

## **Review of the Wider Access Regional Forums – options paper**

### **Purpose**

- 1 This paper presents some options for the future organisation and funding of the forums and national structures. These options are based on the discussions the Council executive has had with groups of stakeholders over recent months.
- 2 We offer these options to stimulate discussion. Following this discussion the Council's executive will feed the outcome into the Council's decisions on the future arrangements for the forums.

### **Background to the review**

- 3 At its meeting on 9 December 2005 the Council agreed its proposed action plan flowing from the Learning for All report. The action plan outlined the need to review the structure, role, capacity and impact of the wider access regional forums and implement the changes required to put them on a longer-term, secure footing. This was identified as a priority action. The executive began the review process in January 2006.
- 4 As part of the review we have consulted with the following groups:
  - current chairs and vice-chairs;
  - previous chairs;
  - current managers/co-ordinators;
  - staff currently involved in projects funded by the forums; and
  - other key stakeholders including schools, local authorities and community learning and development.

## **Outcomes of the consultation**

- 5 The key issues and recommendations emerging from the consultation are outlined in Annex A. We have summarised these under the three headings:
- Local/regional issues;
  - National issues; and
  - Issues for the Council, including remit of the forums.
- 6 During the consultation we received positive feedback from all the groups we spoke to about the way the regional forums have developed their role to meet local need, and are continuing to do this. The groups also provided comments on many things which they felt should be changed to further strengthen and improve the function of the forums and put them on a long-term footing.
- 7 There was strong agreement on the key issues, particularly at the national and strategic level, and the groups made recommendations as to how we might take this forward. There was greater divergence of views at the local/regional level, particularly in relation to operational issues such as funding and staffing.

## **Proposals for change**

- 8 We have addressed the key issues emerging from the consultation in this paper. We have not included a great level of detail at this stage preferring instead to stimulate discussion around the options.

### ***Remit of the forums***

- 9 At the outset of our discussions many stakeholders emphasised the importance of clarity on the purpose and remit of the forums as a starting point for discussion on the other issues. We have revisited and revised the remit of the forums.

- 10 **We welcome views on the draft remit below.**

### ***Draft remit***

The forums exist to:

- Promote wider participation in post-compulsory education – both further and higher – in their area by facilitating and funding collaborative work between universities and colleges and other partners;
- raising aspirations; and
- disseminating good practice in widening participation.

We recognise that many of the actions to widen participation are the responsibility of individual universities or colleges, of local authorities or of national bodies. We do not expect the work of the forums to replace these. Forums should help ensure that the best institutional practice becomes more widespread and to help implement national policy on widening participation in a regional context where this is best done collaboratively.

Forums should work with others to identify the priorities within their areas and to identify which areas are best addressed by collaborative action.

The Funding Council will fund forums to help support collaborative projects or services which help widen participation in their area and pilot new ways of widening participation.

Forums should include the universities and colleges in their region. The Funding Council also encourages strong links with other stakeholders – such as schools and local authorities – either through membership of the forum itself or through other links.

We expect each forum to support activities that support:

- the implementation of the Council's *Learning for All* report (and other relevant policy documents the Funding Council may identify);
- work with the schools sector, particularly in areas of low participation to raise aspirations and support transitions to post compulsory education;
- work to support FE/HE articulation; and
- work with adults and with communities where participation in HE is low.

We will expect forums to have clear plans and targets for work in each of these areas and any other areas of need they have identified.

### ***Funding the forums***

- 12 We expect the need for the forums will continue for the foreseeable future. The Council will channel the funding through a lead institution. (See later section for possible variations within this model.) Fixed-term funding will inhibit long-term commitment to this issue and create planning blight towards the end of periods of funding so:

- we will fund the forums on the basis of a rolling two-year agreement between the funding Councils and each forum. This will allow the forum to decide how they use the funding to meet the needs they identify for their area; and
- any decision to end funding to a forum or to alter the level to a major extent will be signalled two years in advance. We therefore do not expect the lead institution to have to build in significant contingency funding to accommodate severance arrangements as this can be addressed within the notice period.

**13 We welcome views on the proposals for future funding of the forums.**

*Local/regional issues*

- 14 Some stakeholders felt that the forum boundaries were artificial. However, there was widespread support for maintaining the four forum regions with no change to the geographical boundaries. Some stakeholders suggested that the forums could share staff and expertise as appropriate across forum boundaries. We would encourage this but would not prescribe any particular model. The main issue for many was that the learners within the regions should have parity of opportunity and support.
- 15 Some of the groups raised issues around the employment of staff and the problems arising for the institutions offering the contracts of employment. We explored different options for the employment of staff, including the creation of a neutral regional or national body to employ and host the project staff. However, the cost of this option and the associated disruption would be unreasonably high. There was general agreement that as much as the funding as possible should go to the projects for the benefit of the learners. We therefore do not propose to change the current arrangements for employing forum staff. The proposed arrangements for future funding of the forum may help to alleviate some of the issues raised during the consultation.
- 16 **We welcome views on the position outlined above.**
- 17 We heard differing opinions from the groups on the benefits and disbenefits of accessing and distributing project funds appropriately. Most of those consulted agreed that the funding was an incentive that ensured regional buy-in, support and interest. However, one forum considered that the process of disbursing funds was a distraction from the core business of developing partnerships and local approaches to widening participation. We have outlined an option for the Council to support those forums with project funding by offering administrative support from the Council. We are not proposing that all forums would have to operate in this way: some were happy with the current arrangements. For that reason we are proposing a model where a forum could request that SFC becomes more involved in the funding of projects/ and the holding of funds but the default position be as it is presently.

- 18 **We would welcome your views on this option outlined below offering support in administering project funds.**
- 19 Where there would be a benefit to a forum in releasing staff from the administrative burden of managing and disbursing project funds and where the forum wants this SFC could use its administrative and monitoring procedures to disburse project funds directly on the advice the forum. This could free up the lead institution and the managers/co-ordinators to focus on other priorities.
- 20 In the consultation and discussion with managers/co-ordinators it was clear that they are balancing their time across a number of areas including project funding and management, local partnership building and networking, and monitoring, evaluation and research. We suggest that the Council executive work more closely with forum managers in future to share our expertise and input on the gathering and analysis of data related to widening participation, both locally and nationally.

### ***National issues***

- 21 During the consultation nearly all stakeholders expressed some disappointment that the SWARF meetings, which bring together the chairs, vice-chairs, and managers with the Funding Council and the Scottish Executive, had not been as successful as had been hoped in providing a forum for strategic-level sharing of good practice and provision of policy advice. We received many suggestions on how this structure and remit could be improved and strengthened to deliver a national agenda for widening participation.
- 22 We propose that we continue with a national forum for the chairs and vice-chairs of the forums but that we widen the membership to include other stakeholders and a small number of members who would be appointed for their expertise – either academic or as practitioners – in widening participation work in schools, articulation or work with communities. We also suggest membership from other stakeholder bodies.
- 23 In order to align the work of this body as closely as possible with the implementation of *Learning for All*, we propose that this body should help advise the Council on the annual publication and event that we will be holding to monitor progress on *Learning for All*. For this reason we suggest that the new committee be serviced more directly by the Funding Council executive and suggest that it is chaired by the Council’s Director of Learning Policy and Strategy.

### **24 Draft remit of national body**

To:

- bring together national expertise to inform the Funding Council’s and the forums’ widening participation work;

- promote and disseminate good practice in widening participation; and
- advise the Funding Council on progress with the implementation of *Learning for All* and the annual publication and event to report on progress.

## 25 **Membership**

- Director of the Council's Learning Policy and Strategy (Chair);
- the chairs and vice-chairs of the wider access regional forums;
- 3 members with expertise respectively in widening participation work in schools, articulation or work with communities;
- the Scottish Executive;
- Universities Scotland and the Association of Scottish Colleges; and
- the managers/ co-ordinators of the 4 forums, the SFC executive and national co-ordinator for widening participation as observers.

26 If the remit and model for taking forward the national group is endorsed we envisage that a key part of the National Co-ordinator's remit over the next two year period would be to support the Council in establishing and supporting the group and taking the remit forward. This would also enable more resource to be used on the practitioner-level sharing of good practice and information.

**27 We would welcome views on this remit, membership and support arrangements for the national group.**

**28 We would welcome your views on any other issues raised during the consultation that you feel we need to address directly at this stage.**

## **Further information**

29 Contact Linda McLeod, Senior Policy Officer, tel: 0131 313 6694, [lmcleod@sfc.ac.uk](mailto:lmcleod@sfc.ac.uk) or John Kemp, Assistant Director, tel: 0131 313 6637, [jkemp@sfc.ac.uk](mailto:jkemp@sfc.ac.uk)

## Annex A

### Summary of key issues identified during the consultation with stakeholders and recommendations for consideration

#### 1. Local/regional issues:

- tensions between strategic role and project funding;
- project funding creates tensions for the Forum Executive;
- lack of transparency as to how the Forum funds are distributed and the process;
- sustainability – should be looking to mainstream, not indefinite project funding;
- forums do not need to deliver on everything – concentrate on where the partnership approach can make a difference;
- need a common framework for project evaluation to see what makes a difference;
- do more to ensure institutional buy-in – make the business case;
- look at how to involve all institutions locally – some remain outwith the radar;
- consider if the Chair and Vice-Chair should be funded/supported in some way;
- a central, neutral body to employ staff;
- local and national identity could be clearer;
- do more to build relationships across and between institutions;
- wider representation on the regional Forum Executive;
- need to link more with the widening participation projects that are not funded by the Forums eg projects funded through Council's strategic funds and involving a number of institutions across Scotland;
- clearer guidance on the role of the managers/co-ordinators and the balance of their time across a number of areas including project funding and management, local partnership building and networking, and monitoring, evaluation and research;

- regional managers need to be more visible;
- involve widening participation practitioners beyond Forum funded projects and across Forums;
- national priorities should align across the regions;
- sensitivities around the lead institution;
- dissemination could be better at local and national level;
- employment issues – adds confusion when project staff are employed by different institutions;
- employment issues – helps when project staff are employed and placed in different institutions;
- need to be creative/innovative in deprived areas – and need permission to do this;
- clearer guidance on the role of the Chairs/Vice-Chairs – lobbying, accountability, facilitating, giving a mandate, supporting, main focus/influence should be out towards the institutions and other stakeholders.

## **2. National issues:**

- develop and support national projects more effectively and maintain links/outputs locally;
- need a national strategy;
- need a national identity;
- develop relationships between institutions in different regions;
- lack of joining up at national level;
- link with widening participation projects that are not funded through the regional forums but have a regional impact eg WHAP/WHAN;
- more national dialogue and with stakeholders at the national level;
- clarification/simplification across the widening participation agenda;
- widening participation branding/identity – across Scotland;
- national priorities should align across the regions;

- dissemination/sharing good practice nationally;
- national updates useful;
- evaluate and measure success/impact;
- more dialogue across the four Forums;
- need high level national group, with national input on schools, communities and FE/HE transitions.

### **3. SFC issues:**

- SFC needs to be much more specific about its widening participation agenda and policy approach to this, including staffing, remit and policy implications;
- SFC should clarify the remit of the forums;
- clearer direction/purpose/definition for the national SWARF Executive or an alternative which brings other stakeholders on board;
- clearer direction/purpose/definition for the National Co-ordinator;
- SFC to support the forums in disbursing forum funds;
- SFC should acknowledge scale of the issue (as should other stakeholders);
- SFC policy should be central to any new structures;
- direction on how the Forums should engage locally with stakeholder groups and organisations; and
- clear responsibility for assessing the quality of the widening participation projects.