Learner Involvement Strategies

Guidance for lifelong learning and skills providers in Wales

Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

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Guidance

Learner Involvement Strategies

Audience   Further education institutions; work-based learning providers; local education authorities; Welsh for Adults language centres; Estyn; National Union of Students; Colegau Cymru; National Training Federation for Wales; NIACE Dysgu Cymru; Community Learning Wales; Wales Council for Voluntary Action; Children and Young People's Partnerships; Youth Forum Co-ordinators; Funky Dragon; 14-19 networks; Federation of Awarding Bodies; teaching unions; Lifelong Learning UK; Higher Education Funding Council for Wales; Equality and Human Rights Commission; Faith Communities Fora.

Overview   As part of its Quality and Effectiveness Framework, the Welsh Assembly Government is introducing new requirements for post-16 learning providers to establish formal learner involvement strategies. This publication provides detailed guidance and resources to assist providers in developing their strategies.

Action required   Providers of further education, work-based learning, community learning and Welsh for Adults are required to prepare learner involvement strategies by the end of 2010. Progress in implementing the strategies will be reported in providers' annual self-assessments, and inspected by Estyn as part of the new Common Inspection Framework.

Work-based learning providers will be expected to include a summary of arrangements for learner involvement in tendering for contracts for the period 2011/14.

Further information   Further information about this publication can be obtained from:
Marian Jebb
Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills
Welsh Assembly Government
Ffynnon Las, The Orchards, Tŷ Glas Avenue, Cardiff CF14 5EZ
Tel: 029 2092 6086; Fax: 029 2092 6001
e-mail: post16quality@wales.gsi.gov.uk

Additional copies   Additional copies can be obtained by visiting the Welsh Assembly Government's website: www.wales.gov.uk/quality

Related documents   Quality and Effectiveness Framework for post-16 learning in Wales

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Minister's Foreword

The Welsh Assembly Government has made a commitment to putting the 'learner voice' at the heart of its new Quality and Effectiveness Framework for post-16 learning. This is a significant change of direction for our quality assurance strategy; it goes beyond undertaking surveys of learners' views, to give them a key role in taking decisions which will affect their whole experience of learning. This is a dialogue which goes to the heart of the citizenship agenda; it is about treating learners with respect, helping them to take ownership, and breaking down barriers which may prevent them from speaking up and being heard.

Involvement in decision-making has proven benefits for learners. As well as making them feel more motivated and engaged in their learning experiences, it can help them to develop important skills which will equip them for their futures as active citizens. This will also help providers to improve their retention and achievement rates, by shaping a generation of learners who will actively work with staff to improve the quality of learning.

Many learning providers already have strong mechanisms in place for learner involvement, and some have brought these together into formal strategies. We are now seeking to build on this progress by asking all of our providers of further education, work-based and community learning to develop their own strategies which reflect their structures, methods of delivery and the characteristics of their learner cohorts. We recognise that there is no one approach which will meet the diverse needs of our learners and providers; this guidance, therefore, aims to give you practical advice on effective methods for learner representation, consultation and feedback, but it emphasises that the impact of learner involvement on your organisation is more important than the mechanisms you use.

The learner voice will also be a key strand in Estyn's new Common Inspection Framework from autumn 2010, and we have worked with Estyn to develop guidance which will support inspection as well as the Quality and Effectiveness Framework.

The guidance has been developed in close partnership with many of our stakeholders, and I would like to express my thanks to those who have provided advice, contributions and challenge to help us ensure that it reflects the needs of both learners and providers. In particular, I am grateful to those providers who have agreed to share their good practice via the case studies included throughout this publication; this shows the imaginative ways in which learners are already being consulted and involved, and the many possibilities for taking this agenda forward in different settings.

Leighton Andrews AM
Minister for Children, Education, and Lifelong Learning

Overview of this guidance

1. From 2010/11 onwards, the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) is requiring all providers of lifelong learning and skills to establish a formal learner involvement strategy. This document sets out guidance on how to develop, monitor and evaluate strategies, together with examples of good practice which show how learner involvement can work in different learning settings.

2. The guidance applies to:
• further education institutions;
• work-based learning providers;
• community learning providers; and
• Welsh for Adults language centres.

3. Learner involvement will be central to DCELLS' Quality and Effectiveness Framework (QEF), and to Estyn's new Common Inspection Framework from autumn 2010. We will be looking at how providers place learners at the heart of their planning, decision-making and quality assurance processes, and seeking evidence of the impact these processes have on learners' experiences. This guidance is intended, therefore, to help providers evaluate their current approaches to learner involvement, identify where they need to do more, learn from best practice, and use this to develop a formal strategy.

Background

4. Research commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government, **Children and Young People's Participation in Wales [051/2010]** suggests that developing learners' participation is beneficial for individuals, organisations and communities. Participating in decision-making can help learners to enjoy enhanced self-esteem and motivation, gain important personal, social and organisational skills, and become familiar with group and democratic processes. At the organisational level, involvement in decision-making leads to better relationships, more relevant and effective policies, and better

learning. In the best scenarios, young people and adults work together as partners to ensure that their organisation provides the best possible learning environment for all.

5. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out the right of children and young people to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account on any matter that affects them. The Welsh Assembly Government has formally adopted the UNCRC as the basis of all its work with children and young people, and has set out this commitment in seven Core Aims[1] and ten Entitlements or rights which all children and young people living in Wales can expect to have access to. The Welsh Assembly Government wants all children and young people to be able to take part at local, regional and national levels in Wales. Opportunities are presently provided through mechanisms such as school councils, youth forums and Funky Dragon, the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales.

6. While there is a specific policy framework in place for participation by children and young people, we want to extend learner involvement to include learners of all ages - so the requirements in this guidance apply to providers working with adults as well as young people.

7. Learner participation is also an integral part of the School Effectiveness Framework. The School Councils (Wales) Regulations, issued in December 2005, made it a statutory requirement for all maintained primary, secondary and special schools in Wales to establish a School Council by 1 November, 2006. A designated School Councils Wales website[2] has also been developed, containing advice, training materials and case studies so that schools are supported in developing consistent good practice.

8. This guidance has been developed in partnership with Estyn, the National Union of Students Wales, the Wales Adult Learners Network, and the key representative bodies for the lifelong learning and skills sector: Colegau Cymru, the National Training Federation for Wales and NIACE Dysgu Cymru. We have consulted informally

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[1] http://wales.gov.uk/topics/childrenyoungpeople/strategy/?lang=en
[2] www.schoolcouncilswales.org.uk

with a number of providers and learners on the content and wording of the guidance.

9. We have also drawn on experiences from England, where providers have been required to have formal learner involvement strategies since 2007. The Learning and Skills Council has commissioned an independent evaluation of the impact of this approach[3], which has shown that learner involvement results a wide range of benefits both for providers and learners - and that these benefits are enhanced where providers have a *formal* programme of learner involvement in place.

Adapting this guidance for your organisation

10. The lifelong learning and skills sector is very diverse, encompassing colleges, local authorities, private organisations, charities and language centres. Its learners are young people and adults of all ages, full-time and part-time, based in classrooms, the community, workplaces or at home. We recognise these differences, and the fact that there is no one approach to learner involvement which will 'fit' all of our providers. We also know that while some providers have established learner involvement strategies, others consult learners and collect feedback in much more informal ways.

11. This guidance is not intended to provide a prescriptive approach, but broad guidelines which can be adapted to fit the needs of individual organisations. The next section outlines the minimum requirements which we expect all providers to address in their strategies, but other suggestions (including the good practice examples and case studies) may not work for all providers - or indeed, for all learners. The real priority is for each provider to develop an approach which shows understanding of the needs and views of the full range of its own learners.

12. As 2010/11 will be the first year in which we ask providers to develop a formal learner involvement strategy, we will review the guidance during 2011 and will be asking for feedback on how it could be improved or expanded. We will use the first year to establish

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[3] *Evaluation of the Impact of the Learner Involvement Strategy: Year Two: Final Report* (April 2009), EKOS Consulting (UK Limited). Available from www.lsc.gov.uk

a baseline so that we can understand how learner involvement works best in different settings, and can advise and support providers accordingly.

Benefits of learner involvement

13. For learners:
- an enriched, more rounded learning experience;
- the development of active learning skills which can be used in their future careers;
- better quality, more responsive learning opportunities;
- the opportunity to develop personal, social and organisational skills and gain experience, for example by acting as a course representative or learner governor;
- the possibility of gaining accreditation for such skills, such as counselling and mentoring;
- active involvement in how and why the organisation makes decisions;
- better relationships with staff;
- opportunities, where appropriate, to take a more active role in external inspection; and
- increased motivation and 'ownership' of learning outcomes.

14. For providers:
- increased participation, retention, achievement and progression rates;
- feedback from learners can be used to help decide priorities for the allocation of resources, including decisions on what courses to offer;
- dialogue with learners can enhance quality assurance by offering a different perspective to those of managers and teachers or assessors, allowing a more in-depth, rigorous evaluation process;
- learners can work with providers to identify elements for organisational improvement, and to implement policies and initiatives;

- learners who become more motivated, engaged and proactive in shaping their own experiences and outcomes;
- identification of potential barriers that may deter learners from participating or from reaching their potential, and suggestions from learners on how to overcome those barriers; and
- evidence to inform self-assessment, inspection and external monitoring.

Developing a learner involvement strategy

15. There is no one formula for a successful learner involvement strategy, and your approach should take account of a number of factors: your organisation's starting point; its structure; the number, characteristics and location of your learners; and the types of learning you deliver. If you are developing a formal learner involvement strategy for the first time, it is worth taking the time to:

- carry out a baseline review of how your organisation is already involving and listening to learners;
- think about what you want to achieve, what is appropriate for your organisation and its learners, and some realistic goals and timescales; and
- consult widely with learners, managers, staff and governors so that their views can be taken into account.

16. **Annex A** to this document sets out more detailed, step-by-step guidance on putting together a learner involvement strategy.

Outline for a learner involvement strategy

All providers of lifelong learning and skills should ensure that their strategies include:

- A statement of commitment from the organisation's senior management to ensuring that learners have direct involvement in shaping their own learning experiences
- Clear strategic aims for consulting with learners and for enabling them to participate in decisions affecting their learning and environment
- A summary of current arrangements for learner involvement, both formal and informal:
  - In the first version of the strategy, this should reflect the outcomes of the baseline review (see Annex A)
  - In subsequent editions, it should provide an update on progress and evaluate the extent to which the organisation's aims for learner involvement have been achieved

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- Identification of the resources available to enable and encourage learner involvement, which might include funding, staff time, accommodation and administrative costs for learner representatives, and/or investment in staff development to secure learners' involvement in decision-making and evaluation processes
- Arrangements for gathering the views of learners through structured systems, using them to improve the quality of learning, and feeding back to learners so that they can see how their views have made a difference
- Arrangements for seeking the views of 'hard to reach' learners
- Procedures for the recruitment and training of learner representatives so that they can fulfil their role effectively
- Arrangements for integrating learners' views into quality assurance systems, including self-assessment and quality development planning
- Arrangements for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the implementation of the strategy and its effectiveness, including ways of informing learners of action taken in response to their feedback

Where to start

17. Effective learner involvement takes time. Every learning provider has systems in place to gather views from its learners and many are using other mechanisms to involve learners in decision-making; but turning these into a comprehensive strategy will take time and will require cultural change. While this guidance aims to give you suggestions on how to do this, including examples of what has worked well in different learning environments, you may need to experiment in order to find out what works best for your organisation. We want learner involvement to be a developmental process rather than a box-ticking exercise - so it is important to be

realistic about your organisation's starting point and to set priorities. Developing a strategy gives you an opportunity to identify what you are already doing well and to find new ways of developing a genuine dialogue with your learners.

What should the strategy look like?

18. The format, structure and length of your learner involvement strategy will depend on the needs of your organisation and its learners. For some providers, it will be a short document setting out an overall statement of intent and action plan; for others, including colleges, it is likely that the strategy will be more detailed and that it will include specific information on how different learner involvement mechanisms will work, such as learner panels or the role of learner governors. Whatever format your strategy takes, it is important that it is a 'living' document that can be used as the basis for meaningful engagement with learners.

19. You should consider how to disseminate and promote your strategy, including through learner and staff handbooks; your website; email updates; noticeboards and leaflets. Depending on your learner demographics, it may also be appropriate to make the strategy or a summary available in minority languages, Braille or large print formats, or an 'easy read' format. Your own learner forums or, where applicable, Students' Union will be able to help advise you on this.

Strategic leadership

20. A successful learner involvement strategy needs to be led at the most senior level in an organisation. Your strategic aims, organisational values and business plans should reflect your commitment to consulting with learners and listening to their views. This is not simply about putting processes in place or setting targets for learner satisfaction, or about going through the motions of consultation; it is about improving learners' overall experience and outcomes.

21. In providers with a culture of learner involvement, there is strong and visible leadership from the principal or chief executive and from the senior management team. While this means that there is a senior manager with responsibility for leading on the learner involvement strategy, it also requires all staff to exemplify the principles of open and respectful dialogue with learners.

Involving everyone

22. Staff at every level in your organisation need to understand their role in securing learner feedback and participation. It is relatively easy to focus on teaching staff who have day-to-day contact with learners, and who often take the most responsibility for responding to their views and concerns; but remember, too, that effective learner involvement should encompass every area of the learner's experience: you need to consider how to include staff responsible for support functions and facilities. Consider how learner involvement can be incorporated into staff selection and induction, continuing professional development and performance reviews.

23. Providers that work closely with employers need to consider how to influence them to 'buy into' learner involvement alongside their commitment to training. This should be built into discussions with employers from an early stage so that they understand how you will involve and consult with their employees; and it may mean tailoring a bespoke approach for different companies, depending on their size, structure and working practices.

24. Some practical steps that you could take to integrate learner involvement into your day-to-day operation include:

- including a **standing item on learner involvement** on the agenda for senior management and governing body meetings, so that feedback from learners can be formally considered and addressed;

- instigating a regular **principal's or chief executive's 'Question Time'**, where learners have the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with senior managers (with a commitment to following up by publishing answers to questions and any action being taken as a result);

- including **learner representatives** in course/department/ faculty meetings, and giving heads of department or course co-ordinators responsibility for ensuring that learners' views are incorporated into their planning and review processes;

- ensuring that there is an effective **communication strategy** in place, so all learners are aware of their right to take part in decision-making processes, and learner representatives have designated time to talk to their constituent groups, to gather ideas and issues and give feedback;

- inviting learners to put forward **suggestions and ideas** - this can work particularly well where there is a specific focus such as the canteen menu, the name of a new training facility, or ways to improve the organisation's carbon footprint; and

- a volunteering programme and other **citizenship activities** such as Fair Trade Week and Charity of the Year, where learners can work together on fundraising activities.

25. Larger organisations, including further education institutions, should consider appointing a learner liaison officer. The officer's role is not to speak on behalf of learners, but to facilitate dialogue between them and the provider's staff. The learner liaison officer, normally at middle-management level, will work closely with the quality manager and will attend key committees and groups to ensure that learner involvement matters are integrated into your decision-making and review processes.

26. For smaller providers, it may not be appropriate to appoint a dedicated learner liaison officer, but you should still ensure that there is a manager who is responsible for learner liaison and that this role is written into their job description.

Checklist

✓ Is learner involvement written into your organisation's mission statement, vision and strategic aims?

✓ Are issues around learner involvement and learner voice regularly discussed by the governing body, senior management team and other committees/working groups?

✓ Does your organisation have direct learner participation in governance and management structures - for example, learner governors, membership of appeals panels, Student Parliament?

✓ What resources - in the form of funding, equipment and time - are available to support learner involvement in your organisation? How will additional expenses incurred by learner representatives be met?

✓ How are learners involved in your business planning cycle?

✓ What training have governors, managers and staff had to ensure that they understand the importance of learner involvement?

✓ How do learners know that their views, suggestions and concerns will be listened to and taken seriously by the organisation's leaders?

27. 'Learner voice' will be a key performance indicator in the Quality and Effectiveness Framework, and will also be central to Estyn's new Common Inspection Framework from 2010.

28. From 2010 onwards, DCELLS aims to roll out a national learner survey using core questions which can be measured and benchmarked across all providers of lifelong learning and skills. As well as levels of satisfaction, we will be looking at how to gather learners' views on how well they are involved in decision-making, the respect shown to them by staff, and how well the provider responds to their views. The same survey will provide an important source of evidence for Estyn's next cycle of inspections, starting in autumn 2010.

29. We recognise that providers already have a range of systems in place to gather feedback from learners, including data on their levels of satisfaction. Our survey is not intended to replace this, but will provide a common core which can be used as a 'check and balance' to supplement providers' own activities in this area.

Ways of gathering feedback

30. During summer 2009, we asked providers to tell us how they are currently collecting feedback from learners, to help shape our own 'learner voice' strategy. Not surprisingly, we found that there were a wide range of methods being used, and that these varied depending on the nature of providers and their learners.

31. Methods in common use include:

- **Learner questionnaires**, which are used by almost all providers to survey learners' opinions and levels of satisfaction. Some colleges and larger providers contract this out to external companies which can provide analysis and benchmarking of the outcomes. Many smaller providers, particularly in work-based learning, administer questionnaires via their assessors or tutors, as part of progress reviews and/or exit interviews. This can provide rich and detailed information on learners' views and an opportunity to explore the underlying reasons for any concerns or areas of dissatisfaction; however, it makes it difficult to be

Case Study: Hyfforddiant Môn - 'Have Your Say' leaflet

See Annex B for more details

sure that feedback is completely objective. Learners may be uncomfortable making negative comments in the presence of their assessor or tutor, and could be influenced by follow-up questions. This approach is therefore best used in combination with other methods which can give an independent perspective.

- The use of **online surveys** is still quite limited, though several providers are starting to use them. This can be an effective, relatively low-cost way of gathering feedback; learners can be more willing to express their opinions, particularly negative ones, online as opposed to in writing. Many learners are highly IT-literate and comfortable with using this method; however, in implementing this approach, providers need to give careful consideration to its suitability for different groups of learners. Some providers have reported very low response rates to online questionnaires, and it may be that this method is more appropriate when learners can use 'classroom' time to complete surveys. Many learners will not have ready access to the internet or will not be confident in using IT.

- While they are resource-intensive, **telephone interviews** can be a very effective way of obtaining feedback from learners. They should be carried out by an independent member of staff (rather than the teacher, tutor or assessor who has been involved in delivering the learning) to ensure objectivity. The interviewer can ask learners to 'score' or categorise different aspects of their learning experience in order to measure levels of satisfaction, but is also able to clarify questions if needed, and ask follow-up questions in order to understand why the learner is giving a particular response.

- **Focus groups** are widely used by providers, usually in conjunction with written or telephone surveys. They can be an invaluable way of obtaining detailed, qualitative feedback, and could work well to explore themes raised in satisfaction surveys in more depth. If, for example, analysis of questionnaires has shown low levels of satisfaction about a particular department or about the learning environment, a focus group can help you to understand the reasons for this, as well as seeking advice from learners on how to improve. This can,

therefore, be a very participative method which could form part of your overall learner involvement strategy. Focus groups are not, however, a good way of obtaining quantitative information to measure learner satisfaction, and have to be carefully planned, structured and facilitated to avoid being dominated by a few more vocal learners or derailed by irrelevant comments.

• Some providers are using **focused surveys** to seek feedback on specific questions and themes. This can be done by sending periodic emails to groups of learners (selected by random sample, or by a common interest such as all learners on a specific route or course), or by e-tools like SurveyMonkey. Again, this method is best used as one element of a wider strategy, as it is not likely to give you a comprehensive picture of satisfaction across all aspects of the learning experience. It can, however, provide relatively quick, in-depth feedback in relation to a particular question or problem.

The 'feedback loop'

32. During our research with both learners and providers, one point that was emphasised was the importance of the 'feedback loop': ensuring that learners' views are listened to, and that they are told what action will be taken as a result (or, if no action can be taken, the reasons for this). Surveys can often be seen as an end in themselves, particularly where they show high levels of satisfaction; but as part of your commitment to learner involvement, it is essential that you have mechanisms in place to fully evaluate feedback from learners, and consider how to respond to it.

33. Your 'feedback loop' should work on three levels:

(i)   Ensuring that individual concerns and complaints are followed-up, and that the learner knows the outcome. Mechanisms for this should be built into your complaints procedure. The learner may not always get the outcome that they want, but they should be told what has been done to investigate their complaint and any action that has been or will be taken as a result.

(ii) Addressing issues raised through more formal representation structures and events: for example, by course representatives, learner panels, or through conferences which take place at departmental or centre level. Such discussions need to be recorded and arrangements put in place to make sure that you feed back to the learners concerned, and the wider learning community, how their views are being addressed and what is going to happen as a result.

(iii) Responding to feedback received through learner surveys. When someone has made the effort to complete a survey, it can be demotivating to think that no-one is really paying attention to their views. Consider ways in which you can summarise the key issues raised by learners and communicate the outcomes: for example, through your intranet, email bulletins, or posters listing the actions being taken. Providers whose learners are dispersed throughout a number of outreach centres or employers will need to consider how to keep them engaged in the 'feedback loop'. Again, not every individual opinion or request can be covered, but if you have prioritised a few recurring issues, explain how and why this has been done, and what action is being taken as a result.

Checklist

✓ How do you gather feedback from your learners?

✓ Are you using the right combination of methods to reach all learners, and particularly to make sure that those who may not be attending a learning centre or campus have the opportunity to make their views known?

✓ Are you surveying learners at the right time(s)?

✓ Do you consult with potential future learners?

✓ Do you get feedback from learners who have left without completing their programme or course?

✓ How high are your response rates? Are you analysing and benchmarking rates for different courses, departments or faculties? Do you need to consider ways to improve response rates?

✓ Do your surveys focus only on 'measuring' satisfaction, or do you have ways of obtaining qualitative information on what learners think about specific issues and how things could be improved?

✓ What happens to learners' feedback? Who is it reported to? How do learners know what action is being taken to respond to their views?

✓ Do you have a formal complaints policy?
- How are learners told about the policy?
- How do you monitor and evaluate its operation?
- How do you use complaints to improve the quality of your services to learners?

✓ Do learners have opportunities to make constructive suggestions and put forward ideas for the future?

✓ How is learner feedback used in your self-assessment?

Learner participation and representation

34. Participating in decision-making gives learners valuable opportunities to develop citizenship, communication, negotiation and influencing skills. But even more importantly, where it is done well, it can have a real influence on the quality of learning experiences and can be at the heart of a mature dialogue between a provider and its learners.

35. Many providers are already using various different mechanisms for consulting with learners and involving them in planning, decision-making and quality assurance; several examples of this are included in this guidance. Making this part of a formal learner involvement strategy requires you to consider the unique needs and characteristics of your organisation. To work well, learner involvement will take time and possibly investment. You need to consider what outcomes you are trying to achieve and work backwards from there to identify the structures that need to be put in place.

36. To be meaningful, learner participation has to 'drill down' to issues of relevance to learners in relation to their own programme of study, department, centre or campus, and/or employer. Large-scale learner conferences (as described below) and cross-provider groups can be extremely useful, but only as part of a wider strategy that enables you to identify and address specific issues.

The Students' Union

37. A Students' Union is a self-governed association of students, which represents learners' interests and acts as a focal point for all learner involvement activities. In a further education setting, a students' union or association can play an important role in giving learners structured opportunities to participate in decisions affecting their learning experiences. It can also, through dialogue with the institution's managers and staff, help to provide coherent information on learners' views and concerns, and advice on how these could be addressed. Under Section 22 of the Education Act 1994, governing bodies of further education institutions *are required to take such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure that any students' union for students at the establishment operates*

in a fair and democratic manner and is accountable for its finances.
The representative role of the union *applies in academic, disciplinary or other matters relating to the government of the establishment*[4].

38. Union activities are governed through a constitution, or agreement between the institution and its learners detailing the role and operation of the union. The establishment - or resurrection - of a students' union is a good opportunity to define how learners will be represented, how they will be able to provide feedback, and what structures the institution will put in place to respond to the issues raised. Union leaders are elected through democratic processes and should receive structured training, as well as being involved in regular meetings with senior management. The effectiveness of their role depends not just on their own enthusiasm, but on support from senior management.

39. For more information, see the National Union of Students' guide *Setting up a union in further education*[5].

40. Students' Unions will be appropriate for further education institutions, but not for every post-16 provider. In most work-based learning and community learning providers, senior managers will need to look at different approaches to participation and involvement which are appropriate for their particular learners, and to consider how this can be supported and resourced. The next section gives some suggestions on mechanisms you could use.

Other formal mechanisms for learner representation

41. The list below is not exhaustive, but makes some suggestions on mechanisms which have proved effective in different learning settings. While some of these may be more appropriate for further education institutions, which have an established structure of governance and mainly campus-based learners, many (such as learner representatives and conferences) can be adapted for any learning provider.

- **Learner representatives** can help to gather views from learners and feed them through to formal panels or committees. This will often take place at course level, but structures will vary

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[4] www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts1994/ukpga_19940030_en_1
[5] www.nus.org.uk/Students-Unions/Setting-up-a-union-in-further-education

depending on the size and nature of the provider. Representatives will often pick up feedback through informal means, but they can also act as advocates for less confident or vocal peers, as well as being a valuable barometer for the opinions of the learner community. Further education institutions will often be able to work with elected course representatives over a period of time; work-based and community learning providers may not always be able to do this, but could invite a sample of learners from each cohort to take part in course reviews.

- **Learner parliaments or forums** give learners the opportunity to come together on a regular basis to share their views, identify issues and set an agenda for action. In some cases, these events may be geared towards the needs of specific groups such as learners with learning difficulties or disabilities. They will normally be attended by management and staff representatives whose role will be to listen to the issues raised and to help ensure that learners' views are reported and acted on; but it is important that they are led by learners themselves.

- Involving learners in your **complaints procedure** can help to bring an additional perspective to investigations, and ensure that the learner's view is fully taken into account. You could consider involving learners in complaints or appeals panels, and if you have a learner representative structure or Students' Union, this is an appropriate role for these representatives to undertake.

- Elected **learner governors**[6] have a key role to play in ensuring that learners' concerns are taken into account in the governing body's deliberations. For this to work well, appropriate support structures must be established, including training, an induction with the Chair of Governors, preparatory meetings and debriefings. This will help to ensure that the learner representatives understand the issues being discussed and can think through the implications for learners. Ideally, you should appoint two learner governors so that they can support one another.

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[6] The *Further Education Corporations (Replacement of Instrument and Articles of Government) (Wales) Order 2006* provides that the Corporation must include at least one and not more than three members who are students at the institution elected and nominated by the students at the institution, or elected and nominated by a recognised association representing the students at the institution.

- Establishing a **Learner Affairs Committee** of the governing body can allow time to work through particular issues in depth, as well as providing a formalised structure whereby learner satisfaction and other feedback can be systematically reviewed. The committee will include representation from the learner body, governors and the senior manager(s) responsible for leading the learner involvement strategy.

- **Department or site councils** can be helpful for large and multi-site organisations in particular, providing a forum for discussing matters which are specific to an area of learning or venue. You could also consider setting up these councils on a task-and-finish basis to inform specific developments such as a curriculum review, site redevelopment or provision of new facilities.

- **Learner conferences** bring together large groups of learners (either elected course representatives, and/or other groupings) and can be a very valuable way of gathering feedback across a wide representation. Giving learners themselves responsibility for organising the event, setting the agenda and evaluating the outcomes is a good way of ensuring their ownership, although it is also important that the provider is seen to listen and respond. To work well, learner conferences need to be well structured and to have clear objectives.

42. While individual tutors, lecturers and assessors are often good at dealing with individual learners' concerns and suggestions, you also need to make sure that arrangements are in place for recording and follow-up at department or centre level. This ensures that managers are aware of learners' feedback and that 'lessons learned' can be applied across the provider.

43. Informal mechanisms can be equally important, and often work well for providers whose learners are part-time or dispersed. Many providers use suggestion boxes, posters or flipcharts (either in the classroom or displayed prominently elsewhere in learning centres). These can be followed up with 'You said - we did' displays which show what action has been taken in response to feedback. While such methods often work well, they should be used as part of an overall strategy which includes more formal structures for learner

feedback, so that you are proactive in involving learners and get a balanced picture of their views.

Ensuring equality

44. Giving all learners the opportunity to participate is important, but it is a big challenge. It is relatively straightforward to make contact with full-time learners who are attending a centre or campus on a regular basis, but some groups are less visible and you may need to use a range of strategies to ensure that their views are heard. In developing your learner involvement strategy, consider how you will engage with learners who:

• are part-time;

• attend outreach centres;

• participate via distance learning or e-learning;

• are in employment or on work placements;

• are not first-language English or Welsh speakers;

• have low levels of basic skills;

• have learning difficulties or disabilities; or

• have other barriers to engagement that may affect their confidence or ability to articulate their views.

45. If your organisation has a Students' Union, you also need to consider how to give it the support and resources to engage with learners from these groups.

46. Some learners will not be comfortable with being given the responsibility for taking on a formal representative role, and need to be encouraged to express their views and ideas in a supportive, creative environment. Many providers are already using tutorial or classroom discussions to explore issues around citizenship and responsibility; consider how these can be used to gather opinions and ideas which could feed into your overall learner involvement strategy.

Support structures

47. To develop learner representation effectively in your organisation, you will need to put appropriate support structures and resources in place. This is likely to include some financial allocation, but equally importantly, time and commitment on the part of both staff and learners. Depending on the nature of your organisation and its learners, you will need to consider some or all of the following:

- funding for the Students' Union[7];
- office accommodation and equipment for learners with a substantive representative role, such as members of the Students' Union executive;
- time off for learner representative activities, and time in the annual calendar for specific events such as learner conferences and panels;
- creation of full-time sabbatical officer positions;
- identification of a dedicated member of the management team with responsibility for securing learner involvement, either as a dedicated role or as part of a wider set of responsibilities;
- a structured programme of training and development to ensure that your managers, staff and governors understand the importance of learner involvement and how to facilitate it;
- guidance for learner representatives on how to feed back to their constituency;
- training for learner representatives to help them carry out their role effectively; and
- use of technology, including a learner intranet, online forums and other ways of disseminating information to learners and seeking their feedback.

48. Remember that communications are at the heart of any successful involvement strategy. This can have little or no financial cost, but is crucial in ensuring that feedback is followed up and that learners feel their views are taken seriously. Minutes of meetings with learner representatives need to be recorded and promptly circulated, and the outcomes of consultation events or focus groups

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[7] NUS Wales recommends that 1% of colleges' budgets should be allocated to supporting students' unions.

need to be clearly communicated. Learner representatives at any level in the organisation need to have the right information in order to play a meaningful role in decision-making, and in developing your strategy you should consider who will be responsible for this, how and when papers will be issued and what briefings will be needed.

Checklist

✓ How are learners made aware of opportunities to participate in decision-making and give feedback on their views?

✓ What formal arrangements are in place to ensure that learner involvement takes place in a structured way and that the outcomes are clearly defined?

✓ What informal arrangements do you have for learner involvement?

✓ Does your organisation support formal learner associations, such as the Students' Union?

✓ Do learners know how to feed in their ideas and suggestions, as well as concerns and complaints?

✓ How do you ensure that all learners - including those who are part-time, employed or on work placements, based in the community or at home, and those from under-represented groups - have the opportunity to participate in decision-making?

✓ How do you feed back to learners so that they know their views have been listened to?

✓ What resources have been allocated to support the implementation of your learner involvement strategy? Consider finance, staff time, facilities and equipment.

Teaching and learning

49. Perhaps the most direct and tangible area where learner involvement can make a difference to your organisation is the delivery of teaching and learning. Evaluation commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council has shown that a good programme of involvement can help learners to develop a *better knowledge of how they learn and have the confidence to apply this in future. Learners taking ownership of their own learning also show greater motivation, leading to better results (success and retention rates)*[8]. Establishing an effective, respectful dialogue between staff and learners helps to foster better relationships and communications.

50. Some of the best opportunities for learners to express their views come through their learning activities, whether these are in the classroom, vocational setting or workplace. The process of helping learners to understand how best they learn, and how they can shape their own experiences, should be ingrained from the beginning of their programme: the processes of initial assessment, developing individual learning plans, and inductions are all about identifying the learner's needs and agreeing what is effectively a learning 'contract'. All providers have these processes in place already, and many are using them well to respond to the individual's needs. These existing processes can be used to underpin your learner involvement strategy, to gather valuable information on learners' views, to encourage them to become proactive learners, and to strengthen your organisation's overall responsiveness.

[8] *Evaluation of the Impact of the Learner Involvement Strategy: Year Two: Final Report* (April 2009), EKOS Consulting (UK Limited).

The learning journey

51. The diagram below suggests ways in which a learner could be given opportunities to participate in decision-making, to have his or her views heard, and to become a more active, confident learner, at different stages during the learning process. Of course, how this works in practice will vary widely depending on the length and nature of the learning programme, but you should consider how to adapt these ideas to suit your own organisation.

Initial assessment	Using a 'learning styles' inventory can help to identify each learner's preferred ways of working, so that tutors and trainers can help them to apply this understanding. This means building on the individual's strengths and preferences, but also challenging them to develop new styles and ways of learning. Assessment should be a two-way process that actively involves the learner in shaping their learning programme.
Developing the individual learning plan	ILPs should be developed as a two-way process: what does the learner want to achieve? What can they expect, both from the programme or course and from the wider experience of being part of a learning community? What should they do if they have a problem, suggestion or question?
Induction	Learners need to understand how their learning programme will be structured, what is expected of them, and how they can play an active role in getting the most out of their experiences. Some providers use an organisation-wide 'learning model' which sets out each stage of the learning process, including a clear explanation of the aims of each activity, opportunities to ask questions, and a review of learning points at the end of each session, unit or module. Consideration should be given at this stage as to how learners may voice particular needs, and how these may be met. Induction is also a good opportunity to make learners aware of opportunities to get involved in different aspects of how the organisation works, both through formal processes such as the students' union and learner conferences, and less formal mechanisms like using tutorials and suggestion boxes.

During the learning process	Throughout their learning programme, learners need to feel that they can raise any questions or concerns. This will often happen informally through discussions with their tutor or assessor, but consider having a 'safety net' for the learner to speak to someone independent. If your organisation has a Student's Union, this can be a good source of ongoing support and can be a resource for learners who don't feel comfortable speaking to their tutor or assessor. As learners grow in confidence, they will often become more able to participate actively in their learning, to ask questions and to build relationships with staff. This might translate into richer, more detailed and challenging feedback which can help you to improve your teaching and learning methods. Consider what mechanisms are in place for learners to feed back about aspects of the learning experience other than teaching and learning: what about the provider's facilities or learner support functions? Are learners involved in complaints procedures?
On completion	As part of your 'exit survey', ask questions related to learner involvement. Did learners feel that they could influence decision-making? Did they feel that their views were listened to and respected? What could have been done better? Where learners have had a specific role, for example as course representatives or learner governors, use exit interviews or questionnaires to evaluate this experience. While learners often benefit greatly from opportunities to be involved in decision-making, they may not always find it easy to articulate these benefits. As part of the end-of-course review, consider how to help learners to reflect on their experience of participation and how they could apply this in other areas of their lives.

Embedding learner involvement into your quality cycle

52. Many providers are already working with their learners in ways that they might not classify as 'learner involvement', but that nonetheless can be an important part of their overall strategy. These include:

- peer review;
- mentoring or 'buddying';
- taking account of learners' views, formally or informally, as part of course and programme reviews; and
- including individual learning plan reviews, learner satisfaction rates and learner feedback in their annual self-assessment process.

53. You should consider how to integrate learner involvement into your annual quality cycle, as part of your self-assessment process. How you do this will depend on the structure of your organisation; every provider should include evidence of learner feedback in its self-assessment, and evaluate the impact that this has had on the organisation. Consider, too, how you can develop an inclusive approach to self-assessment, using some of the mechanisms suggested in the previous section. If your organisation has a students' union, course representatives or a learner parliament, all of these can help you to incorporate learners' views into your approach.

Checklist

✓ How do you use initial assessment, induction and progress reviews to identify learners' aspirations and help keep track of their achievements?

✓ Do you have mechanisms in place to identify individuals' preferred learning styles? How do you help learners to engage actively with the learning process?

✓ Does learner feedback give you hints as to why retention or success rates might be lower in some areas than others?

✓ How do the views of staff and managers compare to those of learners? For example, managers may see the provider as responsive to learners' feedback, but do the learners themselves agree with this?

✓ How do you use learners' views to help evaluate the success (or otherwise) of new initiatives, courses or events?

✓ Does your self-assessment report have a 'balance' between the views of staff and those of learners?

✓ How could learners be involved in peer review or in internal 'inspections' of learning areas?

Monitoring and evaluating impact

54. There are a number of indicators that you can use to monitor the success of your learner involvement strategy, including:

- learner satisfaction rates, and improvements year-on-year;
- qualitative feedback received from learners via questionnaires, surveys, focus groups or suggestion boxes;
- complaints received and how these were addressed;
- levels of learner participation as course or department representatives, learner governors, in committees or interview panels, or in events such as learner conferences;
- specific achievements which have been taken forward through learner involvement - these should be recorded, evaluated and celebrated;
- levels of participation in training by staff, governors and learner representatives;
- measures of the extent to which your learners' participation in decision-making and their response to surveys reflects the diversity of your learner cohort;
- the extent to which you have responded to learners' views and suggestions; and
- learners' own satisfaction with the processes by which you are seeking to involve them.

55. Using these alongside measures of learner participation, retention and success will help you to assess the impact that learner involvement is having on quality and standards in your organisation. As with all action plans, defining clear and specific objectives for learner involvement will help you to monitor your progress. Look at how you can work with learners to monitor the strategy's implementation: can you use existing structures to do this, or do you need to set up a separate steering group with representation from learners and managers?

56. Your annual self-assessment should incorporate an evaluation of how well your learner involvement strategy has been implemented; what has worked well, what needs to improve, and most importantly, what has been the impact of learners' views on the quality of learning? However, try not to see 'learner voice' as

an add-on or a discrete section of your self-assessment. Instead, look at how you could incorporate the learner's perspective, and the indicators below, into each section.

57. You should plan your evaluation activities to accommodate regular monitoring throughout the year and a periodic, in-depth review of the strategy's impact - so your programme might include, for example:

(i)   **monthly** monitoring to ensure that planned activities are on track, that you are meeting any specific targets for learner involvement, and to help decide whether you need to do anything differently (you could use existing groups or committees to do this);

(ii)   an **annual** review of learner involvement and its impact as part of your self-assessment, which can be used as the basis to prepare a revised action plan; and

(iii)   a full review and revision of the strategy itself **every two to three years** to ensure that it still meets the needs of your organisation.

Checklist

✓ How do you analyse and report on the outcomes of learner consultation and participation, for example:

- Learner satisfaction measures and trends year-on-year?

- The number of complaints received and how these were dealt with?

- Learners' participation in formal involvement mechanisms, such as learner panels, focus groups, conferences and committees?

- Successes and achievements resulting from learner involvement?

✓ How is this information reported to your governing body, senior management team and learner associations such as the Students' Union?

✓ How does it feed into your self-assessment and quality development planning?

✓ What impact has learner involvement had on your organisation over the past year? Can you identify specific changes that have taken place, improvements that have been made and benefits to your organisation and your learners?

✓ How well do learners themselves think the strategy has worked?

✓ What aspects of your learner involvement strategy have worked well?

✓ What needs to be improved?

✓ How does your learner involvement strategy need to be revised?

Developing a learner involvement strategy:
A step-by-step guide

Carry out a baseline review	If possible, make the review part of your self-assessment process rather than carrying out a separate exercise.
	Alternatively, consider setting up a working group, including young people themselves, to audit the organisation's current approach to learner involvement
	• What are you currently doing to involve learners in planning, decision-making and quality assurance?
	• Is this consistent across the organisation?
	• What's working well?
	• What could be improved?
	• What evidence do you have that learner involvement is actually impacting on what your organisation does?
	• Are governors, managers and staff aware of how to involve learners?
	• What do your learner surveys tell you about learners' own views - do you ask them what they think about opportunities to influence decision-making?
Determine your aims and priorities	These should:
	• Be appropriate to your organisation and your learners. A college might take a very different approach to a small training provider dealing solely with employed learners
	• Be realistic and reflect your starting point. If you are only just developing a formal learner involvement strategy, you will not be able to do everything immediately. It's more important to prioritise and to build in time for reflection

Write learner involvement into your organisational mission, values and aims	Consider how you could include concepts such as: • Putting learners at the centre • Respect • Responsiveness • Communicating openly and honestly • Challenging and questioning ourselves • Democracy • Citizenship
Draft your strategy	Use the checklist on page 16 to make sure that your strategy covers all of the relevant areas. Make sure that you include financial costs and other resource implications for implementing the strategy
Consult	Use structures that are already in place: your Students' Union if you have one, or other groups like course representatives, can help you to obtain views from learners in a constructive way, as well as advising you on implementation. Try to ensure that consultation is as inclusive as possible Depending on how your provider operates, you may well also have existing management structures that will help you to gather views from staff: for example, heads of department, senior tutors, the Academic Board, operations group or quality team could all help to identify where there is existing good practice, where learner involvement could be more prominent, and what is realistic and practicable for your organisation

Look at best practice	Use the baseline review to identify where there is already good practice in the organisation. Could this be adopted in other departments, faculties, sites, programmes or projects?

Identify best practice from inspection reports, websites, the Learning and Skills Observatory, and the resources listed in **Annex C** of this publication. See www.wales.gov.uk for examples of documentation from some of the provider case studies included in this guidance

Work with partner organisations: what are they doing that you could learn from? Are there aspects of learner involvement where you could work together? |
| **Start implementation** | Consider what training governors, managers and staff will need

Learners themselves may need training and guidance, particularly those in more structured roles such as course representatives or learner governors

How will the strategy be communicated to learners, parents, employers?

How can existing mechanisms be used to promote and enhance learner involvement - induction, learner handbooks, tutorials, intranet, noticeboards, newsletters? |
| **Monitor and evaluate** | The learner involvement strategy should include a section outlining how you will monitor its implementation and evaluate its impact. You should also plan to review the strategy itself periodically, so that you can consider how to reflect changes to your organisation and the evolution of the learner involvement process |

Index of case studies

Provider	Focus of case study
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WEA (South)	Learner forums: critical success factors

ACT
Learner forums in work-based learning

ACT is Wales's largest work-based learning provider, based in Cardiff. It delivers Skill Build and Apprenticeship programmes, and has recently established a biannual cycle of learner forums to gather in-depth feedback on learners' views of their training and areas for improvement.

The forums are arranged by centre, and split into groups for Skill Build and Apprenticeship learners. Participants are randomly selected from the learner cohort, aiming to cover a sample of around 10% (or 15-20 learners). During the forums, views and suggestions are recorded on flipcharts and agreed by the group. They are then collated into a summary report showing strengths and areas for improvement. Centre managers develop action plans to address the feedback, and these are reviewed regularly by ACT's quality team during centre support meetings.

Following the first round of learner forums, a number of changes have already taken place in response to participants' feedback:

• Learners in the Caerphilly centre requested a dedicated area that they could use for breaks and lunchtimes. ACT is in the process of redeveloping the centre to include a restroom with kitchen and recreation facilities.

• There was inconsistent feedback about induction across the forums - in content, duration and delivery. As a result, Apprenticeship and Skill Build steering groups have been set up to standardise the process, including giving new starters a clearer idea of what to expect from their programme, and opportunities to meet learners who had already completed an Apprenticeship.

ACT has identified a number of **key learning points** for other providers who are considering setting up learner forums:

• invite at least double the amount of learners you would wish to attend to allow for a reasonable drop out rate attend;

• hold the forum on neutral ground and for only half a day, as learners may lose focus and often cannot be released for a whole day;

- have the forum run by impartial staff. ACT also avoid introducing anyone as senior management or directors in case this put learners off speaking openly. The staff should facilitating the session should ensure that the comments made are not personal to any member of staff;
- have a clear lesson plan in place for the session and be focused on your objective and the points you wish to cover;
- document all comments in "strengths" and area for improvement" and ask participants to explain their comments fully;
- create a clear action plan from areas for improvement and review it regularly; and
- at subsequent forums, explain what has been achieved previously from this process.

Coleg Ceredigion
Equality and Diversity focus groups

Coleg Ceredigion operates a range of focus groups, including Equality and Diversity Focus Groups for staff, students and external stakeholders. Each group meets at least twice and sometimes three times a year. At its first meeting of the year, the student group is given an induction into equality and diversity matters, which serves to reinforce the induction programme given to all students in which equality and diversity is a key theme.

At each focus group meeting, group members are given information on current legislation and the opportunity to discuss matters of concern and good practice across all the equality strands. Each of the groups discusses the same generic themes but uniquely looks at equality and diversity matters from the perspective of students, staff or external stakeholders. Group members contribute to the formation of each agenda and, following discussion, make recommendations for change. Students are also asked to bring suggestions for agenda items from their peers.

The role of the groups specifically includes:
• providing input into the preparation and monitoring of the college's overarching Disability Equality Scheme and Action Plan;
• reviewing the college's publicity material to ensure that it projects accurate and positive images of learners from different groups; and
• considering the Annual Equality and Diversity Monitoring Report, which provides a thorough statistical analysis of activity and makes recommendations for action across all the equality strands.

The internal and external focus groups are chaired by members of the college's Equal Opportunities Committee which is a sub-committee of the college's Senior Management Team. Actions arising from the groups' work are taken forward through the college's self-assessment and strategic and operational planning processes, and are referenced in the Annual Equality and Diversity Report, Equality and Diversity Action Plan and Disability Equality Action Plan. Feedback is given to focus group members and the process of listening and responding to the views expressed becomes a full communication loop.

The college's experience is that this targeted and thematic mechanism for gathering the student voice is a valuable addition to the other work it undertakes on gathering the student voice, thus providing a holistic view of need.

Coleg Gwent
Developing a formal learner involvement strategy

Coleg Gwent has established a formal strategy for learner involvement, starting with a baseline review early in 2008. Learners and staff on each campus were consulted on how to improve mechanisms for involvement, and the college used this process to develop its vision for learner involvement, including:

• Actively involving staff and learners in the identification of activities, which they feel will provide learners with opportunities to be equal partners in the shaping of their learning experience and to provide both parties with the skills required to effectively participate within this process.

• Developing a culture where learners are motivated to give constructive feedback, where they see their feedback is taken seriously, and where teachers have the skills to encourage and respond positively to feedback.

• Fostering an inclusive culture where no individuals or groups of learners are left out and where the principles of equality and diversity inform all learner involvement activity.

• A college-wide Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme that prioritises the support that staff need to seek and respond effectively to learner views.

The strategy is based on systems of formal representation, including class representatives who are elected by learners at the beginning of each academic year. Representatives are given structured training to support them in their role and are invited to take part in College Learner Panel meetings that are chaired by the Principal, school-based panels, forums and focus groups. Learners are able to access the minutes and action plans arising from these meetings via Moodle. All learner groups are also invited to complete three online or paper-based questionnaires each year.

The college has an active Student Union, supported by a Student Liaison Officer and by the provision of office space with telephone and internet access. Union officers represent the student body at several regularly convened meetings, including:

- Academic Board
- College Health & Safety Committee
- Energy & Environmental Management Group
- College Procurement Committee.
- Health Promotion Group
- Diversity Steering Group

The college and Student Union are planning to hold pilot learner voice conferences on two of its campuses at the end of the 2009/10 academic year, attended by all elected union members and class representatives. The agenda for these will be led by learners, who will choose the main theme of the conferences.

Coleg Gwent's learner involvement strategy is led by the Vice Principal (Curriculum and Learners). An annual report, evaluating the impact of the strategy, is presented to the Academic Board, management team, corporation and the executive committee of the Student Union.

Coleg Llandrillo
Involving learners in governance

Over recent years, Coleg Llandrillo has strengthened learner involvement in its governance and management systems, to ensure that learners can influence and understand decision-making processes.

The Student Union President is a Student Governor and is a Board member of the corporation. He (or one of his executive officers) represents learners on college committees and groups including:

- Academic Board;
- Equality and Diversity Committee;
- Safety, Health and Environment Committee;
- Student Financial Support Panels; and
- Higher Education Committee.

The college introduced a **governor link scheme** recently, allowing individual governors to work with staff and learners on particular programme areas. Governors are attached to each Programme Area/Directorate and normally attend an event to meet with staff to help them to understand the curriculum offered to learners. This may be in the form of a RED (Review, Evaluation & Development) day, where staff review what has worked well in an area, and what needs to be improved.

In addition, the chair of governors holds a series of learner panels which follow learners through their "learning journey" in each academic year. The panels focus on a series of topical questions which are relevant to where the learners are in the academic year e.g. induction, assessment, work experience, personal tutorials, basic skills support etc. The learner panels enable the governor to identify issues which learners have, and also to recognise good practice.

Coleg Sir Gâr
Students' Union and student liaison officers

The college has a very active Students' Union, supported by a budget and by a Student Liaison Officer (SLO) who has played a key role in raising the profile of the union and encouraging students to participate and take on positions of responsibility. The SLO reports to the Student Services Manager, and has day-to-day responsibility for empowering learners and focusing their extra-curricular activities, including the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and other initiatives as well as the Students' Union.

The Students' Union is promoted extensively during the first few weeks of the academic year, including at the Freshers' Fayre, tutorials, student forums and through the distribution of promotional materials. The college also has a Students' Union website and has worked with its web designers to improve the look and feel of these pages.

Union elections are held annually to appoint officers to its Executive Committee, which meets monthly and is also attended by a member of the Corporate Board, the Operations Manager and canteen manager. Union Officers represent the student body on other committees, including the Board of Governors, the Disability Consultative Committee, the Equality Advisory Committee, and Carmarthenshire Youth Forum. Members of the Executive undergo training to carry out their role effectively, and have taken part in workshops on topics including:

• sexual health
• diversity and cultural awareness
• tackling homophobic bulling

Through the joint work of the SLO and Students' Union, students have taken part in a wide range of activities including:

• Promoting the college to 14-16-year-olds in the Carmarthenshire area

• Campaigns including World Aids Day, Fair Trade Fortnight, and drugs and alcohol awareness

• Sexual health talks at the college's campuses

• Work with the Carmarthenshire Volunteering Bureau to 'match' students to volunteering opportunities

• Training by Childline for students to become peer counsellors

• Social events including lunchtime entertainment sessions, karaoke and a college 'Big Day Out' at Oakwood Park.

**Hyfforddiant Môn
'Have Your Say' leaflet**

Hyfforddiant Môn Training is a work-based learning provider, part of Ynys Môn County Council. During 2009 it introduced a bilingual **'Have Your Say' leaflet**, for learners and visitors to the Centre designed to encourage learners and visitors to voice compliments, complaints and suggestions about any aspect of their learning or courses attended. This leaflet was introduced in addition to questionnaires issued to learners at the beginning, middle and end of their learning programmes. It also includes a tick box to indicate whether they want a direct response. The leaflet sets out the provider's **commitment to listening and responding** to learners' views:

• *Your Comments: we will use what you say to help improve our services.*

• *Your Compliments: we will pass them onto the staff concerned.*

• *Your Complaints: we will do our best to resolve them to your satisfaction. There are two types of complaint:*

  (i) *Informal complaints, which you can either talk directly with the staff concerned or fill out this form and place it in the 'Have Your Say' box located in the foyer.*

  (ii) *Formal complaints, which you can make by speaking to any of the Centre Managers, who will activate a more rigorous process in which your complaint will be investigated more thoroughly. You will then receive a formal written response within three weeks*

During the few months that the leaflet has been in use, staff have had positive feedback from learners about the opportunity to express their views. The provider is further developing its approach to learner involvement, by arranging for learner representatives to attend its Learning and Skills Working Group to give feedback and ask questions. Recommendations from the Working Group are taken to the Quality Group, giving learners a more direct voice in quality assurance systems.

Hyfforddiant Môn Training also commission an independent questionnaire survey to learners and employers which is benchmarked nationally against other providers each year.

Neath Port Talbot College
Learner-led conference

In 2008/09, the college held its first learner-led conference, where BTEC Travel and Tourism students worked with the Learner Services Manager to devise a questionnaire and investigate learner views across the organisation. The learners were briefed to seek views on:

• support at Neath Port Talbot College

• the teaching and learning experience

• how green is my college?

• healthy living/being safe at college

• learner involvement at Neath Port Talbot College

• 'Neath Port Talbot College … More than just an education'

A questionnaire was designed by the Travel and Tourism students and distributed to more than 300 learners. As well as exploring the topics in their brief, the group opted to research the wider 'social concern' of knife crime, and designed an awareness raising campaign around this.

The group took responsibility for planning and organising the conference, held early in the spring term. They presented their findings and recommendations to the college's senior managers and Heads of School. They also presented to the full governing body and to fforwm's Learner Services Network.

The college has taken action in response to several of the recommendations made by learners following the conference, including:

• changes to the policy for issuing bus passes;

• ensuring that new starters are aware of the role of tutors, course co-ordinators and learning coaches, and how to contact them; and

• changes with regard to the implementation of induction and early days at college.

**Rathbone Cymru
Youth forums**

Rathbone Cymru is a third sector organisation which supports young people who are facing barriers with education, employment or training. It is the third largest provider of the Skill Build programme in Wales, supporting 1600 young people each year in ten learning centres across Wales.

Each of Rathbone Cymru's learning centres has a youth forum comprising young people currently involved in learning. These meet on a monthly basis, and address issues within their centre and local community. Among the varied activities undertaken by the forums are:

• feedback on the provider's curriculum;
• participating in interview panels;
• participating in the self-assessment process;
• consultation on funding bids;
• raising funds to improve resources, such as learner common rooms; and
• establishment of particular initiatives (for example, a 'learner breakfast club' in Pontypridd).

Each of Rathbone Cymru's centres and programmes is represented on a national panel of **Young Ambassadors**. This group undertakes activities on a Wales-wide basis, including:

• involvement in the provider's responses to political consultations (for example, lowering the voting age; community cohesion strategies);
• representation on the Rathbone Cymru Council, which enables learners to advise on business plans and other key developments; and
• working groups on specific issues or tasks, such as the development of marketing materials.

Swansea College
Student representatives

The college has established a formal system of student representation as part of its learner involvement strategy. Student Representatives are elected to represent the views and opinions of students on their course, ensuring a close link between learners' views at course level and the work of the cross-college Student Council.

The 2009/10 cohort of Student Representatives was appointed in October 2009, as part of Local Democracy Week. In total, 139 representatives were appointed, 75 of whom took part in training; the college is looking at how to increase future engagement in training.

The representatives are supported through:
• training sessions on carrying out the role effectively;
• provision of a Student Representative Handbook which includes guidance on the role of representatives, contributing to Student Council meetings, and dealing with sensitive or confidential issues from other learners;
• tutor support, including advice from personal tutors and time set aside in tutorials to enable representatives to gather feedback from their peers; and
• a dedicated budget which allows representatives to bid for up to £1500 to improve either a cross-college service, or one within their own curriculum area e.g. improving the grounds with new benches and flower pots and providing additional equipment for courses.

In 2008/2009, successful bids from this budget included:
Lockers for students, a colour printer and computer based at a satellite site for students use and a digital video camera for students to film lectures.

Student Representatives gather views from learners on their courses during tutorial sessions during the autumn and spring terms, and feed these back to the course tutor and to cross-college Student Council meetings held in November and April. The college also holds an annual Student Conference in February.

The Student Representative Handbook contains detailed advice on taking part in Student Council meetings. Representatives are encouraged to:

• read the meeting agenda and papers thoroughly before the meeting, noting any questions and marking particularly relevant sections;

• think about what they want to get from the meeting and how they can contribute;

• be courteous but persistent in putting across their points; and

• feed back the outcomes of the meeting to their fellow students.

Torfaen County Borough Council
Learner Members' Committees

Each of the Council's main community learning centres has a Learner Members' Committee. These are autonomous, but in some cases receive support from the Council's staff in preparing agendas, minutes and ledgers. At enrolment, each learner is charged a membership fee of £1.50 per centre per term (regardless of how many classes they attend at that centre). Fees are held separately to the Council's own budget, and each Committee has discretion on how they are used.

Each Committee elects a Chair, Treasurer and Secretary. The Council has found that some learners are anxious about taking on these roles; these cases they can call on support from Adult Education Officers, for example to take minutes of meetings. Each class can elect a representative to attend Committee meetings on their behalf, and they may put forward requests for funding from the Committee funds - for example, to subsidise travel to see an exhibition, attend a play, or for items of additional equipment. Grants are used for expenditure which will have long term benefit for learners in the centre, or which adds to the learning experience. In some instances, committees have amassed significant sums and have chosen to supplement the Council's own budget to upgrade centre facilities. The Council arranges for the accounts of all of the committees to be audited each year.

Committees meet regularly, between three and six times per year. The level of activity varies between centres, depending on the level of commitment of the learners involved, which may change from one year to the next. The Adult Education Officer responsible for the centre attends each meeting to submit a report on current topics, receive feedback from learners, and ask for specific comments at particular times of year (for example, on curriculum planning). The officer can offer suggestions and guidance to committee members, but has no voting or decision-making powers. Officers feed back to the Adult Education Service's management meetings to ensure that learners' views inform decision-making, either by verbal updates, meeting minutes or a written report.

WEA South
Learner forums in adult community learning

The WEA puts learners at the heart of its curriculum, and they play a key role in determining what and how they will learn. The WEA South Wales' active local branches include a WEA/Communities First learners' branch in Perthcelyn, Rhondda and a Workplace Learning Virtual Branch across South Wales. The Perthcelyn Branch comprises a group of young mothers who started by doing child development classes, then moved to counselling classes, in order to deal with some of the challenges they were facing. The branch has also set up a clothing swap and is planning numerous other activities and learning opportunities.

Three pilot projects in Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Swansea have researched the positive outcomes from learners' involvement in local forums. These projects have identified a number of critical success factors for providers and their partner organisations when working with learner forums:

- convenient timing and location of meetings;
- relevant and interesting meetings organised to ensure participation with a realistic timescale;
- provision of crèche or support for childcare;
- meeting travel expenses;
- training for participation, for example meeting and presentation skills;
- all participants given equal status and respect; and
- no jargon and acronyms.

Resources

Recommended reading

Listening to learners? Citizenship and learner voice (LSIS, 2009)

This training pack includes a DVD-Rom and accompanying handbook, which can be used with members of staff engaged in training and development that is aimed at developing learner involvement through citizenship. It includes video clips from a number of learning providers, and several useful practical activities that can be used in staff development and with learner representatives.

Download or order from: www.post16citizenship.org

Leading the learner voice: dissemination of effective practice (LSIS, 2008)

The Leading the Learner Voice Awards are run in England by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service. This publication includes in-depth case studies about the 2008 Award winners, including outstanding examples of leadership both by learner representatives and learning providers. While most of the case studies are based on further education colleges, the publication also includes examples from private training providers and learning partnerships.

Download from: www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Documents/LSISLearnerVoiceAwardsDissemination.sflb

Learning from learners: a key to success (NIACE, 2008)

This concise booklet was produced jointly by NIACE, the Learning and Skills Council and the National Learner Panel as part of Adult Learners' Week 2008. It contains useful principles for good learner consultation and practical tips for ensuring that your approaches to consultation are inclusive.

Download from: http://archive.niace.org.uk/Research/listeningtolearners/Learning%20from%20Learners%20leaflet.pdf

Responding to Learners Pack (JISC, 2009)

This resource pack synthesises the outcomes from the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme of the JISC e-Learning Programme which had the sustained involvement of over 200 learners and more than 3000 survey respondents to explore learners' perceptions of and participation in technology-enhanced learning in a digital age. The series of five guides offer recommendations on how institutions can better respond to learners' expectations and uses of technology, and offers practical guidance on how to embed the learners' voice more effectively into institutional processes and practice.

Download from: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/documents/respondingtolearners.aspx

Developing a learner involvement strategy: a handbook for the further education sector (LSC, 2007)

The Learning and Skills Council's guidance document contains several useful case studies on providers in England.

Available from www.lsc.gov.uk

Listening to the community: How good are providers at finding out the learning needs of adults in their local communities? (Estyn, 2009)

This thematic report assesses the range and the quality of approaches used by adult community-based learning providers to involve learners and would-be learners in the development, planning and improvement of learning programmes.

Available from www.estyn.gov.uk

Talking it Through: A practitioner's guide to consulting learners in adult and community learning (NIACE, 2003)

Jane Thompson and Sue Duffen's detailed guide includes practical tips, exercises and case studies, as well as setting out the policy context for consulting with learners and citizens.

Buy from: http://shop.niace.org.uk/talking-it-through.html

NIACE's Learner Involvement Policy 2007-10

Download from: http://archive.niace.org.uk/Research/listeningtolearners/default.htm

Useful websites

www.wales.gov.uk/quality
Visit the Learner Voice section of DCELLS' website for downloadable resources from some of the provider case studies included in this guidance.

www.wales.gov.uk/topics/childrenyoungpeople/uncrc
Further information on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, including downloadable documents with information on Articles 1-42 which relate to how children and young people should be treated.

www.nus.org.uk
Website providing general information on the work of the National Union of Students.

www.officeronline.co.uk
This site providers NUS officers with resources and information to support them in their role.

www.lluk.org/national-occupational-standards.htm
Lifelong Learning UK's new National Occupational Standards for Learner Involvement are suitable for use in all post-16 learning settings. They cover roles that include learner engagement, learner representation and contribution, learner support and learner enrichment activities.

http://www.post16citizenship.org/
This site, managed by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service, includes guidance for young people and staff involved in citizenship activities - including resources specifically designed for use in colleges, youth and community groups, work-based learning and adult learning.

http://www.funkydragon.org/
Funky Dragon - the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales - is a peer-led organisation which aims to ensure that the views of children and young people are heard, particularly by the Welsh Assembly Government, and to support participation in decision-making at national level.