

Learning in the Voluntary and Community sector: *Executive Summary*

A summary of the research and review of Adult and
Community based learning provision in the Voluntary and
Community sector in Pembrokeshire

This report has been prepared on behalf of:

Pembrokeshire Association
of Voluntary Services



Executive Summary

Through the ELWa Common Investment Fund, funding was received to undertake research into Adult and Community based learning (ACL) provision in the Voluntary and Community sector in Pembrokeshire. This report details results and outcomes of the research, commissioned by Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services (PAVS), which has taken place across the sector. It provides a significant contribution towards other research that has been undertaken by Learning Pembrokeshire and Pembrokeshire College in considering the development of a delivery model for Adult and Community based learning in Pembrokeshire that is flexible, cost-efficient, quality focused, and responsive to learner needs.

A response rate of 25% was achieved from the base line questionnaires distributed to PAVS members (222), and 30 organisations participated in face to face interviews. In addition, two focus group sessions were held with members of the Voluntary Sector Training Advisory Group (TAG). Information obtained from both the base line questionnaire and interviews indicate that participating organisations represent more than 2000 volunteers, 454 trustees, 239 paid staff (actual bodies not full-time equivalent), and have in excess of 7000 members. However, it is acknowledged that there are other voluntary and community organisations delivering training who have not been included in this report, and whilst the participants in this research do represent 15 main constituencies (detailed in Section 1.2), the information here is being presented as a 'snapshot' rather than a complete picture of provision across the sector.

This report explores current provision of ACL opportunities in the Voluntary and Community sector in Pembrokeshire, examining the content of the learning provided, how it is planned and funded, who it is open to, and issues regarding delivery. Methods of identifying learner needs are described, and opportunities to share such information are explored, along with details on the piloting and evaluation of innovative developments in delivery. Current and future priority areas for training in the sector are identified as well as gaps in current provision. Consideration is given to the potential role of the sector in a Learning Network for Pembrokeshire, and models of networks from two other areas have been reviewed so that elements of their success may be considered for inclusion in a model for Pembrokeshire.

Mapping of current provision indicates that the level of provision of learning opportunities by the sector is healthy, if not uniformly distributed, and there are a number of core training providers who are likely to continue to offer training, and in a significant number of cases expand their current level of activity and widen access to the learning opportunities they provide. Training provision appears to be largely user led, responding to needs as they arise, with pre-scheduled regular training making up a smaller part of provision. There is a level of interest in providing accredited learning opportunities in the future.

There is a good reserve of skills within the sector as some 44% of provision is delivered by staff and/or volunteers, however there is further scope to develop training skills in-house and work with current providers to support and enhance their provision and explore alternative methods of delivery. The issue of sustainability of provision needs priority consideration as over half of courses are run on demand with the majority of organisations receiving no core funding for their activities.

Research on **Identifying and sharing information on learner needs** reflected that the majority of participating organisations undertook some form of identifying learner needs in a planned way, using a wide variety of methods. Just under half record the information, therefore the development of practical and accepted protocols for recording and sharing identified needs, to ensure a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to planning for meeting learner needs, needs to be considered. There is some degree of sharing of information already taking place between the sector and other external organisations and it was acknowledged that this could be improved upon. There were, however, some concerns expressed regarding the need to ensure that

attempts to meet these needs were meaningful for particular client groups, and took into consideration their particular cultural expectations, experiences, and context. This research identified that technical and administrative infrastructures, and even strategically directed funding, to facilitate partnership working to better map and meet learner needs is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of achieving the beginnings of an effective Learning Network in which the Voluntary and Community sector have an equal part to play. What is also required is mutual understanding and dialogue to address and harmonise (not suppress) cultural differences between partners and the community interests they represent, in order to facilitate effective partnership working that respects and values the diverse needs and strengths to be found within and outside of the sector.

This research has explored a number of **delivery models** to gain a better understanding of the ways in which learners may benefit from less formal arrangements, and the potential for these to dovetail into more mainstream offerings, with consideration of sustainable methods of delivery. The three areas piloted in this research have provided an excellent opportunity to explore different approaches to delivery models. The potential of technology, especially on-line learning, to resolve issues of geographical access and reduce costs is considerable, but it is also important to keep in focus the social context of learning, and the contribution that social interaction makes to the overall richness and benefit of the learning experience.

Whatever the specific delivery mechanisms, adopting an approach that is learner-led helps to give previously disempowered learners a sense of power and confidence, and increases motivation. Partnership working enables providers to draw upon the specialist experience in particular sectors to place the learner, with all their learning needs, including the social and interpersonal context within which the learning process is facilitated, at the centre of the picture. If there is a particular strength that the Voluntary and Community sector exhibits, it is surely this experience of seeing the learner in a holistic context on their home ground, and it is this particular perspective that must be retained and built upon if the sector is to make the best of the opportunities that participating in a planned programme of partnership development can bring.

The research undertaken highlights a number of important issues about the possible role of the Voluntary and Community sector in a **Learning Network** for Pembrokeshire. It is clear that more work needs to be done in clarifying in general terms the concept of a 'Learning Network' as many organisations and individuals participating in this research were unable to formulate a clear response to key questions that included the term 'Learning Network'. Only once a clearer understanding has been gained of what a Learning Network is, can the process of engaging in that network begin.

Roles that the sector could perform in an effective Learning Network for Pembrokeshire include that of training provider, offering specialist and complementary provision. The sector's closeness to the 'grassroots' was seen as especially valuable in providing flexible and consumer led learning opportunities which were particularly responsive to community needs, and niche provision of learning opportunities reflecting the specialist knowledge that has arisen within the sector as it has grown by responding to those needs. Acting as advocate and interpreter of community needs to learning providers was also identified, as well as recognising and using more fully the resources the sector has to enhance the quality and relevance of training and educational programmes provided to professionals, and others working in areas impinging upon the interests of particular special interest groups, for example users of mental health services.

For the sector to effectively play its role in the Learning Network, it is essential that it is treated as a true and equal partner by others and that it achieves parity of esteem. Recognition of, and an understanding and respect for, the cultural differences between partners are important factors in ensuring a firm foundation from which a successful and effective Network can evolve. In addition, consideration needs to be given to the capacity of the sector to fully engage in the Network and how it will be represented and consulted.

The **key recommendations** from this research should be viewed in the context of the overall conclusions detailed in Section 7, and reflect the possibilities for the Voluntary and Community sector to play a positive and active role in helping to develop an effective Adult and Community based Learning Network in Pembrokeshire. The recommendations suggest that further research is carried out on mapping of provision across the sector, and that information systems are evaluated to ensure a co-ordinated and coherent approach is taken to identifying and sharing information on learner needs. Support should be given to organisations in their plans for future development, as well as introducing the quality frameworks that will be essential for future funding.

This research clearly demonstrates that the sector has an important, and in many ways unique, role to play in the provision of adult and community based learning opportunities within Pembrokeshire. In preparing for the advent of a Learning Network it will be important to identify areas of particular specialist expertise that will enable the sector to play a positive role in developing this network.

In the context of developing an integrated and sustainable approach to training in the sector, it is necessary to secure funding that encourages co-operation over competition and a strategic approach that is less project led and more focused on long term planning over budget driven short term projects. Funding should be designed to encourage and enable partnership working and reduce duplication of effort. Ultimately the funding needs to follow the learner, and this means it should be planned and distributed in such a way as to view the learner in their community based context, addressing obstacles to access and learner aspirations to ensure equality of opportunity is a reality in adult and community based learning.

Whilst celebrating and valuing the very diversity that is part of the sector's unique strength, it still needs to define and communicate a coherent and distinctive philosophy, and to reflect upon and promote the many examples of good practice that it has developed which can contribute to enriching the adult and community learning experience for the people of Pembrokeshire.