibility of tweaks of emphasis at any stage.

118   Focusing tightly on vocational skills and Level 2 learning (where this could squeeze out other forms of learning that can attract non-learners) was questioned, for reasons such as:

- The need for a 'throughput' of people prepared to embark on higher-level learning: *"They will then realize that they've got this big gap at the other end ……….And then the focus will be back on because they can't get people up to Level 2 and 3 and beyond …."*

- The effects of age discrimination legislation on entitlements for older learners whose interest lies elsewhere than vocational and accredited learning

- The danger that valuable provision (staff, expertise) will have disappeared when the current bulge of younger people subsides after 2006-07, hopefully leaving more money for adult learning; and

- Entitlements around Level 2 and Level 3 being rather broadly drawn: the example given was of people with 'O'- levels which made them ineligible for support but who needed upskilling.

119   A couple of LLSC respondents also remarked on tensions between squeezing of budgets for adult learning and the keenness among Ministers and senior officials for 'success-against-the-odds' stories for presentational reasons: *"They want tales of the individual learner who's succeeded to give them the PR-friendly wow factor, but we can't fund one learner. I've got an ESF funded project*

that's been going for three years, for visually impaired learners and I've had letters from MPs and we still can't fund it."

'Agenda for Change'

120   *Learning and skills – the agenda for change: the prospectus'* (AfC) arises from the concern to improve the supply/demand relationship between colleges and employers, and working arrangements between colleges and LSC. While there is nothing explicit about WAP in the prospectus published to date, there are elements that offer the potential to help:

- Under the 'Quality' theme, measures of success are to include ways of defining economic and social benefits of colleges, and rewards to individuals, business and communities

- Funding arrangements will aim to ensure a certain level of stability for providers - allowing for the consistency that is especially important for WAP;

- Introduction of a Unique Learner Identifier (ULI) and record of learning for every individual will track progression from one provider to another – one of the key difficulties in demonstrating the value of learning undertaken through more unorthodox routes taken by some adults

- Piloting of the QCA Framework for Achievement pilots from early in 2006, supported by the ULI; and

- Marketing and communications will address perceptions among "stakeholders" – might this include individuals and communities not engaged in learning?

121   Given its newness, the operationalising of published AfC proposals, and the further work under way to ensure comprehensive coverage of the whole of LSC provision, should provide an opportunity to ensure that the potential contribution to WAP is realised by building relevant concerns in from the start.

122   AfC was published after the evidence for this research was gathered so there are no reflections from respondents on this topic.

LSC's own Strategies and Initiatives

123   The LSC's strategies for working with the voluntary and community sector and for equality and diversity could be considered companion documents to the widening participation strategy, complementing without duplication.

'Working Together'

124   The VCS strategy, in particular, was frequently referred to by respondents as influential, perhaps because it is more recent and has had some tangible resources devoted to implementation. Of course, development of the VCS strategy was a commitment in the WAP strategy implementation plan, arising from the recognition that the sector has a unique contribution to make to bringing learning to under-represented groups as provider, employer and source of advice and

expertise. 'Working Together' itself was written around this recognition of mutual benefit.

125   It addresses the three WAP strategy milestones on changes to the provider base and LSC's relationship with it.

'*National Equality and Diversity Strategy 2004-2007*'

126   This usefully reinforces widening participation objectives for groups covered by legislation, with the legal requirements setting a safety net or minimum 'bottom line'. It diverges from the WAP strategy in that it covers young people as well as adults, and does not apply (at least directly) to disadvantaged learners not covered by legislation. However its aspirations and proposals run along lines similar and helpful to WAP, such as:

- Communicating with target groups to promote the benefits of learning;
- Putting consultation with learners and potential learners at the heart of planning; working with employers to promote the business case for equality and diversity; working in partnership to increase engagement; and
- Ensuring reliable data for performance monitoring, planning and funding decisions.

127   Under the strategy, Equality and Diversity Impact Measures (EDIMs) are set by each local LSC.

Others

128   The Active Communities Unit's ChangeUp was cited by several respondents as potentially supporting widening participation through its £80 million investment in VCS infrastructure, including a focus on workforce development. LSC efforts have focused on ensuring complementarity with *'Working Together'* implementation – with limited success at national level, but there are increasing signs at regional level of designated LSC VCS leads getting more closely involved in developments to ensure coordination with LSC activity and influence ChangeUp investment decisions.

129   Local Authority Community Strategies were also mentioned once or twice by LLSC and provider alike, as a potential influence on LSC priorities for disadvantaged groups. One respondent was also very clear that his LSC was actively involved with Neighbourhood Renewal on its patch.

Section Four: Taking forward the Aspiration s in 'Successful Participation for All'

130 The previous sections of this report show the extent and nature of the strategy's impact to date. All the milestones have been, or are being, addressed; there is strong commitment from LSC staff and providers involved, and some examples of effective practice.

131 LLSC and provider respondents were acutely aware that the strategy could be seen as *"past its sell-by date",* given the changes to adult learning since its publication. However the consensus was that tinkering with the WAP strategy itself was unwise, not least because this could be interpreted (however mistakenly) as the LSC abandoning its commitment to widening adult participation in straitened circumstances. A desire for consolidation and an appetite for further work were evident: *"I think there's always been an understanding of the idea of widening participation but I think the strategies to get people on board, and really useful learning, have taken a while to emerge and I still think there are crucial developments to take place."* Fairness, social inclusion and life enhancement are still relevant and important, alongside the more 'applied' potential benefits of throughput to skills training and jobs, and, conversely, the potential drag on the economy of continued inactivity and disengagement.

132 Since the original *'Successful participation for all'* vision reprised in the introduction to this report remains valid and widely shared, it is a matter of bringing these aims to bear at an early stage on the formulation of new policy (such as 'Agenda for Change' or the review of IAG), as well as implementation of existing strategies (such as *'21st Century Skills'*) where detailed operational arrangements are still being worked out. The current re-shaping of LSC organisation and staffing is another arena in which WAP interests will need to be satisfactorily covered.

133 The approach to *'Working Together'* (a more recent document) might offer a parallel, in that it has tried to balance realism and ambition: at the request of LSC and VCS alike to "come clean", implementation has focused on a joint view of the art of the possible. There is every reason to think that a similarly transparent, realistic approach to WAP would also be well-received, and publishing this stocktake report will help here, as would the LSCNO proposal to share more LSC internal guidance.

134 The following points arising from the research suggest some areas in which attention and effort might be focused in continuing to pursue the widening participation agenda. Decisions on which to take up, and how, are, of course, for LSC.

Embedding widening participation as a cross-cutting responsibility

135   It is crucial to look across the full range of LSC provision for adults, and the organisations and staff that support it, and use the key LSC business systems to embed WAP into day-to-day business. Anything that reinforces the notion of shared responsibility must be encouraged, and the inclusion of WAP objectives in all 3YDPs seems a good basic vehicle. Evidence suggests that reinforcing this with an explicit reference in central planning guidance would significantly strengthen the hand of local WAP leads and the undertaking to include such a reference in the next the LSC Annual Statement of Priorities is a useful development.

136   Embedding WAP stands the best chance of success where it is supported by a designated WAP lead with sufficient capacity, expertise and authority to make things happen (perhaps a regional rather than a local resource?) and this is something to press for in the current re-shaping of LSC.

Applying evidence to support the case for widening adult participation

137   Information on successful WAP activity needs to be moved on from the 'interesting' to the 'useful', and applied to make the case for the ways that WAP approaches can contribute to headline targets. There are signs of this in WAPAF, for example, where findings from project work is feeding into the South East's development of its Action for Communities strategy, and the West Midland's assessment of, and justification for, the true costs of rural learning. Ideally, a view to potential long-term, strategic applications could be planned into all activity and form a routine element of evaluation.

138   Where "good practice" illustrations are compiled and published, these need to avoid the merely descriptive: valuable as it can be to spread ideas, its use is limited unless it addresses the funding and organisational arrangements that would enable others to emulate it. Despite the recognition of the importance of mainstreaming, most examples of practice in widening participation still focus on activity funded from discretionary budgets: more coverage of embedded WAP activity in all kinds of LSC-funded provision would be valuable to dispel preconceptions and stereotypes.

139   Practice collection and swapping between LSC staff could focus on these priorities, through the media being considered in Section 1.

Links with strategies on Equality and Diversity and the Voluntary and Community Sector

140   The WAP strategy fits usefully alongside the LSC's strategies for equality and diversity and the voluntary and community sector. Arrangements for oversight and management of these three strategies sometimes sit together at local level, and there seem to be moves towards greater coordination nationally (with the WAP local contacts group extending its remit to E&D, for example, and the same Council member chairing external implementation groups for the VCS and E&D). It would make sense to consolidate and develop this coordination further, at

national, regional and local level, presenting the three strategies more explicitly as a joint package. To this end the next Business Planning Guidance will remind LLSCs that their business plans should show clear references to each strategy.

Widening = targeting

141   Reinforcement of the message that "widening" is not simply about "increasing" by the easiest means needs to inform future setting of targets at local, regional or national level. More <u>targeting</u> of client groups in contracts is a good model to encourage, to retain the focus on the most disadvantaged people. Further work on the development and roll-out of the Participation Index should be sure to address these considerations, and the work on tracking and data collection proposed through 'Agenda for Change' should be made to work for these purposes too if possible.

Tracking by LSC and providers

142   It is clear that a vehicle to support tracking of learners through different learning experiences would be widely welcome, to help LLSCs and providers trace complex learning journeys. With such data they would be better equipped to advise on, and provide for, sensible next steps, and would have more evidence to demonstrate the value of informal / first steps / unaccredited learning in securing commitment to learning and subsequent progression. While it is possible that some learners might feel suspicious of personal details being held by 'officialdom', with sensitive presentation this would be outweighed by the advantage of not having to give the same information every time they enrol. The 'Agenda for Change' proposal to introduce a Unique Learner Identifier looks set to address this need and it will be important to ensure its development takes in the needs and characteristics of all WAP client groups.

143   The DfES has recently funded a small-scale study into the contribution of accredited and non-accredited learning in progression to Level 2 and beyond, due to report in December, and LSC will no doubt be interested to see and use the results.

144   Other relatively simple ways to help prove the worth of informal / non-accredited / first steps learning, especially at regional and local level, could include making it easier to access and use evidence from the 'Wider Benefits of Learning' research and encouraging LLSCs to share research findings where they are undertaking long-term tracking of learner samples. Again, this may be a topic for the enhanced inter-LSC communication methods proposed in Section 1.

Progression that matters to learners

145   All those concerned with widening adult participation obviously have a strong interest in the success of RARPA and the forthcoming Framework for Achievement. It would be a useful investment of time and attention to ensure that the needs and interest of WAP learners are at the centre in the FfA pilots due to start early next year (and indeed the subsequent roll-out). Also, as noted in

Section 1, early clear guidance on how RARPA and the FfA fit together would be welcomed by local offices.

Information, advice and guidance and linked activities

146   The narrowing range of learning options, and the importance placed on progression, mean information, advice and guidance seems crucial to help potential learners make the most of what <u>is</u> available to them, through:

- Raising aspirations
- Helping people set goals
- Providing information
- Supporting wise choices
- Making introductions
- Briefing providers and tutors
- Organising practical support
- Helping with arrangements (For example. finance) that make learning possible
- Maintaining interest, support and encouragement; and
- Supporting informed choices for next steps.

147   A broad spectrum of activities, from formal IAG to the support of learning champions, mentors and 'buddies', all have a part to play. Many LLSCs seem to have supported experimentation with these 'softer' roles which benefit both participants and the learners they work with and are relatively economical to support; promoting the results and encouraging wider adoption of the most effective practices would be valuable.

148   The results of recently-introduced funding arrangements, based on number of clients rather than number of interviews, need to be closely monitored to ensure 'harder to help' clients are being catered for.

149   Also, the government's wide-ranging review of IAG now under way, encompassing arrangements for economically inactive people and taking into account issues such as benefits and finance, needs to be influenced to ensure (albeit in the longer term) that the resulting arrangements cover all the functions outlined above to serve widening participation objectives.

Wider alliances and opportunities

150   The Leitch review of skills sponsored by the Treasury, formerly focused exclusively on an economic, work-related agenda is now working to a wider remit that includes skills for social inclusion. Given the influence its report is likely to have on future public spending it will be important that LSC seeks to ensure it produces recommendations that support widening participation aims.

151   Section 1 noted some of the partnerships local LSCs are involved in that can have a bearing on WAP priorities. Increased recognition of the value of learning to the aims of other government departments such as Health and Work and Pensions puts widening participation for adults on the agenda of their

local/regional delivery mechanisms – which can widen and enrich LSC's partnerships. Family learning, for example, can be a valuable addition to Children's Centres, and evidence from WAPAF shows that the offer of adult learning, to enhance the spread of activities available, is welcomed.

152   Section 1 notes how Testbed Learning Communities are extending LLSCs' range of partners. As TLCs develop some are being drawn into Local Strategic Partnerships and, in one or two cases, built into Local Area Agreement pilots. Regional Skills Partnerships are now also required to find ways to work with TLCs. All these links provide opportunities to ensure the needs of marginalised and disadvantaged learners and potential learners are to the fore, as part of a shared agenda between LSC and partners.

Annex: References

'Successful Participation for All: Widening Adult Participation' (LSC, September 2003)

'*Working together: a strategy for the voluntary and community sector and the Learning and Skills Council'* (LSC, May 2004)

'National equality and diversity strategy 2004-2007' (LSC, November 2004)

'Learning and skills – the agenda for change: the prospectus' (LSC, August 2005)

'Success for all: reforming further education and training' (DfES, November 2002)

'21st Century skills: realising our potential' (DfES, July 2003a)

'Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work' (DfES, March 2005)

'*Participation Index'* (LSDA, 2005)

'Widening adult participation in learning: a systematic review of strategies' (LSDA, 2005)

'*Breaking down the barriers: success in widening participation: a toolkit approach'* (LSDA and NIACE, 2005)

'Neighbourhood learning for regeneration: lessons and case studies from the Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities Fund' (NIACE, 2005)

'Inclusive learning: report of the committee on students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities' (FEFC, 1996)

'Learning works: widening participation in further education' (FEFC, 1997)