

14–19: Programme of Support for Delivery of Change on the Ground



department for
education and skills

Developing the learner voice



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Participation is asking children and young people what works, what doesn't and what could work better, and involving them on an ongoing basis, in the design, delivery and evaluation of services. The Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme aims to ensure that policies and services are designed around the needs of children and young people, and that they are involved in decision making at a local and national level. Engaging children and young people in this way gives them an opportunity to make a positive contribution in their communities.

(DfES 2004a)

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Purpose of this guide	2
3	What do we mean by 'learner voice'?	3
4	The changing context	6
5	Benefits of giving learners a voice	9
6	Good practice in developing the learner voice	12
7	Critical success factors	19
8	Potential barriers	21
9	Developing the strategic plan	24
Annex	Further information	28

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1 Introduction

It is government policy (across all departments), and an integral aspect of the agenda for change set out in the White Paper *14–19 education and skills* and the subsequent implementation plan, that young people should be given a voice in the planning and design of services aimed at them.

This guide has been developed for professionals with responsibility for providing 14–19 education and training, including LSC and local authority staff, secondary headteachers, college principals and chief executives of training organisations, and other senior managers who will lead on the management and delivery of 14–19 curriculum change.

The benefits of listening to, and acting on, the views of learners and others have been widely accepted. Provision is better planned and delivered, learners are more motivated and engaged, achievement is greater and cohesion is stronger in organisations that involve everyone – staff, learners, parents / carers, local partners and other stakeholders – in decision-making processes.

In the context of 14–19 provision, it is also important that local partners work together on strategies that enable learners to have a voice. Learners who undergo courses in different institutions will need to be able to make their voices heard in all of them, and members of consortia should make cross-consortia provision for this to happen.

The guide sets out the main principles of good practice in this endeavour. It recognises that an organisation that genuinely listens to learners will require an open, trusting, participative and risk-taking ethos. Throughout, the term ‘learners’ or ‘young people’ is preferred to either ‘children’ or students. Similarly, the term ‘learner council’ is used rather than the more common ‘student council’ or ‘school council’, as the guide is relevant to all 14–19 learners in schools, colleges and work-based learning.

2 Purpose of this guide

This guide to developing the learner voice :

- clarifies the meaning of learner voice in the context of learning provision for 14–19 year olds
- examines the rationale for the development of strategies to enable learners to have a voice, especially in the light of proposed changes to provision for 14–19 year olds
- describes the policy context which has given rise to strong governmental support for young people to have a voice both within their education and training organisations and within the community at large
- summarises the benefits of the learner voice to learners themselves, to providers and to wider society
- suggests good practice and success factors in provision of processes and structures for the learner voice to be heard
- examines barriers to success and ways of overcoming them
- provides guidelines for facilitating the development of a genuine learner voice within education and training organisations.

3 What do we mean by ‘learner voice’?

There are two main strands of the learner voice within organisations: where learners are consulted about the running of the organisation and where they are consulted about teaching and learning.

Where learners are consulted about the running of the organisation

Traditionally, and most commonly, learners have been consulted through the learner council (in schools these are commonly known as school councils and in colleges, student councils). Councils are traditionally associated with everyday issues such as lockers, toilets and meals. Some councils and learner committees now also consider a range of issues relating to the improvement of the organisational environs and some learner councils have been allocated sums of money to spend on their own projects, such as refurbishment, ground improvement or a radio station.

However, in some organisations consultation has moved beyond these everyday issues into broader areas of policy. Learners can attend leadership meetings, contribute to governors’ meetings or be represented on advisory bodies or academic boards. Sometimes committees of learners are involved in the appointment of staff and management of third-party relationships with contracted companies.

Where learners are consulted about teaching and learning

Many organisations are talking to their learners about how they learn and what they learn. It is important in order to improve their performance and commitment – that learners’ views on teaching and learning are heard. In this way teachers can improve their practice and young people become better learners. Listening to learners can take place in advisory curriculum groups or in focus groups convened to discuss particular aspects of teaching and learning. It can sometimes involve a teacher reviewing the lessons with learners over a term to see what worked well and what did not, and what could be changed to make lessons more engaging and effective. Learners have been involved as researchers feeding back on the quality and effectiveness of teaching through surveys (Rudduck and Flutter nd).

Giving learners a voice in their organisation should mean more than consultation. It implies that learners will be listened to and, when possible, their views will be acted on, with their involvement. It requires an underpinning ethos of openness and participation by all members of the organisation, staff and learners. There are many topics and issues that would benefit from a dialogue between learners, staff and management. Some of the main ones are:

- **organisational policies:** including such areas as the rewards / merit system, rules and sanctions, learner support services and contracts, and indeed the role of learner consultation
- **quality of teaching and learning:** including discussion of effective teaching and learning methods, what helps young people learn and what makes a good lesson; it might even include what makes a good teacher
- **curriculum:** especially in the light of new 14–19 vocational qualifications talking to learners about the nature and benefits of such courses and to find out what is most useful to them and what sorts of qualifications they can engage in more readily
- **staffing:** learners can play an important part in the appointment process, meeting prospective candidates or forming a panel to pose questions; a learner representative can sit on an interview panel
- **facilities, access and transport:** including discussion of after-hours facilities to study, arranging breakfast for those who arrive early, support for learners in terms of childcare and finance, access arrangements for people with disabilities, access for those with English as an additional language or drawing in sections of the community who are hard to reach can be put on the agenda, transport costs and provision
- **information, advice and guidance:** whether it is easy to understand, helpful and relevant
- **specific programmes and projects:** including events or activities that would strengthen ties with the local community, conferences in college, school citizenship or careers days, and ideas for events or performances to draw in parents / carers and increase their involvement.

Outside the school or college

The young person's voice has also moved outside the school or college into the local community. Some areas have set up youth fora to discuss local, national and international issues. Some local government councils have set up advisory panels to hear views on ways they can improve services for young people and some, like Lewisham, have funded 'young mayors', elected by young people, to provide a more focused voice representing the youth perspective. There are often close relationships between schools or colleges and community youth forums with the educational institutions feeding these groups with representatives, and preparing and briefing their learners to take part.

4 The changing context

Threaded throughout the White Paper *14–19 education and skills* and the *14–19 education and skills implementation plan* is a commitment to meeting each learner's needs and involving young people in the planning and development of learning. A number of recent official initiatives and reports have also pointed to the importance of asking learners what they want and what they think.

Learning and Skills Council

In 2002, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) published guidance on how to consult young people aged 14–19 about the nature and the quality of provision based on their experience as users of the services (LSC 2002). The introduction to the guidance says:

The Learning and Skills Council is committed to listening to the voice of the learner in shaping its policies, and the programmes and projects it supports. The LSC believes that it can only secure the best standards of learning and skills if providers and partners take account of the needs, aspirations and circumstances of young people and put their interests first. It is a priority for the LSC to engage young people in a continuing dialogue and ask for their views about the nature and quality of provision. It is also important that young people are informed about ways in which the feedback they have given makes a difference to the services they receive. The LSC, therefore, strongly encourages the establishment of arrangements to ensure the active and effective engagement of young people in influencing policy and provision.

Every Child Matters

In 2004, the government published *Every child matters*, following an extensive overview of services for children, and Parliament passed the Children Act 2004, which provided the legislative spine for developing more effective and accessible services focused around the needs of children, young people and families. In particular, a requirement was placed on providers of services to involve young people in the design and delivery of services.

As a direct result of the publication of *Every child matters*, a Green Paper, *Youth matters* (DfES 2005b), went out to consultation in July 2005. It underlined the importance of giving children and young people a voice and aimed to address four key challenges (R2):

- how to engage more young people in positive activities and empower them to shape the services they receive
- how to encourage more young people to volunteer and become involved in their communities
- how to provide better information, advice and guidance to young people to help them make informed choices about their lives
- how to provide better and more personalised intensive support for each young person who has serious problems or gets into trouble.

Foster Report on further education

Simultaneously, Sir Andrew Foster was carrying out an extensive review of the future role of further education colleges (2005). His report says that providers should find as many ways of consulting learners as possible and involve young people in decision taking:

FE colleges and stakeholders need to systematically listen to learners. Learner involvement and representation ... is key to improved performance by colleges and improved outcomes for learners ... FE colleges should be required to collect learners' views in a consistent and systematic way as a key way of improving college provision. And they should also consult learners' on any major changes to their learning and the learning environment.

Citizenship education

Citizenship became a statutory National Curriculum subject in August 2002 for all children at Key stages 3 and 4. It has been described as a new subject, but also a new *kind* of subject (Breslin and Dufour 2006) because it emphasises and enables schools to include young people in decision-making processes. David Bell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, has said :

I would like to make the link between 'participation' in citizenship and the 'making a contribution' element of Every Child Matters. Making a contribution involves asking children and young people what works, what doesn't and what could work better, and involving them on an ongoing basis in the design, delivery and evaluation of services. The emphasis here is on greater consultation and involvement, so that pupils have a real say in making decisions on matters that affect them.

(Bell 2005)

Self-evaluation (for Ofsted/ALI inspections)

The self-evaluation framework (SEF) requires that schools consider their current practice in term of gathering views of learners, parents / carers and other stakeholders. In relation to learners, the self-evaluation questions are :

- How do you gather the views of learners, how often do you do this, and how do you ensure the impartiality of the information ?
- What do the views of learners tell you about learners' standards, personal development and well-being, and the quality of your provision ?
- Can you give examples of action you have taken based on the views of learners, with an evaluation of the effectiveness of what you did ?

In colleges, the self-assessment report (SAR) must, as a minimum requirement, 'indicate how the views of learners, employers, parents and other stakeholders have been obtained and taken into account'.

5 Benefits of giving learners a voice

The needs and demands of learners have changed over recent years. Learners want to be treated in an adult way and they want to have a say in how they are treated, in how they are taught and what they learn. A strong learner voice in a school, college or training organisation brings a whole set of advantages in terms of improved performance and achievement. Those organisations where learners are consulted are likely to be places where there is more cooperation between staff and learners, and the learners identify more with the organisation and with their own position in it, developing a more positive orientation to their own learning.

Those organisations which do not have a culture of consultation are likely to find it more difficult to move forward. The desire to be consulted is not always expressed as a clearly articulated demand but rather in terms of learner disengagement. Learners feel alienated and excluded and do not achieve their potential. There are benefits for the individual learner, for providers and for society as a whole.

Benefits for learners

Learners who are routinely consulted and whose views are listened to, and when appropriate acted on, reap the benefit of improved education or training and are likely to feel recognised, appreciated and valued by their learning organisation. This leads to improved motivation and chances of achieving their personal learning goals. In addition, the process of communicating opinions and requirements to staff and managers enables learners to acquire and develop transferable skills of communication, negotiation and advocacy.

Benefits for providers

If providers listen to learners, they gain a better understanding of what learners want and think, and how they learn better. This enables them to develop priorities in their provision according to learners' needs. Improved achievement of learners and more positive and constructive attitudes help improve participation, retention and relationships between staff and learners.

Benefits for society as a whole

If learners are listened to in schools, colleges, training organisations and the wider services provided for them, it enables them to become better informed young people, who are aware of rights and responsibilities, who are more positive and who feel they belong. This positive attitude is likely to encourage them to use their voice in their communities, both when they are young and as adults. Such engagement and participation can lead to a stronger democracy and, possibly, an improved turn-out in elections.

Case study 1. Student committees and formal representation at a college

B6 Brooke House Sixth Form College opened in 2002 after a review of post-16 provision in the London Borough of Hackney found that young people lacked the opportunity locally to access high-quality academic education. From the beginning, the college was planned as a joint endeavour between staff and students. According to its website, it is 'dedicated to individuality and partnership. We continually seek to represent the views of everyone who is part of our organisation, both students and staff alike.'

Students in all 25 tutor groups elected two representatives to form a new student representative body. From this group, two students were elected to the college's governing body and some were elected to college committees to help make decisions about tendering processes and the issuing of contracts to companies to supply services to the college. Students have been involved in setting up and running catering services since the college opened, and they effectively run the college's relationship with the company. They meet the owner and the college catering manager every few weeks to review the service and plan menus, taking into account student representations. They also deal with pricing policies and subsidies and make decisions about which vending machines to install. They are fully involved in deciding the future direction of the college, including detailed discussions with the architects who are designing the next phase of the building programme, and they have been involved in the re-branding and publicity of the college. Students said:

It taught me a lot. It makes you feel listened to and it gives you a buzz.

I'm involved with the student union. It helps to make me feel part of things. The students definitely encourage each other to get involved and know that if you don't speak up things won't get done.

Case study 2. A training providers' youth forum

Sefton Enterprises Ltd is a training provider based at Bootle and Southport. It provides training and personal development for young people who have underachieved in formal education. It offers courses in business administration, building crafts, ICT, painting and decorating, trowel occupations and retail. It set up a learners' forum to give the young people a voice in running the company and an opportunity to talk through matters of concern. Each vocational area from the Bootle and Southport branches elects a representative to the forum. The forum has an elected chair, vice-chair and treasurer. Forum members have an opportunity to discuss issues at staff meetings and to report to management meetings. In this way, learners gain a better understanding of the business side of the company, its strategy and financial constraints. In the long term, the company plans to ask forum members to report to the board meeting of company trustees and to be given responsibility for some budget issues.

The views of the forum are incorporated into the company business plan. Learners said:

I was surprised how friendly the forum is. Every Thursday we do activities like team building and learning about working together which helps us on the forum.

*The forum has helped to build my confidence.
I'm now much more prepared to speak out.*

(Case studies from QCA post-16 citizenship website :
www.qca.org.uk/citizenship/post16)

6

Good practice in developing the learner voice

Staff need to think about how to plan and carry out strategies that give learners a voice in the organisation. There are different ways of involving young people and the methods used have to be appropriate to the age, abilities, attitudes and culture of the learners. For instance, it is not always helpful to put young people in a formal meeting, where adults lead and are in control, and where many young people are not going to feel at ease and able to express their views, particularly on sensitive issues. Even where this has to be the case, e.g. in governors' meetings, steps can be taken to make the circumstances in which the meeting is held more convivial for young people and to prepare them beforehand. Deciding on the best ways to involve them is a prime example of a subject where young people themselves should be consulted, and where they themselves can provide training for adults.

Organisational standards for the active involvement of young people have been devised and published by the National Youth Agency and the Local Government Association (Badham and Wade 2005).

Some of the methods that can be used to develop the learner voice – including formal structures, specially convened groups that focus on specific issues and making use of surveys, diaries, e-mail and text messaging – are described below.

Formal structures : includes learner councils, representation on formal bodies, advisory panels

It is important to ensure that where formal structures are used as a way of sustaining active involvement and giving the learners a more permanent voice they need to be accessible to a wide range of young people. Organisations should avoid over-reliance on a small group of motivated, articulate learners, and should make strong attempts to reach those most often left out. Elections for representatives should be open and frequent, and the formal structures need to be flexible, adaptable and regularly reviewed by staff and learners. All structures should be underpinned by shared and explicit values, and those involved should be clear about how much power can, in reality, be shared with young people, and the constraints of the organisation.

Specially convened groups focusing on specific issues : includes focus groups, individual, paired or group discussions, special events and conferences

It is sometimes successful to adopt a model that is task-specific to meet a particular need. For example, in one local authority, a group of young people was given the task of arranging and running a series of youth conferences, across the authority area, on the community plan. Such activities can prove to be relevant, engaging and fun. In the example cited, young people took part in electronic voting to express their views on aspects of the plan. Within organisations similar activities can be organised, using young people themselves as speakers and facilitators.

Other methods : includes surveys and questionnaires, diaries, video-diaries, websites (online surveys, chat rooms), e-mail and text-messaging

Depending on the issue to be considered, these approaches can reach a wider group of young people than conventional methods of engaging them. Chat rooms on organisational websites, while needing to be moderated, are often used in organisations as a way of finding out what learners really think about a whole range of issues. Young people are more likely to be engaged by using information and communication technologies than by completing a questionnaire. Learner satisfaction surveys can, however, provide insights for an organisation. The LSC carries out an annual national learner satisfaction survey across the providers it funds.

Case study 3. Diverse approaches at an 11–18 school

At Hastingsbury School and Community College, in Bedfordshire, different kinds of opportunities are provided for students to lead projects. Here are some of them.

Peer listeners: A group of students trained by Relate offer counselling at lunchtimes. They have their own room and are supported by four teachers who have also gone through the training.

Peer mediators: Following training with the Youth Service, students are involved in helping other students to sort out disagreements by talking things through.

Peer mentors: Year 12 and 13 students offer academic mentoring and support to younger students.

Student councils: The chance for students to have a say in decision-making and to represent their year team. Elections and training take place in September and October.

Student trainers: Students are involved in training other students to take on roles of responsibility.

Student leaders: Students can be linked to a department or year team; they offer support by working with teachers to make sure things run smoothly.

Student tour guides: A team of students who give up their time and expertise to show visitors around the school.

Student interviewers: Students have opportunities to join interview panels, asking questions to candidates and providing feedback to senior staff.

Staff and student working parties: Students have a say about teaching and learning in the school by joining a working party.

(For more information, visit www.hastingsbury.beds.sch.uk)

Case study 4. Learning about improving project at a high school

Worthing High School was part of the Learning About Improvement Project. The school set out to look at how it could use the learner voice to improve the quality of learning in the classroom and focused on ways of helping Year 10 and Year 11 learners to take more responsibility for their learning. The school established a working group of 30 Year 10 learners and set up consultation 'cells' of five learners plus a teacher mentor. The learners kept diaries throughout Year 10, which were only seen by an outside researcher who also conducted interviews. A questionnaire was designed to capture the thoughts of the Year 11 group in their last term.

During the course of the project there were six consultations. There were strict ground rules to make sure staff did not feel threatened. For example, learners were not allowed to mention staff names and were asked to make constructive points rather than to air grievances. The team fed back to staff at regular intervals. It became clear that learners in Year 10 had not been clear about how important certain elements were for their progress and what independent learning was until the year was almost over, and that they valued the process of reflection and wanted more praise. As a result of the consultation the Year 9 induction programme was completely revised.

(For more information visit www.consultingpupils.co.uk and find the Consulting Pupils Newsletter February 2003)

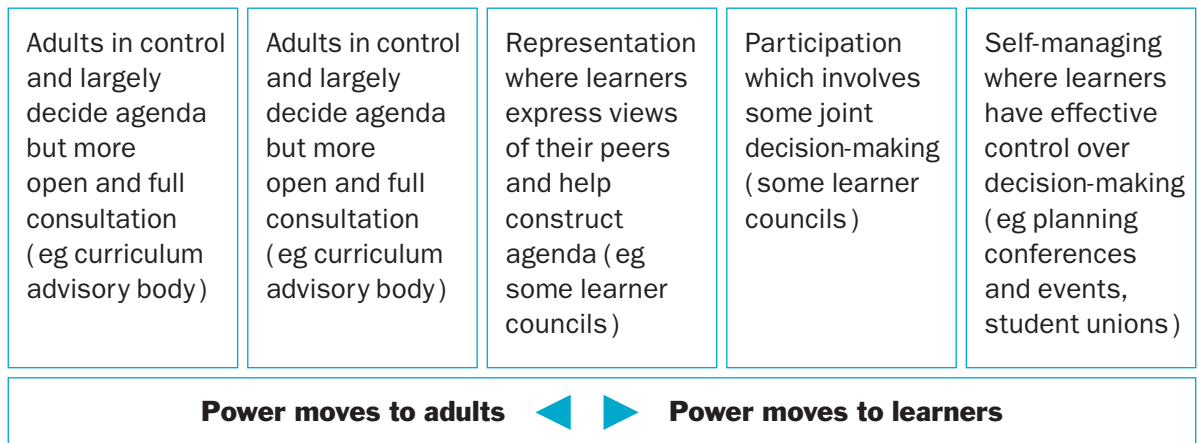
If involvement of young people is to be successful, then organisations have to be clear and honest about how much power and control they are prepared to give to learners and in what areas this is being ceded. Young people understand that there are limitations to what they can do and accept limited powers. For instance, they know they cannot appoint staff but they do feel that their input to the process is important; they know they cannot allocate large sums of money but it is helpful if their views are sought on the things money is spent on. What young people do not like is to feel that they are being sold only an illusion of influence and power. They quickly see through this and the process will collapse or be ineffective. Involvement has to be genuine and learners need to be sure that teachers are really interested in what they have to say and that their views will be given careful consideration.

Learners, who have been led to believe that involvement will lead to action, can easily become disappointed if they do not get some sort of result. This means that managing expectations should form an important part of the process. Communication should be open and learners have to be clear that things may not always work out in ways they want or expect. However, it is equally important that some actions are agreed and that there are clear outcomes. In some organisations, learner councils, given budgets of several thousand pounds, can show observable results. In others, managers respond to issues raised by councils in assemblies or other public meetings and explain what action is being taken. The results of a consultation and any actions taken can be posted on notice boards or on the college website.

Figure 1 shows the spectrum of involvement of adults and young people when developing the learner voice.

Figure 1. Spectrum of involvement of adults and young people

(adapted from *Hear by right* (version 1), Badham and Wade 2005)



Good practice tips on involving 14–19 learners

It is not possible to say that there is a ‘right’ way to involve learners in decision-making. It depends on the context (learner council, formal body, informal discussion group) and the issues being considered (school buildings, quality of teaching, specialised diplomas). However, the following points may be used as guides when meetings or representation on formal bodies are involved.

Before

- The purpose should be clearly explained so that learners know what is going on and why they are there.
- Brief the learners well before the meeting so that they come properly informed and prepared. It may be hard for them to respond to information that they have been given seconds beforehand or if they have had no thinking time on issues. It is a good idea to give someone the responsibility for briefing.
- Some training and support may be needed so that learners can play their parts in the meetings. This may be assertiveness training or training in how to put forward informed opinions supported by argument or evidence.

During

- Topics should not be trivial. Young people want to be involved in decision-making on genuine issues, not tokenistic ones.
- It is important to create the right environment for the meeting or discussion group. The meeting place should be pleasant and welcoming. Providing food and drinks makes people feel more welcome and predisposed to contribute.
- The atmosphere should be relaxed and time given to let people get to know each other. It is important that learners feel confident to express their opinions and views, and that they will not suffer or be put on the spot at a later date for speaking plainly and honestly. For this reason they should be told how the data from the meeting will be processed.
- Make sure meetings are conducted in way that young people can contribute. For this reason try not to use technical jargon or language that might exclude them.

After

- Properly provided feedback is an essential part of the process. It is vital the learners receive some explanation of what has happened as a result of the consultation, particularly if any decisions have been taken. Young people should understand the wider context in which decisions are taken and how their input helped shape the outcome. Feedback should be given as fast as possible and not ages after the consultation.
- Learners should receive recognition for their contribution particularly if this is over an extended period of time. This may be in the form of certificates that go into an achievement file or statements that might go into key skills records (Communication, Working With Others) or citizenship portfolios (participation, making a contribution). Sometimes it might be appropriate to give a book, CD token or similar reward.

Other factors to take into account

- It is important to ensure that there is equality of opportunity and that groups are balanced in terms of gender, ethnicity and disability. This might mean that extra care is needed to draw in learners to make the consultation truly representative.
- It takes time to establish procedures and for them to work effectively.
- Conveners need to be flexible, taking into account young people's lifestyles or time constraints. In colleges, it might not be a good idea to set meetings up at the beginning of the day. In training organisations, trainees have to consider employers' requirements. In schools some meetings might be best carried out at lunchtime or during lessons.
- Where learners are represented on formal bodies it is important to bring on board learners who have a genuine interest in being involved and who will be prepared to talk. This does not necessarily mean choosing the most articulate learners but those involved must show a clear willingness to participate.

7 Critical success factors

The 'Hear by Right' standards (Badham and Wade 2005) have identified the features that need to be in place. They apply to all learner involvement including that of 14–19 learners and are listed below.

Children and young people's involvement is a visible commitment that is properly resourced:

- There is a visible commitment to the principle and practice of children and young people's participation from senior managers and leaders.
- Participation is built into the organisation and is reflected in its strategic planning, services, resources and communication.
- Relevant staff, managers and leaders have the opportunity to develop the attitudes and skills needed to work effectively with children and young people

Children and young people's involvement is valued:

- Children and young people are treated honestly and with respect and their contributions are taken seriously.
- Feedback to children and young people about the effects of their involvement is prompt and clear.
- Children and young people's participation is rewarded and celebrated

Children and young people have an equal opportunity to get involved:

- All children and young people have a right to participate in decisions that affect them.
- Children and young people feel welcomed and included and are not discriminated against or prevented from participating effectively on the grounds of ethnic origin, language, religion, culture, disability, age, gender, sexuality or where they live.
- Care and time is taken to go the extra mile to ensure children and young people facing greatest barriers to getting involved are aware of and can take up opportunities to have their say.
- Relevant training and support are provided to children and young people so that they can contribute effectively.
- Information is available to children and young people in good time and is accessible, jargon free and culturally appropriate.

Policies and standards for the participation of children and young people are in place, evaluated and improved:

- What the organisation is trying to achieve and the intended benefits are clear from the start.
- Children and young people evaluate the process and changes that result from their involvement and help apply lessons learned.
- There are agreed quality standards and codes of conduct for working with children and young people to ensure their participation is safe, sound, effective and evaluated.

8 Potential barriers

Learner voice may be perceived as a threat in some educational institutions because it changes traditional power relationships. It can put the organisation and staff under the microscope in a way that they would prefer not to happen. They may feel that it will have a negative effect on relationships between staff and learners and diminish their authority. However, the experience of most organisations is that when young people are consulted more widely there is almost always an improvement in staff-learner relations and a heightening of learner responsibility. In fact listening to learners is seen as an important element in school improvement and raising standards.

We can identify some potential barriers to successful and effective involvement of young people.

- **Nothing changes:** If school and college authorities are not willing to introduce changes to policies after a period of involvement, then learners will become disillusioned. If they feel that the learner council never achieves anything of note, then it will become a talking shop for a few but the main body of learners will see it as irrelevant to their needs and aspirations.
- **Views discounted:** Similarly, if teachers feel that learners have little to say that is worth hearing about teaching and learning, then genuine involvement of learners will fail. There is little point in 'going through the motions' if no value is attached to the learner contribution.
- **Peer pressure or lack of interest:** Young people themselves may be unwilling to participate. Peer pressure may make it difficult for them to be seen in close partnership with authority figures, or they may not be interested.
- **Pressures on young people:** Keeping young people involved can also be a problem, because of external or exam pressures, or simply lack of time.
- **Clique:** Representative structures can be seen as aimed at articulate white middle class learners and those from minority ethnic groups can feel marginalised.
- **Disability:** The circumstances of young people with learning difficulties or disabilities can be a barrier, making it hard for them to participate or hard for the school or college to draw them in and to reach them.

- **Involvement-fatigue:** There is a problem of involvement fatigue. It can become a cosmetic activity repeated relentlessly (sometimes so that an organisation can say it 'has consulted'). It will then cease to be effective.
- **Lack of resources:** Resources may be required for different sorts of activities. Some organisations may be reluctant to divert funds for these purposes.

Overcoming barriers

These barriers can be overcome if there is a genuine commitment and willingness to listen to learners. It is a long-term commitment and the processes have to be embedded in the organisational structure. Here are some other pointers for organisations to consider.

- **Skills of active citizenship:** Schools and colleges need to make developing the confidence of young people in articulating their views an important aspect of curriculum through citizenship education. It is vital to make learners understand the importance of contributing and give them the skills to do so.
- **Committed, skilled staff:** It does take time, energy, skills on the part of staff and cannot be carried out by those who do not possess these. It seems sensible to build processes with staff who are good communicators and who are committed to the principles of consultation and then move out from there.
- **Minority ethnic representation:** Organisations should try to make sure that the representation of groups reflects the ethnic composition of the learner body. They need to be clear about who should be consulted in black and minority ethnic groups. This could entail opening channels to all groups and making deliberate overtures to learners in different groups to encourage them to participate in formal bodies and ensuring that they are not isolated but have a network of support. At college / training provider level it might involve more use of accessible media like e-mail and websites for satisfaction surveys and wider consultation.
- **Inclusion:** Organisations should have in place arrangements and additional support as required to include young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, eg accessible meeting places, large print for visually impaired (see for example Valuing People: a new strategy for learning disability for the 21st century on the Department of Health website : www.doh.gov.uk). Again this might involve opening channels and encouraging people to support. There may also be resource implications here such as paying fares for taxis or buses to ensure that people can get to meetings.

- **Planning and review:** 'Involvement-fatigue' sets in when learners and teachers see it as form filling or something that happens with monotonous regularity at the end of a course or unit of work and which has little or no purpose. There needs to be some overall coordination and plan to avoid this. It is much better to have less but more effective involvement.
- **Content and process:** Related to this, sessions need to be relevant and of interest to learners. They should be kept fairly short and punctuated with devices to maintain interest, eg brief presentations by learners or visual stimuli. It is a good idea to involve young people in planning and then reflecting on how any session worked out in practice.
- **Resourcing:** Allocating adequate resources is a sign of the commitment of the organisation. Some types of involvement require more resources than others. Focus group discussions require relatively little whereas college wide surveys require much more. It can also add on substantial amounts of money, if organisations are paying for fares and refreshments for more formal meetings or supplying budgets for learner councils. However, quite a lot can be achieved with relatively little money and organisations will have to judge the benefits of spending larger amounts for specific purposes.

'Hear by Right' is a standards framework to be used by organisations wishing to improve practice and policy on the active involvement of children and young people. A full set of audit documents to aid planning is available from the NYA website (www.nya.org.uk/hearbyright). The standards are endorsed by, among others, the DfES:

The DfES is committed to embedding participation of children and young people in the design, delivery and evaluation of services that affect them at a national, regional and local level. 'Hear by Right' offers an excellent set of standards and a highly practical handbook which will enable organisations to embrace participation in their everyday work.

(Tom Jeffery, Director General,
Children, Young People and Families, DfES)

There are seven standards – the seven Ss: shared values, strategies, structures, systems, staff, skills and knowledge, and style of leadership. The mapping and planning tool raises the following questions for organisations to address. These have been reproduced here, but the full documentation should be downloaded and used.

1. Shared values

- Is there a strong commitment to involving learners at the heart of the organisation's values and beliefs?
- Who shares these values and how can you show this?
- Who has been involved in shaping and agreeing the shared values underpinning learners' participation? Have learners been involved themselves?
- How are a range of learners to be included, especially from groups who are often left out?
- What are the benefits of involving learners for themselves, for the organisation, its services, staff and leaders?
- Is there shared understanding of the boundaries of active involvement, who is meant to benefit and how is this reviewed?

2. Strategies

- How are you developing the strategy? Are you involving leaders, staff and learners?
- Are you using the 'Hear by Right' standards framework and the mapping and planning tool (on a CD-Rom)?
- Are there specific ways for learners to have an input?
- Does the strategy have the backing of those with power to deliver and of the learners who are meant to benefit?
- Are the benefits learners in improved services clearly expressed and measurable within the strategy?
- Are there clear timescales and resources to deliver the strategy?
- How are you monitoring and reviewing the strategy and the impact of learners' involvement?
- Are the various strategies linked up to maximise benefit?
- Are there any areas covered by the strategy that learners should not be asked to scrutinise? Why?

3. Structures

- What structures will best serve the interests of all involved, particularly excluded young people?
- Have learners been asked what approaches best suit their needs and where and when they prefer to meet?
- What structures already exist inside or outside the organisation that support the learners?
- Which learners tend to be included and excluded from participating? How can this be responded to?
- Are there approaches outlined in the briefing *Involving children and young people: an introduction* that may be relevant?

4. Systems

- What systems and procedures are needed to make sure participation is conducted in a safe and sound manner?
- Are they in place and shared and reviewed with learners, people and partner organisations?
- How are inclusive practices and policies promoted, for example, on refreshments, venue, communication and timing of meetings?
- How is involvement acknowledged and rewarded?
- Can you prove the impact of learners' participation on decision-making and on the services they use?
- What review and evaluation systems are there?
- Are you using the 'Hear by Right' What's Changed tool?
- Have you shared your learning and evidence of change, for example, on www.nya.org.uk/hearbyright?

5. Staff

- How do you make sure staff really do support the active involvement of learners? Do participation workers understand and make the most of their roles?
- What do you do when they do not understand or make the most of their roles?
- How can you best involve learners in recruitment and selection and induction?
- Where can you get sufficient resources to ensure adequate dedicated staffing for active involvement work?
- Which partners are best placed to support learners' participation across the organisations, partnerships or in the community?

6. Skills and knowledge

- Is there capacity building for learners ?
- How can adults be helped to listen to and learn from learners ?
- What is the best way to involve learners in the design and delivery of training ?
- How will learners get information they need to participate ?
- How important or possible is it to reduce jargon in agendas, papers and discussions involving learners ? Or is this the language they need to learn ?
- How can decision-making be more inclusive and accessible to less confident or less experienced and younger people ?
- How can expectations be both realistic and challenging, without patronising or overloading learners ?

7. Style of leadership

- What is the best style of leadership to help one-off examples of involving learners get established in the decision-making fabric of the organisation ?
- How can champions show enough leadership without letting everyone else off the hook ?
- How will the organisation demonstrate to learners that it is serious about their involvement ?
- Will leaders hold firm to their commitments when the pressure is on, things go wrong and finances are tight ?
- Will the organisation demonstrate to partners the benefits of the active involvement of learners ?
- How will leaders manage conflicting views among learners, staff, elected members, trustees and partners ?

(Badham and Wade 2005)

Annex. Further information

References and further reading

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- Ruddock J (2005). *Pupil voice is here to stay!* for QCA Futures, www.qca.org.uk
- Ruddock J and Flutter J (nd). *Consulting young people in schools*, ESRC Project, Consulting Pupils About Teaching and Learning, www.consultingpupils.co.uk

Useful websites

Active Citizenship Centre
www.active-citizenship.org.uk

British Youth Council
www.byc.org.uk

Carnegie Young People's Initiative
www.carnegietrust.org.uk

Consulting Pupils About Teaching and Learning (ESRC Project)
www.consultingpupils.co.uk

Every Child Matters
www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/participation

LSN's vocational learning website
www.vocationallearning.org.uk

National Union of Students
www.nus.org.uk

The National Youth Agency 'Hear by Right'
www.nya.org.uk

The NIACE / NYA Young Adult Learners Partnership
www.niace.org.uk/research/YALP

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
www.qca.org.uk

The Russell Commission on volunteering
www.russellcommission.org

School Councils UK
www.scholcouncils.org.uk

UK Youth Parliament
www.ukyouthparliament.com

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