

 For information



Leading learning and skills

From Plastic Forks to Policy Change: Involving Disabled Learners in the Work of the National Learner Panel

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Of interest to organisations and individuals with an
interest in learner involvement across England

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Terms used in this report

'Disabled people' and 'disabled learners'

Throughout this publication we use the terms 'disabled people' and 'disabled learners' to reflect the social model, which purports that people with impairments do not have 'disabilities', but are disabled by society. This is in line with the terminology chosen by the Disabled People's Movement. The term 'disabled people' includes people with sensory and mobility impairments, mental health difficulties, learning difficulties, long-term health conditions and all other circumstances covered by the Disability Discrimination Act.

Different services use different labels to describe people. Generally speaking, in educational services the term 'learning difficulty' is used to describe people who have a cognitive or intellectual impairment. In social care services, the term 'learning disability' is more commonly used to describe the same customer group. In education law, the term 'learning difficulties' is also used more generically to describe those 'who have a greater difficulty in learning than their non-disabled peers'.

Person-centred Planning/Approaches

Person-centred Planning/Approaches enable individuals with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to have a greater say in the design and delivery of services. Valuing people (DoH 2001) said services should use person-centred approaches to planning for everyone who needs services.

Executive Summary

Key emerging themes

The survey indicated that 70 (55 per cent) of survey respondents had a learner involvement strategy in place. Of these, 52 specified how disabled learners were involved. Respondents were enthusiastic and passionate about the need to involve disabled learners in advising on national policy. They reported on some significant barriers to the effective involvement of disabled learners and also shared their key success factors.

Barriers

The main barriers to the effective involvement of disabled learners described by respondents were:

- logistical issues (for example, time, transport, funding)
- a lack of strategies to involve learners with complex needs
- the reluctance of some learners, particularly those with mental health problems, to become involved in a discrete activity for disabled learners
- a lack of interest, confidence or motivation to participate on the part of some learners.

Success factors

The key success factors in the effective involvement of disabled learners described by respondents were:

- training and support for learners in how to become more effective
- recruitment of disabled people for established and developing forums
- provision of accessible materials
- genuinely valuing learner involvement and treating learners well, for example by having learner-led agendas, feeding back to them on the results of issues raised and offering payment or incentives.

Respondents offered a wealth of advice to the LSC on how to involve disabled learners. Key recommendations included the following points:

- Models of involvement could be embedded into core provider activity as a way of resourcing this work, for example by accrediting such involvement through community engagement programmes or Skills for Life courses such as those aimed at improving speaking and listening skills.
- Agendas need to be set jointly by the LSC and learners themselves.
- Learners need opportunities for one-to-one involvement and support.
- Learners must receive feedback on issues raised, and the methods of collection must be varied and the materials fully accessible.

Model of involvement

The report developed a suggested model for learner involvement whereby learners from a range of provider types come together in a face-to-face local or sub-regional forum, which could be complemented by online activity. These forums could be discrete for disabled learners or inclusive for all learners. At the next level, regional forums would exist. These forums could have direct contact with the National Learner Panel.

The report highlighted a number of practical considerations that would need to be taken into account when implementing such a model. These included:

- where to have meetings and how learners would access them
- how to train and support learners throughout the process
- what consideration should be given to the reward and recognition of learners on the forum
- considerations of how to engage learners in policy issues
- the importance of having accessible materials
- considerations of the time, duration and frequency of meetings.

All these points highlight the importance of very practical considerations that need to shape the implementation of any model of involvement.

Project findings

Regional learner forums

There is potential for regional LSCs to use existing provider networks that have developed, in part through the Learning for Living and Work planning processes, to develop sub-regional and regional learner forums or panels. These should be inclusive of all learners, not just those who are disabled. One example of this is the Yorkshire and the Humber regional learners' panel established by the regional LSC as a pilot project in March 2007.

It is important that the consortia responsible for supporting third-sector providers are included in any work to develop learner forums in order to make sure learners in voluntary and community sector provision are represented. Similarly, the views of members of the Association of National Specialist Colleges (Natspec) should be sought to ensure that the interests of learners in specialist residential provision are fully taken into account.

Training to develop resources to support providers in improving their learner involvement approaches and to enhance the tools currently available was identified as a need by providers. Resources should address some of the barriers disabled learners face in becoming more active in representational settings, including the dispositional barriers of low confidence and negative self-image.

There is potential for providers to use current survey data sets more effectively to both map and plan in order to improve the responsiveness of current provision. Regular data collection could be used to:

- identify training needs
- raise awareness of issues and concerns
- feed back to policy-makers beyond the institution
- influence institutional change.

Taking the work forward

The Plastic Forks project raised a number of issues that need to be explored further:

- Members of the National Learner Panel should be consulted on the findings of this project to discover whether they feel it is feasible for them to develop links with regional panels.
- The National Learner Panel could explore the degree to which it has autonomy to develop its own social networking capacity within its current online presence and, if this is limited, to explore ways in which it might be developed.

- The National Learner Panel could examine ways in which its website can be made accessible to all, including learners with sensory impairments and those with learning difficulties. The development of such a site could help to reinforce literacy, numeracy and ICT/communications skills for many learners, giving very real and practical purposes for communicating through such technologies.
- The National Union of Students should also be approached to examine the degree to which its institution-based officers and regional and national staff could promote and facilitate increased access to online forums that are accessible to disabled learners.
- An inclusive model of learner consultation will need to make the transition beyond 2010 to the Young People's Learning Agency and the Skills Funding Agency. Within local authorities, there are existing structures that promote the involvement of service users. Their opinions are listened to and valued, and they have an influence on the development of services. It will be important for learner forums to link with such local and regional structures.

Proposed approach

A proposed approach to connect disabled learners with the work of the National Learner Panel would be for the LSC to discuss the possibility of a residential event with the Yorkshire and the Humber regional learners' panel and the National Learner Panel to assess degrees of interest and commitment to the idea. The National Learner Panel and Yorkshire and the Humber regional learners' panel could also collaborate on a DVD to communicate their work more broadly to others.

Follow-up work

Two 'Have Your Say' learner conferences are planned for 2010. The aim of the conferences is to provide an opportunity to:

- hear learners' views on key policies and strategies including Learning for Living and Work and the LSC's Mental Health Strategy
- give key policy-makers and implementers an understanding of how the strategies are being carried out through interaction with learners
- ensure that learners feel they really can make a difference through their involvement in strategic implementation (with feedback on their contributions planned)
- have a programme at the end of which all participants will have made an important and valued contribution
- give messages to learning providers, funders and inspection agencies about how to improve learning opportunities for disabled learners.

Introduction

1 This report details the findings of a short-term research project conducted by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) between May and July 2008 into possible ways in which disabled people can respond to the National Learner Panel.

Background and policy context

2 The National Learner Panel (NLP) was established by Bill Rammell, Minister for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education in 2006. It was set up to provide a voice to learners in the development of further education in England. The appetite among learners and providers for closer involvement by learners in all aspects of education and training is well-documented (Berkley & Jacobsen, 2007) and providers continue to consult and survey learners regularly, including through the LSC's Framework for Excellence requirements but also in other innovative ways (Berkley & Jacobsen, 2007). The role of the NLP is advisory and it works alongside government, most significantly the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS; formerly the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), as well as other policy-making organisations. The NLP aims to add the learner perspective to discussions of policies, proposals and initiatives. The NLP also sets its own work plan to focus on issues that are of interest to its members. As well as meeting four times a year as a full panel, the NLP has established sub-groups to look at issues in greater depth. Recent changes have been made to the accountabilities of the NLP and at the time of writing it is recruiting new members.

3 The Yorkshire and the Humber regional learners' panel was established by the regional LSC for Yorkshire and the Humber as a pilot project in March 2007. It mirrored the national panel, with learners drawn from a cross-section of provider types and studying a range of subjects in different settings. Learners ranged from 17 to 87 and came from the four sub-regions of the Yorkshire and the Humber region; that is, North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire and the Humber. The regional LSC sought support to evaluate the work of the regional learners' panel, with a view to continuing it's work into 2008/09, should the evaluation

determine that it is a useful means of promoting and hearing learner views across the region. Funding for the regional learners' panel was extended to March 2010.

4 In *Learning for Living and Work* (LSC, 2006), the LSC stated its intention to consult learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on issues of policy that affect

their experience of the post-16 education and training system. It also announced its intention to launch a National Learners with Disabilities Panel that would link to the National Learners Panel. In March 2008, the LSC commissioned the Plastic Forks project. This project was based on the premise that the proposed separate panel for disabled learners was not an inclusive approach. The LSC remains committed to developing a model of consultation that will ensure the views of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities will feed into the NLP. This process is integral to the LSC's duty to promote disability equality and to involve disabled people.

Aims

5 The objective of this project was to develop an inclusive model for learner involvement that would be responsive to the views of learners with a range of disabilities including those with complex needs. This model would enable learners with disabilities to respond to the National Learner Panel (NLP) on issues pertinent to them. The project looked at existing models for learner involvement within the post-16 learning and training sector to inform what an effective model of engagement with learners with disabilities might look like. There was a particular focus on how young people could engage with the work of the National Learner Panel.

6 The project sought to understand:

- where current forums are located, geographically and by organisation
- how they are managed
- who co-ordinates them, and whether they are independent of providers
- how they link with learners
- how young people are recruited
- how the practices and structures used can inform a model that would ensure young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities can respond to the NLP on issues pertinent to them.

7 This research project was conducted in three stages: a literature review (paragraphs 9 to 48), a questionnaire survey (paragraphs 70 to 99) and interviews with individuals whose questionnaire responses indicated interesting learner involvement practice (paragraphs 100 to 146).

Why 'plastic forks'?

8 It is a long way from exclusion to inclusion. During the course of this work, the respondents made this point many times. When first asking disabled people what they want, it should not be surprising that the things they ask for at first seem mundane, even trivial. In part, this can be explained by low expectations that change will actually happen; many disabled people genuinely don't expect to get what they ask for, based on their previous experiences. As trust develops between those providing a service and those receiving it, expectations, confidence, competence and desire all grow. Over time, working through various levels of consultation, involvement and participation, people eventually become partners in a mutually beneficial and reinforcing process, which adds value to everyone's work. From the mundane request for 'no more plastic forks, please' (an authentic request from learners in a college) grows a profound, genuine partnership in a process leading to real dialogue on equal terms, resulting in effective and sustainable policy change at all levels.

Literature Review

9 A comprehensive literature review was conducted by NIACE on the consultation and involvement of learners on a regional basis. Here, the relevant points of this earlier review are summarised before a discussion of the issues that are pertinent to the involvement of disabled learners specifically. This sets the report in a political and policy context and brings forward relevant research and literature that can inform the LSC on issues to consider when developing a model to ensure disabled learners can contribute meaningfully to the NLP.

10 The literature review in the regional report is split into three sections: part A explores learner involvement; part B explores wider issues relating to disability; and part C provides a conclusion.

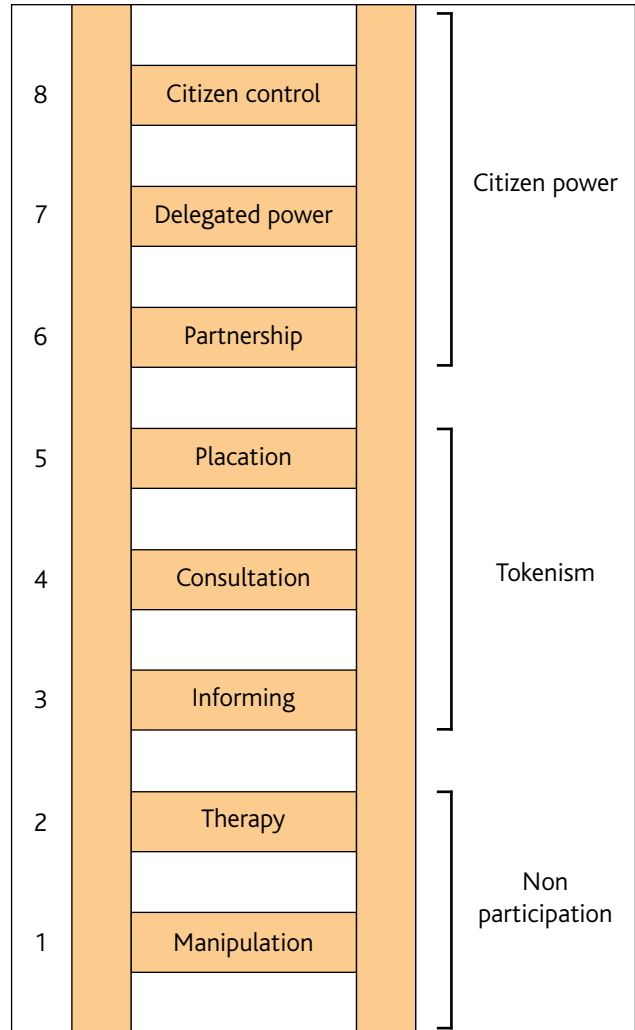
Part A: Learner involvement

11 This literature review sets out a discussion on the increasing importance of the 'learner voice', and the fact that despite this increased focus, the area is still surrounded by ambiguity and inconsistency. Terms such as 'learner voice' and 'learner involvement' are used to describe a wide range of activities with varying levels of learner control.

12 The review goes on to examine existing theories of participation (including Arnstein's ladder of participation¹ (Figure 1) and various adaptations of this) that illustrate a spectrum of activity ranging from manipulation to citizen control. These models are significant because they show the varying degrees of citizen/learner control and powerlessness that can characterise different approaches. Issues of power and control are of great importance. For true learner control, as opposed to passive consultation, these need to sit with learners themselves. However, for practical reasons this is not always possible.

13 The review sets out the principles of good practice in learner involvement, including defining target groups, being clear about the degree to which decision-makers can act on recommendations, and, of particular relevance for some disabled learners, addressing obstacles to participation (for example, sourcing a signer, holding the activity at convenient times or finding accessible locations).

Figure 1: Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation



14 Of particular relevance to disabled learners is the discussion of the membership of forums, which can be unrepresentative and rely on a small number of people who are regularly asked for their views because they are easy to access and engage. 'Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have attracted specific attention as a group at high risk of marginalisation in conventional learner involvement practices. The regional review also sets out the importance of training and development opportunities for staff and learners to ensure learners can participate fully, and asserts that this can be especially important for disabled learners who may be particularly vulnerable to having their input rejected.

¹In Arnstein's model, eight levels of participation are proposed, ranked according to the degree of power that is devolved to citizens by those in a position of authority, and ranging from manipulation to citizen control.

Existing literature and methods of accessible involvement

15 Much of the existing literature relating to involving learners/people, and specifically disabled learners/people, is of a practical nature and is aimed at individual providers (Nightingale, 2006; Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), 2006; Care Services Improvement Partnership, undated; Disability Rights Commission (DRC), 2006; LSC, 2007). In some cases, advice on effective involvement is designed to support providers in producing a disability equality scheme, which requires them to involve disabled people.

16 The literature sets out reasons for involving learners that relate to the benefits for learners and organisations, as well as for the relationship between the two. Effective learner involvement ensures provision is responsive to, and is challenged and changed by, the views of stakeholders; thus involvement can improve quality and service. An improvement in quality can ensure better performance: better participation and retention (for learners) and success (for learners and organisations). Involvement enables learners to develop the important skills of communication, listening, negotiation, and so on, which can be empowering and build confidence. With regard to improvements to disability equality and reasonable adjustment, involvement can mean organisations learning from experts how to become more accessible and inclusive. (Nightingale, 2006; LSDA, 2006; LSC, 2007; Office for Public Management, 2007; Forrest et al, 2007.)

17 The existing literature also advises on how to plan and prepare for learner involvement, including advice on:

- the importance of agreeing the purpose of involvement and roles for learners and staff
- timing, support and travel
- having sufficient resources to meet needs
- ensuring commitment at a senior level
- having an accessible venue and materials, for example providing written materials in plain English and supported by symbols and/or Braille, engaging a palantypist for hearing-impaired learners and obtaining communication aids for people without verbal communication.

18 It is necessary to be clear about where policy- and decision-makers have the scope to make changes to ensure learners do not become disillusioned and perceive their input to be ineffective (Nightingale, 2006; DRC, 2006; Care Service Improvement Partnership, undated).

19 While the literature does not generally explore overarching models of involvement, it does set out a range of methods for involving learners. These range from the formal to the informal, and from those with designated

learners to those that are open to all. It also sets out the pros and cons of different methods and gives advice on how to make these open, inclusive and accessible for disabled people. Methods include tutorial meetings, interviews, focus groups, surveys, meetings for learners as panels or councils, meetings for staff and governors with learner representation, visually stimulating activities such as graffiti walls, online activities, citizens' juries, and so on (Nightingale, 2006; LSDA, 2006; LSC, 2007; Care Services Improvement Partnership, undated; Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2001).

20 In order to reach the widest range of disabled people, a variety of methods of involvement and means of communication is advisable: while some people may be more suited to participating in a focus group, others – such as people with significant support needs – may benefit from opportunities to provide input on a one-to-one basis. For some disabled people, the option of contributing online may be attractive, especially if they are travel-restricted due to their impairment or are from 'hard-to-reach' groups such as people with disabilities who do not want to identify themselves as such.

21 Online activities must be fully accessible and even then many people may miss out because they do not have access to the technology (RADAR, 2007). Some models may assume learners are only speaking on behalf of themselves; others involve learners being trained or supported to speak as a representative on behalf of other learners. The importance of offering learners training and ensuring that they receive feedback on the issues raised is highlighted in the literature. Finally, involvement works best when staff (or policy- and decision-makers) are prepared to be challenged, and within a culture that values listening and openness (Forrest et al, 2007).

A culture of involvement

22 The existing literature offers guidance on involving learners (noted above) in response to a culture that increasingly values the views and voices of stakeholders and service users. In recent years we have witnessed a cultural shift towards the involvement of stakeholders being both expected and valued in public services: involvement of stakeholders is frequently seen as a necessary prerequisite to decision-making.

23 The value of stakeholder involvement is also evident in education policy. *Learning for Living and Work* (LSC, 2006), the LSC's strategy for provision for disabled learners, states its intention to consult with disabled learners on issues of policy. In a White Paper (DfES, 2006a) the government set out its expectation that all colleges and providers would publish and monitor learner involvement strategies.

24 In 2007, the LSC published *Developing a Learner Involvement Strategy* in which it argued for the need to 'put the needs of the learner and the employer at the centre of service design and delivery' (LSC, 2007 p. 1).

25 Following the extensive piloting of the learner views questionnaire (LSC, 2008a) which is part of the learner responsiveness element of the LSC's Framework for Excellence (LSC, 2008b), there is an evident and proactive commitment on the part of the LSC to require learning and skills providers to consult and involve learners in all aspects of their learning.

26 We can also see a shift towards greater participant involvement in the field of research. In the past, research was frequently something done to passive subjects by academic researchers. This approach has received huge criticism, most notably from people with learning difficulties who argue that this approach disempowers research subjects and positions them as problems to be solved, thus reinforcing the medical model of disability (DRC, 2006; Aspis & Cupples, 2002). The self-advocacy movement of people with learning difficulties argues that they have the skills and life experiences to be seen as partners in the research process. In recent years, the research community has been involved in more participatory, inclusive research in which participants are central to the research process. Current practitioner action research supported by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (formerly the Quality Improvement Agency) as part of the Skills for Life Improvement Programme, for example, has included an element for ensuring that learners are consulted as part of the drawing up and implementation of service improvement action-planning strategies.

27 The involvement of disabled people is of course prominent within the Disability Rights Movement (discussed below), which has long argued for 'nothing about us, without us'. For example, Equality 2025 is a network of disabled people that communicates directly with government on disability issues. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 sets out that:

Persons with disabilities should have the opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making processes about policies and programmes, including those directly concerning them.

Office for Public Management, 2007 p.9

28 In particular, in recent years, and in part in response to Valuing People (the government's strategy for improving the lives of people with learning disabilities), we have seen a greater focus on advocacy and self-advocacy for people with learning difficulties, including support for self-advocacy organisations. Self-advocacy groups began meeting in the 1980s in the UK to enable people with learning difficulties to exercise more choice and control over their lives, factors which had previously been denied.

29 Linked to the notion of self-advocacy are the notions of person-centred planning and approaches (DfES, 2006b) and personalisation, which have become key elements of adult learning for people with learning difficulties. A range

of resources has been produced to support self-advocacy that includes advice and training for people about how to express their views (Jacobsen, 2001; DfES, 2001). However, criticism has been levelled at the movement: Buchanan & Walmsley (2006) suggest that self-advocacy has increasingly become located in government activity and this has narrowed its influence away from individual assertions and towards an expectation that self-advocacy groups will be representative of everyone with learning difficulties.

Involvement versus consultation

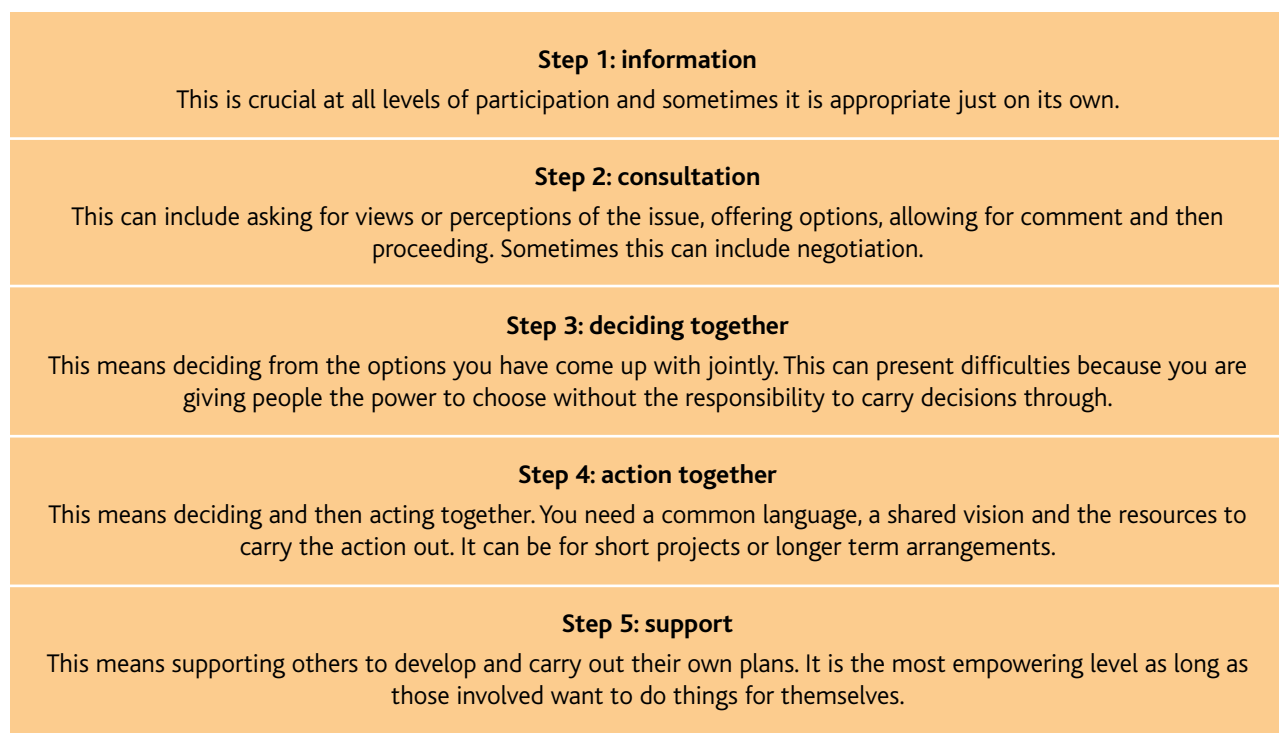
30 There has also been recognition in recent years that consultation, a passive activity based on presenting people with a formulated idea and getting feedback, is insufficient and that true involvement is needed to empower and fully involve stakeholders:

Consultation means finding out what people think about an idea or plan... Involvement is working with people over a longer period of time to change the way an organisation does something.

Care Services Improvement Partnership, undated, p. 2

31 The concept of involvement as opposed to consultation is particularly significant in terms of providers' legal duties to produce disability equality schemes, for which providers are required to involve disabled people. The DRC (2006) asserts that involvement is a more active, deeper and long-term process than consultation.

32 A second model is often used by local authorities in consulting local people on service delivery. Derived from the work of David Wilcox (1994) (cited in Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council, 2007), this model proposes a 'ladder of participation' with five steps (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The ladder of participation

Source: Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council, 2007 p. 8 (adapted from Wilcox, 1994)

Reward and recognition

33 Within the health and social care sector there is an increasing requirement to recognise and reward the involvement of expert service users. In 2006 the Department of Health (DoH) published *Reward and Recognition: The principles and practice of service user payment and reimbursement in health and social care*. This recognised that 'For effective involvement, people need to feel supported, and for their contribution to be valued.' (DoH, 2006 p.1). The document sets out principles for paying and reimbursing service users for their involvement, and offers advice on putting payment and reimbursement schemes into practice.

34 This need for reward and recognition is also noted in various texts guiding organisations and learning providers on how to involve disabled people (Care Services Improvement Partnership, undated; RADAR, 2007; Aspis & Cupples, 2002). However, it is necessary to consider whether payments may affect a person's benefits, and voluntary involvement should be an option. That said, paying disabled people may be seen as particularly important as disabled people are more likely to experience financial hardship.

Part B: Disability

Disability Rights Movement

35 There have been huge and significant developments in terms of disability rights and concepts of disability over the past few decades. While the Disability Rights Movement can be traced as far back as the late 19th century, the 1960s was a defining period for disability activism. It gained momentum in the 1980s, thanks in part to the British Council of Disabled People (now the UK Disabled People's Council) (Campbell, 1997). Disabled people have historically been oppressed within society: Young identifies four aspects of oppression as applied to disabled people: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness and cultural imperialism (cited in Barnes and Mercer, 2003, p. 21). With regard to fighting this oppression ('powerlessness' being particularly relevant to learner involvement), intrinsic to the Disability Rights Movement are the notions of political lobbying, collective voice and 'breaking away from those who spoke on our behalf and finding a space where we could beg the question, why are we excluded from society?' (Campbell, 1997 p. 81). Therefore, the notions of 'learner involvement' or 'citizen control' have strong associations with political empowerment and action for disabled people.

36 The Disability Rights Movement has also brought about a change in the concept of 'disability'. Whereas in the past the medical model of disability situated barriers firmly with the individual and his or her impairment, in recent years there has been a shift toward the social model, which recognises the ways in which society disables people with impairments by presenting barriers.

37 The Disability Rights Movement has also been instrumental in the formation of new disability laws between 1996 and 2005 (see paragraphs 38 to 40), and has led to increased choice and control for disabled people, for example in independent living and individualised budgets. However, there are concerns over decreasing political support for disabled people and benefit reforms, and the movement itself has also come under criticism (Beresford, 2006).

Disability discrimination legislation

38 The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and Part 4 in 2002, made discrimination against disabled learners unlawful and set out duties for providers to make reasonable adjustments and to be anticipatory in their approach. In 2005 public bodies acquired new legal duties to promote disability equality and to produce a disability equality scheme by December 2006, which has to include an action plan about how they intend to reduce discrimination. The corresponding code of practice states that the involvement of disabled people as active partners in the production of the scheme is central:

not only is it expected that disabled people are involved in developing the provider's Disability Equality Scheme, but... this involvement must be meaningful, relevant and not tokenistic.

LSDA, 2006 p.1

Definitions

39 The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) set out the definition of 'disability':

The Disability Discrimination Act says a disabled person is someone with 'a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'.

Examples include cancer, diabetes, multiple sclerosis and heart conditions; hearing or sight impairments, or a significant mobility difficulty; and mental health conditions or learning difficulties... However, only the courts can say if a particular individual is defined as disabled under the legislation.

Office for Public Management, 2007 p.9

40 The definition can be problematic. For example, when does a person experiencing fluctuating and short-term mental health difficulties come to consider they have 'disability'? (Commission for Disabled Staff in Lifelong Learning, 2008.) The problematic grouping of 'disabled people' is explored in more detail below.

Diversity of disability

41 Disabled people are not a homogenous group and indeed many people who would be protected by disability discrimination laws may not consider themselves 'disabled', such as people with mental health difficulties, deaf and hearing-impaired people or people with long-term health conditions. The diversity of disabled people needs to be recognised and specific targeting may be needed to include 'seldom heard from' disabled groups, such as people with disabilities who belong to black and minority ethnic groups, people with learning difficulties, people with mental health difficulties, people with high support needs, lesbian, gay or bisexual disabled people, disabled travellers, and so on (DRC, 2006).

42 It is now widely recognised that disabled black and minority ethnic people may face dual discrimination due to their impairment and their ethnicity, and that traditionally they have been excluded from much consultation. Cultural differences in conceptualising 'disability' may mean some people keep their impairments hidden in their communities. Various methods for targeting disabled black and minority ethnic people have been suggested in the literature, including holding targeted events in community languages, targeted events for black and minority ethnic women and/or older people, or having black and minority ethnic people (of both genders) working in outreach roles to encourage involvement (DRC, 2006; Nightingale, 2006).

Inclusive or discrete?

43 Disability politics, and indeed all equality and diversity politics, have been moving from a position of separateness and separate debate towards the need for collaborative thinking and inclusive practice that promotes equality for all (Campbell, 2008). The new Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) comprises previously single equality bodies (such as the Disability Rights Commission) and aims to reduce discrimination and promote equality based on seven areas of equality and diversity: age, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion or belief, sexual orientation and gender reassignment.

Barriers

44 The existing literature sets out a number of barriers to involving disabled people, many of which have already been touched on in this review. First, issues of defining oneself as 'disabled' can be problematic (see para. 40), as can data on disability due to non-disclosure. Some disabled groups and individuals are traditionally difficult to reach, such as black and minority ethnic disabled people, young disabled people, people with non-apparent impairments, and those with newly classed disabilities such as cancer and HIV/AIDS (Office for Public Management, 2007).

45 Other people may be reluctant to become involved because they think the issues under discussion will not be relevant to them or because they believe nothing will change. As the Disability Rights Commission notes with relation to the history of the research community discussed above, some disabled people 'have been particularly disempowered by research and are likely to be sceptical of its usefulness' (DRC, 2006 p. 27). Consultation fatigue may be more prevalent among disabled people than non-disabled people, and to avoid this, a commitment to meaningful not tokenistic involvement, with clarity about the expected outcomes of involvement, is essential.

46 Further barriers are presented in the form of materials and information, locations and means of involvement which may be inaccessible to disabled people. Forrest et al (2007) suggest there is a danger that the most powerful, confident and articulate learners may become a powerful elite speaking on behalf of others, meaning other learners do not have the opportunity to be heard.

Part C: Conclusion

47 The main issues discussed in this literature review have been as follows.

- In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the importance of the active involvement (as opposed to more passive consultation) of learners/citizens within, but not exclusive to, the field of adult learning. Issues of where power and control lie are of central importance to any model of involvement.
 - While the literature does not offer much in terms of overarching models of learner involvement, there is a wealth of guidance on methods of involvement and on ensuring access by disabled learners. A range of methods is advisable to meet the requirements of a range of disabled people.
 - Recent years have seen great advances in the field of disability rights and self-advocacy and political, organised campaigning by disabled people. The introduction of disability laws and the duty for public bodies to involve disabled people in the production of disability equality schemes have strengthened the voices of disabled people.
 - Disabled people are not a homogenous group and some sub-groups have traditionally been more excluded than others. The literature suggests that black and minority ethnic disabled people and people with profound and multiple disabilities may require specific targeting for involvement activity.
 - The current climate of equality and diversity centres on collaborative thinking and equality for all. Activities aimed at involving disabled people should not be entirely distinct from activities to involve non-disabled people. A fully inclusive approach is required.
- Within models of learner involvement, the participation of disabled learners can be problematic, for example due to barriers of accessibility, unwillingness to become involved or an over-reliance on the 'usual suspects'.
- 48 In conclusion, the Disability Rights Movement and disability legislation have emphasised the importance of involving disabled people and disabled people's voices, while education policy has strengthened the concept of the learner voice. These developments increase the focus on involving disabled learners in decision-making. Methods for involving disabled learners should be varied and fully accessible. Furthermore, a method for involving disabled learners that is distinct and separate from those methods for non-disabled learners would be backward looking and at odds with recent moves towards inclusion.

Research Methods

49 In this section, we describe the approaches used to gather evidence from providers; define key terms such as 'disability' and 'learner involvement' and discuss the limitations of the approaches used.

50 The research comprised three stages: a literature review, a questionnaire survey and interviews with individuals whose questionnaire responses indicated interesting learner involvement practice.

51 In the first stage, the literature review for the disabled learners project covered recent policy documents and existing research, advice, guidance and articles on disability, learner voice and learner involvement. Relevant publications were identified by: searching NIACE's library and the Internet, and following up references in key texts and suggestions from NIACE health, equalities and disabilities experts. Searches were limited to material published within the last 10 years.

52 The second stage involved a questionnaire survey of post-16 education and training providers including further education (FE), sixth form and specialist colleges, work-based learning (WBL) providers, voluntary and community sector providers and local authority adult learning services. The primary purpose of the survey was to identify examples of interesting practice of disabled learner involvement in decision-making, although it also made the collection of other data possible, such as the case studies of practice presented at Annex D.

53 The questionnaire itself was designed by a team comprising subject specialists and researchers with experience of questionnaire design. After several iterations, the questionnaire was assessed for ease of completion by a former practitioner. The tight timescales precluded a full pilot phase.

54 Questions were informed by the research aim and knowledge of existing models of learner involvement derived from previous work on this subject (NIACE, 2008). The questionnaire (Annex A) was structured to enable quick and easy completion. Questionnaires were distributed to relevant contacts whose details are held on NIACE's database and those who had given us permission to contact them for research purposes. The email message (Annex B) explained the background and purpose of the survey and defined learner involvement and disability. The following definitions were provided to aid completion of the questionnaire:

- **Learner involvement** is the process of involving learners in decision-making about the quality and nature of provision and organisational policy and practice. Involvement might be achieved via things such as learner forums or panels and focus groups or by ensuring learner representation on governing bodies.
- **Disability** includes physical, sensory and cognitive impairments, mental health difficulties, long-term health conditions, learning disabilities and neurodiversity, and learning differences or difficulties such as dyslexia or dyspraxia. We are using these labels for the sake of clarity, although we strongly advocate a social model approach to disability.

55 The first two parts of the questionnaire sought data about respondents and their employing organisations. The second part asked about formal and informal learner involvement models and the steps organisations take to ensure that disabled learners are involved. Information was collected on learner involvement strategies, approaches to involving black and minority ethnic groups and future plans and ideas for more effective involvement of disabled learners. We also collected respondents' views about successes and barriers to involvement and their advice to the LSC. In order to further investigate examples of interesting practice, we sought permission to contact respondents again if we had any further queries.

56 Questionnaires were distributed on 9 May 2008 with a return deadline of 23 May 2008, although we did accept some late returns. The time for the return of the questionnaires was very limited as the project had to be completed by the end of July 2008. The questionnaire was distributed to various networks, contacts and email groups (see Annex C). The total number of contacts from this distribution is estimated at 3,500. However, this number is unlikely to be precise as some practitioners may have been included on more than one distribution list. The research team also asked contacts, as well as NIACE and LSC staff, to distribute it to other relevant provider networks. A total of 128 completed questionnaires were returned in the space of only two weeks.

57 Data from the completed questionnaires was entered into a spreadsheet. Quantitative data on regional location, type of organisation, national involvement strategies and approaches to black and minority ethnic learners were extracted. Two researchers reviewed responses to questions about the involvement of disabled learners in order to identify organisations with apparently interesting or

unusual mechanisms or involvement models. Two subject specialists then reviewed the data provided by this sub-group and selected organisations for inclusion in the next stage of data collection.

58 In the third stage, which took place in June 2008, the team contacted these organisations by email or phone and invited them to participate in either an in-depth telephone interview or a site visit. The decision about the method of data collection was informed in part by the detail and sophistication of the model described, but also by logistics; that is, whether the site locations were easily accessible by the research team. A small number of additional sites were identified by the LSC or the NIACE research team and visits were conducted at these organisations if they were known to have interesting models of involvement.

59 A total of 16 respondents were interviewed over the telephone. Of these, six were from general FE colleges, seven were from local authority providers, one was from a school sixth form and two were from specialist residential colleges.

60 A total of eight further sites were visited in person by members of the research team and nine interviews were conducted with appropriate managers. Three were located in general FE colleges, three in specialist residential or specialist day colleges, one with a specialist not-for-profit training provider and one with a local authority adult learning service. Interviews and visits were conducted between 2 June and 23 July 2008.

61 The aim of the in-depth interviews and visits was to gather more detailed data about the models and mechanisms described in the questionnaire returns in order to identify examples of interesting practice and construct models of learner involvement. Individual organisations were also asked about the specific models and mechanisms described by questionnaire respondents. In some instances, site visits also enabled researchers to meet learners and gather their views of involvement.

62 Notes taken during the course of visits and interviews were summarised as reports and verified and/or amended by respondents. The researchers also secured respondents' consent to use their data and identify their organisation in the final report for the LSC.

63 Each interview report was reviewed by at least two members of the project team who identified descriptions of interesting practice and key themes relevant to the research aims. Through discussion, the team reached a consensus about the most significant and recurrent themes that needed to be highlighted in the report. One member of the team constructed a composite involvement model from the review of existing mechanisms and models. The composite was discussed and revised by the research team.

Limitations

64 Although the respondents were provided with definitions, some interpreted 'involvement' in terms of participation in learning rather than in the decision-making process. In such cases, the data did not always address the research objectives.

65 As with many surveys, it is not possible to be certain that the most appropriate member of staff completed the questionnaire. This raises questions about the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data that was collected. A related limitation concerns the quality and level of detail upon which decisions about interviewee selection were based. All responses are individuals' perceptions and views, and which cannot be assumed to represent those of the organisation. Also, respondents may have their own reasons for choosing to present their organisation's involvement work in a particular light.

66 Neither are responses representative of post-16 learning providers as a whole. Although NIACE's contact database has wide coverage, it is not comprehensive. In particular, its contact with the WBL sector is limited. Although we might speculate that respondents were more likely than non-respondents to regard their involvement models as interesting or innovative, we cannot assume this to be the case.

67 Due to the timescale, the project team did not conduct an academic analysis of the qualitative data, but instead reviewed the reports for key themes and messages.

68 Finally, there is some indication that responses were based on practitioners' perceptions of the needs of learners with learning difficulties with less attention given to the needs of learners with mental health difficulties or sensory impairments. In the case of learners with mental health difficulties, this may be due to their low profile within organisations or their reluctance to declare their disability.

69 With these caveats, the findings of this project provide useful indications, drawn from practitioners, about the shape and structure of involvement models and the key issues that need to be taken into account in seeking to involve disabled learners.

Findings

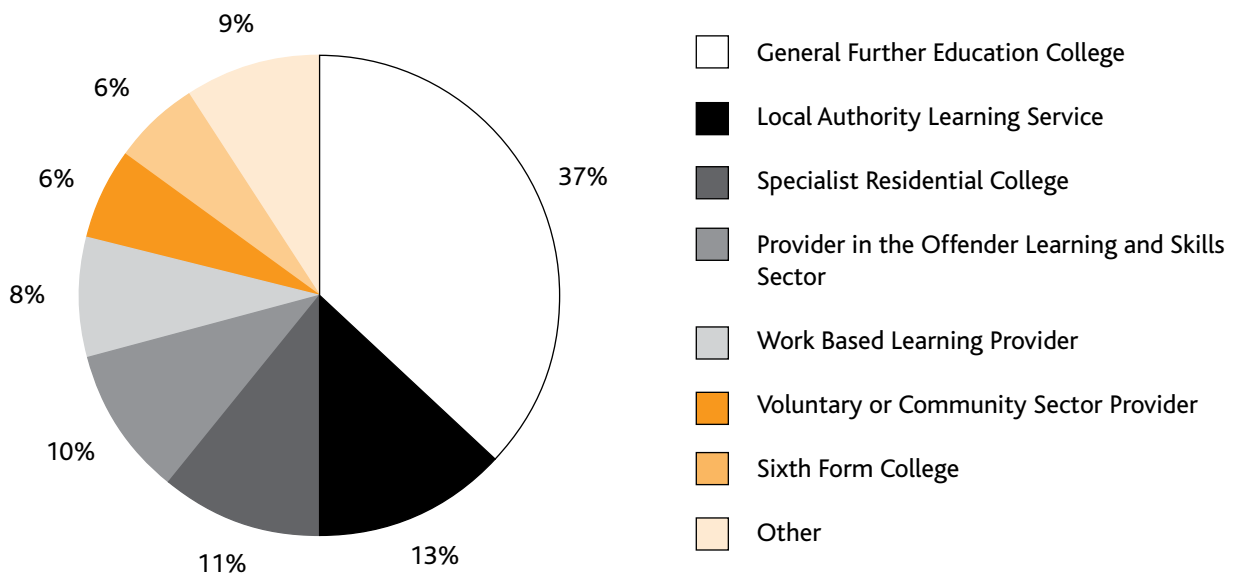
70 In this section, the initial findings are presented from an analysis of the questionnaire responses. The sector (provider type) of the respondents is given (Figure 3) as is their geographical region (Figure 4). Consideration is then given as to whether respondents declared that they had a learner involvement strategy and whether they employed any specific approaches to meet the needs of black and minority ethnic disabled learners. Providers were also asked to say if they had any advice for the LSC, and some examples are given here. Finally, consideration was given to the barriers and success factors declared by questionnaire respondents in relation to ensuring the effective involvement of disabled learners in all aspects of their learning.

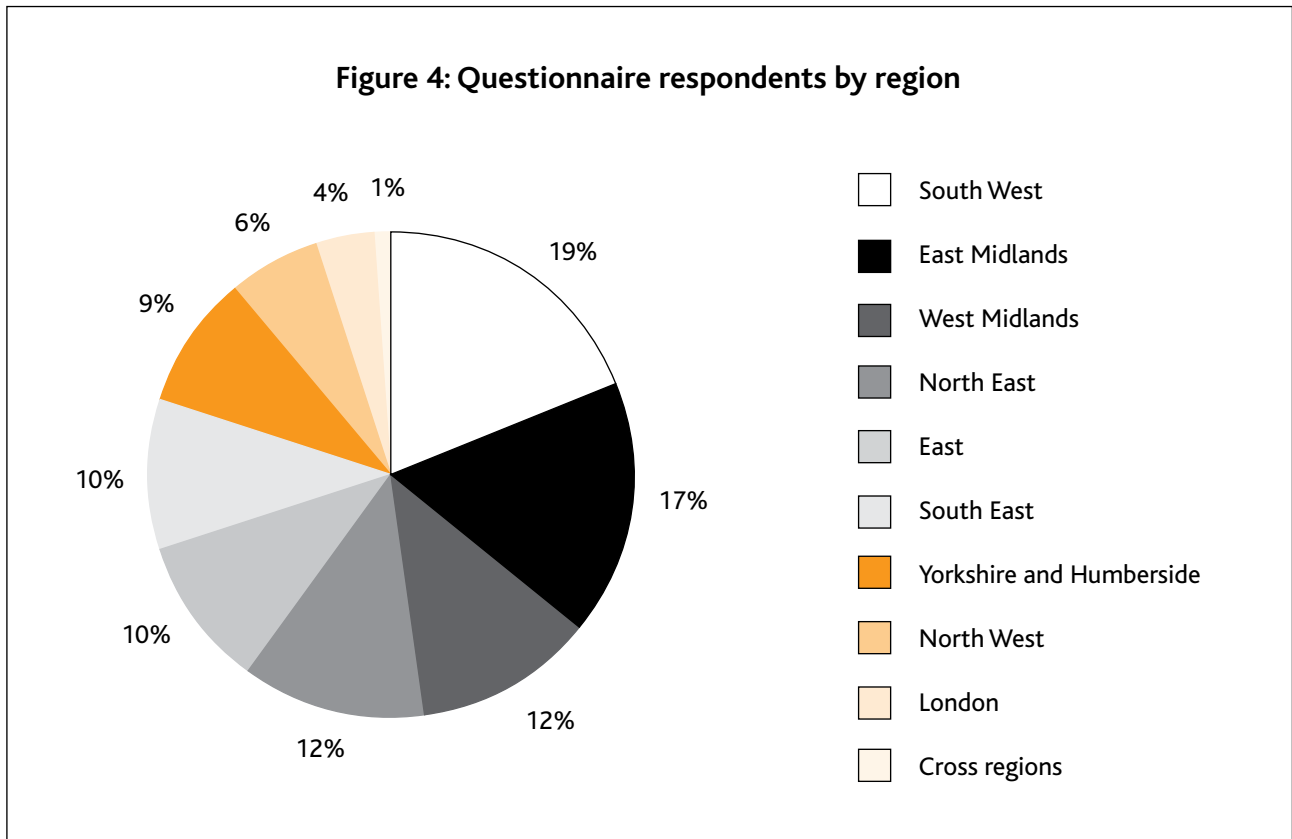
Analysis of questionnaire

By sector

71 Respondents were from a range of sectors, with over a third (37 per cent) from general FE colleges. Following this, 13 per cent were from a local authority learning service and 11 per cent were from a specialist residential college. A further 10 per cent were offender learning providers and 8 per cent WBL providers. Finally, 6 per cent were in the voluntary and community and school sixth form sectors respectively, and 9 per cent were from organisations that did not fit any of the above categories, including respondents from day services, forensic mental health services, borough-funded adult and community learning within FE colleges, higher education (HE) providers and supported employment services.

Figure 3: Questionnaire respondents by sector





By region

72 All the English regions were represented. The South West and the East Midlands had the highest percentages of respondents at 19 per cent and 17 per cent respectively. London had the lowest percentage of respondents (not including those that spanned regions) at 4 per cent (Figure 4).

By learner involvement strategy

73 We asked respondents whether their organisation had a learner involvement strategy:

- 70 (55 per cent) said yes
- 43 (34 per cent) said no
- 8 (6 per cent) did not know
- 7 (5 per cent) did not reply or gave an unclear response.

74 Of the 70 who did have a learner involvement strategy, we asked whether the strategy specified how disabled learners were involved:

- 50 said their strategy did specify how disabled learners were involved, and 2 explained that the provision was specialist (therefore the strategy was about disabled learners specifically)
- 11 said it did not
- 7 did not know, gave no response or gave an unclear response.

Involvement by black and minority ethnic disabled learners

75 We asked questionnaire respondents whether they used any particular approaches to ensure that black and minority ethnic disabled learners were involved:

- 76 (59 per cent) said no
- 37 (29 per cent) said yes
- 15 (12 per cent) did not know, did not respond or gave an unclear response.

76 We asked the 37 who specified that they did have specific approaches for involving black and minority ethnic disabled learners to describe these approaches. Many referred to the fact that all learners have equal opportunities to participate, without specifying any activity that targeted black and minority ethnic disabled learners. Other responses were vague. Respondents referred to:

- an inclusive approach with a culture that fosters equality (but did not elaborate on this)
- their strategies on equality and diversity and equal opportunities (again, with little or no elaboration)
- 'engaging people in an appropriate way'.

77 Some respondents referred to holding specific involvement activities for black and minority ethnic learners, but it was unclear if these were for, or inclusive of, disabled learners. Other referred to meeting individual needs on a one-to-one basis.

78 However, a small number of responses were more specific and referred to directly targeting this group, holding events in locations that different groups used, or translating documents into different languages where necessary. Others referred to monitoring equality and diversity, ensuring that promotional materials included images of diversity or working in partnership with voluntary groups for this purpose.

Advice for the LSC

79 We asked respondents if they had advice or comments for the LSC regarding the involvement of disabled learners.

80 Some responses focused on how the LSC can better support organisations to involve disabled learners at an institutional level. Some providers had concerns about how to resource this work, seeing it sometimes as an additional activity. Whilst there are inevitably additional costs in conducting significant consultation events with learners, some providers had embedded learner involvement naturally within their work and valued its contribution to the curriculum in terms of the development of functional skills, including language, literacy and numeracy skills. These providers claimed to absorb the additional resource requirements within their existing work.

81 Many respondents were enthusiastic and passionate about the need to involve disabled learners in decision- and policy-making. They provided the following advice for the LSC on how to ensure that disabled learners can feed into the National Learner Panel.

Approach

82 Respondents advised that any involvement activity should see disabled learners as individuals, as people first and foremost, and not as a homogenous group. A genuine commitment to involving disabled learners should be made and sufficient funds allocated for this. The agenda should be set not only by the LSC but by learners themselves.

Activity

83 The suggestions for involvement activity included:

- holding cross-organisation events at regional and local levels
- involving learners on an individual, one-to-one basis (as meetings can inhibit some learners)
- ensuring learners receive effective and timely feedback on issues raised
- involving external organisations, such as learning disability partnership boards and voluntary or umbrella community sector organisations
- ensuring learners are encouraged to consider solutions, not just problems
- ensuring involvement is activity based and the format is not prescriptive, using a variety of methods
- ensuring learners' views influence any recommendations so that they can see that their voice has had an impact.

Accessibility

84 Respondents advised that all materials need to be available in plain English and in a variety of formats, such as Braille, large print, easy read, audio, with symbols and photographs, and so on.

Support and recognition

85 Respondents said that learners should have access to appropriate information about involvement and training to allow them to participate. It was suggested that learners with high support needs should have advocates. Respondents also suggested using financial and other incentives for learners to be involved.

Barriers

86 Respondents were also asked what barriers they had encountered when working to involve disabled learners.

Logistical issues

87 Issues of time were mentioned, with respondents reporting that there was insufficient staff time to prepare for involvement, adapt materials and support learners both before their involvement (for example to explain the issues) and within meetings, focus groups, and so on. Transport was also identified as a barrier, as was insufficient funding for support equipment and resources and making information accessible. It can be difficult to ensure learners are all able to meet together, at the same time and same venue.

High support needs and profound and complex learning difficulties

88 Some respondents reported difficulties involving learners with complex needs in a meaningful way. Methods of involvement and the terminology surrounding issues to be discussed were at times too complex or not appropriate for some learners. Some respondents reported a need to rely on staff or advocates to represent learners. Communication can be problematic. The potential for creative uses of information and communications technology (ICT) could help to alleviate some of the concerns here, as could the sensitive use of information gained during work on individuals' person-centred planning documents and records with the consent of the individual or their parent/carers as appropriate.

Disability identity

89 When activity is discrete, this can be problematic, as some people who would be covered by disability legislation do not consider themselves to be disabled and others, such as learners with mental health difficulties, may not declare impairments. Therefore, there are barriers in reaching many disabled people due to a reluctance or refusal to identify as disabled.

Dispositional barriers

90 A frequent response was that for some learners a lack of confidence (for example with entry-level learners), interest or motivation could inhibit their involvement. For others, sensitivity about their impairment or about feeling different may prevent them from contributing fully.

Mainstream involvement

91 Some respondents reported that it can be difficult to gather the views of disabled learners within mainstream activity as these learners may not want to be singled out. There is also an emerging concern of consultation fatigue, particularly among some groups of disabled learners, with learners saying they 'just want to get on with learning'.

Difficulty gaining views

92 If involvement resources are written or electronic (for example surveys based on written text with poor adaptations) there can be difficulties making these accessible. Some learners may need support to read, understand and respond; inadequate resources can mean their responses are not completed independently and therefore not truly representative of that learner's views.

Success factors

93 We asked questionnaire respondents what models and arrangements for involving disabled learners were particularly successful.

94 Some respondents identified simply that specific approaches – such as having student forums and councils, student representatives on boards, advocacy groups or one-to-one interviews were successful. Many respondents identified that small-group activity such as focus groups or tutorial sessions worked well. Others referred to the need for a range of methods, including formal and informal methods.

Training and support

95 Respondents said that mentors, such as peer supporters or specialist support workers, was a success factor. People First (self-advocacy) groups have been involved in such training for some time. These could provide support in meetings or in assisting learners one-to-one, for example with practical support to help complete questionnaires by noting down what people have to say or clarifying the meaning of questions. Training (such as advocacy training)

that supports learners to contribute or represent others was also identified, as was offering inductions to make learners aware of their rights. Some self-advocacy groups, such as People First and Change offer training in the use of simple, plain language and accessible approaches to running meetings, such as consultation events.

96 Some respondents said that targeted activity to reach disabled learners was a success factor. Some suggested that targeted invitations resulted in greater participation, as learners were likely to feel reassured about the process and support available.

Accessibility

97 Providing accessible materials and adapting materials were identified as success factors. Using symbols, images, and flashcards were all identified, as was using speech as opposed to an over-reliance on written materials.

Valuing involvement

98 Having 'the right approach' (such as being person centred, inclusive and valuing learner contributions) was specified as important. Having learner-led agendas, ensuring learners are kept informed of progress on issues raised, and offering gift vouchers for involvement were all mentioned.

Discrete or embedded

99 While some respondents felt that having discrete activity for disabled learners was a success factor, others felt that inclusive activity for disabled and non-disabled learners working collaboratively was better. Discrete activity has traditionally been seen as separating disabled people from their non-disabled peers. See paragraphs 102 to 110 for a longer discussion of this.

Findings from interviews

100 These findings are taken from telephone or face-to-face interviews with providers who were identified from the initial questionnaire as having some aspect of interesting practice. Consideration is given to what is seen as a key debate: that is, whether learner forums or panels should be exclusive to learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, or whether panels of all learners working together, including disabled people as equals, is a preferred approach.

101 Discussion is then focused on a key theme emerging from the interviews. In seeking to improve links between local infrastructure arrangements and the NLP (perhaps through a sub-regional and regional structure as suggested below), providers who were interviewed suggested that the LSC and others should aim to build on existing structures and networks. What is meant by a culture of involvement is then discussed, as is the need to measure the impact of learner involvement activities. Finally, some current and potential uses of ICT are examined.

Discrete versus embedded

102 One of the key debates that emerged from discussions with providers was whether learner involvement in relation to consultation and representation strategies should be discrete (that is, involving only disabled learners), or embedded across the organisation to involve all learners. The parameters for this debate could be argued to be set by the nature of the organisation itself.

103 A number of specialist residential colleges were involved in the follow-up study, either by telephone interview or site visit and the nature of their provision is that they usually only have responsibility for providing to disabled people as learners. However, even in these settings, interviewees were keen to consider how learners could be networked with other learners outside the residential college, perhaps with enhanced contacts with the local general FE colleges or through engagement in National Union of Students activity.

104 Through the National Association of Specialist Colleges (Natspec), there is also the possibility of learners networking with other learners in other specialist residential colleges, particularly at the regional level. Natspec is already leading on some national work to secure greater learner involvement for students in specialist residential college provision.

105 In general FE colleges, this debate takes a slightly different form in that the college has to consider how to engage with all its learners and, in this context, how it can ensure that disabled learners are equitably involved. Some achieve this by ensuring that there is targeted representation from representatives from discrete courses in college and others by also ensuring that a positive and proactive approach is taken to promoting access to learner forums or student council representation by disabled learners on mainstream courses, perhaps as elected representatives for non-discrete courses.

106 A number of providers are interested in how they can galvanise the main body of students through innovative approaches such as texting, social networking, e-magazines and video- and audio-podcasting.

107 Several of our examples used discrete models as a first stage of development to collect learner comments and train representatives to engage in mainstream panels and forums. Effective models are again likely to differ according to the setting.

108 The issues raised by some learners may initially appear trivial and ill-informed, such as complaining about the use of plastic forks in a canteen or the quality of the social activities available in college, but in the opinion of many interview respondents and the NIACE research team, such issues are vital milestones on the route to fuller involvement in curriculum and policy engagement. They

can demonstrate that the organisation is listening to its learners, is prepared to respond, and has set up appropriate mechanisms to do so effectively.

109 One further issue is ensuring that learners who are empowered in specialist settings can be seen and treated as equals in mainstream learner forums and settings. As learners develop the competence and confidence to engage in early advocacy activity, they often comment that as they try to get their voices heard in non-discrete settings, it becomes harder and less effective.

110 In the opinion of the NIACE research team, the group and political dynamics involved in these situations need to be acknowledged, as does a hierarchy which is said to exist within the disability movement, which sees learners with learning disabilities and mental health difficulties sometimes struggling to be taken seriously in pan-disability settings.

Building on existing mechanisms

111 A plea was made by a number of the interviewees that infrastructures either already exist or could usefully be built on to ensure that the views and interests of disabled learners are considered, particularly at a local level. This was less evident at a sub-regional and regional level, but was seen as a possible and sensible development from existing arrangements.

112 In some areas, for example, colleges are active members of local learning disability partnership boards, although representation may be taken by staff rather than student members. In the opinion of the research team, a logical development would be to encourage these institutions to support a small group of learners to develop the skills and confidence to accompany them to such meetings. Each board should have two self-advocates on it, so learners could relate relevant issues to them. Further scrutiny of the effectiveness of the self-advocates' roles on such partnership boards may reveal how effective they have been. There is a small number of examples of disabled learners gaining access to countywide service user forums. These may not be discussing learning and skills issues exclusively, but form a useful way for learners to contribute to key policy and planning debates and to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute effectively in more formal collaborative environments.

113 Student councils were felt to be another useful means of facilitating learner involvement, but at present these remain most effective at the institutional level. Within any given area, however, it would be interesting to explore how learners from a range of settings, with experiences of working on student councils, could come together to create a formal or informal body to discuss issues of importance to them.

114 At a local or sub-regional level, it may be possible for learners from several sectors including general FE, WBL and personal and community development learning to come together to work on issues of individual and mutual concern.

115 There are other distributed or electronic networks that currently exist such as Skill's networks and website, and it was felt that these could be exploited more effectively to promote the views and interests of disabled learners. The development of social networking sites is explored more fully in paragraphs 121 to 126.

116 Providers were keen to point out that although learners with cognitive impairment are often regarded as considerably disadvantaged when talking about current established involvement activities, their needs have to be considered alongside those of other learners. It was felt by some respondents that there are already partnership networks for learners with learning difficulties, whereas other learners, such as deaf learners or those with physical disabilities, are less well supported.

Culture

117 Interview respondents stressed the need for a culture of involvement to be developed over time, so that asking learners what they think of provision and where improvements could be made, for example, becomes the norm. They said that involvement needs to be embedded into the norms of student life and not become either discrete or cumbersome. Commitment needs to be apparent beyond a single champion and critically has to be led by senior leaders and managers in an institution, but understood and enacted by all. Many respondents pointed to the length of time it takes to build up the trust of the student body to such initiatives and how fragile it can become when communications are not effective or when little feedback is given on suggestions made. The notion that learner involvement passes through phases and that small but significant steps are both necessary and to be expected in the early stages was cited by most respondents. Some learner involvement strategies were already described as static and having served their purpose, and thinking here needs to focus on how these groups can make a dynamic contribution to the life of the institution and develop into critical and vital elements of the institutional infrastructure.

Measuring impact

118 Interview respondents were asked to consider how effective current learner involvement mechanisms were in engaging with disabled learners. There was considerable evidence of positive involvement at the personal and institutional level, in that learners who had been involved in either self- or group advocacy had developed a positive sense of individual and group agency and had definitely gained in confidence. At the institutional level, there was also emerging evidence that learners had had an impact on improving conditions for other students, including physical

conditions, and in improving the range of learning opportunities, supporting fellow learners, and in delivering provision through 'convivial learning', that is, learners teaching learners (see Case study 11 in Annex D).

119 The cumulative impact of these improvements has not been measured, however, because there are currently insufficient means to collate this information beyond the institutional level. Emerging networks of providers do not at present have sufficient learner involvement to fulfil this role at the sub-regional or regional level.

120 Respondents commented on the ways in which current survey data sets could be used more effectively to both map and plan improvements in the responsiveness of current provision. Regular data collection could be used to identify training needs, raise awareness of issues and concerns and feed back to policy-makers beyond the institution as well as influencing institutional change. A concern expressed was that some providers might survey students only because they are obliged to do so and would fail to use the data effectively for the purposes for which it was intended, that is, to improve the delivery of provision, in part by making it more responsive. This view has been expressed by members of the Yorkshire and the Humber regional learners' panel. Providers need to find effective ways of feeding back to learners.

Current and potential uses of ICT

121 Respondents gave mixed views on the nature of learners' responses to using ICT. Some learners were very keen and skilled, while others lacked either the exposure to appropriate technologies or were unconfident users of, for example, web platforms for social networking purposes or email groups.

122 Any use of ICT should always be subject to a proactive risk analysis or impact assessment to ensure that disabled people can equitably access all the provision delivered by electronic means.

123 There have been some attempts to try to establish social networking sites for disabled people, but these were often inaccessible to people with learning disabilities, for example. People with sensory impairments, including hearing- and visually-impaired learners, have used technologies effectively, although again, this is not consistently applied across all regions.

124 Some providers are using Moodle (an online virtual learning environment with a generally accessible interface) and video-conferencing to network with off-site learners.

125 If this area of work is to be exploited to its potential, a lot will depend on the ability of learners to access and use ICT effectively. Training and support will be important considerations, as will the need to adapt equipment and meet accessibility requirements, as well as personal preferences and learning styles.

126 There is also often a skills gap for staff in using some technologies and this will be an important consideration in ensuring that learners with complex disabilities, for example, are included in future developments.

Proposed model of involvement

127 In interviews, providers were asked to describe:

- how their organisation's mechanisms worked
- how different arrangements to promote learner involvement related to one another
- how these arrangements might feed into working collaboratively with the work of the National Learner Panel.

128 The models that were offered suggested, as in the literature, progression from one level of involvement to another. Practitioners were aware of the need to start where the particular learner is in terms of his or her own awareness and experience of issues before facilitating progression to greater engagement and decision-making. Where learner panels, student forums or advocacy groups are at different stages of development, the view of the NIACE research team is that there is a risk of control by the group with more developed mechanisms, greater confidence and a louder voice.

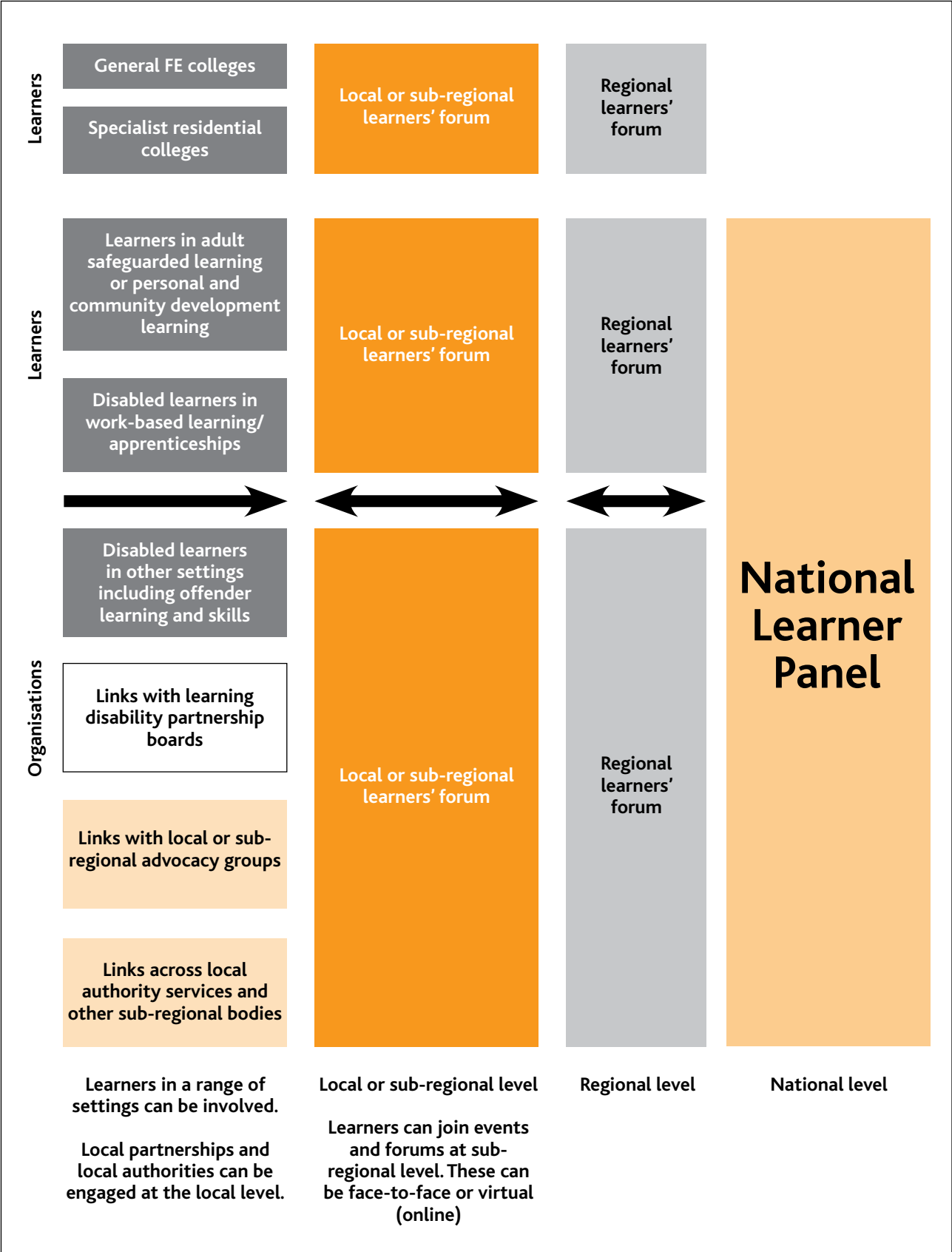
129 The proposed model (Figure 5) offers three levels of involvement. At the local or countywide level, learners drawn from a range of provider types come together at a face-to-face local or sub-regional learners' forum. This could be complemented by an online learners' forum to attract a greater number of participants. There are important links with existing infrastructure arrangements, such as learning disability partnership boards, advocacy partnerships and local authority structures. Flexibility is built into the model, in that local circumstances can dictate whether those invited to the forum are just disabled learners or whether all learners are invited to become involved, with particular attention being paid to ensuring that disabled learners are represented. Local and sub-regional forums allow for urban and rural issues to be discussed separately or in tandem and allow for local issues to be addressed.

130 From these local or sub-regional forums, regional forums could be established. These would be composed of a cross-section of learners from sub-regional forums and would address issues specific to the region. In the Yorkshire and the Humber region, for example, it has been important to attract members from the four sub-regions as each has its own distinct identity and needs. These regional learners' forums are indicated at the centre of the model in Figure 5. If this model were accepted, there would be nine of them across the English regions.

131 These regional forums would have a direct line of contact to the NLP. Members of the NLP might be invited to attend meetings of the regional forums and vice-versa in order to gain different perspectives and share experiences.

132 The model does not preclude direct contact between the local or sub-regional forums and the NLP, but there would be many more of them and it would be difficult to achieve in practice. Connections via an enhanced NLP website (see paragraph 167) has the potential to make this more achievable and sustainable.

Figure 5: A model for learner involvement



Practical considerations for the model

133 Practitioners felt that there were practical issues that need addressing in promoting greater genuine learner involvement at and beyond the institutional level. These issues have further relevance in considering the connections between local and sub-regional activity, through to regional activity and direct links with the work of the NLP.

134 The location of meetings is important transport and staffing are expensive in ensuring student attendance at events external to the provider. In terms of the NLP, it would not be practical for members of all sub-regional forums to meet with members of the NLP directly, but some occasional face-to-face contact might be possible, certainly at a regional level. The ICT models discussed at paragraphs 123 to 124 could work favourably with directed and facilitated input from learners.

135 Providers and advocates need to prepare learners for active and full involvement and provide training and support to ensure equal participation. Discrete meetings prior to embedded panels seem an effective way of doing this so that learners can discuss and prioritise issues they want to talk about at their own pace. There is clearly a need to guard against such discrete panels being seen as segregated from mainstream activity, but for some learners, including those with complex and multiple disabilities, for example, there will always be a requirement for facilitated support. As much as possible, providers should help to facilitate communications with all student bodies, whilst ensuring that the views and interests of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are clearly heard.

136 Motivation, incentives and rewards for involvement should be considered. These could be certificates or material rewards (including payment) and should be embedded into curriculum activity. Involvement in such activity clearly has direct relevance to the citizenship agenda, and functional skills development and learners' engagement can also be readily embedded into programmes such as these.

137 Materials and equipment need to be appropriate to the group, including attention being paid to the physical, sensory, emotional and cognitive needs of a wide participant group. The level of detail required here for planning purposes is considerable and facilitators need to identify with learners how best they can enable learners to be actively involved in ways that are sensitive and responsive to their preferred means of communication and meeting format. Some individuals find very vocal or noisy groups uncomfortable and unproductive, for example, and others struggle with inaccessible websites, which do not work effectively with their assistive technologies.

138 The timing, duration and frequency of meetings need to be considered. Scheduling for meetings should be

realistic; overly frequent meetings are likely to be less well attended. On the other hand, meetings must not become so infrequent that momentum is lost.

139 It may be difficult initially to engage learners in discussions about policy issues, and some thought needs to be given to presenting topics in a stimulating and engaging way, for example by illustrating the solidly practical connotations of policy decisions. As the title of this report suggests, problems that at first glance seem trivial such as the provision of plastic forks to disabled learners when everyone else is using metal cutlery are for many disabled people not only not trivial, but representative of a historical lack of personal and collective power. Tackling such apparently 'trivial' problems helps learners to develop a collective identity and the confidence to challenge other oppressive and discriminatory practices so that they can become, over time, supportive and collaborative partners for change at all levels, including policy.

140 Learner involvement forums need to consider how to encourage the proactive involvement of disabled learners, for example by giving them space to raise topics themselves rather than responding only to the providers' or government agendas. It is crucial that disabled learners are given opportunities to comment on all aspects of policy that the NLP considers, not only those that are seen as being particularly relevant to disabled people. When this is achieved, it is a significant moment in the process of change from powerless to empowered.

141 Forums need to access the views of non-learners who may be hard to reach. People with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are likely to be disproportionately represented in this group. Some potential learners may sit outside learning provision because they feel it is 'not for them', or because of negative experiences in the past. One common reason given for non-participation by all potential learners, disabled and non-disabled, is that they 'don't know what they don't know'. They simply are not aware of the breadth, depth or variety of learning and skills provision available, and nor are their carers, so they do not access it. The NLP, perhaps with the support of NIACE, could consider new ways in which learning opportunities could be promoted and discover whether these are inclusive, attractive and meaningful to disabled people who are considering returning to learning.

142 There is a need to ensure that all groups have opportunities to be involved by developing mechanisms to involve people who are engaged in informal learning for example on short- or long-term projects and in franchised learning centres, or those learning in the offender learning and skills sector. Considerable amounts of activity take place in the third sector, for example, which is often targeted at meeting the needs of disabled people as a discrete group, but they have limited opportunities to engage in mainstream debates. The NLP could adopt a proactive approach to targeting these groups.

143 There is also a need to ensure that the authentic voice of learners is heard, in other words, not that of their support workers, and that learners are not constrained by politeness or sidelined as trivial by their mainstream peers in integrated settings.

144 Anecdotal evidence suggests that some groups of disabled people sharing the same disability, such as those with hearing impairment or other forms of physical disability, are more active in campaigning and decision-making than, for example, people with learning difficulties or mental health difficulties. This can lead to problems in ensuring that all learners are properly represented: the assumption that one disabled learner with a particular condition can represent the needs of all disabled learners with a wide range of different conditions must be avoided. Similarly, some thought need to be given to the tendency to label groups of disabled people when in fact their needs may be very individual and even unique.

145 In the view of the writers of this report, the narrow concept of identity politics is outdated and any activity involving disabled people should include non-disabled people, rather than being separate. As noted above, the distinction between disabled and non-disabled people is problematic, so an approach that is inclusive of all may help remove the barriers of non-disclosure and non-identification as disabled, which in turn lead to exclusion from participation.

146 Training for staff is also a key issue. Many disabled persons' organisations offer training on disability awareness, accessibility, the implications of disability legislation and discussion of the different interpretations of the medical and social models of disability.

Additional considerations in promoting learner involvement

147 Those interested in listening to learners need to find ways of involving them in issues beyond their own immediate concerns. This may be a gradual process, starting with engaging interest in practical and physical issues (for example parking, food) before moving on to learning delivery and content, structural issues and making the learner voice heard at the institutional level to policy issues affecting the whole learner group and future learners. Thus the impact of agency at the local level may develop motivation and interest in wider issues beyond learners' initial and immediate concerns.

148 Dependency may be an problems for some learners with only limited opportunities for agency or action. They may as a consequence lack confidence or be over-protected by carers and family. There is an attendant risk that some support workers will speak for learners rather than empowering them to express themselves. If this is the case, highly skilled and trained support workers could be used to ensure learners self advocate, at least in the initial

stages. This situation could also be alleviated by the involvement of local, regional and national advocacy services and organisations, particularly those led by disabled people themselves. This will not only keep such organisations up to date on LSC and provider activity, but will encourage joint working in other areas.

149 The form of consultation and involvement should also be considered. For example, there is a clear difference between forums and focus groups. Forums (or panels) run to a schedule of meetings that are held over a given timespan, such as a year. In this sense, they differ from focus groups, which are more usually associated with one-off consultations on particular issues, and that have no formal constitution or membership. Participants are there by invitation or as volunteers rather than being elected. Face-to-face forums and panels bring personal development and social networking advantages.

150 In terms of consultation, Berkley and Jacobsen (2007) have a useful contribution here in *Brightening Lives*, a large survey of learners with learning difficulties, the results of which are being used by practitioners as a teaching and learning resource, often in very innovative ways.

Conclusions and Recommendations

151 In this section, we draw conclusions from the project findings and suggest some ways in which the views of disabled learners could feed in to the work of the NLP and ways that the LSC and its partners could support this work. Our aim is to provide a viable alternative approach to the proposal in *Learning for Living and Work* to establish a separate panel for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A similarly inclusive model of learner consultation will need to make the transition beyond 2010 to the Young People's Learning Agency and the Skills Funding Agency.

152 There is already good practice in some local authorities that have established structures to promote the involvement of service users. In these cases, their opinions are listened to and valued, and service users can genuinely influence the development of services. For instance, as part of the Valuing People Now delivery plan, a regional and local cross-agency structure has been established to improve services for people with learning difficulties. This includes the development of self-advocacy training and services. It will be important for learner forums to link with such local and regional structures.

Current levels of involvement

153 There is sound evidence from this research that providers are making efforts to engage disabled learners at the institutional level. Changes have been made to learning programmes, and learners now have better opportunities to comment on their learning activity (see Annex D). However, the cases studies involving small unitary authorities, such as in Rochdale (Case study 11 in Annex D) and Middlesbrough (see Whaley, 2007) and countywide initiatives to engage with learners directly, such as those in Dorset, Leicestershire, and Northamptonshire (Case studies 8, 9 and 10 respectively) are few and far between.

154 Evidence from the Yorkshire and the Humber regional learners' panel is that even a small number of committed individuals can quickly gain the confidence and capability to respond to ideas put to them and come up with suggestions of their own. There are currently far too few opportunities for all learners to do this meaningfully across all the regions. Learner forums or panels established at the sub-regional and regional level have the advantage of reducing travelling and organisational issues and could be responsive to sub-regional and regional issues.

155 Such forums or panels could invite key policy-makers as speakers to explain priorities for the region. It is possible that such forums could be replicated in an online community of interest platform (COIP), such as that developed by the Humber Apprentices Panel in the Yorkshire and the Humber region.

156 There is growing evidence that, through the Learning for Living and Work strategy, regional LSCs have successfully mapped local and sub-regional provision, but this has often been done at the provider level and has not always engaged the learner voice effectively.

157 Supported intervention would ensure that the voices of people with more complex learning disabilities or mental health difficulties could be heard. It is the view of the writers of this report that separate panels for disabled learners would disadvantage disabled people by segregating them from mainstream activities, and is counterintuitive when considered in the light of single equality approaches.

158 The practitioners interviewed for this research indicated the importance of training for those involved in supporting learners, whether disabled or not, to have a voice.

159 There is an appetite and willingness among learning providers to be more active in promoting learner involvement. The benefits to the individuals, the learning offer and the institution are beginning to be realised.

160 NIACE recognises the considerable resource implications of the proposed model, but feels it does offer a practical and sustainable structure with which to capture the views of learners at regional level and to connect these with the work of the NLP in a mutually beneficial way.

Regional learner forums

161 Regional LSCs could use existing provider networks developed as part of the Learning for Living and Work planning processes to develop sub-regional and regional learner forums. These should be inclusive of all learners, not just those who are disabled. Building on the good work that providers have done to date, this would see groups of learners coming together, from different provider settings and different programme types, to discuss general issues concerning learning in their region.

162 The consortia responsible for supporting third-sector providers should be consulted to ensure the representation and presence of learners in voluntary and community sector provision. Similarly, the views of Natspec members should be sought to ensure that the interests of learners in specialist residential contexts are taken into account.

163 The LSC could commission training to develop resources that would support providers in developing their learner involvement approaches. These resources should address some of the barriers disabled learners face in becoming more active in representational settings, including the dispositional barriers of low confidence and negative self-image.

164 The LSC could also encourage providers to use current survey data sets more effectively to both map and plan the responsiveness of current provision. Regular data collection would identify training needs, which in turn could be employed to raise awareness and feed back to policy-makers beyond the institution, as well as influencing institutional change.

A model for connecting with disabled learners

165 If regional or sub-regional panels are established, it would make it much more feasible for the NLP to link directly with them. For example, quarterly meetings between some members of the NLP could be scheduled in between meetings of the full panel. This would have the advantage of building personal relationships between the NLP members and people living and learning in their own home region, and in addition keep regional panel members up to date with the activities of the NLP.

166 Although the development of sub-regional and regional learner panels would be useful in engaging large numbers of disabled learners in national policy debates, it would be necessary to consider complementary means of involvement. The use of electronic devices to do this is worthy of exploration. The NLP website could carry a moderated social networking facility where, for example, learners could contribute online to policy debates. Such facilities could be very accessible to learners with sensory impairments, if full access considerations are taken into account.

Links with the National Learner Panel

167 NLP members need to be consulted on whether they feel it is feasible for them to develop links with regional panels, using the model described in paragraph 165. The NLP could also explore the degree to which it has the autonomy to develop its own social networking capacity online and, if this is limited, to explore ways in which this might be developed. This development might also include reviewing and ensuring that the website is fully accessible to all, including learners with sensory impairments. Another advantage of an enhanced website would be its

potential for reinforcing learners' literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, providing a very real and practical purpose for communicating using such technologies.

168 The National Union of Students could examine the degree to which its institution-based officers and regional and national staff could promote and facilitate access to online forums for disabled learners.

Effectiveness of the proposed model

169 Some learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities may experience difficulty in understanding complex policy issues, particularly if material is only available in the written form. Evidence from the questionnaire responses and the interviews also indicated that some learners might not be engaged by issues that they see as being outside their immediate experience. It will be important to bring these issues to life for all learners in an accessible, engaging and interesting way.

170 One possible approach might be for the NLP to work with the proposed regional or sub-regional learners' panels to explore how they could engage with a considerable number of learners at either (a) a themed event to examine one or two significant areas of government policy; or (b) an open-space event in which learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are invited to identify issues for themselves and to discuss them with learners from a broad range of settings, in a relaxed and comfortable environment. A residential event may enable people to relax and reflect on issues of interest to them and would have a social dimension that learners might find appealing.

171 In addition to opportunities to discuss issues face to face, events such as those suggested above would be valuable for recording, in different media, activities that other forums can learn from and so be encouraged by early adopters. For example, the NLP and the Yorkshire and the Humber regional learners' panel could produce a training DVD for teaching staff and learners themselves. One way forward would be for the LSC to arrange a residential event with the Yorkshire and the Humber regional learners' panel and the NLP to gauge interest in and commitment to the idea.

Involving learners in research

172 Finally, in this small-scale research project, the focus was deliberately on inviting the views of providers on how they felt learner involvement could be more actively promoted, particularly in relation to improving communications with the NLP. Given the nature of the findings of this report and its subject matter, it is almost inevitable that the final recommendation relates to greater involvement of learners in research.

173 The opportunities to engage with learners in this project were very limited, given its timescale, timing (being near the end of term) and scope. Providers reported a tremendous appetite among learners to be more engaged in contributing to research activity and the evidence from *Brightening Lives* (Berkley and Jacobsen, 2007) endorses this view.

174 The LSC could commission further research with learners, including those on the NLP and the Yorkshire and the Humber regional learners' panel, in order to test the efficacy of the proposals above, and gauge support for the proposed model of involvement suggested here.

Annex A

Introductory Letter and Questionnaire

Dear colleagues,

I am writing to invite you to have your say in informing national practice about learner involvement in post-16 learning and training provision. The questionnaire below should take about **10 minutes** to complete. Please return the questionnaire by **Friday 23 May 2008**.

Background

In *Learning for Living and Work: Improving education and training opportunities for people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities* the LSC states its intention to **involve learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities** on issues of policy that affect their experience in the post-16 education and training system.

The research

NIACE has been asked by the LSC to develop a **model for learner involvement** that ensures that learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities can respond to the National Learner Panel on issues pertinent to them. This model will be responsive to the views of learners with a range of disabilities, including learners with complex needs.

The questionnaire asks about existing models of learner involvement in the post-16 learning and skills system. This will help us to identify what works well, as well as challenges in involving learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Your contribution

We would be very grateful if you or an appropriate colleague would complete the following questionnaire to tell us about your organisation's current learner involvement practice.

Please complete the questionnaire and return it as an email attachment to anne.agius@niace.org.uk. If you prefer to return the questionnaire by post, please send it to Anne Agius, NIACE, The Resource Centre, Room 2.3, 356 Holloway Road, London, N7 6PA.

Your responses will be treated anonymously; that is, we will not refer to you or your organisation in our reporting without your permission. Contact details will be stored by NIACE for the duration of the project, but will not be passed onto any third parties.

Definitions

'Learner involvement': the process of involving learners in decision-making about the quality and nature of provision, and organisational policy and practice. Involvement might be achieved via things like learner forums, focus groups or learner representation on governing bodies.

'Disability': this includes physical, sensory and cognitive impairments, mental health difficulties, long-term health conditions, learning disabilities and neurodiversity, and learning differences or difficulties such as dyslexia or dyspraxia. We are using these labels for the sake of clarity, although we strongly advocate a social model approach to disability.

Thank you for your time

Yola Jacobsen

Development Officer, NIACE

Part 1: About you

Please provide the following information.

Name: _____

Organisation: _____

Postal address: _____

LSC region: _____

Telephone number: _____

Email address: _____

Your job title: _____

Which box best describes your main role? (Please mark one box only.)

- Senior postholder
- Head of teaching department
- Head of support department
- Other management role
- Human resources/personnel staff
- Senior teacher, tutor, trainer or lecturer
- Teacher, tutor, trainer or lecturer
- Learner support staff
- Governor or council member
- Other support staff
- Other (Please specify.)

Part 2: About your organisation

1. Which box best describes your organisation? (Please mark one box only.)

- Sixth form college
- Specialist residential further education college (Please specify the learner group.)
- Local authority learning service
- General further education college
- Provider in the offender learning and skills sector
- Voluntary or community sector provider
- Work-based learning provider

- Other(Please specify.)
- 2. Approximately how many **individual learners** are enrolled at your organisation across all learning programmes? (Please write the number below.)
- 3. Approximately how many learners have **declared a disability or learning difficulty**? (Please write the number below.)

Part 3: Learner involvement

In this section we ask about arrangements for involving learners. Questions 4 and 5 ask about formal models where particular learners have dedicated roles relating to learner involvement. Question 6 asks about more informal models that are open to all learners.

- 4. Does your organisation have **formal** models to ensure **general learner** involvement? (Please mark one box only.)

- Yes
- No (skip to question 6)
- Don't know (skip to question 6)

- 4a. If **yes**, what models does your organisation have? (Please mark all that apply.)

- Representation of learners on college or other boards
- Representation of learners on governing bodies
- Face-to-face forums/panels
- Other (Please describe.)

- How often do the above groups meet? Please describe below. If your organisation uses more than one of the above, please indicate in your responses which group you are referring to.
- How are learners recruited and selected to sit on these groups? Please describe below.
- What is the process for deciding what topics or issues the groups will explore (e.g. how is the agenda set)? Please describe below.

- 5. How do you ensure that **learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities** are included in these **formal models**? (e.g. by providing training or support, by holding discrete activity for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.) Please describe below.

- 6. In addition to learner satisfaction surveys and those models described in question 4, does your organisation have **informal** learner involvement models (i.e. open to all learners) to ensure **general learner** involvement? (Please mark one box only.)

- Yes
- No (skip to question 8)
- Don't know (skip to question 8)

- 6a. If yes, what models does your organisation have? (Please mark all that apply.)

- Online forums

- Virtual learning environments
 - Text messaging
 - Paper-based surveys
 - Electronic surveys
 - Focus groups
 - Other (Please describe.)
7. How do you ensure that **learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities** are included in these **informal models?** (e.g. by providing accessible versions of materials, by holding discrete activity for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.) Please describe below.
8. Do you have a learner involvement strategy? (Please mark one box only.)
- Yes
 - No (skip to question 9)
 - Don't know (skip to question 9)
- 8a. If **yes**, does it specify how you ensure that learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are involved? (Please mark one box only.)
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
9. In your experience, what learner involvement models and arrangements have been **successful** in including learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities? Please describe below.
10. What **barriers** have you identified in involving learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities? (e.g. difficulties involving particular groups of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, difficulties making information accessible.) Please describe below.
11. Given that **Black and Minority Ethnic** learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities can be a particularly marginalised group, do you use any particular approaches to ensure that these learners are involved? (Please mark one box only.)
- Yes
 - No (skip to question 12)
 - Don't know (skip to question 12)
- 11a. If **yes**, please describe below.
12. Do you have any future plans or ideas for how to ensure you involve learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities more effectively? (Please mark one box only.)
13. Do you have any advice or other comments for the LSC regarding the involvement of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities?

14. Can we contact you if we have any further questions about any of your responses?

Yes

No

Please return to **anne.agius@niace.org.uk** or by post to Anne Agius, NIACE, The Resource Centre, Room 2.3, 356 Holloway Road, London, N7 6PA, by **Friday 23 May 2008**.

Thank you very much for taking the time and trouble to complete this questionnaire.

Annex B

Email to Providers

Dear colleagues,

This is your chance to influence LSC thinking and practice and to make a difference to how **learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities** can be **involved in decision-making** at a national level.

NIACE has been asked by the LSC to find out about existing models of learner involvement (such as forums, student governors and learner surveys) in the post-16 learning and training systems. Your input will be extremely valuable in helping us develop a model to ensure learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities can respond to the government's National Learner Panel on issues pertinent to them.

Please find attached a questionnaire for further education organisations that receive LSC funding. This might include further education colleges, sixth form colleges [and] adult and community learning and work-based learning [providers].

We would be grateful if you could spend a few moments to tell us about practice in your organisation. This questionnaire should be completed by a staff member who supports the process of learner involvement this might be a learner/student support manager. It should only take about **10 minutes** to complete.

Please complete the questionnaire and return it to **anne.agius@niace.org.uk** by **Friday 23 May 2008**. We recognise this is a tight turnaround but would really appreciate your support. If you prefer to return the questionnaire by post, please send it to Anne Agius, NIACE, The Resource Centre, Room 2.3, 356 Holloway Road, London, N7 6PA.

Please forward to the most appropriate person in your organisation, as necessary. Please accept our apologies for any cross posting.

Many thanks

Yola Jacobsen
Development Officer, NIACE

Annex C

Questionnaire Distribution List

Network, contacts or group	Number
Contacts from NIACE's database of practitioners with job roles focused on equality and diversity, disability, learner support or learner involvement issues	856
Local Education Authorities Forum for the Education of Adults (LEAFEA)	200-250
NIACE's mental health network	1,405
NIACE's East of England mental health Moodle (virtual learning environment)	50
NIACE's health and disability equality practitioner email group, and literacy, language and numeracy practitioner email group	900
Skills for Life Improvement Programme cluster group (selected regional contacts)	18
Suggested contacts from NIACE colleagues (various)	28
Offender Learning and Skills Service contacts, heads of learning and skills and LSC offender learning leads	60

The questionnaire was also sent to all NIACE staff and selected LSC staff. Those who received the questionnaire were also urged to send it to any relevant colleagues, contacts or organisations.

Annex D

Case Studies

Case study 1: Bridge Specialist Day College

- 1 The student council of Bridge Specialist Day College meets fortnightly. The membership is elected, with candidates chosen from each of 12 tutor groups.
- 2 The agenda is led by the students themselves, and also by staff members. Recent issues that have been raised are food choices and a rota for the use of a CD player. Student council members also have a role in recruitment of new staff, and represent the college to visitors.
- 3 Electronic support aids are used in the meetings of the council: some learners use alternative and augmentative communication aids to participate, such as voice output communication aids (VOCAs), Big Macs (a disk on which messages can be recorded and played), text-to-voice packages, and so on.
- 4 The college is a Makaton centre of excellence and Makaton signing is used in meetings. Minutes of the meetings and surveys are also symbolised using Makaton.

Case study 2: Derwen Specialist College

- 5 Derwen Specialist College uses a range of mechanisms to involve its learners, including a role in staff selection, a full election process for candidates for the student council and a student-led agenda at council meetings.
- 6 In the future, the college plans to reward student involvement, adopt video conferencing and instigate greater involvement in assessment, for example by the recruitment of learners to the college's self-assessment review panel.

Case study 3: East Riding College

- 7 At East Riding College, foundation learners are invited to represent their course or group. If more than one learner volunteers, an election is held. Learner representatives attend termly focus groups and curriculum meetings. A recent project has involved foundation learners in planning new buildings for one of the college's site.
- 8 All student representatives receive training from the enrichment officer in their responsibilities. The enrichment officer is also tasked with inducting foundation students alongside mainstream students and for identifying and meeting support needs.

Case study 4: Lambeth College

- 9 Lambeth College's adult and community learning centre has discrete focus groups and forums for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, which meet termly. There is a good level of support in meetings, with appropriate support materials.

Case study 5: Lewisham College

- 10 Entry and pre-entry students at Lewisham College are represented on the college's forum, which meets termly. Class representatives meet less frequently, usually once or twice a year. A discrete group for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities meet before the main college forum in order to prepare for the meeting.
- 11 There is good general support for this group, for example in the form of study buddies, who are second-year students at entry level who support students at pre-entry level.
- 12 All student representatives receive training about their roles and responsibilities as members of the forum.

Case study 6: Oaklands College

- 13 At Oaklands College, the learner quality review group (LQRG) comprises representatives from entry-level programmes. Meetings are chaired by learners, and managers attend regularly. There are also tutorial groups and more informal student meetings to collect the views of learners. Some LQRG representatives also attend these mainstream student groups, although none is as yet represented on the student council.
- 14 Support for LQRG is good, with trained staff, equipment and use of symbols. The initial focus of discussion has been the physical environment, though this is now moving on to comment on the learner experience, and learners are also taking up mentoring opportunities, which is involving them directly in the delivery of provision.
- 15 The college also sends representatives to its Moving On group, which meets with representatives of adult social care services. Recent topics discussed have been transport, health and post-college employment opportunities.

Case study 7: South Nottingham College

16 The student council of South Nottingham College meets every six weeks to deal with practical issues such as facilities, computer systems and library provision. All tutor groups elect representatives to sit on this council.

17 Two part-time youth workers have time specifically dedicated to support learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities up to the age of 25. Their role includes identifying the support learners need in order to participate fully in training and in the student council. If learners wish, learning support assistants can help with reading and writing at meetings, and youth workers may speak on learners' behalf. Training for participation in the student council aims to build learners' confidence, and to clarify roles and processes.

18 One example of self-determination is where learners with learning difficulties have successfully submitted requests for monies from the extra-curricular fund.

Case study 8: Dorset Adult Learning

19 Dorset Council has been running a county-level consultative panel for several years, although the recruitment processes have changed over time. The current panel was formed by targeted invitations sent to learners in specific groups (including learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and black and minority ethnic learners), identified from the council's database. Panel members include learners with physical disabilities, dyslexia and other learning difficulties.

20 In accordance with members' preferences, consultation is via email rather than face-to-face meetings. Members can request consultation via other media such as telephone or face-to-face visits. The use of other media, such as Moodle, is being explored.

21 The agenda is set by the council's equality and diversity committee. Recent meetings have seen the panel involved in policy-level consultations by contributing to the diversity and equality action plan.

Case study 9: Leicestershire County Council

22 Leicestershire County Council ran a discrete countywide consultation event, Every Learner Matters, specifically for learners with learning difficulties. At the event, accessible materials were used, for example, picture bank images were used in written materials. The meeting dealt with matters such as information, advice and guidance (IAG), providers' publicity, learner-centred teaching, and health and safety issues.

23 The impact of the event has been measurable: as a result of learner feedback, the service's publicity, which used to be made up of three brochures, has been merged into one to provide a better IAG tool. Two sites are reviewing the individual learning plan (ILP) procedures to

streamline the process. There are now plans to invite participants to the event to join a learner forum, which will meet three times a year, and to run a similar event for learners with mental health difficulties.

Case study 10: Northamptonshire County Council

24 The adult services department of Northamptonshire County Council has introduced a supported forum and a learning committee skills course. The forum has two or three meetings a year, and the meetings are supported by workers who help with reading and note-taking, though they do not have a vote.

25 Learners use symbol cards in meetings to indicate concerns such as not understanding something or wanting to slow the pace of discussion. The main purpose of the meetings is to review the paperwork learners receive – such as the mission statement or complaint forms – and to improve their accessibility.

26 Learners can also raise other issues. For example, one learner brought up the issue of kitchen equipment and learners with restricted mobility. This resulted in the purchase of new equipment that was more appropriate.

27 The forum also devised a questionnaire for adults in day centres which led to a new course being set up. A separate committee skills course has also help raise awareness of the Valuing People initiative.

Case study 11: Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC)

28 Rochdale MBC's social inclusion unit has introduced a 'tell us' suggestion process to collect learner voice and make the learner voice heard. 'Tell us' forms are printed on high-quality coloured paper to signal the importance of learners' suggestions. Staff respond to all suggestions, although some, such as a request for a new course, require wider consultation before decisions can be made.

29 The council is increasingly using peer mentors to induct new learners – to the extent that the induction programme now requires no input from staff. Some learners also deliver courses, referred to as 'convivial learning'. Learner-delivered courses include cookery, touch-typing, online shopping and Internet skills. These initiatives help learners to become more proactive in seeking out opportunities for involvement.

30 There is also a disabled learners group, which has worked with Skill and NIACE at regional events.

31 The reported gains for individuals include: increased confidence and skills, accelerated progression, qualifications, employment and access to social networks. At an institutional level, involvement has brought about practical changes, for example in car parking, menus and recycling.

32 Future plans include supporting the development of social enterprises and learner businesses.

Case study 12: Suffolk County Council

33 Suffolk County Council's adult community learning service includes a dedicated advocacy service and modernisation development panel. It offers a six-week induction programme, designed to build confidence and self-advocacy and covering rights, responsibilities and complaints procedures.

34 ACE, an independent advocacy service, holds consultation meetings with Suffolk County Council's learners every few months. ACE advocates bring a particular issue to each session, but learners also have opportunities to raise their own concerns.

35 Learners were involved in a six-month modernisation consultation process, which gathered feedback from people with disabilities about county council services. Learners with learning difficulties met as a discrete group prior to mainstream panel meetings.

36 'Customer' meetings' are held every month or six weeks. Learners and other service users decide on the timing and content of meetings. So far, issues raised have been mainly practical such as health and safety, and café menus. Future plans will train staff to help learners move into the wider community and develop the existing community café into a social enterprise.

Annex E

Research Group Membership

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Annex F

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