

# Post-16 provision in schools – factors that influence the capacity of school sixth forms to meet the needs and aspirations of learners



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<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
-----------------	-------------

1. What is the overall pattern of sixth form and FE provision in Wales?	1
2. What are the strengths of sixth forms?	2
3. What are the weaknesses of sixth forms?	4
4. Why are sixth forms the way they are?	5
5. What are the barriers to change?	5
6. How are sixth forms responding to these challenges?	6
7. Do sixth forms provide good value for money?	9
8. What is the future of sixth forms?	11
9. How can we improve the provision for post-16 learners in Wales?	12
Appendix 1	
What is the evidence base for this advice?	13

## **1. What is the overall pattern of sixth form and FE provision in Wales?**

- 1.1. The proportion of post-16 students who attend an FE college rather than return to their school after the age of 16 varies a lot from place to place in Wales. This is because there are different arrangements for post-16 provision in different parts of Wales.
- 1.2. In some areas, there are 11-16 schools with no sixth forms and post-16 learners go to tertiary FE colleges which provide a full range of A level and vocational courses. In other areas, almost all A level courses are in the school sixth forms and the local FE college offers mainly vocational courses to post-16 learners with only a relatively small range of A level courses. In other areas, there is a mix of 11-16 and 11-18 schools. In these areas, a learner in an 11-16 school can choose to move either to the local FE college or to a local school with a sixth form.
- 1.3. Each of the above patterns can be effective.
- 1.4. Geographical factors influence the pattern of post-16 provision, but they do not necessarily determine what it must be. However, the college-based pattern tends to be more common in urban areas where one college can be close to many schools and better public transport often makes learners' journeys shorter.
- 1.5. Table 1 overleaf shows the range of provision in each local education authority (LEA) area in Wales. LEAs with similar geographical characteristics have been placed into groups and it can be seen that the urban areas contain both the greatest variety of provision and the highest proportions of 11-16 schools.

## Pattern of provision from KS4 onwards

Characteristics of LEA	11-16 Schools	11-18 Schools	Sixth form Colleges	FE Colleges/ Institutions
<b>Rural</b>				
Carmarthenshire	4	11		1
Ceredigion		7		1
Gwynedd	7	7		3 - 4*
Pembrokeshire		8		1
Powys		13		1
Anglesey		5		
<b>Urban</b>				
Bridgend		9		1
Cardiff	8	12	1	2 - 4*
Neath Port Talbot	9	2		1
Newport		8		
Swansea	8	6		2
Wrexham	4	3		1
<b>Valleys</b>				
Blaenau Gwent	2	4		
Caerphilly	5	11		1
Merthyr Tydfil		5		1
Rhondda Cynon Taff		19		1
Torfaen	3	5		
<b>Mixed</b>				
Conwy		7		1
Denbighshire		8		1
Flintshire	1	11		2
Monmouthshire		4		1
Vale of Glamorgan	1	6		1
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>23-26</b>

\* This includes Coleg Harlech (Gwynedd), WEA South (Cardiff) and YMCA (Cardiff).

NB. HE Institutions that provide for FE learners are not included.  
Coleg Gwent covers 5 LEAs but the main campus, Usk, is in Monmouthshire.

- 1.6 School sixth forms cater mainly for post-16 learners following level 3 academic courses, mainly A levels. Most FE colleges cater for a wider range of post-16 learners and offer a range of vocational and academic courses mostly at levels 2 and 3. In sixth forms and FE colleges, post-16 learners follow courses that are either academic or vocational, with little mixing of the two.

## 2. What are the strengths of school sixth forms?

- 2.1. Many sixth forms offer their learners an education of high quality and promote students' moral, social and cultural development well. Sixth forms are most successful in offering academic (ie non-vocational) courses at level 3

(predominantly A level courses) and in preparing students for higher education. In effect, they cater well for those pupils who gain five or more GCSE qualifications at grades A\* to C, i.e. about half the post-16 learners in Wales.

- 2.2. Estyn reports show that quality and standards in sixth forms are significantly better than in key stages 3 and 4. Overall, the amount of very good or good work is about 20 percentage points higher in sixth forms than in key stages 3 and 4 and there is about twice as much outstanding teaching in sixth forms. Inspectors find very little unsatisfactory work in sixth form classes.
- 2.3. A few of the largest schools have sixth forms where post-16 learners can choose from as many as 27 A level courses. Large school sixth forms are often popular and successful. The wide range of courses goes a long way to meet the needs and aspirations of many of the learners who have gained good GCSE passes and wish to enter higher education.
- 2.4. Many sixth forms have recently begun to broaden their sixth-form provision to offer learners more vocational options post-16. Almost 90% now offer some vocational courses in a small number of areas.
- 2.5. When learners stay on at school, they understand the school ethos and their parents have often developed a relationship with the school and its staff over many years. Schools know the learners and often their families well. This helps them to offer well-targeted support and guidance post-16. It is often easy for information on a learner's strengths and weaknesses to influence teaching and the support the school can offer without the need for screening and assessment on starting post-16 learning. Learners, also, have well-established transport arrangements for getting to their school.
- 2.6. In some areas, schools have been successful in keeping learners within education who might otherwise have left the system at 16 years of age. The absence of post -16 provision within easy access can be a real disincentive to young people who are not already committed to continue in education or training. One community college in a disadvantaged area found that when they ceased post 16 provision, fewer pupils continued their education or training on leaving school. The school has re-instated its sixth form in order to remedy this problem. In addition, it also aims to increase participation from the local adult community in lifelong learning.
- 2.7. Schools have a good record of providing Welsh-medium and bilingual courses so that learners can study courses through the language of their choice. Welsh and English provision is well matched locally to the many different linguistic backgrounds of students across Wales. It is fairly easy for schools to carry this bilingual provision through to post-16 courses. Most schools do this very well, although there are very few Welsh-medium vocational or applied courses available in their provision.
- 2.8. Denominational schools are often keen to establish and retain sixth form provision, or to establish a denominational sixth form centre. Their aim is to

offer an 11-18 faith-based curriculum and ethos for their learners. These schools often receive strong support in this from parents and often succeed well.

### **3. What are the weaknesses of school sixth forms?**

- 3.1. School sixth forms do not cater as well for about half the post-16 learners in Wales, namely those who do not achieve 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A\* to C. Where sixth forms offer vocational courses, the range is narrow. The courses tend to be in only a small number of vocational areas.
- 3.2. Most schools with sixth forms offer about 16 A level courses. This is much narrower than the range of up to 40 A level courses, or more, offered by many FE colleges. The A level courses that schools offer tend to be in subjects that learners have already studied at GCSE. Compared with FE colleges, schools tend to offer fewer options for learners to begin new areas of study.
- 3.3. Most schools do not have the teachers, equipment, accommodation or financial resources to offer a wide range of level 3 academic courses or more vocational courses at level 2 or level 3 to post-16 learners.
- 3.4. In many areas of Wales, further education colleges already provide a wide range of A level and vocational courses of good quality within the same geographical area as the schools.
- 3.5. Schools with sixth forms often compete with FE colleges over post-16 learners in order to retain their pupils in the sixth forms. Schools do not always give all their pre-16 pupils enough information about the full range of options available to them post-16. In some areas, pupils do not receive appropriate information about the courses available in the local FE college. This limits the range of options available to these learners.
- 3.6. When learners from 11-18 schools decide to transfer to an FE college at the age of 16, transition arrangements are often weak. Much useful information on the learner held by the school, for example diagnostic assessment of strengths and weaknesses, is not passed on. This leads to FE colleges having to identify strengths and weaknesses from scratch.
- 3.7. Some sixth forms are very small and have less than 100 learners. Where sixth forms are small, the choice of courses available to learners is often narrow and the individual sixth form classes can be very small. In some schools with small sixth forms, there is a need to address shortcomings in the development of learners' key skills in key stages 3 and 4. Sixth form provision in these cases requires valuable resources to be diverted away from key stages 3 and 4 to sustain the small amount of sixth form teaching.

## **4. Why are sixth forms the way they are?**

- 4.1. From school to school, the curriculum on offer to post-16 learners at A level is very much the same, as it is mainly based on the subjects taught in key stage 4. It is very common for teachers of GCSE subjects to teach the same subject to post-16 learners at A level. This provides continuity and progression for many of the post-16 learners.
- 4.2. Schools are currently best equipped to offer academic A level courses that build on the pre-16 curriculum because:
- they cover the subjects of the pre-16 school curriculum in which school teachers have expertise;
  - schools already have specialist accommodation in these subject areas;
  - the learning resources required for post-16 work link well to those needed to teach the pre-16 courses; and
  - schools can make full use of their teaching staff by providing an appropriate teaching load for teachers within their main area of expertise.
- 4.3. Many schools argue that a sixth form gives a school a higher status and helps to attract teachers with higher qualifications. They also argue that the presence of sixth formers provides pre-16 pupils with good role models.
- 4.4. Achievement at A level remains the route into higher education for the great majority of entrants. Many people regard A levels as the desired end-point for learners. Therefore, schools with sixth forms may feel as though the world at large judges their success in relation to the achievement of good A level results.
- 4.5. Many parents are familiar with A level courses and see them as offering their children the best foundation for higher education and employment. Individual learners will also have preferences regarding the nature and location of their post-16 education. Some learners prefer the relatively small size and familiarity of their school sixth forms whilst others will relish the challenges that a new environment and wide range of options can bring.

## **5. What are the barriers to change?**

- 5.1. The potential loss of the benefits identified in the previous section goes a long way to explain the reluctance of many schools to accept reorganisation or the closure of their sixth form provision. Parents are often strongly opposed to the closure of school sixth forms for the same reason.
- 5.2. Traditional school funding models provide an allocation of money on the basis of the number of pupils on roll. New schools built under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) are also under further pressure to retain pupils in order to ensure sufficient funding to repay the cost of new construction over a set number of years. These models may encourage schools to retain as many of



their pre-16 pupils as possible into the sixth form in order to gain funding. The menu of academic courses at level 3 attracts a good base of around 50% of a school's pre-16 pupils back into its sixth-form.

- 5.3. Some schools have broadened their range of options to include more vocational courses. This enables them to meet a broader range of needs and, hence, to retain more students. A few schools are developing vocational courses in key stage 4. This is sometimes in association with (or as an alternative to linking with) FE colleges, as part of the provision of an appropriate curriculum for disaffected 14-16 year olds.
- 5.4. While most schools have diversified a little, there are strong barriers that prevent significant further broadening of the curriculum. New courses might require additional specialist accommodation and expensive equipment. They might place a school in direct competition with its nearest college, a situation that would usually work to the advantage of neither institution and would be likely to undermine rather than promote co-operation. The new courses might not be attractive to enough learners to cover the costs of setting them up. Schools might find it difficult to attract teachers with the necessary expertise for new courses, especially if it were only possible to offer a few hours spread widely across a weekly or fortnightly timetable.
- 5.5. Some schools involved in the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification pilot have started to address some of these issues. In some cases, they have reduced the number of A and AS subjects in order to make room for the Welsh Baccalaureate. This has reduced the number of very small classes in the sixth form and made the provision more cost effective. Any resultant reduction in the number of AS and A level subjects available to learners in schools, often from four AS subjects to three, may, however, narrow the options available to students in Higher Education.
- 5.6. In the past, a lack of clear leadership has made change in post-16 provision across a geographical area difficult. Tensions between schools and post-16 providers have added to this problem. Community Consortia for Education and Training (CCETs) have identified many issues in relation to post-16 education and training, but they have not brought about significant change. The impact of CCETs has been limited because they do not:
  - have the resources or powers to bring about major change;
  - have powers to assign courses to institutions; and
  - allocate funds and, therefore, cannot finance any recommendations they might make.
- 5.7. With 22 LEAs in Wales, it is likely that more than one LEA might be involved in any attempt to reorganise sixth form provision in collaboration with an FE college. Almost all CCETs cover the same area as the local authority, when action is often required across more than one authority as learners from one authority often go to sixth forms or colleges in another. The constraints identified above also apply to the powers of the new 14-19 Learning Networks.

- 5.8. Local education authorities and ELWa have parallel powers to propose the reorganisation of sixth forms. If either an LEA or ELWa wishes to change the pattern of local provision, it must consult the other and all stakeholders. There is no guarantee that all parties will share a common vision for the future pattern of provision within an area.
- 5.9. ELWa must refer any proposals for reorganisation of post-16 provision to the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning. Any similar LEA proposal would need to be referred to the Minister if there were any objections. Any reorganisation of post-16 provision is likely to be a long and complex process. ELWa is currently engaged in the process of 'Geographical Pathfinders', which is intended to rationalise provision across Learning Networks within local authorities.
- 5.10. In considering changes to post-16 provision, local authorities and ELWa would need to consider many factors. These include:
- the quality of education and training available to all post-16 students in an area;
  - the long-term needs of the Welsh economy, for example as set out in the regional statements of needs and priorities and the analyses of employment needs and trends by Future Skills Wales;
  - the quality of provision for pre-16 pupils in local schools (which may be influenced by the presence of a sixth-form);
  - the views of learners;
  - environmental and transport implications; and
  - financial costs.
- 5.11. While collaboration between schools and colleges is improving, organisational factors continue to exert a strong influence. The timetables in schools and colleges tend to have different structures. Timely planning, close cooperation and a strong commitment to achieving workable arrangements are all required, if conflicting timetables are not to undermine attempts at closer collaboration. Access and transport difficulties also need to be addressed. These problems have been overcome in some areas.
- 5.12. Collaborative arrangements also require staff from schools and colleges to work together. Teachers in colleges and schools have different contracts and salary structures. The FE teaching qualification does not lead to qualified teacher status in the schools sector. These differences create barriers which make it difficult for schools and colleges to share teachers.
- 5.13. Collaboration in the delivery of courses leading to the requirement to transport students from one institution to another costs time, money and energy. The management of transport is a complex task and maintenance of the service is an extra responsibility for a manager in at least one of the partner institutions. There, also, have to be special arrangements for the monitoring of attendance and the provision of pastoral support.

- 5.14. Modern technology can assist in the delivery of sixth form courses. Yet, most schools either do not have, or have only recently acquired, equipment that would allow the high quality of link needed to make the e-learning activity a pleasant and satisfying experience.
- 5.15. A further factor which creates difficulty is the impact that collaborative working can have on the schools' ability to fulfil legal requirements, for example, in the areas of religious education and collective act of worship.

## **6. How are sixth forms responding to these challenges?**

- 6.1. Despite the challenges, schools and FE colleges in some areas are beginning to work more collaboratively. Greater collaboration is being further developed and promoted through the 14-19 Learning Networks. Often the collaboration between schools and colleges builds on the close working established between schools and colleges in providing an alternative curriculum for 14-16 year olds in the local FE college. Some schools and colleges have begun to offer Year 11 pupils a joint prospectus that sets out a wider range of post-16 options available to the learner at both the school and sixth form college.
- 6.2. In most cases where collaboration takes place, the FE college offers A levels in subjects not covered by the school, usually in subjects such as sociology, law, economics, psychology, philosophy, film studies and media studies. The college also offers post-16 learners a wider range of vocational courses. In order to foster collaboration rather than competition for learners, the college and the school tend not to offer learners the option of choosing whether to study the same course either at the school or the college. For some learners, this may mean that their preferred pathway is not available.
- 6.3. In some cases, schools link to share the delivery of A level courses between themselves in order to:
- offer post-16 learners a wider choice;
  - achieve economies of scale; and
  - allow staff the opportunity to continue teaching post-16 learners.
- 6.4. Collaboration between institutions is a response that often leads to greater choice of courses for the learners, where the size of sixth form classes is small. However, students often have to travel more to benefit from any collaboration; timetables need to be organised jointly between the providers; and issues relating to health and safety, communication between providers, and funding do not always make this an easy option either for the providers or the learner.
- 6.5. For many years, schools in north Wales have shared courses using video links. Welsh-medium schools have also shared courses in this way. However, few schools have exploited these links extensively.
- 6.6. A number of schools are now piloting the post-16 Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification. In these cases, learners follow a curriculum that has additional

elements, such as work on Wales, Europe and the World. The intention of these elements is to provide opportunities for learners to apply their skills in problem-solving activities and to develop a deeper understanding of some areas of study.

- 6.7. Partnerships with colleges are helping more learners to study a mix of academic and vocational courses. The longest established partnerships, in Cardiff and Deeside, work well in extending the range of options available. These partnerships broaden course options for students in both schools and colleges. However, even there, the partnerships fall some way short of the strategic approach that is set out in *Learning Pathways 14-19*.
- 6.8. As stated in *Learning Pathways 14-19*, the driving force in the development of partnerships should be the interests of learners. Schools and colleges often express this in their mission statements and in their strategic plans. However, when planning their provision, providers often take a narrower, more institutional view, which can work against the larger interest of the learner.
- 6.9. Providers are anxious that any developments that result in better provision for a greater number of learners should not lead to any reduction in the high quality of provision currently available for the most highly-qualified 50% of students. The same providers are also often keen not to lose their 'share' of the post-16 market. These are legitimate concerns. However, they are preventing much-needed change, especially in reducing unnecessary duplication of courses in some areas, increasing options for learners, and producing a more efficient and effective pattern of provision.
- 6.10. Part of the challenge for local planning partnerships will be to stimulate the market to increase the take-up of post-16 (including adult) opportunities. Such a development could leave every provider with more learners.
- 6.11. The vision set out in *Learning Pathways 14-19* requires closer collaboration between providers than exists at present. Tensions are inherent in partnership working. For collaboration to be fully effective, all partners need to believe that their views have equal consideration and that no single organisation predominates. This is not always perceived to be the case. However, the benefits of co-ordination and collaboration should, over time, help to overcome these tensions.

## **7. Do sixth forms provide good value for money?**

- 7.1. Many school sixth forms provide education of good quality. FE colleges often provide education of good quality too.
- 7.2. The range of choices available to level 3 learners, post-16, is greatest in large sixth forms and in FE colleges. The range of post-16 choices available at level 2 is much greater in FE colleges. FE colleges offer far more vocational courses than school sixth forms.

- 7.3. It inevitably costs more to educate post-16 learners (where class sizes average about ten<sup>1</sup>) than it does to educate pre-16 pupils (where class sizes range from an average of about 24 in Year 7 to about 20 in Year 11).
- 7.4. If post-16 learners in an area all attended a single institution, rather than several different schools and colleges, group sizes would rise. In the largest sixth forms, for example, managers normally allow class sizes to rise to about 20 before they split a class into two. In a school with a sixth-form of about 150 students, such an average class size would lead to a saving of about 5 full-time equivalent teachers.
- 7.5. If post-16 learning in an area were consolidated within one institution, for example an FE college or a sixth form centre, there would be greater efficiencies in the use of staff and accommodation, but learners would need to travel more than they do at present. There would also be a reduction in choice. Transport costs, fuel use and environmental effects all have a bearing on efficiency. Nevertheless, reorganisation of post-16 education in parts of Wales would lead to substantial savings in some budgets.
- 7.6. The size of the sixth form is crucial in considering its efficiency and viability. The Audit Commission has historically considered that sixth forms need 150 learners to be viable and efficient. This number of learners was previously considered adequate to generate the funding required to provide a reasonable choice of subjects within classes of a viable size. Closing sixth forms that were below this size would have significant implications for post-16 provision in Wales. In some local authorities, it would lead to the closure of all or most of the school sixth forms. However, more research is needed to establish whether 150 learners are still necessary for viability, given the greater flexibility in delivery that is possible through collaboration, video-conferencing and e-learning.
- 7.7. Clearly, where sixth forms are small, diseconomies of scale will occur. There may also be inefficiencies. It is not unusual to see small classes in some school sixth forms, when there is a thriving class following the same courses at a nearby larger sixth form or in a local FE college.
- 7.8. While schools with sixth forms generally like to retain as many learners as possible, new funding arrangements may encourage schools to look afresh at their provision. These arrangements may provide an incentive for schools to take a greater part in planning the rationalisation of local provision. They may begin to see advantages in losing some courses and some learners, if they can develop new areas of expertise and attract other learners.
- 7.9. There may be instances where small sixth forms provide something unique or outstanding within an area. Welsh-medium schools with small sixth forms may be justified on the grounds that there would be a significant loss in the

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<sup>1</sup> Figures from 'Schools in Wales: General Statistics 2003' National Assembly for Wales. The paper by John Roberts shows that, in sixth-forms, the average class size in different schools ranges from under 3 to over 17.

bilingual development of learners if the small-scale provision were to close. Denominational schools with small sixth forms could make the same case. Some learners, including those with particular needs, may flourish best in the context of relatively small provision. However, the case is only convincing when standards and quality in such institutions are good.

## **8. What is the future for sixth forms?**

There are no simple solutions to the issues we identify.

- 8.1. Sixth forms and colleges are now both funded by ELW, but they are managed by different bodies. Schools and FE colleges have autonomous governing bodies or academic boards. The leaders of these organisations answer to their governors rather than to ELW or the LEA.
- 8.2. In many schools and colleges, the managers work together to provide a number of shared courses. However, in other areas, managers still see themselves as working in competition. This competitive structure does not naturally lead to the best range of courses for the greatest number of students, or an efficient system of education and training.
- 8.3. CCETs have had a purely advisory role. In many cases, they have identified unnecessary duplication of courses or the lack of some aspect of provision, but their activities have had relatively little impact on provision. The CCETs have no power to direct schools or colleges to broaden or reduce their range of courses nor to establish joint courses shared between two or more providers. One aim of the recently-established 14-19 Learning Networks is to provide all learners with a complete menu of options at the age of 16. There is scope for the networks to be influential in leading change within local areas. They are now producing development plans that follow the guidance within 14-19 Pathways in advising schools, colleges and training providers to collaborate more. However, the 14-19 Learning Networks are relatively new. In many cases, they are only at the point of auditing the provision that already exists within their areas and they have yet to influence provision to any great extent.
- 8.4. Small sixth forms offer only a narrow range of choices for post-16 learners and often use staff and accommodation inefficiently. Where standards and quality are good, and where the institution offers something unique in an area or meets a specific need, such as Welsh-medium provision or a denominational ethos, the case for continuing with sixth forms is stronger. Where this is not the case, there are many arguments to suggest that the provision should be reorganised in order to provide a greater range of choice and better value for money.
- 8.5. In most cases, reorganisation would mean the closure of the small sixth form. The learners would then go either to a local FE college in the area or a local school with a larger sixth form that offers a suitably wide range of courses. In some areas where there are many small sixth forms, LEAs might consider

closing them all and establishing either a new sixth form centre at one of the schools or by expanding a sixth form that was already offering a suitable range of courses. Operating a joint sixth form across one or more sites is another option.

- 8.6. Large sixth forms can often offer a suitably wide range of courses at level 3. Due to their size, they can also offer these courses in an efficient way.
- 8.7. FE colleges often have a wide range of vocational courses at level 2 and level 3. In most cases, it would be inefficient for schools to develop more and more vocational courses when these courses are often available and delivered successfully at a local FE college.
- 8.8. All learners need access to full and objective information about the choices available to them post-16. Currently, this is not the case in many schools where there is competition between the school and a local FE college for post-16 learners. In these cases, schools often do not pass on important information on the learners' strengths and weaknesses to FE colleges effectively.
- 8.9. The most powerful incentives to change tend to derive either from a statutory requirement or an increase or decrease in funding. Despite the barriers identified in section 5 above, LEAs and ELWAs, in collaboration with the National Assembly Government, are still best placed to promote and drive forward significant change.

## **9. How can we improve the provision for post-16 learners in Wales?**

Providers need to:

- make sure that every pupil in key stage 4 receives information about the full range of courses available locally (the 14-19 Learning Network options menu), and impartial advice on the best courses for them to follow;
- analyse the standards learners achieve where collaboration exists between schools and FE colleges to ensure that the learners are benefiting well from the arrangements; and
- ensure that the needs and aspirations of learners are at the heart of decisions on provision.

Local authorities and ELWAs need to:

- reorganise local post-16 provision, especially where there are small sixth forms, to improve options for learners and secure a more efficient system; agree, where necessary, a strategy and implement a timetable for

reorganising the provision of school sixth forms; and

- continue to fund small sixth forms where they have outstanding outcomes, or offer a unique contribution to a learners' development, such as bilingual or specialist provision or a denominational ethos.
- make sure learning networks work including across LEA boundaries, where this would better match the distribution of schools and colleges and existing transport networks.



## **Appendix**

### **What is the evidence base for this advice?**

We have based the advice in this paper on recent evidence from:

- section 10 inspection reports on secondary schools;
- inspection reports on further education colleges; and
- the findings of district inspectors through their work in Local Authorities.

In addition, we have interviewed senior staff from:

- secondary schools;
- further education colleges;
- LEAs; and
- Community Consortia for Education and Training (CCET).

The report also refers to data in the report 'Modelling sixth-form provision in Wales, 2000-2001' (ELWa, 2001) by John Roberts.