

19 September 2011

Communities First Consultation Response
Communities First Policy Unit,
Communities Division
Local Government and Communities
Welsh Government
Rhydycar Merthyr Tydfil
CF48 1UZ

Dear Sir/Madam

Consultation on Communities First – The Future

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Communities First programme consultation. We welcome the continuation of the Programme, which is a key element of our policy for widening access to higher education, and the retention of the Communities First brand and we look forward to working with Welsh Government officials on the new phase of this important Programme.

Having reviewed the specific questions in the consultation document, we consider that the majority of the consultation questions would be more appropriately answered by local Community First Partnerships. Therefore, as an organisation engaging with the Programme on a Wales-wide basis, our response addresses broader issues. Background information on HEFCW's widening access policy development has been attached as **Annex A**.

Consultation response

Aligning anti-poverty work

HEFCW welcomes the alignment of the next phase of the Communities First Programme with the Welsh Government anti-poverty agenda. Communities First-focused actions will be a key element of HEFCW's Child Poverty Strategy, to be published by March 2012. Therefore, we would welcome a whole Government approach to aligning anti-poverty commitments and related strategic priorities across all Government departments to support further 'programme bending'.

Focus on education and skills

A key HEFCW policy objective is the recruitment and retention in HE of Communities First students of all ages. Therefore, we welcome the Programme's education- and

skills-focused outcomes and the opportunity to add value to collaborative activities by encouraging the use of HEFCW “matched funding” for joint projects, as proposed in the consultation document.

Key role for HE

While we recognise the demand for further basic skills-level education and training opportunities, our experience and data demonstrates that higher level skills are also required. Higher education has a key role to play in community regeneration and developing skills for employment. In collaboration with schools, communities, colleges and third sector organisations, such as Business in the Community, the HE sector:

- provides learning progression routes to and through universities;
- delivers higher education in community settings;
- offers higher education-level opportunities in further education colleges;
- develops flexible study pathways including part-time study, workbased learning and new vocational qualifications at Foundation Degree level.

Furthermore, higher education has significant expertise in developing mechanisms to take account of the ‘learner voice’ and the ‘learner experience’. Our experience in this area aligns closely with the planned focus, in the new CF Programme on accommodating and encouraging children and young people to voice their opinions (consultation document, p.12, paragraph 4).

Geographical boundaries

Turning to issues of ‘clusters’, ‘hubs’ and geographical boundaries raised in the consultation, we welcome a move to fewer, larger Communities First areas with simpler management structures. It has been challenging, and a barrier to effective working, for HEIs and the regional Reaching Wider Partnerships, to engage with more than 150 Communities First Partnerships, each with different local priorities.

We welcome the Welsh Government’s review of pre-determined boundaries which risk excluding equally deprived individuals or areas. We recognise the need to respond to the most deprived individuals and communities. However, we are aware that robust impact measures depend on clearly defined criteria and baseline data against which to assess progress. The number of measurable Communities First areas changed during our work with the Programme resulting in an inability for us to maintain consistent baseline data since 2002. Our current Corporate Strategy measure is only possible because we have set as our baseline only those Communities First wards identified by the 2008 index of multiple deprivation. Should flexible area boundaries be introduced into the Programme, it would not be possible for us to maintain a consistent and meaningful Communities First widening access measure in the longer-term. This issue must also create difficulties for others in terms of measuring the impact of the Programme. We strongly suggest therefore, that

should the Welsh Government allow programme boundaries to be locally negotiated, the process should be completed within a set timescale, and final boundaries be established and confirmed to provide clarity and stability for external stakeholders to develop impact measures over the longer-term.

HEFCW's policy priority

As mentioned above, our Corporate Strategy target measures the number of Communities First students entering HEIs in Wales. While the Communities First Programme may not want to incorporate such a target, it might raise awareness of higher education's commitment to Communities First areas if the final Communities First strategy drew attention to HEFCW's intention to monitor and publish data on Communities First learners' progression to, and retention in, higher education.

We are confident of the considerable contribution that higher education can make, in partnership with other providers, to the outcomes and key indicators identified in the consultation document, specifically in relation to developing 'Learning Communities' (consultation document page 17 paragraph 6.1). Therefore, given the extent of our 'programme bending', including support, funding and experience of work in Communities First areas, we would welcome HEFCW representation on the National Programme Board.

Philip Gummatt
Chief Executive
HEFCW

Background to widening access policy development

Widening Access Policy and the Communities First Programme

Our commitment to alignment with Communities First programme began in 2002 with the publication of the then Welsh Assembly Government's strategy for higher education, *Reaching Higher*. To meet *Reaching Higher* objectives, and measure the progress and performance of the higher education (HE) sector in widening access, we agreed a Communities First target with the then Department of Children, Education and Lifelong Learning (DCELL). The target aimed to increase the percentage of full-time and part-time undergraduate new entrants at UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education institutions (FEIs), from Communities First areas (equivalent to the 100 most deprived electoral divisions) from 8.9 per cent in 2000/01 to 11.4 per cent by 2010/11. Further information about the target and the sector's performance can be found on our website.¹

To further increase funding and support for these areas of multiple disadvantage in Wales, we established the Reaching Wider Partnerships. This higher education-led initiative, in collaboration with FEIs and other education providers, has received approximately £2m a year, from 2002 to the present. The Reaching Wider Programme supported regional Partnerships to deliver innovative programmes to learners of all ages to raise educational aspirations, high-level skills and to encourage progression to higher education and employment. We also funded individual universities, through widening access strategy and premium funding to target Communities First areas. Our widening access strategic intentions have sought to complement and add value to the Communities First Programme. This alignment, or 'programme bending' of widening access policies to the Communities First Programme was recognised in the 2009 Wales Audit Office report and included Reaching Wider as a case study effective practice example².

Recent Welsh Government and HEFCW Widening Access Policy Developments

For our Future, the Welsh Government's new HE strategy, with its twin priorities of delivering social justice and promoting a buoyant economy was published in 2009. While our widening access measures of success were revised, Communities First areas remained a key priority, as our Corporate Strategy 2010-11 to 2012-13 indicates³. Currently, our Communities First measure of the sector's engagement is

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http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/about_he_in_wales/wag_priorities_and_policies/Reaching%20Higher%20Target%20Widening%20Access%20English.pdf

² See the Wales Audit Office Communities First report, including the HEFCW case study, (page 61):

http://www.wao.gov.uk/assets/englishdocuments/Communities_First_eng.pdf

³ http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/publications/corporate_documents/corporate_strategy.aspx

to effect a 10% rise in the proportion of all Welsh Communities First students studying HE courses at HEIs and FEIs in Wales from 15.6% in 2008/09 to 17.2% in 2012/13. In addition, to measure the extent to which more people in Wales, including in the Heads of the Valleys, experience HE and are equipped with higher level skills we introduced a measure to increase the participation rate, within Welsh HEI providers of students from the five Universities Heads of the Valleys Institute (UHOVI) unitary authorities, from 8% to the current national average by 2012/13 (from 2.5% to 2.7%). Approximately 50% of the UHOVI area is comprised of Communities First areas⁴. We are aware that these are challenging targets in the context of higher university fees and a cap on university places.

In February 2011 we published our *Strategic Approach and Plan for Widening Access to Higher Education 2010/11 to 2012/13*⁵. Our *Approach* sets out in more detail our commitment to delivering the Welsh Government's widening access expectations, including ensuring that '*inconsistencies in access and opportunity are addressed*'. Our Communities First-related policies recognise that the barriers to educational engagement in these areas of multiple deprivation are deep-rooted and require a collaborative, long-term commitment to change cultural and individual aspirations.

⁴ <http://www.uhovi.ac.uk/index.aspx>

⁵ http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars_2011/W11%2009HE%20Annex%20A%20Strategic%20Approach%20%20Plan%20for%20WA%20to%20HE.pdf