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

Exploring effective ways of capturing the views of disabled learners
Introduction

In 2008, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) was asked by the LSC to produce a report on ways in which the views of disabled learners could link with the work of the National Learner Panel. The title of NIACE’s report is *From Plastic Forks to Policy Change: Involving Disabled Learners in the Work of the National Learner Panel* and proposes how an inclusive model for such involvement could be developed. The project behind this report was based on the premise that having a separate panel for disabled learners (as proposed in the Learning for Living and Work Strategy\(^1\)) is not an inclusive approach to involving learners.

The government’s National Learner Panel was established in 2006 to give learners a voice in developments in learning and skills provision in England. The members of the panel are able to offer perspectives on government policies, proposals and initiatives, and are also empowered to raise issues for discussion themselves.

The title *Plastic Forks* reflects the potential of learner involvement activity, and the journey it can take learners and providers on. Issues raised by learners can initially appear trivial (such as a request by a group of learners for metal rather than plastic cutlery). However, with high-quality involvement activity and appropriate support and guidance, learners’ confidence and expectations can grow. Trust between learners and providers/policymakers can develop, leading to real partnership work that results in effective policy change.

Project Research Methodology

NIACE sent out a questionnaire to learning providers in the FE sector. This survey focused on current models of learner involvement. It received responses from 128 providers. Of these, 24 responses

\(^1\) LSC (2006) *Learning for Living and Work: Improving education and training for people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities*, Coventry: Learning and Skills Council
indicated particularly interesting learner involvement practice. These were followed up with telephone interviews and/or site visits.

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

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

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

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

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

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

• Models of involvement could be embedded into core provider activity as a way of resourcing this work, for example by accrediting such involvement through community engagement programmes or Skills for Life courses such as improving speaking and listening skills.

• Agendas need to be set jointly by the LSC and learners themselves.

• Learners need opportunities for one-to-one involvement and support.

• Learners must receive feedback on issues raised, and the methods of collection must be varied and the materials fully accessible.

**Model of involvement**

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

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

• where to have meetings and how learners will access them

• how to train and support learners throughout the process
what consideration should be given to the reward and recognition of learners on the forum

considerations of how to engage learners in policy issues

the importance of having accessible materials

considerations of the time, and the duration and frequency of meetings.

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

Project Findings

Regional learner forums

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

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

14 Training to develop resources to support providers in improving their learner involvement approaches and to enhance the tools currently available was identified as a need by providers. Resources should address some of the barriers disabled learners face in becoming more active in representational settings, including the dispositional barriers of low confidence and negative self-image.
There is potential for providers to use current survey data sets more effectively to both map and plan in order to improve the responsiveness of current provision. Regular data collection could be used to:

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

**Taking the work forward**

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

- Members of the National Learner Panel should be consulted on the findings of this project to discover whether they feel it is feasible for them to develop links with regional panels.

- The National Learner Panel could explore the degree to which it has autonomy to develop its own social networking capacity within its current online presence and, if this is limited, to explore ways in which it might be developed.

- The National Learner Panel could examine ways in which its website can be made accessible to all, including learners with sensory impairments and those with learning difficulties. The development of such a site could help to reinforce literacy, numeracy and ICT/communications skills for many learners, giving very real and practical purposes for communicating through such technologies.

- The National Union of Students should also be approached to examine the degree to which its institutionally based officers and regional and national staff could promote and facilitate increased access to online forums that are accessible to disabled learners.
An inclusive model of learner consultation will need to make the transition beyond 2010 to the Young People’s Learning Agency and the Skills Funding Agency. Within local authorities, there are existing structures that promote the involvement of service users. Their opinions are listened to and valued, and they have an influence on the development of services. For instance, as part of the Valuing People Now delivery plan, a regional and local cross-agency structure has been established to develop work in order to improve services for people with learning difficulties. This will include the development of advocacy training and advocacy services for these people. It will be important for learner forums to link with such local and regional structures.

**Proposed approach**

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

**Follow-up work**

18 Two “Have Your Say” learner conferences are planned for early 2010. The aim of the conferences is to provide an opportunity for disabled learners:

- to give their views on key policies and strategies including; Learning for Living and Work and the LSC Mental Health Strategy
- give key policy makers and implementers an understanding of how the strategies are being carried out through interaction with learners
• ensure that learners feel that they really can make a difference through their involvement in strategic implementation (with feedback on their contributions planned)

• have a programme at the end of which all participants will have made an important and valued contribution

• give messages to learning providers, funders and inspectors about how further to improve learning opportunities for disabled learners.