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ABSTRACT

This booklet gives smaller adult and community learning (ACL) providers and their partners a practical insight into how to adapt current approaches to quality improvement for their own institutions. The first sections set out how they can do the following: plan the process; collect, collate, and analyze data; make value judgements and act upon them; and organize processes for continual monitoring and review. Each stage is looked at in turn, and the issues facing smaller providers and their partners are considered. The final section, Local Education Authorities Contracting with Smaller Providers, outlines how local education authorities can work with their ACL partners on self-assessment. Appendixes include lists of 11 references and 8 useful Web sites. (YLB)

NIACE
THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR ADULT LEARNING

learning and skills development agency

fit for purpose

self-assessment for small providers

Mark Ravenhall, Juliet Merrifield and Sue Gardener

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adult and community learning
quality support programme

A 3-year programme to support ACL providers to meet quality requirements of inspection and funding agencies and improve their provision. It is run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in partnership with the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) and is funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The programme includes an advice and information service, a website, quality improvement networks, staff development workshops and consultancy, development projects and case studies. Details of the programme, extra copies of this guide and back-up materials are available on the website www.qualityACL.org.uk

Further guides and workshops are planned on:

- equality and diversity
- involving part-time staff in the quality agenda
- measuring achievement in non-accredited learning.

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Contents

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Introduction

Each provider should seek to develop a form of self-assessment that is responsive to its own organisational needs and the needs of its client groups.

Learning and Skills Council October 2001, p4

Adult and community learning (ACL) is diverse and complex, with providers ranging from large general services to specialist colleges and small community organisations. Learners choose the provider that is right for them. Wherever people choose to learn, they are entitled to expect high-quality provision.

ACL providers organise learning opportunities to suit the needs of their learners; their quality systems should aim to do the same.

'Raising standards' in provision does not mean 'standardisation', however. Recent approaches to self-assessment and development planning have placed the responsibility on providers to devise systems that suit their organisational aims and benefit the people with whom they work.

This presents challenges to smaller ACL providers. Such providers may:

- not have specialist quality improvement staff
- have concerns about their capacity to meet quality requirements compared with other organisations in the sector
- not have benefited from investment in management information
- see their learning provision simply as part of a range of other services
- provide relatively few learning opportunities per year
- work in partnership within a network of providers
- have neither partners nor the support of a local Learning Partnership.

This approach also presents challenges to those local education authorities (LEAs) and others that fund and coordinate the work of a range of small providers in their area.

This booklet aims to give a practical insight into how to adapt and organise current approaches to quality improvement to meet the needs of your organisation and your learners. It complements the earlier publication in this series: *Self-assessment and development planning for adult and community learning providers* (Kenway and Reisenberger 2001).

The booklet draws on case studies from a range of organisations: small single-purpose ACL providers, multi-purpose agencies for whom ACL is a small part of their work, and LEAs that support them. It outlines approaches to self-assessment and development planning that work for smaller providers – approaches that are fit for the purpose of your organisation. It will be of interest to all ACL providers – whether funded directly by a local Learning and Skills Council or through contracts with local education authorities – and to the LEAs supporting these contracts.

Where to start

Smaller providers of ACL will find it helpful to read the earlier sections first. They give advice on the practicalities of self-assessment where learning programmes are actually being offered and delivered.

The section 'Local education authorities contracting with smaller providers' focuses on the LEA as a main partner in the process of self-assessment, and managers in LEAs which secure ACL by contract with smaller partners may find it helpful to read this section first. There are other models where smaller voluntary and community providers have formed partnerships to help them liaise with LSCs or to monitor and improve their quality standards. Models include voluntary sector consortia and Open College Networks. Managers responsible for quality and self-assessment across such partnerships will also find that the section 'Local education authorities contracting with smaller providers' contains useful ideas and approaches for their contexts.

New challenges for a new context

New to self-assessment?

Many adult and community learning (ACL) providers are approaching self-assessment for the first time. All are having to confront the new challenges presented.

Self-assessment is a systematic approach to reviewing and improving your performance. It is not merely a preparation for external monitoring and inspection. It is an approach that has been developed for the whole of the post-16 sector in education and training.

ACL is only one small part of that sector and is characterised by a number of factors that have an impact on the quality improvement process:

- the workforce is largely part-time, particularly those with most contact with the learner
- where it is organised by local education authorities (LEAs), ACL is usually delivered on many sites within the same organisation; the average number of locations per local authority is 72 (Merton 2001, p14)
- a significant amount of local authority work is delivered in partnership, often through contracts with other organisations in the area.

Within the sector there is a range of providers, from very large direct-delivery LEA services to organisations for whom ACL is only part of their work. Funding bodies and inspectorates recognise the diversity of the ACL sector and the challenges it faces in producing self-assessment reports and development plans.

Self-assessment should help funding bodies and inspectorates judge the quality of your provision and, more importantly, help you improve your service to learners.

One of the best ways of ensuring that the process really does lead to improvement is for it to be 'owned' by the organisation carrying it out. It should also involve those who ultimately benefit from the provision: the learners.

The purpose of self-assessment

Self-assessment encourages a 'culture of continuous improvement' (DfEE 2001, p2; LSC August 2001, p2). The provider – the organisation with which the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has a direct contract – is responsible for assuring the quality of its own provision. In carrying out self-assessment, the provider can judge how well it is doing the job that it is being paid for and how to improve its work.

The challenge for smaller ACL providers is that their contractual relationship with the LSC may not be a significant part of their activity. The majority of their funding may come from elsewhere, with quite different 'strings' attached to it. Such providers must find a way to satisfy the requirements of self-assessment without diverting resources or detracting from learning.

The requirements of self-assessment

There are four requirements relating to self-assessment that providers must satisfy. What does this mean for smaller ACL providers or those LEAs working in partnership with them? See Figure 1 opposite.

There is no common format for, or approach to, self-assessment. The process is about finding a way to report that suits your individual organisation. If you work in partnership with LEAs, you can expect guidance and support on the shape and content of your self-assessment reports (SARs), perhaps even contributing a 'mini-SAR' to the main LEA one. In any event, self-assessment should be 'undertaken as an integral part of strategic and operational planning, not as a bolt-on activity' (LSC October 2001, p4).

Figure 1 Self-assessment and ACL – content and structure

Self-assessment should deal with all aspects of the organisation's activity, in particular the quality of learners' experiences and the standards learners achieve. (LSC October 2001, pp5–6)	Your organisation may have a wider remit than just ACL. If so, you need to report only on those aspects of your work that have an impact on current and potential adult learners.
Providers must address the quality statements in the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) and the LSC and the Employment Service (ES) quality and financial probity requirements. (LSC October 2001, pp5–6)	There are over 60 quality statements in the CIF. Although it is unlikely that you will need explicitly to judge your work against all of these, you will be expected to address in some detail the CIF's seven key questions.
Self-assessment should take account of the quality improvement strategies of the LSC and the [Learning and Skills] Council's framework for provider performance review. (LSC October 2001, pp5–6)	These strategies apply to the whole of the post-16 sector. They are understandably based on the experience of the majority of activity in the sector and are in the process of being fine-tuned as the needs of the sector are better understood. For the latest developments, see the LSC website: www.lsc.gov.uk
The structure of reports should, as far as possible, be similar to that of published inspection reports. (LSC October 2001, pp5–6)	It is sensible to use a format that others across the sector use. The format of inspection reports follows the CIF, with detailed commentary by curriculum area. This may not be possible for smaller providers or where provision cuts across curriculum boundaries. Use your judgement in deciding on a format that best represents the work you do. Unlike inspection reports, self-assessment reports should be backed up strongly by evidence that is cross-referenced throughout.

The process of self-assessment and development planning: five key steps

Self-assessment as a process is unlikely to be different from your existing quality assurance schemes. In this booklet this process is simplified into five key steps:

Planning the process	Preparing for self-assessment and deciding on your approaches and standards and who to involve...
Knowing your practice	Collecting evidence, collating and analysing data, relating data to standards of performance...
Making judgements	Asking yourself whether the evidence tells you enough, putting a value on what it tells you, prioritising greatest need...
Acting on judgements	Writing and prioritising targets for improvement, planning for the greatest impact on the learner's experience...
Living with self-assessment	Having appropriate processes and systems for monitoring and reviewing your development plans and the self-assessment process itself.

The process is cyclical: the 'living with self-assessment' stage will inform next year's 'planning the process' stage. In the following sections, we look at each stage in turn and consider the issues facing smaller providers and their partners.

Planning the process

What to do and when

You will need to produce a self-assessment report (SAR) and development plan, or you may have to contribute to one being compiled by an organisation from which you subcontract work, such as an FE college or LEA. The format of the SAR will influence the processes you go through and the timescale.

However, the SAR must also be fit for the purpose of reporting accurately on your organisation. Although the LSC has 'not prescribed an entirely standard format' for the SAR (LSC October 2001, p6), try to address the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)/Ofsted areas of learning or curriculum areas and include a section on leadership and management. If you already have a method for reporting to your governors or trustees that applies to the whole organisation, you may be able to adapt this to answer the questions in the CIF.

Most organisations already have an annual planning and reporting cycle of some kind, usually related to funding. Using that cycle as a basis, identify and plan the following processes:

- matching your current activities, processes and participants to the CIF seven key questions and identifying the evidence you need to collect, how much of it is already collected and any new practices you need to take account of, including those identified by the LSC
- identifying participants in evidence collection and in evaluating your evidence
- reviewing, evaluating and grading – with internal or external moderation
- confirming and amending your judgements in consultation with all parties
- maintaining existing review and evaluation processes and introducing new ones, if your planning shows that you need them.

Your resources – time, money and personnel – for carrying out self-assessment are inevitably limited. Make use of existing resources, such as:

- your current planning cycle – this will indicate at what points in the year self-assessment can be merged into existing processes
- gatherings and events already planned – at which participants could contribute to self-assessment by expressing their views
- informal spaces in your buildings – information could be gathered and disseminated in the canteen or hall or on the stairs
- reports already prepared for funding agencies and other audiences.

Your most important resources are your staff, particularly those who have most contact with your learners, and the learners themselves. Involve both staff and learners in the self-assessment process.

Example Design a colourful a poster depicting a big jigsaw puzzle, with each piece of the puzzle representing an area of the organisation that you want to examine. Put up the poster in a canteen or coffee bar, with Post-it notes beside it. Ask users to write their thoughts on the Post-it notes and place them on the appropriate parts of the 'jigsaw' so that it becomes a kind of 'graffiti board'. Make sure that you can identify the respondents in broad group terms: students in different subject areas could use different coloured Post-its, for example, or students and staff could use different colours.

For groups of learners who do not currently have the skills to communicate in this way, think of other approaches more appropriate to their needs.

Who to involve

Many organisations provide learning opportunities for adults as part of a larger portfolio of activities, using many different strands of funding. Many purposes therefore fit together to meet a core organisational purpose. For example:

- language learning, cultural activities, housing advice and skills development may all serve the integration of refugees and asylum seekers
- a cooperative canteen, childcare facilities and family learning may serve families in temporary housing
- community research, training local support workers and self-help groups may combine in a project addressing health issues.

Other organisations focus solely on ACL provision.

The set of people involved in the self-assessment process will differ from institution to institution: you may have a governing body, a board or a group of trustees, or you may be accountable to a members' group or a user group. How will you brief those who have oversight of your organisation? How will you enlist them in the process? Do any of them have experience of similar processes in other institutions?

Whatever the type of your organisation, the general rule in planning the self-assessment process is to consider who has a stake and who should be involved, for example:

- trustees or management committee members
- users – learners and others (eg people seeking information and advice, people who refer clients to you)
- management at different levels, from head of centre to coordinators or lead tutors
- administrative and support staff
- teaching staff and volunteers
- other interested parties (eg community partners, your LEA or local FE college).

*We use the canteen or hallways and stairs of the building to **tell** people about the self-assessment process and findings, **ask** people what they think about particular questions, and **involve** users and staff in reflection and planning.*

Multi-purpose provider, London

Developing capacity for self-assessment

Your staff may not think of themselves primarily as tutors and be anxious about the self-assessment process. Alleviate their worries by:

- working in partnership with another small provider that has experience of self-assessment
- providing briefing sessions or training events, perhaps with the help of your local FE college or LEA
- circulating reports of recent inspections of similar organisations, highlighting key findings and asking your staff what they feel this means for your own organisation.

Involve staff and others in a self-assessment team which leads the process. This could include managers, experienced tutors, members of the governing body, and users. The team can plan how to involve other interested parties in the review process. It can also take a lead in setting standards against which to measure performance or identifying existing standards that could be used.

Setting standards

Standards are expectations of what 'good practice' should be in the context of your institution. Judgement (or evaluation) always involves comparing performance with a set of standards, but often these are not stated or examined. If you are already using external standards, think about how you might use the evidence you have gathered to prove you are achieving these standards to meet some of the criteria of the CIF questions 1–7. Take the example of PQASSO (Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations) (Farley 2000), widely used in the voluntary and community sector. All its quality areas (from Area 1, Planning for Quality, to Area 12, Results) relate strongly to all the criteria of CIF question 7 'How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?' The same process can be used of examining evidence for other quality systems like Investors in People, Charter Mark or ones you may have developed in-house (see 'Making judgements') and applying it to the relevant parts of the CIF.

Figure 2 Create an evidence grid

Standard	**Interpretation** (from CIF draft guidance)	**Existing evidence**	**New evidence to be gathered** What?	Who?	When?
Accommodation provides a suitable setting for good teaching, training and learning and support for learners. CIF 3	*Venues used serve local communities well. Accommodation is conducive to learning, irrespective of whether the provider owns the buildings used. There are suitable childcare facilities.* CIF draft guidance, ALI 2001, p64	Sources include: □ accommodation policies □ maintenance records □ childcare policies □ inspection records (childcare) □ learner surveys (questions about accommodation).	□ Records on use of rooms □ Records of notes re renting other accommodation □ Photographs □ Equipment lists		

Source: Figure 2 is based on work developed by consultant Sue Benn for Friends Centre and Portslade Community College, 2001.

18

There are positive aspects to this variety of activity and accountability. You may already be using a set of standards in your wider activity that could be adapted for adult learning. If you have conducted surveys or undertaken reviews for purposes not explicitly required by the CIF but which could contribute evidence to it, explore their potential as evidence for the SAR.

Decide what evidence you will draw on to make your plan and then use it to back up your judgements.

Knowing your practice

Gathering evidence

We're keeping a diary, we'll look at the first term, and assess it against the CIF.

Multi-purpose provider, London

Before gathering new evidence, think about what you already know:

- **Who** has useful knowledge?
- **What** is known?
- **Where** is the knowledge held?

Part of the challenge of the self-assessment process for a small organisation lies in tapping into people's knowledge so that it can be written down, analysed and evaluated – and ultimately acted upon.

Key sources of evidence are:

- statistics and data
- learners
- other users
- tutors
- volunteers
- administrative and support staff
- staff who have contact with learners and other users (reception staff, information, advice and guidance workers, canteen and crèche workers, caretakers and cleaners)
- partners and other interested parties in the community, including other providers, your local Learning Partnership, referral groups.

Make the gathering of new evidence manageable by prioritising – what do you need for the first year and what can be included in your development plan for future years? For example, if many of the tutors in your non-accredited courses are not currently assessing non-accredited learning, you will not be able to gather much evidence of learning progress in the first year, but could plan how to do so in future years.

Planning evidence collection

When you have thought through all the different kinds of evidence you need, make a data collection plan. Consider four questions:

1. **Significance.** How important is the evidence? Crucial evidence warrants more time and resources.
2. **Timing.** When do you need the evidence in order to analyse and evaluate it? How long will the data collection take?
3. **Resources.** What people resources do you have for data collection, and how much time can each person offer? What other resources do they need (eg access to telephones, paper, computers)?
4. **Management.** Who will manage the data collection, keeping track of who has agreed to do what, making sure that tasks get done, gathering together the incoming data, and ensuring that any gaps are filled? Data management can be done by one individual or by a team (provided that the team is clear about who does what).

Collecting the data is only the first step – allow time to analyse it, write it up and report on it to others.

Figure 3 A timetable for data gathering, analysis, reporting and action-planning

September	October	November
□ Health and safety walkabout, plan work needed □ Learner information materials □ Tutor inductions □ Course files established □ Plan staff development based on tutor input and strategic plan □ Management committee review of curriculum □ LSC early monitoring survey □ Data on students	□ Fire drills, all class periods, note issues, add to H&S plan □ Enter student data onto simple data capture form or database □ Review initial course files □ Learner evaluation 'first impressions' survey □ Review attendance data for early dropout (third week of term) □ Early indicators of problems, new tutors, and any needing additional support □ LSC provider review	□ Tutor feedback □ Observations (all new tutors and 25% sample of existing tutors) □ Analyse observation reports and plan staff development □ Appraisals for all tutors who teach 6 hrs/wk or more □ Report and accounts (short version for wide distribution) □ AGM and management committee □ Data report on LEA student numbers

Source: this is an extract from an annual timetable, which includes some 'catch up' activity that in future years might be done in earlier months.

Collecting and analysing evidence

There are many ways of gathering data: some will be quantitative, prescribed by the LSC and required of all providers; other qualitative data will also be fit for your organisation's purpose. The tools that you choose for gathering data will depend on what you want to find out, what you need to find out, and the time and resources available for managing the process.

You could:

- *ask questions*: in conversations, focus groups, group discussions, interviews, surveys (by telephone or by post or in person)
- *involve people in 'visualisation' techniques*: drawing 'maps' which symbolise problems and solutions
- *use observation*: gauge levels of social interaction, isolation or anxiety by observing both classes and more informal situations – during tea breaks, before and after class, in the corridors and on the stairs
- *examine study records*: already collected by your organisation (eg attendance, enrolment, withdrawal, retention, achievement, progression) or other agencies (eg characteristics of the local community, transportation patterns).

Before analysing your data, think about its:

- reliability – do you have enough data from enough different sources?
- consistency – would someone else collecting evidence get the same answer?
- credibility – do key stakeholders, tutors and students agree that the evidence has 'truth value'?

How you carry out the analysis will depend on what data you have and what the LSC requires. You may have: statistics (a survey, attendance records, learning assessments); comments (interviews, a 'graffiti board', a group discussion); or photos, drawings and symbols from visual research techniques.

23

Analysing data

Evidence that is not analysed and reflected upon is not useful. There are three main steps in analysing data:

- *cluster and group*: draw together similar data; this 'clustering' allows you to describe your data and see its common qualities
- *compare and contrast*: look for patterns and relationships in your data
- *integrate and interpret*: examine the clusters and patterns to try to answer your questions about the data.

Cluster and group

Think about the possible variations in responses that might be associated with different learner characteristics. You could examine responses by course participation (whether learners in different classes have different responses), by gender, by age group, by day-time and evening participation.

Example **Here are answers to one sample survey question from learners in a painting and drawing class and from learners in an ICT class:**

Would you prefer it if the course offered a form of national or local accreditation?

	Yes	No
Painting and drawing class	0 responses	5 responses
Introduction to computers class	4 responses	1 response

24

Compare and contrast

Now see whether the pattern you have found is a chance variation or applies more generally. Taking the example above, for instance, would more learners in all the ICT classes support accreditation, and would the responses of the painting and drawing class learners be similar to those in other art classes? Do men and women give similar responses across all age groups or is age more significant than gender in the variation in responses?

Example ***Do you feel you received enough information about the course before enrolling?***

	Yes	No
Learners on accredited courses	121 (85%)	6 (4%)
Learners on non-accredited courses	61 (91%)	1 (1%)
All learners	182 (87%)	7 (3%)

Integrate and interpret

Look at the different patterns and use your contextual knowledge to interpret the findings. You may know, for example, about the different experiences of learners at different sites, or that daytime and evening learners have different demographic profiles and different expectations from the learning experience. Develop a hypothesis to explain the pattern you have found, and test it against other kinds of data you may have.

For example, you may conclude from your data that learners who are focused on work-related skills are more likely to want more detailed information before enrolling. You can test this by asking learners themselves, by checking the responses of learners in non-ICT but similar work-related courses, and by asking tutors about the kinds of questions learners have in the first class meeting.

Evidence for learner achievement

You will need to show that you know what progress learners are making. This does not necessarily mean examination results. There are many ways of showing that learners are achieving new skills and confidence. Think about:

- ways that are appropriate to your learners
- how to compare this year's performance with last year's or next year's
- what standards of achievement you would expect from learners on particular programmes.

Start by looking at a sample of learning programmes and note systematically how you record evidence of achievement. For example:

Learning programme	Evidence of achievement	How evidence is recorded
Young Parents Drop-in	Learners produce paintings on glass, negotiate a stall pitch and sell goods for the centre	□ Video diary □ Photograph □ Group diary □ Commentary on video, listing outcomes achieved
'Nifty Fifties' Drama Group	Revue put on during adult learners' week	□ Video of rehearsal and event □ Article in local newspaper
Working in a shop	Adults with learning difficulties work in a charity shop	□ Testimony of shop manager □ Advocacy group's independent evaluation

You will also need evidence to judge the quality of teaching and learning. How do you know that your tutors and other workers are doing a good job? How can you prove that you know?

Figure 4 Setting standards for achievement of learning outcomes

Standard to meet	**Sample evidence**	**How evidence is recorded**
Tutors 'show knowledge, technical competence and up-to-date expertise' CIF 2	□ Curriculum vitae □ References of staff □ Appraisal □ Supervision records	□ Summary of CV □ Skills audit of organisation □ Anonymised summaries of appraisal
Tutors 'challenge and inspire learners' CIF 2	□ Observation of learning sessions □ Testimony of learners on feedback poster/ 'writing wall'	□ Checklist for observation of teaching and learning □ Summary of learners' responses
Learners 'acquire new knowledge and skills and increase understanding' CIF 2	□ Learners demonstrate progress against own targets	□ Proposed learning outcomes identified in initial Individual Learning Plan updated by tutor to achieved outcomes at review dates (including final review)

27

Case study

The scenario below (The Riverside Centre) exemplifies ways in which evidence of quality, learning achievement and progression planning can be produced for non-accredited courses.

The Riverside Centre is a new multi-purpose drop-in and facility centre for refugee groups. It is a voluntary organisation that has been contracted by the local LEA to start non-accredited ESOL classes for small groups.

The ESOL tutor is experienced and well qualified, but new to the organisation. Working with her supervisor, she has devised a simple system of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) for the men and women on her 10-week modular learning programme. Each goes through an informal assessment process to enable the tutor to establish his or her level of understanding, speaking and reading; and learning objectives are individually identified and agreed and recorded with the learners. More advanced learners are often able to help beginners with this process by interpreting.

The ILPs are individually reviewed early in the programme and midway so that they can be adapted as necessary. At an end of programme review students are encouraged to say how they feel they have progressed, and to agree this with the tutor. Their next steps are also discussed and recorded.

The individual learning plans provide evidence that the learning is meeting the standards set in the CIF. One of the criteria under question 2 'How effective are teaching training and learning?' is:

with learners, develop individual learning plans, informed by initial assessment, that are reviewed and updated regularly.

The completed ILPs are recorded as evidence of achievement of learning objectives and of progression planning. They provide a quantifiable way of describing achievement which fits the way the learning programme works. The outcomes will be monitored and over a year will provide a baseline which will enable future targets to be set.

Figure 5 shows how the tutor and her learners have got on.

Figure 5 Statistical data for ESOL groups

Group	1	2	3
Students starting	10	12	15
Students retained	8	11	14
Students completing their ILPs	7	11	14
Percentage retention (starters vs students retained)	80%	92%	93%
Percentage ILP achievement (ILP completers vs students retained)	87%	100%	100%

Already data can be analysed to help set targets for next year's modules. The tutor and her learners have done well in this system, with an upward trend in both retention and achievement. Perhaps a target for retention could be set a little higher than has currently been achieved.

Making judgements

How robust is your evidence?

At the core of the self-assessment process is the need to **evaluate** how reliable your evidence is, **measure** your performance against the standards you have determined for good practice, and **compare** your organisation with others. This takes time and careful thought.

Be sceptical

Always bear in mind where your data came from and how reliable it is. Do not assume that numerical data is more reliable than other types of data – record-keeping can be sporadic, counting inaccurate, and the significance of figures uncertain.

Researchers often 'triangulate' data – they obtain data on the same question in different ways (see Figure 6 overleaf) – so that it is more credible and reliable. You may find this approach useful: for example, you could judge student satisfaction with your schemes by asking current students what they think, observing classes and studying attendance records. Use 'triangulation' to support small data sets or qualitative data.

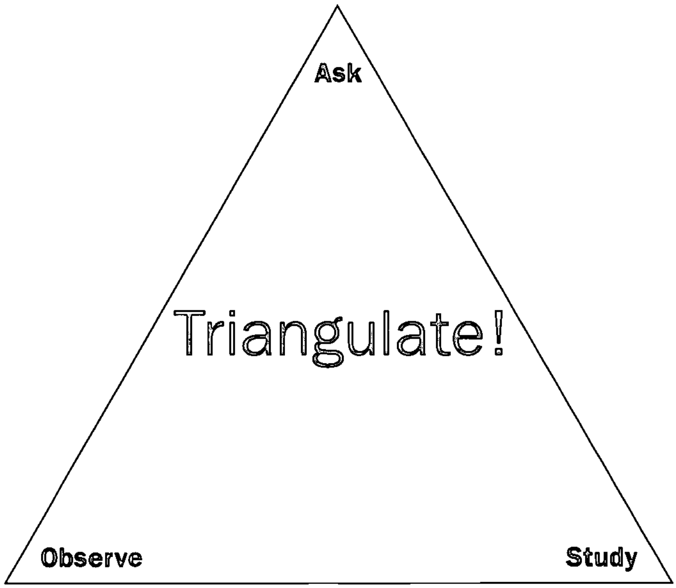
Figure 6 How reliable is your evidence?

Listen to learners

Tutor discussion groups

Invite input from other users

Survey people who enquired about learning programmes



Lesson observations

Informal interactions in canteen, hallways, rooms

Interaction in management committee

Attendance records

Complaints and suggestions

'Graffiti' comment boards

Tutor qualifications and staff development records

LSC prescribed data

Develop standards

Develop your own criteria for judging your organisation – what would you regard as 'satisfactory', 'good' or 'excellent'? Be as precise as you can in defining good practice. You cannot make judgements without having standards in mind.

Set expectations of good practice for:

- *student retention rates*: consider whether you need different standards for different subject areas
- *student satisfaction rates*: make sure that you have evidence from all students, including those who left before the end-of-course evaluation (see Ravenhall 2001)
- *graded teaching observations*: set standards for the percentage of class observations as 'good' or above (see Ewens 2001)
- *student achievement rates*: probably the most contentious and difficult area for standard-setting in ACL, as these are appropriate for only some areas
- *student progression*: did your learners return to a subject at a higher level, go on to a different course, go to another institution, begin an accredited course?

Recent guidance (see Figure 7) indicates the expected level of data required as part of self-assessment reports.

Figure 7 How will the LSC collect data from ACL providers?

- *The LSC intends to ensure stability, minimise disruption, ensure that new data collection minimises impact on current MI* [management information] *systems and maximise 'commonality' of data collected.*
- *To do this, it will use three data collection methods in 2002/3 – LSC on-line capture of data from forms (small providers only by agreement with local LSCs); provider on-line capture of data (direct input); provider on-line capture of batch data (exported from a provider MI system).*

  www.qualityACL.org.uk/news

Develop standards for process measures, such as:

- session plans – not just their existence, but also their quality and relationship to observed teaching
- teaching team meetings and minutes – not just their existence, but whether they address important issues and result in action
- learner information – whether learners find learner information useful, and whether it enables them to enrol on the right learning programme for them.

Figure 8 Checklist for robust evidence

Is the evidence **valid**?	It directly supports the strength or weakness claimed – not something else.	Yes/No
Is the evidence **quantifiable**?	Does it use performance indicators where they exist?	Yes/No
Is the evidence **sufficient**?	Is the sample large enough to draw conclusions from?	Yes/No
Is the evidence **current**?	Is the evidence recent enough to give an accurate picture at the time of writing?	Yes/No
Is the evidence **accurate**?	Is it verifiable from named sources of evidence?	Yes/No
Is the evidence **reliable**?	If it is collected again, would it be the same?	Yes/No

Source: adapted from Kenway and Reisenberger 2001, p24

Putting a value on what you know

When you have assembled your evidence base, draw out what it shows you about the strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement in your organisation.

If your organisation is not primarily an education provider, or you do not have substantial contact with, or support from, a mainstream ACL provider, you may feel vulnerable at this point. Work on your evidence base to develop confidence in what it shows and what you can identify as working well or less well.

Evaluative statements

For example, take learning styles. Suppose your evaluative statement reads as follows:

All tutors use materials to enable learners to identify their learning styles.

70% of session plans reviewed used learning styles to indicate differentiation in order to support learners more effectively in the classroom.

A minority of students refer to recognition of learning styles as a factor in helping them learn better.

This shows that although you have introduced some improvements, they are not yet fully effective. The more specific you are in the writing of your evaluative statements, the easier it is to write your development plan.

Grading

The other way of placing a value on your work is through grading. Grading is a method of external benchmarking. Allocate a grade to your provision and its leadership/management on the following scale:

1 Outstanding
2 Good
3 Satisfactory
4 Unsatisfactory
5 Very weak.

It is essential for small providers to work with others in moderating the grade they award themselves. If you work in partnership with an LEA or an FE college, it may be in their interest to enable this to happen.

Making comparisons

You may also want to compare your organisation with others, using other benchmarks, to form a judgement on how you are doing.

- Use outside moderation, in which an experienced outsider reviews your evidence against some accepted judgement criteria.
- Find a peer organisation (locally or elsewhere) that works with similar learners in similar ways and benchmark your data against theirs.
- Make local comparisons, even with different kinds of organisations which work in a common context, perhaps with some of the same kinds of students.

From evaluative judgements to development plans

An evaluative judgement places a value on the key parts of the work you do. It says whether they are strengths or weaknesses. Evaluative judgements should not address what are considered to be norms, for example that tutors are suitably qualified, which is what you would expect anyway.

Figure 9 From evaluative judgements to development plans

Features of an evaluative statement	**Features of a development plan**
They are **specific** and **measurable**: *40% of session plans in tutors' files did not address how all learners are actively involved in learning...*	**Specific** actions: new system of common lesson planning introduced **Measurable** outcomes: 80% of tutors receive induction in use of revised lesson plans in Term 1.
They address **impact** on the learner: *...this was a factor in learner withdrawal in 50% of investigated instances.*	Success criteria measure **impact** of action on learners: *learner withdrawal reduced by 10%... analysis of reasons for withdrawal show this is a factor in less than 10% of cases.*

For fuller explanation of evaluative judgements and development plans, see: Kenway and Reisenberger 2001, pp24–5 and pp34–5; LSC October 2001, Annexes E and F, pp23–6; and staff development materials at www.qualityACL.org.uk

Acting on judgements

Reporting and listening

When you have analysed your data and made judgements, report on them so that action can be taken. Think about who your report is aimed at and what form it should take to make it accessible and useable, for example :

- textual – a report, newsletter or poster
- visual – a drawing, chart or diagram ; a skit or drama
- verbal – a presentation to a meeting or informal chats with individuals.

Share your self-assessment report to ensure that everyone agrees that it is an accurate picture of the organisation. The resulting action plan is for use now, not for after your report has been validated or challenged by inspection.

You should have uncovered which issues are common across the organisation and which are specific to particular teams or sections. This will affect how the action plan is drawn up, who signs up to it, who is involved in carrying it out and what the timescale is.

Example **You have identified an issue in one section about the quality of session plans and the absence of end-of-session evaluation and feedback. Action needs to be taken by tutors and team leaders in that section, in consultation with learners. It is internal to that section.**

Actions across sections or teams may also be beneficial. The arts team, for example, has more regular and open feedback and evaluation practices than the ESOL team. Can the arts team run events to develop the richness of feedback from the ESOL users? Can learners in the advanced ESOL class facilitate a focus group for less fluent learners?

The development plan will only make sense in the context of planning across the whole organisation.

By reporting on the data, you involve stakeholders in the process of making changes. Get feedback from your audience – in discussion, on comment sheets, or via a 'graffiti board'. Ask people whether your data confirms their experience or opinion, surprises them, or needs further explanation. This feedback will help you test your data.

Development plans

It is estimated that 80% of improvement initiatives fail because of poorly thought-out development plans.

LSC October 2001, p12

The self-assessment review culminates in a development (or action) plan that sets priorities to address the most important issues through specific activities. The evaluative statements you develop as part of the judging process will identify the issues to be addressed in your development plan. This plan should focus on the key issues that have the most impact on learners.

An action plan should address four main points:

1 **What needs to be done?**
Good action plans can be both visionary and realistic, and are clear about what must be done to achieve the changes desired. What options are possible within current constraints of resources and structures? What possibilities are there for new resources or changes in structures?

2 **Who needs to take action?**
Good action plans are clear about who will have responsibility to do what.

3 **What is the time frame for action?**
Good action plans have realistic time frames and a way of checking that things are going according to plan. Distinguish between action that can be taken immediately, in the medium-term (the next year or two) and in the long-term.

4 **How will you know that change is happening?**
Make sure that your plan will generate evidence that you can use to continue the cycle of self-assessment in the future.

You will not be able to address all the issues at once. Focus on those that are likely to have the greatest immediate impact on learners and those that are doable by reassigning existing resources (rather than finding new resources). Plan for morale-boosting 'quick wins'.

For small ACL providers that are under-resourced and have limited management structures, resources are key: how can you make change happen and who can take a lead?

- Examine your staffing structure to see if specific individuals can take on responsibility for leading particular actions, such as staff development, curriculum development, learner involvement, community engagement.
- Investigate outside resources that you can tap into – perhaps a local university could help with action research; community development workers could provide input on potential learner needs and wants; your trustees or management committee could take responsibility for specific review activities.

Living with self-assessment

Where now?

If your self-assessment report disappears into a filing cabinet, gathering dust until next year, your time and energy will have been wasted. Your development plan should include ways in which self-assessment can become a living process, with activities throughout the year. Figure 10 offers an example of an annual planning and quality improvement cycle that identifies key points for data collection, analysis, planning and reporting, and review activities.

Checklist

- ☐ Check that your development plan is happening and note revisions. Your plan should have mapped out when and by whom this will be done.
- ☐ Generate evidence along the way so that next time round you will already have evidence at your fingertips. Encourage people to write things down (rather than keeping information in their heads). Set up a filing system so that you can gather together the pieces of evidence throughout the year (eg keep records of staff development activities and their evaluations).
- ☐ Bear self-assessment in mind in every aspect of your organisation's planning – during strategic planning, budget setting, fund-raising, staff training, communication planning and curriculum development.
- ☐ Encourage people in your governance structure to become involved and take responsibility. Build into your planning cycle specific points at which management and/or governance institutions review progress on the development plan.
- ☐ Reward improvements in performance. Rewards can be intangible, such as opportunities to share good practice with others. The rewards may be public (in newsletters, posters, award ceremonies) or private.

At the core of the process is 'ownership'. Ownership comes from having a voice and being heard. If you have included interested parties along the way, informed them of the process, gathered input on specific questions, reported back on the evidence and how it measures up to the standards, then they will feel involved. If you have sought their views on the key issues and actions to be taken, they will have a sense of ownership in the process.

Figure 10 Planning the ongoing process

Evidence	**Who prepares**	**When**	**Who monitors**	**When**
Tutor information				
CVs on file, qualifications on tutor database	All tutors	Contract time	Programme coordinator	Termly
Updated staff development records	Office staff	After each staff development event	Centre manager	Termly
Tutor course reviews	All tutors	End of each course	Programme coordinator	Annually
Record of observations and feedback (all new tutors and 25 % of existing tutors each year)	Programme coordinator, peer assessors, outside moderators	November, January, March	Centre manager	Termly
Annual appraisal notes (tutors who teach > 6 hr/wk)	Programme coordinator	Annual appraisal period (June/July)	Centre manager	Annually

Figure 10 continued

Evidence	Who prepares	When	Who monitors	When
Course files to document teaching and learning				
Scheme of work – specifies expected learning outcomes, basis for information to learners	All tutors	Course planning period	Programme coordinator	Before teaching starts
Managing individuality – individual learning plans where appropriate	All tutors	In first few weeks of course	Programme coordinator	Termly
Lesson plans	All tutors	As course develops	Centre manager	Review sample of tutors mid-term, review all at end of course
Tutor course review – what went well, what not so well, what they would do differently next time	All tutors	As soon as possible after course ends	Centre manager	Within 1 month of end of course
Student evaluations	All students	Twice per course: first impressions at end of month 1 and end of course	Programme coordinator	Within 1 month of evaluation
Report of learning outcomes achieved	All tutors consulting with learners	End of course	Centre manager	Within 1 month of end of course
Records of qualifications achieved	Tutors on accredited courses	When results received	Programme coordinator	Termly update
Celebrating learning: displays, events, documents that demonstrate and document the learning	Tutors and students in all courses	Ongoing annual 'open house' events	Centre manager	Ongoing

41

Doing it differently next time

What improvements would you make in preparing your next SAR? Changes might include:

- more explicit statements of aims and values
- greater clarity about job roles and the roles of those who steer and support you
- evidence of what users and stakeholders value in your work – an aid to refocusing
- neater and more usable documentation on quality procedures
- better techniques for listening to learners and better assessment of what action this evidence indicates
- prompts for a thorough curriculum review
- diffusing the quality message and tasks, so that your role is less overloaded
- team development through shared work.

Make your knowledge available to others. Then you will be able to use it to assert the value of what you do in order to clarify and better fulfil your purposes in the interests of learners.

Local education authorities contracting with smaller providers

The role of local education authorities

LEAs are directly funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC); they are all regarded as providers. However, only just over half of local authorities deliver adult and community learning (ACL) services directly. Some of these even manage small grants to voluntary organisations to help support the delivery of ACL in their area.

It is fundamental to the culture of local authority work to secure services at the 'best value' for their citizens. In many cases this has meant contracting with other providers of ACL to deliver services on their behalf. These may be providers in their own right with direct contracts with the LSC. In this case, they would have to produce their own self-assessment report (SAR) and development plan, as well as contribute to the LEAs.

Many LEAs work with large providers in the FE sector, or with their own community schools, but in recent years there has also been an expansion of partnership work with smaller, sometimes specialist, providers in the voluntary sector. This approach was designed to widen participation in ACL by involving those organisations that already had close links with target groups of learners. Such providers may not specialise in ACL and may require support from their LEAs to meet the new requirements for self-assessment and development planning.

LEAs that subcontract and coordinate provision in partnership with other providers may face some of the following challenges:

- there is a geographical focus on most work, as opposed to areas of learning
- key front-line staff, with most contact with the learner, are not line-managed by the central team
- part-time tutors have a portfolio of work across a number of contracted providers
- the contract and its monitoring has been seen as the main lever on the quality of provision
- observation of teaching and learning is the perceived responsibility of the subcontractor provider
- resourcing for quality coordination is relatively low and quality coordination itself is often a new addition to the responsibilities of the central team.

The final SAR and development plan will be for the whole of the provision funded by the LSC through the LEA's Adult Learning Plan, the document that sets out the LEA's strategic direction for ACL and how it intends to allocate the LSC's funding. Adult Learning Plans outline the LEA's aims and the purpose of the service. This is essential for any judgement as to whether that service is 'fit for purpose'.

Planning the process

The first task is to consider what the final SAR and development plan will look like. This is crucial because so many independent and interrelated organisations have a stake in it. The LEA's views on provision and its respective elements will inform the views of funding bodies on its partners. They may have direct contracts with the LSC themselves. LEAs should not take the decision about the format of the SAR and the process that leads to it without due consultation with partners.

Some LEAs have approached this by holding a partnership meeting to discuss formats and draw on the expertise present. Some have involved FE sector college Quality Managers with experience of self-assessment. The aim of the meeting should be to draw together best practice and decide on a common format, timetable and approach.

Another outcome of such a meeting could be to establish a 'Quality Partnership Group' to act as the LEA's reference group for the SAR. It can:

- help with moderation and identifying solutions to emerging issues during the self-assessment process
- involve tutors and other front-line staff in the group
- look at ways of involving learners – voluntary sector organisations often have considerable experience of user involvement in decision-making.

The LEA will need to consider amending contracts with providers to take account of self-assessment and its demands. As the contract is often the main lever on quality, it is fitting that it reflects the rigour of the process. Use a Quality Partnership Group to review the contracts so that subcontractors have ownership of them.

One of the challenges facing the LEA is when to publish its SAR. The most logical solution is to base it on the academic year cycle, but the views of a Quality Partnership Group should be sought on this. Once a cycle is agreed, it should be published as a flowchart poster as an appendix to the contract, as a practical document for subcontractors to use.

Other tasks which could be delegated to a Quality Partnership Group are:

- mapping of current quality systems in use across providers and the LEA
- developing agreed systems for reporting on areas of learning (eg common approaches to the use of the 14 ALI/Ofsted areas of learning)
- making decisions on an acceptable level of sampling
- investigating the feasibility of a tutor peer observation programme across providers
- establishing the relative readiness of providers and support required
- moderating and publishing guidance on grading
- agreeing the level and shape of hard data needed in Year One.

Knowing your practice

One of the challenges of working in partnership with, and coordinating the work of, smaller providers is managing the complexity of information available. Once the LEA and its partners have decided what evidence and hard data need to go into the report, or the local LSC has made its requirements clear, the processes for collation must be established.

Southampton City Council, for example, has developed a 'map' of where evidence to meet the requirements of the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) is to be found, shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11 How are achievement and learning affected by resources? (CIF 3)

There are enough qualified and experienced teaching, training and support staff matching the demands of programmes and the range of learners				C	S
The professional development of staff contributes to their effectiveness		L		C	
Specialist equipment and materials are used including facilities which are relevant to the workplace and which meet current industrial standards	LO		T	C	
Accommodation provides a suitable setting for good teaching, training and learning and support for learners	LO	L	T	C	
Learners have access to learning resources that are appropriate for effective independent study		L		C	
Learners work in a safe and healthy environment	LO			C	
Resources are used to best effect in promoting learning	LO			C	
Learning resources and accommodation allow all learners to participate fully	LO	L		C	

Key

Lesson observations = LO
Learner questionnaires or learner forums = L
Tutor reviews = T
Centre responses = C
Information that the LEA holds centrally = S

Figure 12 East Sussex County Council format for using the CIF seven questions (example of question 4)

CIF criteria	Interpretation (from CIF draft guidance)	Strengths	Evidence	Weaknesses	Evidence
The quality of education and training 4. How effective are the assessment and monitoring of learners' progress?					
Forms of assessment and recording are suitable for the courses and programmes being followed	This applies to courses that are not accredited, as well as those leading to qualifications				
Assessment is fair, accurate and carried out regularly	Assessment methods are applied rigorously and sensitively, especially as many adults returning to study initially may be anxious about having their work assessed				
Initial assessment provides an accurate basis on which to plan an appropriate programme of work	Tutors are successful in identifying what skills and knowledge learners possess initially and are able to devise a learning plan that is suitable for them. Tutors display sensitivity in diagnosing learners' needs. They ensure that any form of initial assessment does not demoralise learners.				
Assessment is used to monitor progress and inform individual learners about how they are performing and how they might develop further	This applies to courses that are not accredited, as well as those leading to qualifications				
Achievements towards learning goals and qualifications are recorded and accredited	Learners' achievements are recorded for all programmes, irrespective of whether they are accredited				

47

The next step is to identify strengths and weaknesses based on the partners' evidence, linked with each of the CIF's key questions. East Sussex County Council has developed a common format for this, as illustrated in Figure 12 (see page 41).

The LEA should bear in mind that the collated version is its own SAR; it is not reporting on behalf of others. The performance data and its analysis are its interpretation of the range of evidence available. The subcontractors' 'mini-SARs', or reports to the LEA, represent evidence that they should retain to support the case they are making, during inspection or LSC performance review. Similarly, the targets set in their development plans will be those set for the LEA service but may focus on support for individual subcontractors or curriculum areas.

With the increased focus on the observation of teaching and learning, LEAs that work with subcontractors are considering how they gather direct evidence of the quality of practice. LEAs may assist smaller providers, which may not have their own established systems for observation of teaching and learning, or may not have systems compatible with the requirements of the CIF. LEAs may assist partners in the development of 'peer assessment' systems. This is where an 'umbrella' system of observation of teaching and learning is applied, using peer observers from a range of organisations. Centrally coordinated by the LEA, this would provide a significant sample of observation of teaching and learning to be looked at alongside the observation carried out by the subcontractors themselves.

Making judgements

The LSC and the ALI will look at the LEA's evidence and decide whether it provides adequate justification for what it is claiming. The challenge is in collating the range of evidence from subcontractors. Common formats and approaches may assist this. But it is unlikely in Year One that a completely consistent methodology will be in place. The first task is to assess the quality of the evidence (see Figure 6, page 24). Once the evidence has been collated and checked, judgements must be made from it.

LEAs should ensure that any statements made by subcontractors about their provision meet the requirements outlined in the LSC guidance (October 2001, pp23–4).

Once evidence is collated by the LEA for its SAR, judgements should be developed and tested through a process of moderation. This will ensure that judgements made by individual subcontractors are consistent across the whole LEA service and, for example, that a 'strength' in one area of the service is not regarded as a 'norm' in another.

LEAs might approach the process of internal moderation through a subcontractor network such as a Quality Partnership Group. Such a group could then form links with a similar group in a similar or neighbouring LEA. Then the process of external moderation could be addressed. The local LSC may be able to help in the benchmarking process.

Close working with the LEA's local LSC is essential to the quality improvement process. This is particularly true of LEAs that have a complex web of relationships with their partners that often extends beyond the post-16 sector and education in general. It is essential that the SAR is shared with the local LSC in draft form at an early stage, as well as with other partners. The Quality Partnership Group could decide on and publish the different versions of the report, depending on the intended audience (see Kenway and Reisenberger 2001, p29).

Acting on judgements

LEAs should be clear about the fact that development plans are theirs. They should take into account the views of partners and subcontractors, but their main focus should be to serve the needs of learners and other customers. To this end a development plan should address the strategic direction in which the service is going. This may be affected by 'best value' and other review processes in the local government context. In relation to this, an LEA may want to go back to the fundamental question: 'what is the purpose of our ACL service and how does it link with other local authority services?'.

Whatever the LEA decides, a complex service of subcontracting has to communicate its purpose clearly showing what it is about and the way it works. This will provide much needed contextual information for those reading the development plan, whether they are funding bodies, councillors, staff or learners.

Actions and success criteria need to be specific so that they can focus on the needs of individual subcontractors where a weakness was identified or where a strength needs to be consolidated. It is important for the LEA to provide 'quick win' situations, so that changes to working practices, however small, are brought about almost immediately. Targets should be 'SMART' – specific, measurable, achievable, results-oriented, time-bound – and comprehensively address the weakness raised. The plan should prioritise those actions that have the maximum impact on learners.

Living with self-assessment

The self-assessment and development planning process should be dynamic. LEAs need to address the monitoring of plans and to decide whom to involve in this. If an LEA has subcontracted ACL to ensure 'best value' for its residents, it may also decide on external monitoring of its development plan. Some LEAs use external consultants for this process. A consultant could report to the Quality Partnership Group in such an instance. However, even if an LEA subcontracts to providers, the LEA may keep the quality and monitoring role itself – it certainly has responsibility for the SAR.

Consultancy could also be used for an independent review of the process itself, an essential part of quality improvement. Such provisions should be made within the development plan and specific targets written.

The most important role for the LEA is to enable its subcontractors to use self-assessment and development planning as tools for continuous improvement. In Year One this may involve practical help in establishing a baseline assessment of performance. In Year Two, LEAs may be able to develop common indicators of performance across the range of providers and provide training opportunities for partners in smaller organisations.

Conclusion

Self-assessment and development planning constitute a process. They are also *part* of a process: that of an organisation's continual improvement.

This booklet emphasises the processes you will have to address to demonstrate quality improvement. Some of the approaches may be useful in the context of your organisation; all will require some form of adaptation so that they are 'fit for the purpose' of finding out how effective you are as an ACL provider, making judgements on that knowledge and planning to improve.

The LSDA/NIACE Adult and Community Learning Quality Support Programme team would like to hear from you about any approaches that you have found useful. Please contact us via our website: www.qualityACL.org.uk

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Useful websites

www.qualityACL.org.uk
The website of the Adult and Community Learning Quality Support Programme

www.ali.gov.uk
Adult Learning Inspectorate : inspection reports and the latest guidance on inspection

www.lsc.gov.uk
Learning and Skills Council : all the latest publications, circulars and strategies for quality improvement

www.ideabestvalue.net
This site, managed by the Improvement and Development Agency, has all the information you need on approaches to securing best value public services

www.ces.org.uk
For information on PQASSO (Practical Quality Assurance Systems for Small Organisations) from Charity Evaluation Services

www.cabinet-office.gov.uk
For browsing other quality systems to suit your organisation

www.pqasso.org.uk
The PQASSO website

www.vsnto.org.uk
The website of the Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation

adult and community learning
quality support programme

Providers of adult and community learning (ACL) range from large multi-purpose agencies to small community organisations, all striving to provide a high-quality service. Quality improvement systems appropriate for some providers are not, however, fit for all. Recent approaches to self-assessment and development planning have placed the responsibility on ACL providers themselves to devise systems suitable for their own organisations.

This booklet gives smaller ACL providers and their partners a practical insight into how to adapt current approaches to quality improvement for their own institutions. The first sections set out how they can: plan the process; collect, collate and analyse data; make value judgements and act upon them; and organise processes for continual monitoring and review. The section 'Local education authorities contracting with smaller providers' outlines how LEAs can work with their ACL partners on self-assessment.

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