Evaluation of the impact of the learner involvement strategy:

*Year one interim report*

in association with

Ipsos MORI

A report to LSC National

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Executive summary
Summary of background and method

i. Learner involvement is a key element of the wider personalisation agenda which advocates that services will be improved by putting citizens at the centre of a given service and understanding and acting on their needs. As such, learner involvement takes account of the views and needs of the learner. DIUS and its partners, including the LSC, have been developing resources to help providers meet this strategic aim to involve learners individually and collectively, including the launch of a handbook: “Developing a Learner Involvement Strategy – a handbook for the further education sector”, in June 2007. It is expected that the strategy will set out the approaches the provider will put in place to capture, understand and respond to learner views.

ii. The requirement to develop a learner involvement strategy applies to the wide range of further education providers. The Handbook provides a broad outline of what a strategy should contain and was not prescriptive, although it does provide an outline that could be used as a template; rather providers are encouraged to develop an approach relevant to their circumstances, based on best practice and consultation. The LSC therefore commissioned an evaluation to understand the impact of learner involvement strategies on learners’ experience and success across the full range of Further Education (FE) providers. The evaluation runs between December 2007 and May 2009, with a Year 1 report in Spring 2008 and a Final Report in Spring 2009.

iii. The overall approach adopted for the evaluation has been through three phases of work. Phase One was a preparatory phase which included scoping work with various stakeholders. Phase Two covered the main evaluation activities in Year One (2007-2008) and set out to establish the extent to which further education providers have developed learner involvement strategies and levels of awareness and involvement among learners. Phase Three will cover the main evaluation activities in Year Two (2008-2009) and will explore the extent to which providers have evolved their approach; levels of awareness and involvement among learners; and further experiences among providers in developing and implementing learner involvement strategies. This is the report for Year One. It is worth noting that for Phase Two, the evaluation drew a distinction between whether providers have a programme of learner involvement activity in place (which may have been in place for some time and could either have been structured or ad hoc in nature) and whether they had put in place a learner involvement strategy (implying a more focused and coordinated approach). The report therefore comments on both programme and strategy where appropriate.

iv. The provider sample had 1,000 respondents, which included 630 Work Based Learning (WBL) and 370 FE providers. Large providers (over 1,000 learners) comprise a third of the sample of providers and within this group, the very largest providers (over 5,000) accounted for the majority (20% of total sample). In addition, the greater proportion of providers (over 30%) was located in the south of the country (South East and London).

v. The learner sample totalled 2,000 respondents, which included 1,500 learners from FE and 500 from WBL institutions. For the purpose of this study, these totals were weighted so that the responses represented 1,800 FE and 200 WBL learners. Overall, the majority of learners responded that they were either studying full-time (39%) or part-time at college-one or two days a week (30%). A further 13% were no longer training/on a course. A cohort of these learners will be followed up in a longitudinal study in Phase Three.
Outcomes and benefits

vi. In both WBL and FE, learners and providers reported similar benefits. With regard to providers, a range of learner involvement benefits were recognised among those providers that have learner involvement programmes and are either developing a strategy or have one in place. Further, the nature of reported benefits did not vary significantly according to the length of time providers have had a learner involvement programme in place, or whether the provider already has a strategy compared with those developing one. The top four outcomes were: improving methods for communication between staff and learners; ability to demonstrate changes in approach that have come about as a result of learner involvement; improving ability to correlate learner involvement with overall quality assurance processes; and that staff members are more confident in how they involve learners.

vii. Providers are recognising and describing benefits to learners, staff and for the organisation as a whole from their learner involvement activity. These benefits are broadly consistent with those reported by learners. 60% of providers reported that they have a programme of evaluation in place to assess the impact of their learner involvement programme and survey responses also indicated that 92% of providers would be able to provide evidence to support the outcomes described. The discussions in the case study interviews suggest that providers are not yet readily able to attribute these benefits to having a learner involvement strategy, with many indicating that they do not yet have fully robust evaluation mechanisms in place. Most providers indicated that they had mechanisms in place for collecting and analysing data on learner involvement and that this would help with review, for example in undertaking their self assessments. Fewer reported having detailed evaluation arrangements for their learner involvement strategies, although one notable example was identified in the case study programme where a consortium of FE colleges had developed an evaluation framework for their learner involvement strategies and were undertaking this evaluation as a peer review project.

viii. Given that providers are recognising benefits and have declared that they can provide evidence, it is arguable whether it is critical that the attribution of impact should be to the existence of a ‘strategy’ rather than to having a holistic programme of involvement in place. However if the DIUS/LSC strategy to encourage all providers to adopt a high quality programme is successful, overall benefit should be seen to increase across the full range of providers as the influence of this national strategy is felt.
Strategy development

ix. Both providers and learners are positive about the value of learner involvement. A significant majority of all providers (96%) report having some form of learner involvement programme in place and most (71%) also consider that they have some form of strategy. It is not clear how well formed many of these strategies are and the case study visits indicate that many are still developing their approach, even though some form of basic strategy has been produced. This said, a high level of commitment and intent was evident.

x. Barriers and resource implications relate mainly to the time and staff demands required to put a learner involvement strategy in place and to convince learners that this is worthwhile. Most providers taking part in the case studies have not increased staff levels and have reassigned duties to help deliver their programmes. It also appears that there is considerable variation in approach to where responsibility for learner involvement sits within provider organisations, partly due to the range of sizes and resources available. Some more explicit resource implications were identified, in particular to develop and manage systems for surveys and data collection to support learner involvement.

xi. Less than half of those providers with a learner involvement strategy had made use of the new Handbook, and the level of use was lower again among WBL providers. Most small and medium sized providers tended not to use the Handbook in preparing or refreshing their strategy. The Handbook was much more likely to have been used by providers that had put a programme of learner involvement in place within the last year. While most of the providers that had used the Handbook had found it to be helpful, case study consultations indicated that other providers were not familiar with the Handbook and some—particularly WBL providers—had found that it did not adequately reflect their situation of working with widely dispersed learners and employers.

Participation mechanisms

xii. FE and WBL providers reported use of a broadly similar range of mechanisms, although FE providers (most notably the largest providers) tended to make more use of collective arrangements than WBL providers, which placed more emphasis on one to one relationships with learners. Both types of organisation use overarching communication tools such as learner newsletters, e-forums and websites to disseminate information. Both types of providers had made use of collective and individual mechanisms and had found merits in both these broad approaches.

xiii. WBL providers found less scope for introducing collective forums given the dispersed locations of their learners and were often unsure of how they could make these arrangements work, given both this dispersion and the relative lack of engagement of employers.

xiv. Providers consistently identified that the arrangements that work well are underpinned with thorough and consistent briefing and support for learners, from induction to the ethos of the organisation through to individual briefings for those offering to take part in active involvement mechanisms.

xv. Learners also reflected awareness and involvement in similar mechanisms, most frequently mentioning discussions with staff as well as the use of surveys. They could also recognise where their contribution had had some effect and had been able to observe changes. Learners also indicated a general preference to be involved in the ‘hands on’ issues and stressed that the smaller issues were important as they affected the short term experiences learners had. Some providers also noted that attracting learners to some committees and forums proved difficult—whether due to the technical knowledge needed, to levels of interest or to timing of sessions.
xvi. Providers have recognised the need for collection and analysis of consistent data to inform a variety of purposes across the organisation, from providing feedback and responses to their learners, through informing management decisions to external assessment and reporting. In smaller organisations of all types, this places an additional burden on administrative and teaching staff. In larger organisations, responsibility tends to lie with Quality Teams and specified Service Managers.

Influencing teaching and learning

xvii. Most providers, both FE and WBL, reported that they involve learners in developing course content. However, some 40% do not. Further analysis identified that there were no significant variations among different groups of providers reporting this situation, for example by size or between WBL and FE providers. This implies that a significant number of providers are yet to be convinced of the benefits of this type of learner involvement; hence more could be done to encourage learner involvement in this area. Providers with the longest established programmes of learner involvement were most likely to support this form of involvement and there was a strong correlation between providers involving learners in developing course content and those involving learners in wider strategy and direction.

xviii. Providers consider the most important means of learner involvement to influence teaching and learning were through the use of feedback for evaluation, including telling learners about the actions taken. FE providers were more likely to state that they would inform learners of actions that were taken than WBL providers. Reasons for providing support in this area included both the use of feedback to improve provision and to make learners feel their comments are treated seriously.

xix. FE learners studying at Level 4 or 5 are less likely to say they have been involved in decisions about exam and coursework arrangements than those studying at Level 1, 2 or 3. In addition, black learners are considerably more likely than white learners to say that learners are involved in these arrangements.

xx. WBL providers are significantly less likely to involve learners in shaping the wider direction and strategy of the organisation than FE providers. Overall, providers that had a strategy in place and those that had a programme of learner involvement for more than three years were more likely to involve their learners in strategic decision making. This might imply that progression to involvement in these areas takes longer to establish.

Supporting learners and staff

xxi. Both FE and WBL providers described themselves as offering a range of learner support options such as ensuring that learners had time and resources (such as IT access) to become involved. Fewer were offering specific training for learners to help them become involved, with large FE providers the most likely to offer this support. This group was also most likely to have provided dedicated staff support for learner involvement. Providers with a learner involvement strategy in place were also most likely to offer a ‘full’ range of support options including both ‘passive’ activities such as surveys and questionnaires and ‘active’ activities such as learner forums and course or learner representatives.

xxii. Providers generally find that learners are willing to be involved, at least to take part in feedback activity, though there are constraints of time and a relationship with the length of course and time spent with the provider in terms of willingness of learners to engage. Providers adopt different approaches and degrees of emphasis to encouraging learners to become involved; some use incentives to encourage long term fulfilment of commitments.

xxiii. Providers were less sure about the extent to which they were able to ensure full involvement in terms of inclusivity or equality and diversity, although several – mainly larger – providers did have clear arrangements to cover learners with disability or learning difficulties.
Providers broadly expect staff to engage in learner involvement as part of the wider approach to improving quality and supporting learners to achieve. Providers’ approach to training staff was more varied, ranging from ‘soft’, awareness briefing to explicit training with learner involvement as an explicit element of the content.

Conclusions

Encouraging levels of activity provide a good basis for future development

At the beginning of the evaluation, the LSC and DIUS representatives emphasised the low levels of absolute knowledge about the overall level of activity and the characteristics of learner involvement activity across the FE sector, despite the wide range of FE reform and personalisation initiatives that were under way. In that sense, the overall levels of activity reported here are encouraging, both in terms of the numbers of providers that have at least some learner involvement activity taking place and those that already have some form of learner involvement strategy in place. 65% of providers have a programme of Learner Involvement “fully” in place and over 70% of these have a strategy. It is also reassuring – and remains a challenge – that only 5% of providers have no plans to develop such a strategy. Overall, this would appear to be a very strong base to build on. Continued focus on the development and implementation of Learner Involvement Strategies will help to enhance the coherence and quality of learner involvement across the sector.

Consensus around the positive value of learner involvement

Providers displayed a broad degree of consensus around the meaning of Learner Involvement – essentially the integration of learners into the fabric and ethos of the organisation. Encouragingly both providers and learners are positive about the value and benefits of Learner Involvement. The research highlighted that learners were more confident and comfortable in speaking to staff and articulating their views. Also motivation levels had improved amongst learners and learner involvement was perceived as a useful part of student retention. Learners in both FE and WBL provision have also clearly stated that they are supportive of the idea of involvement and many recognised the types of activities being offered by their providers. Many have reported positive experiences through the case studies and have seen benefits from their participation. For providers, motivation, retention and achievement appear to be the key drivers for learner involvement.

The significance of briefing and support for learner involvement should not be underestimated (within the constraints that have been identified).

The research has highlighted the extent, nature and importance of learner and provider support for learner involvement. It can play a key role in influencing teaching and learning too (for example around course content); and feedback and dialogue can help to reinforce the significance and impact of learner involvement activity. The key inhibitors to learner involvement that emerged from the provider perspective included actually getting learners involved and time constraints. Some learners felt that they were too busy or that they had not been approached. The choice and resourcing of approaches would appear to be significant on both the provider’s ability to undertake activity and the learners’ desire to become involved. Approaches need to be adapted to meet the circumstances of both the learner cohort and type of provision.

Active and passive measures combined with individual and collective mechanisms can result in a comprehensive LIS

The report has highlighted some practical examples promoting learner involvement through improved access to facilities and premises and measures to promote learner involvement and motivation.
Most providers also report that they are seeing benefits from their learner involvement activity and both FE and WBL providers report a similar range of outcomes in terms of improved methods of communication between staff and learners; an ability to demonstrate changes in approach that have come about as a result of learner involvement; improving ability to correlate learner involvement with wider quality assurance processes; and that staff are more confident in how they involve learners. Over 90% of the providers also declare that they can substantiate their activity and outcomes if needed. However many providers appear to focus much of their energy on what have been described as more passive means of involvement, such as surveys and group feedback sessions led by course tutors, with feedback on actions and changes provided to learners through newsletters and ‘you said, we did’ notices.

Some 40% of providers do not involve learners in shaping and developing their course content implying that more could be done to convince them of the benefits of this type of strategic learner involvement.

Our view is that a mix of both active and more passive measures (mentoring, ambassadors for instance) combined with individual and collective mechanisms can result in a comprehensive learner involvement strategy. Learners expressed a preference for activities where they thought they could ‘make a difference’.

There is awareness of the need to develop a strategy but there is room for improvement amongst WBL providers

There are high levels of awareness of the need to develop a learner involvement strategy, with 84% FE and 57% WBL providers aware of the recent requirement for a strategy. However the levels of awareness are significantly lower among WBL providers and this suggests that a focused campaign is required to increase this awareness and stimulate further development of strategies.

Most providers that are aware of the requirement also reported that they have changed their approach to learner involvement (68% FE and 51% WBL) because of the requirement. For most, this has been to draw together what ongoing activity there was, to identify where they wanted to add and to make activity more coherent, and to develop a more structured framework against which to manage and monitor progress.

There were many examples of both overall strategic approach and specific involvement activities that emerged through the qualitative case study interviews, in both FE and WBL providers. These examples included a high level of expectation that provider staff would engage fully with learner involvement activity. However, it was also clear that many providers remain uncertain about the shape that their learner involvement strategy should take.

Providers recognise that they are at an early stage of strategy development and may welcome advice to further improve strategy depth and quality

Although it was not part of the evaluation to assess providers’ strategies for merit or quality, many providers offered them for review and in many cases the plans were sketchy in nature – even taking into account that providers were often still in the early stages of the development of their plans. Several requested the opportunity to have sight of ‘best practice’ examples that were relevant to their own situation in terms of provider type and learner intake; and indeed sought feedback from the evaluators on perceived quality and how plans could be improved.

Overall, it would appear that while there are high numbers of providers with learner involvement strategies in place, many are at an early stage on their journey to consistent, high quality and inclusive learner involvement and would welcome further support to improve. At this stage the monitoring and reporting arrangements are not always fully developed although providers recognised the importance of collecting data in a consistent manner despite potential resource implications. In short, the active measurement of LIS will help to demonstrate effectiveness and impact.
There is a difference in the underpinning approach to learner involvement between WBL and FE providers

xxxvii. This difference is driven by two main factors: that WBL learners are normally based in their workplaces, often in small numbers and geographically dispersed, which leads to different contact and support arrangements than for larger, concentrated groups of learners in FE colleges; and that WBL providers are very conscious of the three-way relationship between themselves, the learner and the employer, which reinforces the link of learner involvement to commercial customer satisfaction and quality assurance processes.

xxxviii. These differences appear to be reflected not only in how providers describe their learner involvement activity, but also in how learners describe – and value – their involvement and satisfaction.

The handbook has been considered useful for those that have used it but could usefully be refreshed

xxxix. The findings offer mixed messages about the recently published Learner Involvement Strategy handbook. Less than half of providers had used it – and considerably fewer WBL providers. There is also no direct correlation between those providers that are aware of the requirement to have a learner involvement strategy and the reported use of the Handbook – 70% were aware of the requirement, but only 47% had used the Handbook.

xl. Those providers that had a programme of learner involvement in place for a longer period of time (up to 3 years) were less likely to have used the Handbook, perhaps reflecting that they felt relatively comfortable with developing their strategy independently. Those that had used the handbook had generally found it helpful, but a number of issues were raised about its content. In particular the handbook does not appear to meet the needs or expectations of WBL providers, who have to engage with employers as well as learners and often deal with widely dispersed learners. Others felt the handbook could give more specific guidance on dealing with particular situations such as high learner turnover or provider/sector types. There is clearly an opportunity to refresh the ‘message’ and guidance.

xli. To summarise, whilst the level of learner involvement is encouraging, the next phase of policy advice should build on the high levels of intent and commitment identified and focus on depth, quality and robust development and implementation of learner involvement strategies.

xlili. As discussed above, an important part of this first cycle of evaluation has simply been to establish a clearer picture of the extent and characteristics of provider engagement with learner involvement and in particular the extent of progress in developing a strategy rather than having a series of potentially ad hoc activities in place. Given that the findings could have been that overall activity levels are low, the results provide a strong starting point for further meaningful action.
Recommendations

At this stage in the evaluation, eight recommendations are proposed to deal with some of the emerging issues from the evaluation work completed to date:

**Recommendation 1: Communication Strategy to encourage provider engagement.** While it is encouraging that only 1% of providers do not plan to have a programme of learner involvement and only 5% have no plans for a learner involvement strategy, these providers continue to enrol and work with learners across the country. Consideration should be given as to how these providers can be motivated to take a more proactive approach to this area. This may not require a ‘compliance’ action but rather a communication strategy that helps reinforce the benefits and requirements of learner involvement strategy development and implementation.

**Recommendation 2: Guidance on approach.** It is clear that both the providers with a strategy and those currently in the process of developing one would welcome more information and support that would help them to determine whether they are applying good practice and moving in the right direction. This might take the form of advice on an appropriate mix of individual and collective activity that promotes both active and passive measures. There may be scope for the LSC to work with support organisations such as LSN to offer best practice support. Other potential areas include working with inspection agencies to clarify for providers how learner involvement will be explored and reported during provider inspections and any best practice emerging from Self Assessment Reviews.

**Recommendation 3: Prioritise high impact learner involvement activity.** Linked to the above, there are strong messages in the evaluation findings about the benefits of appropriate support for learners and providers, for example about encouraging ‘active’ learner involvement and encouraging staff training to support learner involvement. The LSC and its partners should look to establish and develop positive trends from this potentially strong base. Trend improvements in these types of activity are likely to provide some of the strongest evidence for impact of the learner involvement strategy in the longer term.

**Recommendation 4: Involve learners in development of content.** Some 40% of providers reported that they do not involve learners in developing course content and there were no significant variations among different groups of providers. This is a major weakness in any system which purports to put the views of learners at the heart of provision. Consideration needs to be given as to how this figure can be reduced, and how organisations can be persuaded to introduce new systems and processes which allow learners to be involved in developing course content.

**Recommendation 5: Promote innovation.** The dispersed nature of learners and lack of engagement by employers has reduced the use of collective forums by WBL providers. Guidance and best practice on new communication channels, such as the use of social web sites, should be developed as part of any refreshed best practice guidance. This could also be incorporated in the Handbook.

**Recommendation 6: Disseminate and encourage policy development.** The headline findings from this report could be used as a mechanism to enhance understanding, promote good practice and encourage an open exchange of views on learner involvement strategy development and implementation.
Recommendation 7: Refine the learner involvement strategy handbook.  The LSC’s Learner Involvement Strategy handbook has been well received by many of the providers who have used it. The majority of providers have not used the Handbook and WBL providers are least likely to. This reduces the likelihood of learner involvement strategies being of a consistently high quality. The LSC has the opportunity to:

- review the content of the Handbook;
- consider strengthening the best practice element, for which there is a high demand (more detail on strategy development and potential composition and participation and support mechanisms);
- re-focus some of the material to much more explicitly meet the needs of the WBL providers, taking account of issues such as dispersed learners and (limited) employer engagement;
- consider either a re-launch to the provider network, or a series of workshops, briefings, seminars to increase the use of the Handbook; and,
- include some more prescriptive advice on monitoring and evaluation methods which providers would find helpful.

Recommendation 8: Embedding and reviewing learner involvement strategies. The LSC should encourage providers to embed learner involvement strategies in the inspection/assessment process, to review activity regularly and be able to report on progress of their Learner Involvement Strategy. Ideally, this should include active involvement activities and ensure equal engagement and representation for different groups and individuals.

These recommendations have to be seen in the light of some very positive results and feedback, and take account of the extent to which providers are developing and improving their learner involvement strategies as they become familiar with both the benefits and what works and what doesn’t work.

The next phase of the evaluation will take a longitudinal perspective, will be able to determine ‘distance travelled’ and more accurately pinpoint the benefits providers are able to attribute to their learner involvement strategy given more time will have elapsed. There will also be more focus on the additionality arising from the introduction of the requirement for a Learner Involvement Strategy, for example considering the additional activity stimulated as a result of introducing the strategy.
Section 1
Introduction
Background to research

1.1 Learner involvement is a key element of the wider personalisation agenda which advocates that services will be improved by putting citizens at the centre of a given service and understanding and acting on their needs. Learner involvement takes account of the views and needs of the learner and while it is not a new concept, 2007/08 is the first year in which there is an explicit requirement for Further Education providers to develop a learner involvement strategy. DIUS and its partners including the LSC have been developing resources to help providers meet this strategic aim to involve learners individually and collectively, including the launch of a handbook: “Developing a Learner Involvement Strategy – a handbook for the further education sector”, in June 2007. It is expected that the strategy will set out the approaches the provider will put in place to capture, understand and respond to learner views. The strategy should also set out the steps that will be used to maintain, enhance and build learner involvement to improve the effectiveness of the organisation and provision.

1.2 Even where learner involvement activity has already been part of the provider ‘offer’, it is expected that the development of a strategic approach will result in benefits for both the learner and the provider. For example, these benefits might include:

- For the learner, a more engaging and responsive learning environment that enables them to shape their learning experience and helps them achieve improved learning outcomes;
- For the provider, more motivated and expert learners; improved information on which to base decisions about resources and approach; and increased performance in terms of participation, retention, progression and achievement for learners.

1.3 The requirement to develop a learner involvement strategy (in place since October 2007) applies to the wide range of further education providers and as such, different approaches would be likely to suit the various needs of learners and providers – what works in a large further education college may not work as well in a small, work based learning provider, an adult education centre or a specialist provider. The Handbook did not prescribe what a strategy should look like in terms of a template approach; rather providers are encouraged to develop an approach relevant to their circumstances, based on best practice and consultation. Similarly, the suitability and quality of learner involvement activity will be reviewed as part of the overall self assessment reviews and inspection arrangements being developed as part of the FE Reform programme, including through the Framework for Excellence.

1.4 The LSC therefore commissioned an evaluation to understand the impact of learner involvement strategies on learners’ experience and success across the full range of FE providers. In summary, the objectives of the evaluation are to:

- Evaluate the impact of Learner Involvement Strategy on the experience of learners in the FE system, in the full range of providers;
- Determine the extent to which providers have implemented a Learner Involvement Strategy;
- Measure the possible impact of Learner Involvement Strategies on teaching and learning, retention and achievement;
- Assess how providers are evaluating the impact of their Learner Involvement Strategies;
- Establish the impact of the Learner Involvement Strategy Handbook;
- Set out the elements of the Handbook that are most successful and/or commonly occurring and those that are not, with reasons why;
introduction

- Evaluate the place of the Learner Involvement Strategy as part of the strategic planning of the provider agencies;
- Analyse the possible impact of Learner Involvement Strategy on diverse groups including young people ‘looked after’;
- Determine any further interdependencies with other policies/strategies including the framework for excellence and the common inspection framework.


Summary of method

1.6 The overall approach adopted for the evaluation has been through three phases of work (a full method statement is included in the separate technical annex):

- Phase One was a preparatory phase which included scoping work with various stakeholders to ensure that later stages are based on full understanding of the policy and programme context in which the Learner Involvement Strategy is being implemented and that the evaluation specification would be fully met by the research programme.
- Phase Two included the main evaluation activities in Year One (2007-2008) and set out to establish the extent to which further education providers have developed learner involvement strategies; levels of awareness and involvement among learners; experiences in developing and implementing learner involvement strategies and emerging good practice.
- Phase Three will cover the main evaluation activities in Year Two (2008-2009) and will explore the extent to which providers have evolved their approach; levels of awareness and involvement among a further new cohort of learners; changes in awareness, involvement and expectation among learners participating in Year One (a longitudinal study); and further experiences among providers in developing and implementing learner involvement strategies and good practice.

1.7 This report presents the findings of Phase Two and is based on:

- A telephone survey of 2,000 learners drawn from the ILR for academic year 2007/08.
- A telephone survey of 1,000 further education providers, generically categorised as ‘further education’ or ‘work based learning’.
- A series of 30 qualitative case study interviews with providers selected from the respondents to the telephone survey. Where possible, case study interviews included discussions with learners currently involved with the providers visited. Providers participating in case studies included local adult/community education centres, local authority continuing education teams, work based learning providers covering different sectors and FE colleges. Providers also included publicly funded community organisations, voluntary organisations and commercial training providers.
- Learner and provider samples for the telephone surveys were developed separately so there is no presumed connection between learner and provider responses.

1.8 In the interests of readability, we have not presented detailed statistical values and charts for all commentary. In many of the survey responses, there was no significant difference between FE and WBL providers or within specific sub-groups in cross-tabulation. This was also true of learners. Full data tables and SPSS files have been provided to THE LSC along with this report.
1.9 The remainder of the report is presented under the following sections:
- Outcomes and Benefits
- Strategy Development
- Participation Mechanisms
- Influencing Teaching and Learning
- Supporting Learners and Staff
- Conclusions
- Recommendations

1.10 A Technical Annex is presented separately which includes:
- A Profile of respondents – learners and providers
- A Desk review
- A Method statement
- Technical Tables
- The Year One Learner Questionnaire
- The Year One Provider Questionnaire.

Summary profile of respondents

Providers

1.11 The provider sample had 1,000 respondents, which included 630 WBL and 370 FE providers (Figure 1.1). Large providers (over 1,000 learners) comprise a third of the sample of providers and within this group the very largest providers (over 5,000) accounted for the majority (20% of total sample). In addition, the greater proportion of providers (over 30%) was located in the south of the country (South East and London).

Figure 1.1:
Provider profile

Base: 1000: All providers
Learners

1.12 The learner sample totalled 2,000 respondents, which included 1,500 learners from FE and 500 from WBL institutions. For the purpose of this study, these totals were weighted so that the responses represented 1,800 FE and 200 WBL learners. Overall, the majority of learners responded that they were either studying full-time (39%) or part-time at college one or two days a week (30%). 13% were no longer training/on a course (Figure 1.2).
Section 2
Outcomes and benefits
Determining outcomes and benefits

2.1 A key characteristic of this phase of the evaluation is to determine the extent to which FE providers have a learner involvement strategy in place. This development is discussed in later chapters of the report, but in essence the research is determining whether providers have a programme of learner involvement activity and whether they also have, or are developing a strategy. A programme may include many of the activities that would be features of a strategy and may indeed be carefully focused, coordinated and directed by the provider; alternatively these activities may be ad hoc in nature. However, in developing a strategy the provider would be expected to assess requirements for a holistic approach to learner involvement and to have a focused plan of action set in the context of wider objectives for the provider and learners.

2.2 In this early assessment, many of the providers described themselves both as having a programme (96% of all providers had a programme of learner involvement in place) and a strategy for learner involvement in place (71% of all providers had a formal strategy), or as being in process of developing a strategy. At a further level of detail, 75% of those providers that had a programme of learner involvement also have a formal strategy in place, and 17% are planning to develop one. Most described a range of outcomes they had seen – and expected to see in future; however from our case study work it appears that it is likely that at this stage providers generally have not yet distinguished fully the benefits arising specifically from having a strategy as opposed to general benefits they may have seen from an existing programme of learner involvement activity. The next phase of the evaluation will be able to determine more accurately what benefits providers are able to attribute to their learner involvement strategy given that more time will have elapsed, and to compare the nature of benefits and outcomes with those described below.

Providers

2.3 In the quantitative survey, both FE and WBL providers reported a similar range of outcomes arising from their Learner Involvement Strategy. In general, a slightly greater proportion of WBL providers responded positively to each outcome, relative to their FE counterparts, although not to a significant extent. Figure 2.1 therefore shows the responses for FE providers for illustration.

2.4 The top three outcomes, which were identified by the majority of providers (over 80%) include, in order of significance:

- Improving methods for communication between staff and learners.
- Ability to demonstrate changes in approach that have come about as a result of learner involvement.
- Improving ability to correlate learner involvement with overall quality assurance processes.

2.5 The fourth and fifth most significant outcomes do differ. For FE providers, these responses were that ‘we have improved our ability to collate and analyse information collected’ and ‘learners increasingly feel that they are partners in the learning experience’ respectively. The fourth and fifth outcomes identified by WBL providers were that ‘staff members are more confident in how they involve learners’ and ‘trainees increasingly feel that they are partners in the learning experience’ and ‘trainees are reporting increased levels of satisfaction with the processes by which they are involved’.
2.6 The qualitative case studies have provided some useful insights to help illustrate these views. In general, evaluation methods do not appear to be well developed and embedded, although there were some interesting exceptions. One provider commented that “as yet, there are no formal performance indicators agreed for measuring the success of our Learner Involvement activity”. Others also commented that impact is not yet formally measured, often adding that this process will be part of developing their strategy. Some described their approach to measuring impact as being through a mix of attainment levels and feedback from learners, with one commenting that “where attainment increases, staff are more motivated”.

2.7 When asked in the qualitative interviews how benefits would be reported, most were once again of the view that approaches were still slightly ad hoc and would be formalised by the strategy. It appears that smaller providers may find it easier to attribute impact than large FE colleges, though not rigorously. Some smaller providers were confident in stating effects, for example in improved retention, that were attributable at least in part to their learner involvement activity; however they were also of a size where the individual responsible for learner involvement was able to engage in considerable ad hoc activity and direct contact with learners, compared to the more complex organisational structures of larger providers.

2.8 The most usual arrangements by which providers reported on benefits and impact was through Senior Management Team meetings and minutes and Curriculum Manager/team meetings. Most providers also made a connection to their SAR process.

2.9 Overall, while most providers are therefore reporting consistently on the nature of benefits they are seeing from learner involvement, it would appear that at this stage the nature of monitoring and reporting arrangements are not fully developed.
2.10 However, one group of FE providers has developed a peer review project that specifically includes an evaluation framework for their learner involvement strategies. The framework includes 27 questions that are grouped under four headings:

- “Does the learner engagement (sic) strategy set out a clear agenda for change which addresses college priorities and is it understood and owned by learners and members of staff?
- Is the college effective in engaging learners and acting on their feedback?
- Is the strategy having the desired/beneficial impacts?
- How effective are leadership and management at all levels of the college in driving the changes associated with the learner voice (sic) strategy?”
- The peer group intended to place the findings for each provider on their ‘moodle’ for common benefit.

Provider perspective: benefits for learners

2.11 The qualitative interviews allowed for more detailed discussion of the nature of benefits observed by providers. These are discussed below in relation to benefits for the learner; for staff; and for the organisation. The overall benefits described by those consulted in the case study interviews were summarised in the words of one: “there is a stronger sense of achievement for learners and staff – greater satisfaction and fulfilment; and this sets the scene for future learning.” Others also noted that a key overall benefit to all is improved communication.

2.12 WBL and FE providers again described similar benefits for their learners from an active programme of learner involvement. As discussed later in the report, the mechanisms used vary between WBL and FE providers; however they do feel the benefits are similar.

2.13 Several providers commented that a key benefit for learners from a good programme of involvement is that the learners have a better knowledge of how they learn and have the confidence to apply this in future. This understanding developed from improved trust between learners and their tutors and assessors, and from seeing that things can change as a result of giving feedback on specific issues. It was also noted that this change “keeps the learning experience fresh as provision is constantly being developed to respond to learner needs.”

2.14 Providers also noted that confidence increased for those who became involved thus developing their transferable skills which is important for employment. Some providers linked this directly to learners who had become active being able to differentiate themselves from their peers, for example when preparing CVs or UCAS applications. In part, the increased confidence was attributed to learners realising that the provider is interested in the learners’ experience and that they can see the effect of their contributions.

2.15 Several providers stressed the benefit of learners taking ownership of their own learning. This was felt to increase buy-in and motivation, leading to better results (success and retention rates). In other words, when learner involvement is managed well and learners can see that their views are valued, it generates a virtuous circle which benefits all the key stakeholders (learners, staff and the organisation as a whole).
Provider perspective: benefits for staff

2.16 Benefits for staff were observed in three main areas: being able to develop and manage the curriculum; improving their own motivation and satisfaction; and improved management relationships.

2.17 In terms of developing and managing the curriculum, several providers noted that good learner involvement helped to sharpen the curriculum and make it more responsive. As noted above, a virtuous circle was identified in which feedback helped tutors to understand their learners, helping them to tailor their approach (which in turn made the teaching easier), leading to learners themselves being more engaged and likely to participate. This was seen to lead to higher job satisfaction for the tutor.

2.18 A challenge noted by some providers in this regard is that learner involvement can be seen to open the door to criticism, which not all staff (tutors in particular) are comfortable with. Several providers commented that this feeling was most likely to arise in more ‘traditional’ departments such as engineering or construction, than in ‘newer’ departments such as media or hospitality. Most noting this saw it as a challenge for managing expectations and providing staff with support and encouragement, however, rather than as a barrier to encouraging learner involvement.

2.19 In addition to satisfaction arising from better teaching, providers noted that the function of learner involvement also helped motivation. Learner involvement also gives staff the opportunity to talk and develop relationships with learners. One respondent described this as “broadening their horizons by helping them to re-focus on the learner rather than just on skills and the curriculum”. Another felt that “there is no ‘us’ and ‘them’ culture – communication between tutors and learners is much stronger”.

2.20 A further area of benefit was felt to be that the improved focus on curriculum and the expectation of engagement between tutor and learner reinforced a sense among staff that they are supported by management. This is linked to the decision making processes responding to feedback – managers endorse and support the changes that are made, and staff recognised that they have support and know that learner issues will be dealt with effectively.

Provider perspective: benefits for the organisation

2.21 A common recognition of the importance of learner involvement was summarised by one provider: “our service would not survive if it was not for learners. Essentially learners are our ‘customer’. Therefore if we didn’t deliver what they want we’d go out of business”.

2.22 Many providers recognise this link: comments included a recognition that satisfied learners would be likely to lead to ‘repeat business’ either with that learner or by recommendation. Some also saw this as linked to the employers they worked with: more focused and individualised learning can lead to employers being satisfied: “because we deliver what we say we will deliver, companies are prepared to pay”.

2.23 Two further areas of benefit related to the management of the organisation and learner insight arising from involvement. For some, learner involvement had helped raise learner awareness around the financial aspects of provision, including the financial implications of learners not attending. In a wider sense, providers also recognise that learners bring fresh ideas which stimulate and challenge management: “they ask relevant and topical questions and challenge us.”
Scope for improvement

2.24 Providers were also asked in the case study visits if they felt they were realising all the benefits they expected or believed to be possible. None felt they were, for several reasons that are directly linked to some of the observations above:

- Overall, the process will never be complete as it is a continuum: “approaches to delivering learning can always be developed and enhanced”;
- Learner involvement programmes are not yet systematic enough to achieve all benefits; and
- Specific objectives and/or the required breadth/scale have not yet been achieved in order to realise full benefit. For example, one large FE provider noted that they hadn’t yet got student representatives on all the committees they wanted.
- Some providers are still in the relatively early stages of implementing their programmes of learner involvement, and in those cases it is therefore still early to be talking about achieving all possible benefits. However, the case study visits have established a baseline in this regard against which we can measure progress through the longitudinal aspect of the study next year.

Learners

2.25 WBL and FE learners also identified a similar range of benefits to each other. In the learner survey, those that have taken part in learner involvement identified a range of benefits, including the quality of teaching (13%) and the facilities improving (11%), which were the top two responses from FE learners. The graph below (Figure 2.2) shows the five most frequent responses of the FE sample. Similarly, WBL learners feel that their overall learner experience improves (17%), and that they are happier with their course/training (8%).

Figure 2.2:
Personal benefits (FE)

- The teaching has improved: 13%
- The facilities are better: 11%
- I feel my overall learning experience has improved: 11%
- I am happier with my course/trainer: 7%
- Now taking a more active part in decisions about my learning: 5%

Base: 1743: All learners whose college involves learners in the delivery of their learning and who chose to get involved
2.26 The figures in the graph above represent relatively small proportions of the sub sample. In addition to the options provided, around a tenth of learners (11%) identified ‘other’ benefits. These responses can be grouped into three categories: direct outcomes (such as extra time with coursework, extra help, times of classes changing); general feelings (such as feeling involved and feeling valued); and general comments (related to ‘being listened to’, ‘having your say’ and ‘talking about ideas’).

2.27 Further to this, there are groups of learners that ‘didn’t know’ (18%) what the benefits had been or felt that they had not experienced any (23%). It is possible that these groups may not recognise that such benefits are attributable to learner involvement or that it is too early in their learning/involvement to have realised the outcomes.

2.28 In the case study visits, learners shared the views described above. Feedback from these learners supported the view that learners find a proactive learner involvement programme helps them to feel more comfortable in speaking to staff and talking about their views. There was recognition that this could happen because their views were taken seriously and because there was support available to help them express those views. The following quotes illustrate some of the benefits expressed by the learners themselves:

“I really like it here. We get treated like adults and everyone [the staff in the college] respects us. Being listened to has really helped me with my confidence.”

“It’s nice that the tutor is more ‘into you’. It’s better than other learning options and very congenial to learning.”

“The experience has definitely changed my perceptions towards learning – I really feel part of something here…”

“Learners are allowed to take control of their learning and they know what they can gain from it.”

2.29 Further discussion about learner experiences is provided in Chapter 4.
Summary

2.30 In both WBL and FE, learners and providers reported similar benefits. With regard to providers, a range of learner involvement benefits were recognised among those providers that have learner involvement programmes and are either developing a strategy or have one in place. Further, the nature of reported benefits did not vary significantly according to the length of time providers have had a learner involvement programme in place, or whether the provider already has a strategy compared with those developing one.

2.31 Providers are recognising and describing benefits to learners, staff and for the organisation as a whole. Being able to improve communication and to demonstrate changes in approach that have come about as a result of learner involvement was important for providers. There were also staff benefits in terms of increased motivation and development of the curriculum. These benefits are broadly consistent with those reported by learners. Learners felt that the quality of the learners’ experience, teaching and the facilities available had improved. Whilst learners were not always able to pinpoint the benefits in the survey, the case study visits suggested that they did feel their views were being taken seriously.

2.32 60% of providers reported that they have a programme of evaluation in place to assess the impact of their learner involvement programme and survey responses also indicated that 92% of providers would be able to provide evidence to support the outcomes described. However, given the discussions in the case study interviews it seems likely that providers are not yet readily able to attribute these benefits to having a learner involvement strategy as many have indicated that they do not yet have fully robust evaluation mechanisms in place. This is one area where some further guidance may be appropriate.

2.33 Given that providers are recognising benefits and have declared that they can provide evidence, it is arguable whether it is critical that the attribution of impact should be to the existence of a ‘strategy’ rather than to having a holistic programme of involvement in place. However if the DIUS/LSC strategy to encourage all providers to adopt a high quality programme is successful, overall benefit should be seen to increase across the full range of providers as the influence of this national strategy is felt.
Section 3
Strategy development and approaches
Learner involvement programmes

What does learner involvement mean?

3.1 As part of the qualitative interviews, providers were asked what they understood learner involvement to mean. In terms of a ‘high level’ description, FE and WBL providers gave consistent responses, some examples of which follow:

“Learners being part of the whole fabric of the college as opposed to being a restricted group.”

“Learners not just being a group where teaching is ‘being done to them’.”

“Learner involvement means every individual has something to say that you want to hear.”

“Learners being part of decision making processes and the development of the vision and future of the college as well as the here and now.”

“Learners taking ownership of their learning, and being given the opportunity to do so”

3.2 There was little difference in the proportion of FE and WBL providers that have a programme of learner involvement in place (Figure 3.1). In general, the large majority of providers sampled (over 95%) have a programme of learner involvement in place, at least to some extent. An encouraging number of providers (65%) have a programme ‘fully in place’. In contrast, only 39 providers (3.9% of the sample) did not have a programme of learner involvement. The results would suggest that both FE and WBL learning providers have endeavoured to introduce a programme of learner involvement of some kind.

![Figure 3.1: Status of learner involvement programme](image-url)
3.3 As indicated in the previous discussion of benefits, learners are also very supportive of the idea of learner involvement - the large majority of FE learners (95%) feel that it is a very good (65%) or quite good (30%) idea (Figure 3.2). WBL learners were even stronger in their support, with 71% stating that it is a very good idea.

![Figure 3.2: Learner opinions of learner involvement (FE)](image)

Base: 2000: All learners

3.4 Female learners were also more likely than male learners (68% compared with 62%) to think learner involvement a ‘very good idea’, though overall views were equally balanced. There was little difference in view between age groups. The small group of respondents that described themselves as having learning difficulties (147 total) were slightly more reserved in that a smaller proportion rated learner involvement a ‘very good idea’ (55%), but virtually all still rated it as a good idea overall.
3.5 When asked why it was a good idea, learners identified three main reasons:

- So that everyone’s opinions or views could be heard (21%);
- As students are the ones doing the training, information is based on actual experience (20%); and
- That it makes people aware of what learners want (15%).

Figure 3.3 shows the top five responses to this question.

![Figure 3.3](image_url)

Top 5 reasons why learner involvement is a good idea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyone’s opinions/views/ideas can be heard</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are the ones doing the training.</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information is based on actual experience</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make people aware of what students want</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes you feel part of the process/more involved</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 1893. All learners that thought it is a good idea for colleges and training providers to involve learners in making decisions.

Non-involvement of learners

3.6 The case studies explored reasons why providers may not feel it appropriate to involve learners. The consistent view taken was that in terms of curriculum, development and planning, learners could be involved in all aspects.

3.7 Several providers highlighted that while learners should be involved in most aspects, it is important to understand that there can be a mismatch of expectations and that this had to be managed carefully by providers.

3.8 A number of areas were indicated – by only a few providers – where it was felt that direct learner involvement may be less appropriate:

- Around sensitive or personal issues, for example issues relating to safeguarding vulnerable adults;
- Areas such as staff grievances, disciplinary processes and individuals’ pay and conditions;
- Providers also thought that while learner views would be sought about finances and negotiations with partners, it would be more likely that this would be as consultation rather than direct involvement.
- Learner involvement in disciplinary actions taken against their peers was also noted as one area where learner involvement was inappropriate.
Purpose

3.9 During the qualitative interviews, the purpose of learner involvement activity was explored, focusing on the following areas:

- Improving access to facilities and premises
- Increasing learner motivation
- Developing personalisation of learning
- Helping learners make choices
- Developing citizenship skills
- Helping inform staff CPD needs
- Meeting SAR and/or OFSTED/ALI requirements.

3.10 Examples relating to each of these are discussed below. However, most providers were clear that a holistic approach was considered most important to provide learners with a positive learning experience. Some specifically mentioned the need to focus on those with low esteem, low level qualifications and/or having had a poor learning experience previously. Others did not focus on these learners specifically but provided support mechanisms for them to be involved, such as offering students staff support, for example to accompany them to learner feedback sessions.

3.11 Many of the providers taking part in case study interviews stressed the high turnover of learners, either through short courses or due to the nature of learners supported. This requires the providers to commit considerable effort to informing and convincing the learners of the value of involvement in any of these areas. This is exemplified by the comment of a 6th Form College:

“Student turnover is 50% a year so the college must constantly seek views. Students may not always see the fruit of their input, but the senior leadership is open about the college’s response – what can be done, and by when.”

Improving access to facilities and premises

3.12 This area is one that was acknowledged during the scoping consultations to be a typical characteristic of learner consultation. However it clearly remains an important aspect for discussion with learners, as illustrated by the following case study examples:

- **Involvement in new build design**: One college has involved its students from the outset in the design of its new college building. Focus groups were used to establish what student IT needs might be in the future and this information has been used to help shape the design of the building.

- **Accessibility**: a college noted that it has duties to ensure that provision is accessible and that it has structures for dealing with people with special needs. In this case, learner feedback through discussion identified that learners attending keep fit classes for the 50+ age group needed assistance with hearing. As a result, an audio induction loop was fitted in the classroom.

- **Convenience**: One private provider working with hard to reach learners has undertaken surveys of target learners to establish the best times and locations to run its courses to maximise engagement. Views of learners over the suitability of venues are sought and those that are not liked by learners are not used subsequently.
- **Provision of suitable study areas**: one college noted how students were keen that the learning centre provided space for group work as well as individual study as this reflected the way they were taught. The students were supported to put together and present proposals to the learning centre manager for a group study area. The support provided was to ensure the students presented credible proposals effectively. A 30 day pilot scheme was agreed with the learning centre manager. The pilot was successful and has been continued with the group study area due to be expanded.

- **Dining areas**: a WBL provider with on-site training facilities learned through surveys and direct feedback discussion that improvements were needed to the site’s kitchen and dining areas. As a result, the area is now acknowledged to provide a good area for tutors, managers and learners to interact and communicate informally.

- **Health and safety**: a WBL provider recognised the need for direct feedback from learners on conditions in their host workplaces. As a result of inviting learners to look at the facilities where they worked, feedback combined with assessor/tutor visits led to improved understanding of health and safety conditions in health and social care sector placements.

### Increasing learner motivation

3.13 Providers identified several types of approach that have helped to increase the motivation of learners and encourage involvement. Some are discussed elsewhere in this report, but examples included:

- **Case study ‘exemplars’**: an Adult Education Centre has a publication which focuses on learner stories of how they got involved and how it has changed their lives, increased confidence and/or helped them find employment. The provider considers these case studies to be very motivating for other learners.

- **Focusing on the individual**: a WBL provider has noted that stressing the importance of one-to-one sessions with all individuals at every workplace visit to assessors/tutors has helped to keep learners focused and feeling that their learning experience is being taken seriously. Assessors have been noted to develop strong relationships with their learners.

- **Learners suggesting enrichment**: an FE college invites learners to propose appropriate enrichment activities to be offered; and seeks to involve the college in high profile competitions such as the World Skills Competition so that learners are exposed to and take part in interesting and motivating events. One WBL provider assisted its learners to apply for Challenge Funds to enable them to attend a residential activity. The students successfully secured £4,000 and the provider paid the remainder so that this activity could take place.

### Developing personalisation of learning

3.14 WBL providers in particular stressed the need for an emphasis and focus on one-to-one working with learners to help them feel included. In addition to the examples above, this is felt to help develop a strong sense of personalised learning for the individuals.

3.15 Many WBL providers also stressed the importance of the commercial relationship with employers as a driver to ensuring that learners had their individual and specific needs addressed. For older learners, this commercial dimension often influenced their expectations from the relationship as well. For example, one WBL provider specialising in training older WBL learners noted that the profile of their trainees included:

- An average age of 40, ranging from 20 to 64

- an average ‘stay’ of only a few days as most courses were short and intensive (4,500 learners annually)

- a longest stay of 4 to 6 months, in which time there was 25 hours direct contact, of which 6 hours is face to face
- all trainees were either put forward by their employer or were self employed
- trainees are paid hourly by their employers and treat attendance at training as a ‘work’ activity
- repeat business from employers is over 85%.

3.16 Given this set of conditions, the provider felt the emphasis had to be on the tutor/assessor support so that any issues could be addressed individually and immediately. The provider has a system of contacting 40% of learners/trainees annually by phone to seek feedback on their provision, but feels that there would be little chance of more structured involvement activities working.

Helping learners make choices

3.17 Many examples were provided by respondents as to how learners are consulted about their learning experience at course level. Some providers have taken the holistic approach to involving learners across the organisation. One example described how students have been heavily involved in lobbying and canvassing in their community in support of proposals to build a new, combined campus to be developed in the town centre, given that there has been some opposition to the proposal in the community.

Developing citizenship skills

3.18 Most providers recognised the potential for learners to develop citizenship skills, in particular where they are involved in forums, committees or Student Parliaments. Some have also encouraged direct links with the wider community through volunteering linked to involvement activity. For example, one small Adult Education Centre opened a crèche as a result of learner feedback, but with expectation that the crèche is staffed mainly by volunteers drawn from the learners and is linked to the career paths many want to follow, for example in health and social care.

3.19 An FE provider feels its citizenship agenda is a central part of what it offers. The college ensures its students take part in activities that are as ‘real life’ as possible in order to prepare them for the outside world. This includes the way student elections are run as well as how students put forward proposals and take part in negotiations when organising student activities.

Helping inform staff CPD needs

3.20 The consultations also threw up a range of examples where learners are involved in staff recruitment – including sitting on the interview panel for a new Director. Providers have already noted (in describing benefits) that personnel are motivated by learner involvement. In addition, several providers described how learner participation and feedback helps to inform whether tutors require additional support or training. One FE college summarised their expectation:

“We as a college encourage tutors to view teaching and learning as a process of continuous development so that they are open to student feedback, willing to learn new approaches and undertake necessary training.”
Meeting SAR and/or OFSTED/ALI requirements

3.21 There was common recognition that learner involvement is both an area of interest to external inspectors and a vital source of information for providers in preparing for those inspections and evaluations. All providers recognised that learner involvement would help them to meet SAR and OFSTED/ALI requirements. The following illustrations reflect the approach taken:

“We give students a lot of exposure to OFSTED inspections – they are central to this process at all levels”

“We try to relate everything that we do to what we should be doing: LI will help meet SAR requirements.”

Developing a strategy

3.22 Most providers were aware of the requirement for a Learner Involvement Strategy (65% of all providers). However, FE providers were more likely to be aware of the requirement (Figure 3.4) compared to WBL providers (82% of FE and 55% of WBL). The data also showed that larger providers (over 1,000 learners) and those located in the East Midlands and East of England had a greater awareness of the requirement for a learner involvement strategy. There might be a strong correlation between size and region in the respondents, as almost a third of the providers from the East of England are among the largest providers (over 5,000 learners).

Figure 3.4:

Awareness of requirement by provider type

![Bar chart showing awareness of requirement by provider type](image-url)
3.23 Most providers that involve learners also state that they already have a strategy, with over 70% of those surveyed confirming that they have a formal strategy in place. There was no significant difference between FE and WBL responses. Of those providers without a formal strategy, the majority (72%) are planning to develop one (Figure 3.5), in particular those providers who have had a programme of learner involvement in place for less than a year. However, a small number of providers have no plans to develop a strategy. When asked about their reasons for not developing a formal strategy, some providers responded that there is ‘no need/happy with current process’ and that they ‘have a strategy in place and have no need for a formal one’. While stressing that these are very small numbers of providers, there is still a need to convince some of the potential merits of developing a strategic approach.

3.24 An equal proportion of providers responded ‘yes’ and ‘no’ with respect to whether learners were involved in drafting the strategy. There was a marked difference however, by provider type, with a significant number of FE providers (70%) involving learners in drafting strategy compared with only 35% of WBL providers. Some FE colleges were very clear about how important the involvement of learners was, as exemplified by the following:

   “Learners are involved from the bottom up and what they say is taken into account in our 3 year business plan. The business plan also goes to the Student Parliament to be discussed.”

3.25 Some providers also reported difficulties with drafting a Learner Involvement Strategy (46% of FE and 41% of WBL). For instance, 96 providers had experienced difficulty in getting learners involved or committed to the programme. The largest providers (over 5,000 learners) made up the majority of this group. Other difficulties identified were ‘employers not being willing to release staff for training’; ‘the practicalities of carrying out surveys and getting responses’; ‘getting students to value and understand what we are doing’ and ‘reluctance from staff/persuading staff it was a worthwhile thing to do’. Not surprisingly, those providers with a programme of learner involvement in place for less than a year were more likely to face difficulties getting learners to become involved and to commit to their programme. This was also the case for those providers who had the programme only ‘partly in place’ compared with those who had their programme of learner involvement ‘fully in place’.

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**Figure 3.5:**

Providers that are planning to develop a strategy

- 32% Planning to develop strategy
- 52% Already have a strategy
- 16% No plans to develop strategy
- 16% Don’t know

Base: 44: those providers currently without a programme of learner involvement.
3.26 The majority of those providers that do not have a programme of learner involvement or a formal learner strategy are planning to put one in place within the next 12 months (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6:
Predicted timescales for introducing a programme/strategy

![Predicted timescales for introducing a programme/strategy](chart)

*Base: 186: All providers without a formal learner involvement strategy in place currently but are planning to develop one*

**Implementation of a learner involvement strategy**

3.27 Providers were less able to discuss the specific experience or issues associated with implementing a learner involvement strategy. Most saw the development of the strategy as an enhancement or continuation of their existing programme of learner involvement activity and consequently as an evolution of management and staff practices.

3.28 In broad terms, two approaches have emerged to implementation, which reflect how the learner involvement strategy is positioned among the range of policies and procedures in the organisation.

3.29 One group of providers has chosen to develop a substantial learner involvement strategy with considerable detail of the different elements of learner involvement activity, goals and responsibilities included (see example at 3.34 below). These tend to be the larger providers and FE Colleges in particular. Although linked to other policies and procedures, these strategies are ‘stand alone’ in nature.

3.30 Other providers have elected to develop a briefer learner involvement strategy that is more interdependent with other policies such as Quality Assurance and Customer Service. These strategies simply describe key objectives and measures in a short document that can be reviewed by management (and learners); and some have an action plan attached. In particular, WBL and smaller ACDL providers seem to have adopted this approach although there were also examples from smaller FE Colleges.
3.31 There were also examples of new systems and procedures that had been developed. Most providers taking part in the case studies described these as amendments or development to existing activities to incorporate the Learner Involvement Strategy:

“it helped us to develop a centralised system and reinforced what we had in place already.”

“it has been more a continuation and development of what we were doing...the strategy has made us look at what we have as a framework and how we can build on this”.

“it is a less ad hoc approach. The strategy has pulled all our learner involvement activity together”.

3.32 Similarly, most providers felt that extra responsibilities had been absorbed into existing staff roles and duties such as quality assurance, customer service and student liaison.

Where learner involvement ‘sits’

3.33 There is clearly a range of different approaches that are taken to determining responsibility for learner involvement in the providers’ management structures. Key variables are obvious: the size and nature of provision. The largest FE colleges and adult education services based in local authorities have large and complex management systems, whereas commercial WBL providers vary from large corporate structures to very small private businesses. There are also a considerable number of voluntary/community based organisations, usually governed by a voluntary board or committee.

3.34 Consequently, there was no consistent pattern to where learner involvement currently sits. There were, however, several examples of how the various types of provider organisation have approached this. The following illustrations show examples of these approaches:

- **Local authority Continuing Education Service:** “The philosophy of the service is that all personnel have an overall responsibility to incorporate learner involvement. Responsibility lies primarily with the Head of Service from the strategic/overview perspective; and two Service Managers, one of whom has responsibility for collection and analysis of learner feedback. Implications of analysis are discussed in SMT (senior management team) meetings.”

- **Large FE College:** “Responsibility sits with the two Vice Principals in the college, the Quality Team and the Student Liaison Team. The Student Liaison Coordinator identifies the key requirements and follows this through. We are now developing calendars of events for the Boards of Study so that the system which was already in place before our learner involvement strategy can become more coherent, bearing in mind that we have three sites.”

- **Smaller FE College:** “The Student Support Manager took up post in April 2007 and from there learner involvement has become more strategic, comprehensive and joined up. We consulted with the Student Council, staff and college managers and produced a strategy and an action plan. A Learner Involvement Working Group has been introduced to monitor and update the Action Plan. Attendees include the college’s assistant directors, the executive director for learning, the quality manager, four students, course tutors and student support advisors. The Action Plan has three main elements: ‘involving learners individually’; ‘involving learners collectively’; and ‘involving the whole organisation’. Learner Voice groups were also set up.”
Commercial WBL provider: “The Chief Executive. The SMT are committed to LI. Learner Involvement is not linked directly to our business plan. There isn’t an LI ‘lead’ in place although we’d consider putting a system in place for a rolling LI ‘champion’, e.g. tutors take it on and rotate the role every six months or annually.”

Small commercial WBL provider: “With me as Director. Day to day, it would have to be with the three regional assessors. But we only meet as a full team together – face to face – about three times a year and the agenda is always full. We drafted our strategy last December but don’t meet again until May, when it’s on the agenda. We’ll have a plan of activity in place for the autumn.”

Medium commercial WBL provider: “The Finance Director. Previously, learner involvement was the responsibility of the Quality Director, but because we make a direct link between learner involvement activity and retention rates, and therefore to our income, we transferred responsibility to the Finance Director”.

Barriers and resource implications

Barriers

3.35 Those providers that did not have a programme of learner involvement or a formal learner involvement strategy in place but were planning to develop one were asked about anticipated barriers and difficulties in developing their strategy. Based on their responses, the two most commonly anticipated barriers to developing a formal learning strategy were ‘difficulties getting learners involved or committed to the programme’ and ‘time constraints’. It would appear that persuading learners to get involved in the programme – especially 16-18 year old learners – is a barrier at both the strategy development and implementation stages, as seen in the difficulties identified by those providers that already have a strategy in place.

3.36 Examples of time barriers emerged during the case studies. One related to the wider demands on large public sector organisations that have to meet obligations to their public duty. An adult education team described their situation:

“Our Learner Involvement activity has grown organically. We have not yet made headway in launching a formal LI strategy although we do have a mission statement for the service which demonstrates our focus on the learner. The strategy would need to be put through an Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment before it can be agreed and finalised with the Council. We expect this to take until July.”

3.37 Another provider described the lead times involved:

“Our teaching and learning policy would provide the template for a Learner Involvement Strategy. We just need the time to develop the strategy and have it formally agreed. We hope to complete this for the start of the next academic year.”

3.38 Other providers noted the challenge in finding management time to “do justice to LI” and to “rolling it out in a managed and consistent way that isn’t patchy – and so that specific groups are not missed”.

strategy development and approaches
3.39 Other providers also noted the need to be able to have “time and energy” to provide the support that learners would require to be fully engaged. Some also commented that this would require them to achieve an acceptable timeliness of response in terms of actions: “overcoming frustrations in terms of getting answers to students where not all members of staff are forthcoming”.

Learner perspective

3.40 In order to determine barriers to learner involvement as experienced by learners, those that had not previously been involved (some 11% of total respondents) were asked to identify what had preventing them from doing so. No single barrier was obviously attributable as a cause of non-involvement.

3.41 Within the FE sample, the most common barriers are learners being ‘too busy’ (21%) and ‘the provider not asking them to be involved’ (19%). The latter is also the most widespread barrier for WBL learners, together with learners ‘not being interested’ (14%). The graphs below (Figures 3.7 and 3.8) show the different responses that were given by the two groups. Differences typically relate to the ranking of the barriers, with the exception of one which was reported by FE learners: ‘the provider not helping learners to be involved’; which was replaced by ‘unsuitable location of activities’ by WBL learners.

Figure 3.7:

Barriers to involvement (FE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too busy</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider did not ask</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuitable timing of activities</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not interested</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The provider doesn’t help learners to do this</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family commitments</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not for people like me</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 200: All studying at FE provider who choose not to get involved even though their provider involves learners
3.42 In addition to the barriers listed in the graphs, a further 10% of the learners that haven’t been involved did not know what has prevented them from doing so. 10% also identified ‘other’ barriers. These barriers included ‘language barriers’, ‘not knowing other people that are involved’, ‘being new to the institution’ and ‘only attending the college part-time / not being there enough’.

3.43 However, the overall number citing barriers is small. Encouragingly, learners generally feel that their views are sought at least ‘some of the time’ (77%) and in these instances the majority (82%) also feel that the provider responds to their views at least ‘some of the time’.

Resource implications

3.44 Providers taking part in the case study interviews were also asked to consider particular resource implications that would limit or be incurred through learner involvement activity. Responses fell into three groups:

3.45 The first was the potential additional staff costs of managing an enhanced learner involvement programme. Several providers felt that they would be likely to need additional staff, especially if substantial additional activity was needed.

3.46 A second group that had developed a robust learner involvement programme had not found this to be necessary. For example, one small ACDL provider with only two administrative staff and seven part-time tutors has developed their activity incrementally and has a fully embedded philosophy of involvement, extending to learners joining the volunteer management committee. This provider has had a regular feedback and survey process in place for seven years and activities are shared across all the staff team. These providers did recognise that there were additional ‘start up’ demands on staff time and priorities, as discussed above, but did not find that overall personnel levels needed to increase substantially. One large FE provider has long had a programme of learner involvement activity. The introduction of the strategy has not therefore generated new activity requiring new staff, although it did provide the opportunity to review and reflect to see how improvements could be made.
Third, some providers had created new positions and/or specified learner involvement as a key part of a senior personnel job description. These tended to be larger providers who had sufficient scale to balance this extra cost against wider activity. The emphasis was still on embedding learner involvement in ongoing activity and job roles, as described by one provider: “extra responsibilities have been assumed into day to day activities, although it does take time to develop a collective and centralised approach. There is a stronger quality feel to our learner involvement activity now”.

One area where several providers noted that extra costs had been incurred was in generating and managing the data and systems needed to monitor and report learner involvement activity. Commonly, this had involved commissioning external contractors to develop and maintain databases and on-line survey systems. However, providers had also adopted different approaches to this task. Several had relied on ongoing external support, while others had used this support to set up systems and then subsumed the activity into existing job roles once it was established. Overall, providers did feel that there was a clear resource requirement for dealing with survey and feedback data.

Some smaller providers mentioned the costs associated with printing surveys and ‘you said, we did’ posters. One WBL provider estimated printing and materials costs at around £2,000 per year.

Use of the Strategy Handbook

Less than half (47%) of those providers that had a learner involvement strategy in place had made use of the handbook while refreshing or preparing their learner involvement strategy. Further, FE providers were more likely to have used the handbook (67%) compared to 35% of WBL providers; and 85% of large FE providers (5,000 or more learners) had used the handbook. The handbook was much more likely to have been used by providers that had had a programme of learner involvement in place for less than a year (75%) – in fact, this would suggest that use of the handbook had been central to developing their programme. In contrast, most small and medium sized providers (50 to 999 learners) tended not to use the handbook in preparing or refreshing their Learner Involvement Strategy. This is discussed further below.

Of those providers that had used the handbook (335), the majority (over 90%) found it helpful or very helpful (Figure 3.9). A greater proportion of FE handbook users found it ‘very helpful’ compared with WBL users (44% and 31% respectively). 97% of the group that had only introduced learner involvement programmes in the past year reported finding the handbook had been helpful.

Two thirds of providers were aware of the requirement to have a learner involvement strategy. More than half of those providers who were aware of the requirement had since changed their approach to learner involvement. Again, the smallest providers did not change their approach to learner involvement following the requirement, possibly because they were also the group that were least likely to be aware of the requirement and also to use the handbook. Interestingly, those providers that had their programme of learner involvement in place for over a year were least inclined to change their approach to learner involvement following the requirement. This may have been the case because they already had a formal learner strategy in place and hence were happy with their existing programme.
Providers taking part in case studies also had mixed views on the value of the handbook. In particular, larger FE colleges and local authority ACDL providers had positive views, while WBL providers were less convinced and some other providers felt that the handbook did not help them understand how to address their particular situation. The following comments illustrate these points:

- **Large ACDL provider:** “The handbook gives meaning to what learner involvement should be about – not just a process, not just about ILPs. Our strategy followed it as a means to determine how the design of the service should change in order to deliver a programme that better meets learner needs”.

- **Large FE College:** “We looked at the LIS Handbook and identified what we were doing. We have continued what was working and amended existing activities to incorporate them in the strategy. We used the handbook to identify any gaps in what we were doing. Developing the strategy helped us to develop a centralised system and reinforced what we had in place already”.

- **Large FE College:** “the handbook is well structured, but there could be more on the involvement of learners in the process of reviewing the Strategy itself – we’ve chosen to ask the Learner Voice Influence Group to be involved”.

- **Large FE College:** “The handbook is almost an irrelevance. We’ve been doing this for years and it was a case of bringing it all into one document. The main benefit of putting the strategy together was that it was an opportunity to review and refine, it did focus our minds a bit.”

- **WBL provider:** “this is not seen as offering detailed guidance for WBL or understanding of the issues: it doesn’t address or engage employers at all. For example, ‘one man bands’ plan only a couple of weeks ahead, while large companies tend to limit the apprentices skills experience to particular tasks – and none want to pay for training”.

- **Rural 6th form college:** “the handbook is an introduction only – it is not a specialist guide either by sector or for different types of provider. We need varied examples of good practice. Matching similar types of environment and intake also works well for sharing good practice”.

- **Small ACDL provider:** “the handbook needs to have a toolkit – where do we start?”

Base: 335: All providers with a formal learner involvement strategy in place and have referred to the “Developing a Learner Involvement Handbook”
Voluntary sector ACDL provider: “the handbook is very comprehensive; we used it to develop our draft strategy. But we’d be very keen to see examples of LI strategies from other providers – best practice – to help us to strengthen our own strategy”.

Specialist provider for people with physical and/or learning difficulties: “the handbook has been referred to but did not provide specific practical guidance that could be directly applied to the College’s situation: learners did not find the handbook accessible, which is a pity since they were involved in developing the strategy”.

3.54 One large FE provider with a well developed learner involvement strategy had made use of the Handbook extensively, though with some reservations about its value for those providers with good experience of learner involvement. Although a single comment, it does provide insight for possible improvement:

“the Handbook was a bit over mechanistic and didn’t enable us to work out the process we should use, for example in taking stock of the current situation and setting objectives for where we wanted to be in the future. We developed a strategy more tailored to our own needs and our process included using an ‘expert group’ to go back to square one and develop the strategy”

3.55 Another FE provider offered the main headings of their strategy as an example for structuring an approach: the strategy is based on a framework of 5 key strands, each with a series of defined success measures, with accountable actions and milestones. The strands are:

- **Telling us what you think**: this strand includes establishing class representatives, feedback notice boards, a student disability forum and a student intranet;
- **Respect for All**: this strand includes involvement of learners in reviewing the college’s code of conduct and disciplinary procedures to encourage consistent standards of behaviour; and developing a promotional campaign to reinforce the college culture and value for respect;
- **Creating a dynamic student union**: this strand supports a review of arrangements for supporting the college’s student union, including consideration of paying union officials and improving facilities for students;
- **Engaging students in college life and in making decisions**: this strand provides a range of actions to engage students in the management of the college, including election of two student governors, review of staff recruitment and selection procedures to involve students; and creation of a student parliament to be run by the students union;
- **Building a better college and a better community**: this strand includes provisions to review the enrichment curriculum of the college, to engage learners in community activities and to engage learners in evaluating the quality of teaching and learning by training a team of learners to conduct lesson observations. It also sets an objective of embedding the development of employability skills into all courses for young people.

3.56 These mixed views on the value of the handbook would suggest that while many value the approach and content, it has not been able to meet the needs – and encourage – others to develop their strategic approach. In particular it appears that WBL providers do not feel that the handbook reflects their situation.
Strategy review

3.57 One college noted its plans to review its strategy on an annual basis. The focus of the review will be whether the college has undertaken the activities it proposed within its strategy and whether these have worked. Evidence will draw on the student surveys undertaken throughout the year and will be undertaken by a Learner Involvement Committee, which students will sit on.

SWOT analysis

3.58 The case study interviews provided an opportunity to undertake a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) with several providers about the characteristics of developing a learner involvement strategy. Their comments are summarised in Table 3.1 below.

3.59 On balance, providers saw the weaknesses and threats very much in terms of pragmatic issues that placed stresses on their organisations' capacity or capability to respond, whereas they were willing to think on a wider scale in terms of the benefits and opportunities a learner involvement strategy could bring. No fundamental, environmental issues were raised and it is likely that continued support and sharing of good practice could help overcome the perceived weaknesses.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing dialogue between trainers and learners is a firm foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having multiple methods of opportunity for feedback and being involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating our attitude to inclusivity and transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The atmosphere created enables and makes learners feel comfortable with being involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes the ethos of the organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The rapport and ethos of consistent support and encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility in responding to learners needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision can evolve as opportunities present</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weaknesses:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scale of the organisation can limit what you do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LI is not a priority for funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LI is the kind of activity that is at risk when you have no guaranteed continuity of funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The competition: the scale and reach of larger providers to absorb problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no guarantee with learners: they change and involvement varies!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement strategy is not well defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measuring cause and effect well enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t recognise the importance of training staff at an early enough stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(FE) needed to recognise that young people on WBL programmes and adult learners would need different processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with severe or profound learning difficulties are currently under-represented within LI processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much focus on a rigid strategy may risk losing the informal, personalised relationships that bring our repeat business</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being good at involvement helps develop empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing multiple methods and levels of opportunity for learners to be involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We will be helped by continued strong performance in OFSTED etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing good staff continuity of approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiatives may increase community engagement and provide additional focus for learner involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training a volunteer to expand capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff will target energy where it needs to go</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threats:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being funding driven and exposed to contract driven cycles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline if learners decide not to be involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainers’ skills need regular updating if quality of provision is to be maintained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition with other providers to be the best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Framework for Excellence requires a learner survey of a particular kind – is this survey overkill?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having raised expectations and aspirations, can we meet them with such a lean service?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying learner champions has proved impossible so far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The local Advocacy Service, which trained the learner advocates, has lost its funding while advocacy services in the local community are being reorganised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differentiating WBL and FE approaches

3.60 A general observation from the survey responses and the case studies is that there is a difference in the underpinning approach to learner involvement between WBL and FE providers. This is based on two drivers:

- WBL learners are normally based in their workplaces rather than a central location. These workplaces are often very geographically dispersed, and often there are only small numbers of learners based in any given workplace. The general approach to providing support is therefore based on one to one contact through tutors and assessors and is tailored to the individual circumstances of the learner. Activity to involve and respond to learners’ needs is driven by this one to one relationship;

- WBL providers are also very conscious of their relationship with the employers with whom the learners are based. This creates a tri-lateral relationship where learner, employer and provider have to engage and resolve learning issues positively. The long term relationship tends to be between the employer and the provider, which drives the commercial relationship in which training is provided. For the provider, this reinforces the link of learner involvement – and any strategy – to ‘commercial’ customer service and quality assurance processes.

3.61 This difference in approach to the overall support for learners would appear also to be reflected in how WBL learners report on the opportunities and extent to which they are involved, and their satisfaction with their experience. These aspects are discussed later in the report.

3.62 This may also help to explain some of the differences in use – and value – of the Handbook.

Summary

3.63 Both providers and learners are positive about the value of learner involvement. The large majority of learners thought that learner involvement was a ‘very good’ or ‘quite a good’ idea (there was little gender or age bias). The learners perceived that having their views heard and making people aware of their needs was important. Providers were consistent in their understanding of learner involvement as including learners as part of the fabric and decision making structures of the organisation. A significant majority of all providers report having some form of learner involvement programme in place and most also consider that they have some form of strategy. With few exceptions, those that don’t intend to put one in place within the next 12 months and in only a few cases was learner involvement considered inappropriate. However, it is not clear how well formed many of these strategies are and the case study visits indicated that many are still developing their approach even though some form of basic strategy has been written. Even so, high levels of commitment and intent were evident. This was illustrated by the number of practical measures that were identified within the case studies, for instance in improving facilities and developing teaching and staff skills.

3.64 Levels of awareness of the requirement to develop a learner involvement strategy were higher amongst FE providers compared to WBL. Our recommendations later suggest that communicating the benefits of learner involvement will help to enhance awareness – it would appear that this is more urgent for WBL providers.
3.65 Barriers and resource implications relate mainly to the time and staff demands required to put a learner involvement strategy in place and to convince learners that this is worthwhile. Most providers taking part in the case studies have not increased staff levels and have reassigned duties to help deliver their programmes. It also appears that there is considerable variation in approach to where responsibility for learner involvement sits within provider organisations, partly due to the range of sizes and resources available. However some more explicit resource implications were identified, in particular to develop and manage systems for surveys and data collection to support learner involvement. Looking at the SWOT analysis, it would seem that there are some clear benefits from learner involvement activity – the key challenges appear to be to achieve consistency and resourcing.

3.66 There appears to be a difference in underpinning approach between WBL and FE providers, with WBL dependent on the one to one relationship with learners and much more conscious of the role and attitude of the employer. The use of the strategy handbook was more prevalent amongst FE providers, though overall those that had used it had found it generally to be helpful. However, there is overall consensus that the handbook could be refreshed to include more practical examples and to be more applicable to WBL providers’ situation.
Section 4
Participation mechanisms
Provider perspective: approaches and effectiveness

Mechanisms in use

4.1 Providers responding to the telephone survey identified several participation mechanisms that were used to involve learners - a combination of active and passive methods. The two most common mechanisms reported were ‘using surveys and questionnaires to get feedback’ and ‘learners acting as mentors or offering peer support’. In contrast, the two least popular mechanisms that were common across all provider types were ‘site/learning area councils’ and ‘establishing a learner affairs committee’.

4.2 In general, FE providers reported greater use of all participation mechanisms relative to their WBL counterparts. The largest FE providers (over 5,000 learners) were also more likely to use a wider range of participation mechanisms to encourage learner involvement. For instance, they reported strong use of learner governors, learner conferences, learner parliament/forums and course representatives.

4.3 Table 4.1 below shows the range of involvement mechanisms described by the providers taking part in the case study interviews. They match closely the broad descriptions used in the telephone survey. Some interesting additional examples are highlighted in bold.

4.4 Providers recognise the importance of communicating outcomes with learners as it shows that they are being listened to. Even where learners’ proposals could not be supported by the provider it was felt important to explain the reasons why.

4.5 Providers described a wide range of methods of communicating the outcomes of learner involvement to their learners. FE and ACDL providers consistently used newsletters, websites and e-forums; learner forums and ‘you said – we did’ posters/notice boards. WBL providers also used newsletters; e-forums etc, but placed much more emphasis on the importance of 1 to 1 contact given the dispersed locations of their learners and the often very specific nature of their issues. This was illustrated by one provider:

“We can be very responsive through our 1 to 1 approach: learners can see changes made for the better shortly after the visits, which reinforces to them that what they say will be taken seriously”.
Table 4.1: Involvement activities used by case study providers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities consistent with survey responses</th>
<th>Activities that are additional to survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Learner surveys – start and end of course</td>
<td>• Involved in recruitment and selection of staff – employment panels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Newsletter (including learner contributions)</td>
<td>• Learner logs – reflective practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Observing learning and teaching</td>
<td>• On-line learner panel responding to a weekly question thrown up by survey/research (example that for younger learners, only 8% attend courses to meet people, whereas for over 30’s around 80% attend course to meet people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Involvement in SMT/management committee</td>
<td>• Learner ‘target boards’ whereby learners are asked to place a pin on an archery style target to reflect their satisfaction levels with their course (bullseye reflects ‘very satisfied’ with the outer targets reflecting less satisfied)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Curriculum forums</td>
<td>• Use of learners in psychology classes working with tutor to improve questionnaire design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Feedback on facilities and equipment</td>
<td>• Research budget to find out what should be changed if priority groups are to be engaged more effectively (examples were 19-30 age group and those with mental health and/or living skills issues) – seeking to find out how to design delivery to overcome barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Feedback on curriculum content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Users Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1 to 1 tutor sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Feedback postcards: ‘first impressions’ at beginning of course; ‘how was it for you?’ at end</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• On-line questionnaires – seen by learners as more private and secure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus groups with tutors not present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.6 One large FE provider noted this was an area for improvement and felt a new on-line system as part of the college intranet could well be the solution to communicating more effectively with a large, and sometimes dispersed student body.
Figure 4.1 provides an illustration of the most common mechanisms reported by FE and WBL providers using FE providers as a base. The two most common mechanisms were reported across all providers (surveys/questionnaires and ‘learners acting as mentors or offering peer support’). In addition to these, FE providers also identified ‘learners acting as ambassadors of involvement’; ‘learner representatives’ and ‘communicating through regular newsletters’ among their top six participation mechanisms. FE providers that had a formal Learner Involvement Strategy in place were also more likely to use student unions, course representatives, learner governors and learner parliaments as a means of encouraging learner involvement.

**Figure 4.1:**

**Top 6 mechanisms used to encourage learner involvement (FE)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using surveys and questionnaires to get feedback</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners acting as mentors or offering peer support</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners acting as ambassadors of involvement</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner representatives</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating through regular newsletters</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course representatives</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 370: All FE providers
4.8 WBL providers felt that the most effective mechanisms were: ‘using surveys and questionnaires to get feedback’; ‘learners acting as mentors or offering peer support’ and ‘learner forums’ (Figure 4.2). On the other hand, their three least effective mechanisms were ‘learner board members’, ‘site councils’ and ‘learner affairs committee’. Further, larger WBL providers (500 to 999 and 1,000 to 4,999 learners) were more likely to find learner representatives and learner forums as effective methods for encouraging learner involvement.

Figure 4.2:
Top 6 mechanisms seen as being most effective in encouraging learner involvement (WBL)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learners acting as mentors or offering peer support</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using surveys and questionnaires to get feedback</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner forum</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners acting as ambassadors of involvement</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating through regular newsletters</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote e-forums and websites to encourage discussion</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 630: All WBL providers who mentioned at least one strategy they would use to encourage learner involvement.

4.9 During the case study visits, providers were asked whether learners were involved individually and/or collectively. In most cases a combination of approaches is used and providers indicated the benefits of each.

4.10 In terms of collective mechanisms, the advantages were that common issues can be identified and that valuable qualitative information can be gathered from in-depth debate with learners. Some felt that a group situation allowed learners to achieve a balance and give more rounded information: “what one learner argues, another learner might defend from a different perspective”. It was also noted that learners can feel more powerful at a group level – and feel safer by reducing isolation.

4.11 There were also benefits from the individual approach; in terms of the scope for learners to raise personal issues, allowing for disclosure that may require differentiation or an individual response, as well as when learners are less confident. It was noted that learners need to have a good relationship with tutors and support staff for this to happen.

4.12 An important point was made by more than one FE College regarding the importance of having good Student Union engagement in helping to facilitate many of the channels of learner involvement. The Unions have undertaken a range of functions from canvassing student opinions, organising focus groups and disseminating information to students. It has been through Student Unions and Student Liaison Officers working together that much of the learner involvement activity has been delivered.
The effectiveness of approaches

4.13 Some examples were provided of approaches that providers felt had not worked well. Four examples follow that illustrate the broad issues raised:

- **Ensuring participation on all committees:** Some providers noted that an expectation to secure learner involvement on all committees can be difficult to achieve; examples where ‘recruitment’ had proven difficult included equality and diversity groups and health and safety groups.

- **Timing:** Learner forums held for learners taking part in evening sessions do not tend to get high participation rates – “learners who study in the evenings tend to have most pressure on their time”.

- **Achieving full coverage:** WBL providers in particular noted the difficulty in arranging for full coverage: “a learner forum has to cover 150 learners across 3 sites, 3 craft areas and 3 years – I’m not sure how to get this to work.”

- **Ensuring representation across course types:** One college noted it had traditionally been its A-level students that had tended to become engaged, with vocational and lower level learners under-represented. Tutors have encouraged these under-represented groups to be engaged and the profile is now more evenly balanced.

- **Isolation:** ACDL provider: “individual trustee representatives were tried and did not work well as learners felt too isolated. A buddy system would have helped to overcome this although it was not introduced.”

4.14 Conversely, providers were also able to illustrate characteristics and approaches that had worked well. In particular these related to consistent and thorough briefing and communication with learners, described by one provider as “selling the idea to the learner”. These characteristics are:

- Providing thorough induction for learners including the opportunity and expectation that they will be involved and explaining the ethos of the provider;

- Explaining processes and outcomes fully to ensure learners understand how they can make a difference;

- Briefing face to face on becoming involved;

- Talking with learners informally as well as in formal situations;

- One provider reported having tied learner involvement activity to a module in entry level learners’ course programme to make the link with their teaching and learning experience (City and Guilds 3071, Unit 300/301: Me and My Learning, Making myself Understood);

- Including participation in college life as a key consideration in the award of a gold ‘college diploma’ (the silver diploma is based on academic criteria), awarded at the end of year awards ceremony.
Learner perspective: awareness and involvement

4.15 In the telephone survey, the learners recognised a range of methods that are used to involve them. Figure 4.3 below shows the most frequent responses for FE learners. Both FE and WBL learners report ‘discussions with staff’ and ‘surveys about their course and provider’ as the main mechanisms in use. Further to this, at least half of the learners had personally been involved through these methods. Additional methods such as ‘learner and course representatives’ and ‘student/learner committees’ had comparatively smaller proportions of learners reporting direct involvement. This is expected given the nature of the methods, which aim to select or elect representatives to act on behalf of the student population.

4.16 Learners taking part in discussions in the case study visits broadly reinforced their awareness and involvement in the methods described above. In addition, they recognised the benefit of direct discussion as well as more passive methods such as surveys. Both WBL and FE based learners described how 1 to 1 discussion and tutorials helped them feel supported. Several learners noted that they thought that their tutors and support staff were good at listening to their issues and needs. One learner recounted an example of how positive listening/awareness by the tutor had helped a fellow learner:

“a young man (name withheld), referred with his aide worker, opened up enough to a volunteer to say that the reason that he never went back a second time to any class was that he didn’t like to sit facing the door because people coming in would always look at him – this was new information even to his aide. He now continues to attend but doesn’t have to sit facing the door.” (FE Learner)

4.17 A group of WBL learners (1st year apprentices) confirmed the providers’ assertion of ongoing dialogue between trainees, trainers, assessors and support staff. They had noted the range of teaching and flexibility to spend more time on aspects they found (individually) more complicated. They were impressed with the efficient and effective way that their Key Skills activities were improved over the space of just a week and how what they did helped them to bond as a group. Overall they were clear that this motivates them to continue.
### Figure 4.3:

#### Mechanisms for learner involvement (FE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Methods used by providers</th>
<th>Methods which students have been involved in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having discussions with staff</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being asked to complete surveys about the course</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being asked to complete surveys about the college</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having learner representatives</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having course representatives</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a student/learner committee</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being invited to learner discussion groups to give feedback</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having representative on a committee that staff also sit on</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having representation on the board of governors</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: Methods used by providers: 1800 All FE providers, Methods which students have been involved in: 1649 All learners studying at a FE provider that involves learners

4.18 Learners in the case study visits that had decided to become directly involved reported that they had found it easy to do so since they were encouraged by their provider. One learner commented that because she had spent a long time out of education she was less confident, but that being surrounded by supportive staff had given her confidence to be involved. Interestingly, learners felt that specific training for the roles they had taken on was less important than support: “help in building confidence so that all of us feel more comfortable in making a contribution”. Other learners did explain that they felt there was a lot to learn having taken on the more demanding roles and the need for time to develop their understanding of the organisational processes involved.

4.19 These learners were generally unable to quantify how much of their time was taken up by ‘involvement activities’ – they appeared to think of it as part of their learning experience and one learner described it as “a nice distraction from the work aspect of studying”. In many cases the provider has helped make specific arrangements to enable them to be involved – an example was one provider arranging a taxi to take a student governor home due to the timing of governors’ meetings.
4.20 Table 4.2 summarises examples provided by learners about where their contribution had made a difference to how the provider operates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing teaching and learning</th>
<th>Influencing learning environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Learners complained about distracting and disruptive behaviour during classes. This was raised as an issue by the Student Council with the Boards of Study and has now been actioned.</td>
<td>• Learners identified that a lot of paper was being wasted in meetings and lessons. The Board of Study requested recycling bins, which are now placed in every room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Issues were raised through both surveys and in the Student Parliament in relation to teaching and learning styles. For example, some learners felt there was too much focus on use of technologies in lessons when they prefer a more interactive/person based approach. Staff were able to change the balance of tutorials, focus groups and 1 to 1 sessions to address this.</td>
<td>• Discussion about car parking issues has led to exploration of car sharing schemes and improving the shuttle bus system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learner representatives approached the senior tutor in a science department about issues with the teaching style of a chemistry tutor whose approach was considered “too fast and too technical”. As a result, the tutor changed approach, ensuring that what was being discussed was understood.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Catering learners requested interim hand-in dates so that their work could be reviewed and improved before final deadlines. As a result, overall scores improved and this is now done for all catering courses.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.21 It is important to note that the learners stressed that the seemingly small issues can make a big difference to their experience. Learners described that they were often less interested in the overall management of the provider but liked to be involved in the ‘hands on’ aspects. When asked about the overall effect of learner involvement, these learners shared similar views; the key benefits put forward were:

- A calm atmosphere;
- Being treated with respect, like adults;
- Learners responsible for their own learning;
- More team working between students through being involved;
- More confidence and more assertive.

4.22 The learners taking part in case studies were also asked if their experience of being involved would influence their decision about where they would go if they were to undertake further study. The consensus was that it would not necessarily directly influence choices, but that if they had to pick between a provider that had more opportunities for involvement and one that had less, they would definitely prefer the former. One learner summarised: “I most certainly feel more ambitious now. I would definitely prefer to continue learning in this kind of environment – the tutors and learners are exceptional here.”
4.23 Another group of learners noted how a previous provider had taken little interest in their learning and as a result they had become de-motivated and left to attend another provider that they had heard good reports of from their peers. One learner noted: “Their attitude was that they (at previous provider) got paid whether we achieved or not. Here we’re listened to and you know they want us to succeed.”

Using learner involvement data

Design

4.24 We have noted above that several providers used external contractors to help the design and management of data and survey systems and one example (see Table 4.1 above) where psychology tutors and learners helped redesign survey tools, an approach which led to a 74% response rate for these surveys.

4.25 Providers consistently noted the need for careful consideration of what information would be required and its end purpose. The common view was the purpose ‘to find out areas where overall improvement was required and which aspects require internal improvement’. Some providers noted the need to remain competitive in relation to other providers.

4.26 Therefore the use of surveys with scaled responses as well as qualitative comments was important, both to quantify issues and to allow for trends to be monitored. Consistent information would be required if learner involvement activity was to be included in assessments such as the SAR. Some providers also noted the opportunity to use data for testimonials and marketing purposes.

4.27 It was also noted that surveys can only provide so much information. While they are useful, for example in assessing satisfaction with course provision and delivery (data which is used in staff appraisals), to get a better understanding of student views then focus groups were a valuable addition.

Management

4.28 For the smaller providers, the task of collecting and analysing data falls on the core team of administrative/management staff and the tutors/assessors. Larger providers generally assign responsibility to their Quality Teams, with standardised monitoring and review procedures.

Use of data

4.29 Analysis is normally fed into SMT and other forums, depending on the size and structure of the provider, as well as to any learner forums, newsletters etc. The larger providers use the Quality Teams or other departments responsible to conduct analysis and produce reports for the various user groups and management committees.

4.30 Reports are made available through media such as college extranet sites, student councils and forums and through course and learner representatives to provide feedback. Providers noted that data on learner involvement and learner satisfaction informs:

- Provider self-assessment processes;
- Teaching and learning strategies;
- The outcome of staff appraisals;
- Staff CPD;
- Marketing strategies such as prospectus;
- ‘You said, we did’ notices;
- Learner panels and forums;
- Organisation planning processes.
Summary

4.31 FE and WBL providers reported use of a broadly similar range of mechanisms, but FE providers (most notably the largest providers) tended to make more use of collective arrangements than WBL providers, which placed more emphasis on 1 to 1 relationships with learners. Both types of organisation use overarching communication tools such as learner newsletters, e-forums and websites to disseminate information. Both types of providers had made use of collective and individual mechanisms and had found merits in both of these broad approaches. They made use of ‘passive’ techniques such as surveys, questionnaires and newsletters as well as more active engagement measures, through for instance mentoring, ambassadors and learner representatives.

4.32 In particular, WBL providers found less scope for introducing collective forums given the dispersed locations of their learners and were often unsure of how they could make these arrangements work, given both this dispersion and the relative lack of engagement of employers.

4.33 Providers consistently identified that the arrangements that work well are underpinned with thorough and consistent briefing and support for learners, from induction to the ethos of the organisation through to individual briefings for those offering to take part in active involvement mechanisms.

4.34 Learners also reflected awareness and involvement in similar mechanisms, most frequently mentioning discussions with staff as well as the use of surveys. Learners could also recognise where their contribution had had some effect and they had been able to observe changes. Some examples of changes effected are illustrated at Table 4.2. Learners also indicated a general preference to be involved in ‘hands on’ issues and stressed that the smaller issues were important as they affected the short term experiences of learners. Some providers also noted that attracting learners to some committees and forums proved difficult – whether due to the technical knowledge needed, levels of interest or timing of sessions.

4.35 Providers have recognised the need for the collection and analysis of consistent data to inform a variety of purposes across the organisation, from providing feedback and responses to their learners, through informing management decisions to external assessment and reporting. In smaller organisations of all types, this places an additional burden on administrative and teaching staff. In larger organisations, responsibility tends to lie with Quality Teams and specified Service Managers.
Section 5
Influencing teaching and learning
Shaping learning content

5.1 Most providers—over half of those sampled, reported that they involve learners in developing course content (Figure 5.1). This was also the case among those providers that had a formal strategy. Likewise, there were no significant differences between FE and WBL providers.

5.2 Additionally, the providers that had their programme of learner involvement in place for the longest time were more likely to report that they involve learners in developing course content. There was also a strong positive association between the providers that involve learners in developing course content and those involving them in shaping strategy and direction.

Figure 5.1: Learner involvement in developing course content

5.3 Another perspective, however, is that more than two fifths of providers (42%) do not currently involve learners implying that more could be done to encourage learner involvement in the shaping of their course content.

5.4 Of note also is the finding that there were no significant variations across different groups of providers. The proportion of providers that do not involve learners in developing course content were relatively similar for FE (39%) and WBL (44%) providers alike. Figure 5.2 provides a breakdown of the 420 providers that do not involve learners by provider type.

5.5 Likewise, there was no significant variation based on size, length of time of having a learner involvement programme, presence of a formal strategy and regional location. These findings suggest that, in general, a significant number of providers are yet to be convinced of the benefits of this type of involvement. Hence, greater awareness of the importance of learner involvement in developing course content is needed across all types of providers.
5.6 It is not surprising, considering the popularity of surveys as a participation mechanism, that providers regularly undertake surveys as a means of involving learners. Nearly all providers use learner feedback as a part of their learner involvement programme. Gathering learner feedback about courses to enable courses to be evaluated and reviewed is by far the most common way learners are involved - all but 5 providers reported that they do this. In contrast, the involvement of learners in observation of teaching and training is relatively uncommon. One large FE provider noted that teaching staff may be ‘scared’ by learners taking part in observations. In addition, few providers train learners in how to evaluate courses.

5.7 One college provided an example of how learners are more directly involved in developing the courses available. Each course on offer is subject to formal course review annually, and following the development of the strategy, the learner involvement in this process was added. The review teams examine the modules available, the assignments that are set and the detail of how these are delivered (for example the best order to deliver modules or the balance between individual and group work). Learner input into how the course has run from their perspective and their views of proposed changes are now fully integrated into this review process.
5.9 Many reasons were cited for providing support to learners to encourage their feedback. The three most popular reasons given for support included:

- Feedback can be used to make improvements/improve delivery;
- Learners can give direct feedback of their experiences/what they gained from the course;
- Make learners feel their comments are valued/taken seriously;

5.10 Figure 5.4 below describes how learners reported that they could be involved in the providers they were engaged with.

5.11 From the learner perspective, learners recognise that providers involve them in a range of decisions associated with student support, facilities and strategy. This is an area where it is possible to recognise significant differences within the responses of learner sub-groups based on age and ethnicity, some of which reflect potential trends.

5.12 FE Learners that are under 25, especially those aged 16-18, are more likely to identify that they have the opportunity to be involved in various decisions, such as those relating to the kind of library services and the types facilities available. However interestingly, when looking at the proportions within the age groups which have indicated personal involvement, there is no significant difference.

5.13 Similarly WBL learners aged 16-18 are more likely to acknowledge that learners are involved in various decisions, especially in comparison to those that are over 25. There are isolated examples where a higher proportion of learners aged 16-18 have stated that they have been personally involved in decision making, for example, relating to the help they receive to understand the subject and access to Information Technology. However generally speaking these differences do not amount to a trend in personal involvement in relation age groups.
In terms of ethnicity there were only significant differences within the FE learner sample. In particular black learners were more likely than white learners to have been personally involved in certain decisions, such as getting help and advice on options when completing the course. Although, as with the other trends within the sub groups, these are broad correlations and are not a rule of thumb.

Further specific examples are highlighted in the commentary in this section.

Figure 5.4:
Are learners in your college involved in decisions about (FE):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helping you to understand the subject you are learning</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting help and advice on your options when you complete your course</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The kind of support available to learners with disabilities or learning difficulties</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to get financial support if needed</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 1800: All learners at FE provider

Learners are most likely to be able to be involved in decisions about helping understand the subject being learned; they are significantly less likely to be involved in decisions about all the other areas mentioned. Clearly, there is a dichotomy between decisions about learning which learners are immersed in, and what might be deemed more ‘specialised’ concerns, such as financial, careers and disability decisions or advice.
5.17 Figure 5.5, below, shows the responses of WBL learners to the same question.

5.18 As with learners at FE colleges, WBL learners are also most likely to say that they are involved in decisions which help them understand the subject being learnt. However, (at 87%), WBL learners are considerably more likely than FE learners (75%) to declare an involvement in this area. When it comes to ‘getting advice on options’ WBL learners (67%) are again more likely than FE college learners (58%) to say that learners are involved in the decision making process.

![Figure 5.5:](image)

**Figure 5.5:**
Are learners at your training provider involved in decisions about (WBL):

- Helping you to understand the subject you are learning: 87% Yes, 7% No, 7% Don't know
- Getting help and advice on your options when you complete your course: 67% Yes, 19% No, 19% Don't know
- Being able to get financial support if needed: 50% Yes, 26% No, 24% Don't know
- The kind of support available for learners with disabilities or learning difficulties: 55% Yes, 18% No, 27% Don't know

Base: 200: All learners at WBL provider

5.19 Figures 5.6 and 5.7 show the FE and WBL learner responses to their potential for involvement in other learning and teaching related issues. For FE learners, feedback on teaching is the area most learners have been involved in giving feedback on.

5.20 By age group, 16-18 year olds in FE are far more likely (77%) to say that learners are involved in giving feedback on teaching than respondents in the 19-24 (71%) or 25+ (63%) age groups. This young age group is also least satisfied about being treated with respect by staff – the desire to have involvement in feedback might then reflect this slightly greater dissatisfaction.
5.21 FE Learners studying at Levels 4 (24%) and 5 (38%) are less likely to say they have involvement in decisions about exam, coursework arrangements and so on than are those studying at Levels 1 (59%) 2 (56%) and 3 (54%). Black students are more likely (61%) than White (49%) to say that learners have involvement in these arrangements.
5.22 For WBL learners, all three areas are higher than reported for the equivalent in FE, especially on influencing arrangements for exams and courses/qualifications (67% in WBL against 54% in FE). This may reflect the earlier observations about the emphasis among WBL providers on 1 to 1 support and discussion.

5.23 One of the case study WBL providers noted how it uses its 1 to 1 interim review discussions with learners to discuss the assessment methods and ways of compiling evidence for their portfolios that the learners are most comfortable with. This could involve using recorded rather than written evidence for those learners who are less confident with their literacy skills.

Shaping Strategy and Direction

5.24 A little more than half of providers involve learners in shaping the overall strategy and direction of the organisation (Figure 5.8). FE providers dominate this group, with over 70% involving learners in this way compared with 42% of WBL providers. Larger providers (over 1,000 learners) seem more likely to involve learners in shaping strategy and direction. Nevertheless, there was still a relatively large group (47%) of providers that do not currently involve learners in shaping strategy and direction.

5.25 From a regional perspective, providers located in Yorkshire and Humberside were more likely to involve learners in this field. Moreover, similar to the results for learner involvement in developing course content, those providers that had a strategy in place and that had a programme of learner involvement for more than three years were also more likely to involve their learners in strategic decision making. This might imply that progression to involvement in these areas takes longer to establish.

Figure 5.8:
Learner involvement in shaping strategy and direction

![Pie chart showing learner involvement in shaping strategy and direction.](image)

Base: 1000: All providers
Evaluating teaching and learning

5.26 As discussed earlier, 60% of both WBL and FE providers stated that they have a programme of evaluation in place to assess the impact of their learner involvement programmes. The largest providers (5,000 or more learners) were significantly more likely to report this, although smaller providers with 50 to 199 learners were also more likely to have these arrangements. Regionally, providers in the South West, East Midlands and North West were most likely to have arrangements, with providers in London least likely. Those with a learner involvement strategy in place were significantly more likely to report having evaluation arrangements in place (68%).

Summary

5.27 Most providers, both FE and WBL, reported that they involve learners in developing course content. However, some 40% do not, implying that more could be done to encourage learner involvement in this area. Providers with the longest established programmes of learner involvement were most likely to support this form of involvement and there was a strong correlation between providers involving learners in developing course content and those involving learners in wider strategy and direction.

5.28 Providers consider the most important means of using learner involvement to influence teaching and learning were through the use of feedback for evaluation, including telling learners about the actions taken. FE providers were more likely to state that they would inform learners of actions that were taken than WBL providers. Reasons for providing support in this area included both the use of feedback to improve provision and to make learners feel their comments are treated seriously.

5.29 FE learners studying at Level 4 or 5 are less likely to say they have involvement in decisions about exam and coursework arrangements than those studying at Level 1, 2 or 3. However, Black learners are considerably more likely than White learners to say that learners are involved in these arrangements.

5.30 WBL providers are significantly less likely to involve learners in shaping the wider direction and strategy of the organisation than FE providers. Overall, providers that had a strategy in place and those that had a programme of learner involvement for more than three years were more likely to involve their learners in strategic decision making. This might imply that progression to involvement in these areas takes longer to establish.
Section 6
Supporting learners and staff
Learner participation

6.1 Based on provider responses to the telephone survey, the areas of ‘helping learners with difficulties’, ‘providing sufficient time’ and ‘providing sufficient resources’ are the most common ways in which learners are supported in being involved (Figure 6.1).

6.2 Whilst this would suggest that those most in need of support are getting it from providers, more emphasis on awareness and training may be required. Fewer providers provide training for their learner representatives or raise awareness amongst learners about their role as learner representatives, though feedback from the learner case study interviews discussed above may indicate that support, rather than training, is what they look for.

6.3 Further, FE providers and larger providers (over 1,000 learners) are much more likely to provide this type of training and raise awareness compared with their WBL and smaller FE counterparts. These FE/large groups of providers were also more inclined to provide a dedicated liaison or support staff as part of their learner involvement programme. Of interest also are providers with a formal strategy in place that also demonstrated a greater tendency to use all the areas of support mentioned.

Figure 6.1:
Supporting learner involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We help ‘learners with difficulties’ to participate</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We provide sufficient time for learners to be involved</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We provide resources, including IT facilities and space for discussions</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We raise awareness among learners of the role of learner representatives</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We train learners to be representatives or advocates</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 200: All learners at WBL provider

6.4 During the case studies, providers discussed the following areas, taken in turn below:
- Are learners willing to be involved?
- How are learners encouraged to be involved?
- Are they provided with support or training to be effective?
- Are all learners involved equally or do certain types of learners tend not to engage?
Are learners willing to be involved?

6.5 As we have discussed above, providers generally find that learners are willing to be involved. Some groups were noted to be more difficult to engage for various reasons, for example those 16-18, or part time students. Pragmatically, providers recognise that their ability to be involved varies on the time they have available and on other priorities and interests they have. At the least, providers find that learners tend to be willing to provide feedback. Some providers observe that learners who are taking a course that requires longer hours – and consequently may be physically on the provider site more - will be most likely to be more committed to the service and happier to attend forums and such like. This may be related to their developing more of a bond with the provider than learners on short courses.

6.6 Some providers also observed that ‘long standing’ learners that have been enrolled for some time tend to be more committed to the organisation and more interested in how it is run. As we have noted, some providers try to offer progression for learners to move from early levels of involvement through to participation in management committees and so on as volunteer trustees or governors.

6.7 We have also noted that providers sometimes find it difficult to get representatives to take up positions that have been made available. This appears to be driven both by the demands of the particular role and especially by the extent of awareness and information on what is involved and the benefits that can be realised. Some providers observed that this can be particularly true in the early stages and that it can become easier over time: as one provider noted: “now we have representatives in place we are confident that the momentum has got going”.

How are learners encouraged to be involved?

6.8 Several different types of response came from this question. The key issue is felt to be that providers must be able to accommodate individual needs and create conditions where the learners feel comfortable to become involved. This also included making the involvement activity as informal as possible so that it is not intimidating.

6.9 Providers stressed the need for learners to understand and see that tutors and other staff are interested in them, their learning and their achievement – several providers noted that tutors can act as positive role models.

6.10 Some providers highlighted the need to design/adopt different approaches for different types of learners. Examples included recognising that learners aged 16-19 in WBL programmes may be less inclined to complete surveys, so that tutor or assessor led discussions would be more appropriate to encourage feedback. One provider also described how they had invested in interactive whiteboards that allowed learners to contribute while staying seated – this had been found to support learners who were shy/lacking confidence to contribute to open discussion.

6.11 Providers also give incentives for learners to fulfil the commitment they make. Several mentioned the use of vouchers and prize draws for survey responses. A large FE provider commented that they offered the incentive of a group excursion to learner members of the Student Parliament that had attended a minimum number of meetings. Another approach, (noted earlier), is the awarding of a gold diploma for students who have made a contribution to wider college life than simply recognising academic performance for which a silver diploma is awarded.

6.12 Importantly, providers also stress the need to tell learners about the benefits to them individually and collectively of being involved. In addition to the altruistic benefits, some providers are monitoring individual participation so that they can help active learners to include their contribution on job applications and UCAS applications.
Are they provided with support or training to be effective?

6.13 As discussed above, larger FE providers tend to be the ones offering structured training. Some providers were concerned that a ‘requirement’ to undertake training might be off-putting. In general, this was an area where case study respondents were not certain. As one commented: “we don’t systematically provide support to learners in terms of training and perhaps that is a current failing of the service”. There was more certainty that learners with particular difficulties, for example learning difficulties, would be provided with support and coaching to be able to make an effective contribution.

6.14 An example of this approach was provided by an independent specialist residential college for students with physical and/or learning difficulties. To support their learner involvement strategy, the College runs a voluntary ‘student envoy’ programme that helps to prepare learners for involvement in decision making, elected roles and responsibilities (such as being a course representative or a peer advocate) and covers – for example – issues such as how to meet and greet visitors, how to behave in meetings and how to participate in interview processes.

6.15 There were roles where FE providers noted that training was important. Student Governors, for example, are felt to have an important role within what can be complex and intimidating governors’ meetings. Training is important in order that student governors understand how these meetings work and how they can contribute. One provider also noted the involvement of the NUS in supplementing its own internal training for the Student’s Union Executive Committee. This has enabled the committee to lobby effectively on a number of issues raised by students. Course representatives also receive training.

Are all learners involved equally?

6.16 Most providers were less certain about this area, aside from earlier comments about time and access issues. Larger FE and ADCL providers were clearer: these providers tended to be able to make tangible links to organisational equality and diversity policies and ‘standards and conducts’ policies. Several of these providers described arrangements for covering their commitment to inclusion through course induction, reinforced through course delivery and learner groups.

6.17 Several of these providers also described particular arrangements to ensure that learners with learning difficulties and disabilities (LLDD) could contribute – for example through the use of simplified survey tools and stickers (e.g. smiley or sad faces) as indicators on feedback surveys. One noted that the Student Council specifically considers issues for LLDD learners.

6.18 A further example of extra support for learners with difficulties was provided by a FE college with a large specialist section, which ‘pairs’ course representatives from this ‘school’ so that they can be mutually supportive – otherwise they take part on the same basis as course representatives from other parts of the college. An additional measure adopted has been to ensure that all papers for meetings are deliberately in plain English to be accessible to all learners, whether from the learner support ‘school’, the ESOL ‘school’ (the biggest in the college) or from other ‘schools’ within the college community.

Staff Support and Capability

6.19 During the case study interviews, providers were asked the following questions:

- Are all staff required/encouraged to implement learner involvement activities?
- What support is there for staff to become engaged?
Are all staff required/encouraged to implement Learner Involvement activities?

6.20 Given the wider personalisation and FE reform agenda, it is not surprising that all providers expected personnel to take an active approach to involving learners. Several degrees of expectation were observed.

6.21 At the broadest level, many providers indicated their overall expectation that staff will involve learners in directing their learning experience through the use of Individual Learning Plans and encouraging staff to work with RARPA\(^1\) to structure 1 to 1 sessions with learners.

6.22 Some providers have taken a ‘softer’ touch approach, namely to focus on raising awareness and reinforcing understanding among staff of what learner involvement is; what procedures are in place; and what they involve. In these cases, any training for staff is delivered in the context of broader teaching and behavioural skills aimed at helping staff to deal appropriately with learners. Where specific activities are in place – for example the need to support a Student Council or learner forum – informal training will tend to be provided on procedures and processes. Senior managers in provider organisations do not necessarily expect that staff recognise that involving learners would fall under a specific Learner Involvement Strategy; rather it would be promoted through the development of overall learner support.

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\(^1\)Recognising And Recording Progress and Achievement
6.23 Other providers had clearer expectations, although these are again couched in terms of the demands to meet wider quality objectives in teaching practice.

6.24 In a wider sense, a practical example of benefits arising from engaging support staff in learner involvement processes was described by the Catering Manager of a large FE provider. Her involvement as a staff representative on the Learner Voice group had encouraged the catering team to work through a report of comments from learners and identify themes that they could work on. This has resulted in “the team being more aware of learners’ perceptions of the college catering and that they do have opinions and ideas. They don’t always like the comments, but welcome the feedback. It also ties in with the recent development of having team meetings in this work area”.

What support is there for staff to become engaged?

6.25 Given the full expectation of providers taking part in the case studies that staff would implement Learner Involvement activities, some did admit that they had not fully considered what the training and support requirements for staff – as opposed to learners – would be. These providers did however emphasise that tutors were recruited for teaching ability which included relationship building skills. There was an interest from this small group to find out more about options for training staff in areas such as advocacy, introduction to counselling and supporting learners to contribute.

6.26 Some noted their requirement for all trainers to be registered with the Institute of Learning and therefore to undertake CPD to an appropriate level across the range of competences needed including supporting learner involvement.

6.27 One of these providers emphasised that this approach would include in-house training covering teaching techniques and learning styles, with learner involvement as an integrated and explicit part of the content. For this provider, learner involvement was described as “fundamental to recruitment and assessment procedures; teaching and learning; individual support and 1 to 1 review”.

6.28 Another provider described their approach in more detail: “we have a formal programme of CPD. Tutors attend courses on individualised approaches and RARPA; staff briefing events cover advice on how to deal with specific issues for the individual. Staff are involved and receive a staff newsletter, and learner involvement issues are discussed in staff team meetings.”

6.29 On a practical level, one specialist provider described a ‘reverse induction’ process for new staff, during which they shadow a learner for a full day, from the moment the learner leaves home through to the end of their day. The purpose of this is to offer staff new insight into the travel issues, finance issues, practical living issues (shopping, buying lunch) or learning issues they face and to listen to what the learner has to say about how he/she feels to be on the ‘learning’ side rather than the ‘teaching’ side of the relationship.
Summary

6.30 Both FE and WBL providers described themselves as offering a range of learner support options. Fewer were offering specific training for learners to help them become involved, with large FE providers the most likely to offer this support. This group was also most likely to have provided dedicated staff support for learner involvement. Providers with a learner involvement strategy in place were also most likely to offer a ‘full’ range of support options.

6.31 Providers generally find that learners are willing to be involved at least to take part in feedback activity, though there are constraints of time and a relationship between the lengths of course and time spent with the provider and the willingness of learners to engage. Providers adopt different approaches and degrees of emphasis to encouraging learners to become involved; some use incentives to encourage long term fulfilment of commitments.

6.32 Providers were less sure about the extent to which they were able to ensure full involvement in terms of inclusivity or equality and diversity, although several – mainly larger – providers did have clear arrangements to cover learners with disability or learning difficulties.

6.33 Providers broadly expect staff to engage in learner involvement as part of the wider approach to improving quality and supporting learners to achieve. Providers’ approaches to training staff was more varied, ranging from ‘soft’, awareness briefing to specific training with learner involvement as an explicit element of the content.
Section 7
Conclusions
Encouraging levels of activity provide a good basis for future development

7.1 At the beginning of the evaluation, the LSC and DIUS representatives emphasised the low levels of absolute knowledge about the overall level of activity and the characteristics of learner involvement activity across the FE sector, despite the wide range of FE reform and personalisation initiatives that were under way. In that sense, the overall levels of activity reported here are encouraging, both in terms of the numbers of providers that have at least some learner involvement activity going on and those that already have some form of learner involvement strategy in place. Some 65% of providers have a programme of learner involvement “fully” in place and over 70% of these have a strategy. It is also reassuring – and remains a challenge – that only 5% of providers have no plans to develop such a strategy. A lot of learner involvement activity has been reported, which has been reinforced by the new requirement – although it is not yet clear how much new activity has been stimulated by the requirement itself. Overall, this would appear to be a very strong base to build on. Continued focus on the development and implementation of Learner Involvement Strategies will help to enhance the coherence and quality of learner involvement across the sector.

Consensus around the positive value of learner involvement

7.2 Providers displayed a broad degree of consensus around the meaning of learner involvement – essentially the integration of learners into the fabric and ethos of the organisation. Encouragingly both providers and learners are positive about the value and benefits of learner involvement. The research highlighted that learners were more confident and comfortable in speaking to staff and articulating their views. Also, motivation levels had improved amongst learners and learner involvement was perceived as a useful part of student retention. Learners in both FE and WBL provision have also clearly stated that they are supportive of the idea of involvement and many recognised the types of activities being offered by their providers. Many have reported positive experiences through the case studies and have seen benefits from their participation. For providers, motivation, retention and achievement appear to be the key drivers for learner involvement.

The significance of briefing and support for learner involvement should not be underestimated (within the constraints that have been identified).

7.3 The research has highlighted the extent, nature and importance of learner and provider support for learner involvement. It can play a key role in influencing teaching and learning too (for example around course content); and feedback and dialogue can help to reinforce the significance and impact of learner involvement activity. The key inhibitors to learner involvement that emerged from the provider perspective included actually getting learners involved and time constraints. Some learners felt that they were too busy or that they had not been approached. The choice and resourcing of approaches would appear to be significant on both the provider’s ability to undertake activity and the learners’ desire to become involved. Approaches need to be adapted to meet the circumstances of both the learner cohort and type of provision.

Active and passive measures combined with individual and collective mechanisms can result in a comprehensive learner involvement strategy

7.4 The report has highlighted some practical examples promoting learner involvement through improved access to facilities and premises and measures to promote learner involvement and motivation.
Most providers also report that they are seeing benefits from their learner involvement activity and both FE and WBL providers report a similar range of outcomes in terms of improved methods of communication between staff and learners; an ability to demonstrate changes in approach that have come about as a result of learner involvement; improving ability to correlate learner involvement with wider quality assurance processes; and that staff are more confident in how they involve learners. Over 90% of the providers also declare that they can substantiate their activity and outcomes if needed. However many providers appear to focus much of their energy on what have been described as more passive means of involvement, such as surveys and group feedback sessions led by course tutors, with feedback on actions and changes provided to learners through newsletters and ‘you said, we did’ notices.

Some 40% of providers do not involve learners in shaping and developing their course content implying that more could be done to convince them of the benefits of this type of strategic learner involvement.

Our view is that a mix of both active and more passive measures (mentoring, ambassadors for instance) combined with individual and collective mechanisms can result in a comprehensive learner involvement strategy. Learners expressed a preference for activities where they thought they could ‘make a difference’.

There is awareness of the need to develop a strategy but there is room for improvement amongst WBL providers

There are high levels of awareness of the need to develop a learner involvement strategy, with 84% FE and 57% WBL providers aware of the recent requirement for a strategy. However the levels of awareness are significantly lower among WBL providers and this suggests that a focused campaign is required to increase this awareness and stimulate further development of strategies.

Most providers that are aware of the requirement also reported that they have changed their approach to learner involvement (68% FE and 51% WBL) because of the requirement. For most, this has been to draw together what ongoing activity there was, to identify where they wanted to add and to make activity more coherent, and to develop a more structured framework against which to manage and monitor progress.

There were many examples of both overall strategic approach and specific involvement activities that emerged through the qualitative case study interviews, in both FE and WBL providers. These examples included a high level of expectation that provider staff would engage fully with learner involvement activity. However, it was also clear that many providers remain uncertain about the shape that their learner involvement strategy should take.

Providers recognise that they are an early stage of development of their learner involvement strategy and would welcome advice to further improve depth and quality

Although it was not part of the evaluation to assess providers’ strategies for merit or quality, many providers offered them for review and in many cases the plans were sketchy in nature – even taking into account that providers were often still in the early stages of the development of their plans. Several requested the opportunity to have sight of ‘best practice’ examples that were relevant to their own situation in terms of provider type and learner intake; and indeed sought feedback from the evaluators on perceived quality and how plans could be improved.
7.12 Overall, it would appear that while there are high numbers of providers with learner involvement strategies in place, many are at an early stage on their journey to consistent, high quality and inclusive learner involvement and would welcome further support to improve. At this stage the monitoring and reporting arrangements are not always fully developed although providers recognised the importance of collecting data in a consistent manner despite potential resource implications. In short, the active measurement of LIS will help to demonstrate effectiveness and impact.

There is a difference in the underpinning approach to learner Involvement between WBL and FE providers

7.13 This difference is driven by two main factors: that WBL learners are normally based in their workplaces, often in small numbers and geographically dispersed, which leads to different contact and support arrangements than for larger, concentrated groups of learners in FE colleges; and that WBL providers are very conscious of the three-way relationship between themselves, the learner and the employer, which reinforces the link of learner involvement to commercial customer satisfaction and quality assurance processes.

7.14 These differences appear to be reflected not only in how providers describe their learner involvement activity, but also in how learners describe – and value – their involvement and satisfaction.

The Handbook has been considered useful for those that have used it but could usefully be refreshed

7.15 The findings offer mixed messages about the recently published Learner Involvement Strategy handbook. Less than half of providers had used it – and considerably fewer WBL providers. There is also no direct correlation between those providers that are aware of the requirement to have a learner involvement strategy and the reported use of the Handbook – 70% were aware of the requirement, but only 47% had used the Handbook.

7.16 Those providers that had a programme of learner involvement in place for longer (up to 3 years) were more likely not to have used the Handbook, perhaps reflecting that they felt relatively comfortable with developing their strategy independently. Those that had used the handbook had generally found it helpful, but a number of issues were raised about its content. In particular the handbook does not appear to meet the needs or expectations of WBL providers, who have to engage with employers as well as learners and often deal with widely dispersed learners. Others felt the handbook could give more specific guidance on dealing with particular situations such as high learner turnover or provider/sector types. There is clearly an opportunity to refresh the ‘message’ and guidance.

7.17 To summarise, the level of learner involvement is encouraging, the next phase of policy advice should build on the high levels of intent and commitment identified and focus on depth, quality and robust development and implementation of learner involvement strategies.
Section 8
Recommendations
8.1 As discussed, an important part of this first cycle of evaluation has simply been to establish a clearer picture of the extent and characteristics of provider engagement with learner involvement and in particular the extent of progress in developing a strategy rather than having a series of potentially ad hoc activities in place. Given that the findings could have been that overall activity levels are low, the results provide a strong starting point for further meaningful action.

8.2 At this stage in the evaluation, eight recommendations are proposed to deal with some of the emerging issues from the evaluation work completed to date:

Recommendation 1: Communication strategy to encourage provider engagement. While it is encouraging that only 1% of providers do not plan to have a programme of learner involvement and only 5% have no plans for a learner involvement strategy, these providers continue to enrol and work with learners across the country. Consideration should be given as to how these providers can be motivated to take a more proactive approach to this area. This may not require a ‘compliance’ action but rather a communication strategy that helps reinforce the benefits and requirements of learner involvement strategy development and implementation.

Recommendation 2: Guidance on approach. It is clear that both the providers with a strategy and those currently in the process of developing one would welcome more information and support that would help them to determine whether they are applying good practice and moving in the right direction. This might take the form of advice on an appropriate mix of individual and collective activity that promotes both active and passive measures. There may be scope for the LSC to work with support organisations such as LSN to offer best practice support. Other potential areas include working with inspection agencies to clarify for providers how learner involvement will be explored and reported during provider inspections and any best practice emerging from Self Assessment Reviews.

Recommendation 3: Prioritise high impact learner involvement activity. Linked to the above, there are strong messages in the evaluation findings about the benefits of appropriate support for learners and providers, for example about encouraging ‘active’ learner involvement and encouraging staff training to support learner involvement. The LSC and its partners should look to establish and develop positive trends from this potentially strong base. Trend improvements in these types of activity are likely to provide some of the strongest evidence for impact of the learner involvement strategy in the longer term.

Recommendation 4: Involve learners in development of content. Some 40% of providers reported that they do not involve learners in developing course content and there were no significant variations among different groups of providers. This is a major weakness in any system which purports to put the views of learners at the heart of provision. Consideration needs to be given as to how this figure can be reduced, and how organisations can be persuaded to introduce new systems and processes which allow learners to be involved in developing course content.

Recommendation 5: Promote innovation. The dispersed nature of learners and lack of engagement by employers has reduced the use of collective forums by WBL providers. Guidance and best practice on new communication channels, such as the use of social web sites, should be developed as part of any refreshed best practice guidance. This could also be incorporated in the Handbook.

Recommendation 6: Disseminate and encourage policy development. The headline findings from this report could be used as a mechanism to enhance understanding, promote good practice and encourage an open exchange of views on learner involvement strategy development and implementation.
Recommendation 7: Refine the learner involvement strategy handbook. The LSC’s Learner Involvement Strategy handbook has been well received by many of the providers who have used it. The majority of providers have not used the Handbook and WBL providers are least likely to. This reduces the likelihood of learner involvement strategies being of a consistently high quality. The LSC has the opportunity to:

- review the content of the Handbook;
- consider strengthening the best practice element, for which there is a high demand (more detail on strategy development and potential composition and participation and support mechanisms);
- re-focus some of the material to much more explicitly meet the needs of the WBL providers, taking account of issues such as dispersed learners and (limited) employer engagement;
- consider either a re-launch to the provider network, or a series of workshops, briefings, seminars to increase the use of the Handbook; and,
- include some more prescriptive advice on monitoring and evaluation methods which providers would find helpful.

Recommendation 8: Embedding and reviewing learner involvement strategies. The LSC should encourage providers to embed learner involvement strategy in the inspection/assessment process, to review activity regularly and be able to report on progress of their Learner Involvement Strategy. Ideally, this should include active involvement activities and ensure equal engagement and representation for different groups and individuals.

Next Steps

8.3 These recommendations have to be seen in the light of some very positive results and feedback, and take account of the extent to which providers are developing and improving their learner involvement strategies as they become familiar with both the benefits and what works and what doesn’t work.

8.4 The next phase of the evaluation will take a longitudinal perspective, will be able to determine ‘distance travelled’ and more accurately pinpoint the benefits providers are able to attribute to their learner involvement strategy given more time will have elapsed. There will also be more focus on the additionality arising from the introduction of the requirement for a Learner Involvement Strategy, for example considering the additional activity stimulated as a result of introducing the strategy.