

Learning in the Voluntary and Community sector:

Research and review of Adult and Community based learning
provision in the Voluntary and Community sector in
Pembrokeshire – Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has been prepared on behalf of:

Pembrokeshire Association
of Voluntary Services



7. Conclusions

This report has explored the current provision of adult and community learning opportunities provided by the Voluntary and Community sector in Pembrokeshire, innovative developments in delivery and planning, and methods for identifying and sharing learner needs. Two models of Learning Networks from other areas of Wales have been explored with a particular focus on the role the Voluntary sector had to play in each of these, and consideration of the role of the sector in a Learning Network for Pembrokeshire has been discussed.

7.1 Mapping of current provision

It is clear that a wide range of adult and community based learning courses are being successfully delivered by the Voluntary and Community sector, and there are indications of prospects for future growth, as discussed at the conclusion of section 2.

As discussed, much of the training provided is 'on demand', with no core funding. It is suggested that developing a strategic plan involving effective partnership working within, and outside, the sector, must make the case for suitable sustained strategic funding as well as developing models for sustainability. Research from Estyn¹ identified that learners generally make good progress as a result of their involvement in ACL courses and that the skills gained such as confidence and self-esteem helps take them further on the road of learning, but that progress of these learners tends not to be well-tracked and evidence of progression is anecdotal. In this respect recent research by NIACE² on measuring 'soft outcomes' of informal or non-accredited learning, such factors as growth in self confidence, improved communication skills and educational aspirations, may be worth investigating in arguing for new funding models to help deliver strategic benefits and making the case that formally accredited learning is not the only type of learning worth providing or pursuing.

7.2 Identifying and sharing information on learner needs

In respect of identifying and responding to learner needs, appropriate methodologies for recording and sharing information should be explored. The development of the Pembrokeshire Education Portal to provide a 'shop front' for the sector, will be beneficial in promoting training opportunities to current and potential learners, but needs to be linked to co-ordinated activities and partnership working.

This research has also identified, however, 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.

Demand for additional subjects reflects primarily the particular requirements of the sector, with a high degree of specialist requirements such as training in arts marketing, and community transport.

¹ Widening Participation in adult community-based learning: A survey of best practice, Estyn, 21st June 2004

² Catching Confidence: the nature and role of confidence – ways of developing and recording changes in the learning context, NIACE, 2005

7.3 Delivery models

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 potential of technology, especially on-line learning, to resolve issues of geographical access and reduce costs is considerable, but it is necessary to be aware that this is just one form of learning, and there is a need to balance the costs of up-skilling trainers and potential learners, and developing technical infrastructures, against the potential benefits and savings. 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.

7.4 Contribution to a Learning Network

As previously indicated, building an effective Learning Network will require commitment in continuing to develop mutual respect and understanding, and embracing a shared strategic vision that puts the needs of the learner at the centre. There needs to be a clear understanding of the concept of what a Learning Network is for the sector to 'buy in' to this vision, and to be clear about the benefits and agendas that can be genuinely subscribed to that transcend particular sectional interests. In this context an understanding, and appreciation, of the diversity of the sector is fundamental, as it is often the very differences between organisations and the communities they represent and are embedded in, that makes partnership working in pursuit of a common strategy both challenging and potentially so effective.

There has therefore to be a clear delineation of the generic values and culture of the sector as a whole, the grasping of an appropriate *unity-in-diversity*, and an attempt to map out a clear role for the sector in providing a unique but complementary and specialist provision within adult and community based learning in Pembrokeshire.

Research indicates that *"funding must encourage partnership rather than competition among institutions, and be founded on regular and structured mapping of all stakeholder needs and strategic planning"*.³ As suggested above, if the development of a Learning Network is to result in the provision of sustainable opportunities in Pembrokeshire, the case must be made for appropriate models of funding that will provide the necessary basis for planning and delivery of integrated needs-led services.

³ Best practice approaches to achieving parity of esteem in education and training, Newidiem, February 2003

Recognising and drawing on the particular strengths and experience of individual providers can only enhance efficient use of resources whilst driving up quality standards. The success of the RISE network, for example, has been in part due to the ability to recognise and build upon the strengths that each partner had to bring to the network. The recognition that the voluntary sector, for example, has much to offer in the way of specialist knowledge and expertise in engaging 'harder to reach' groups and is in touch with the 'grassroots' learners was capitalised on in RISE through their involvement in the Learning Advocacy scheme and is an example of the benefits that the sector can bring to the development of a network model.

Government-set targets for lifelong learning presented in the context of 'The Learning Country'⁴ strategy, recognises that widening participation of adult learners, particularly those in adult community-based learning, will help towards the achievement of those targets identified within the strategy as the need for policy and programme development 'to be undertaken on the basis of partnership with all those who can contribute to success using effective consultation; the least possible bureaucracy; and encouraging genuine commitment to work across organisational boundaries with partners playing to one another's strengths'.

Quality of provision has been mentioned in a number of different areas of this report and the requirements of organisations such as Estyn with regard to adult and community based provision means that all sector providers operating in this area will need to meet these standards. In addition, between 2005-2008 ELWa is expected to invest £1.75 billion in learning and skills in Wales⁵. Improving the quality of learning delivery is key, and a Provider Performance Review (PPR) system has been developed by ELWa to build a comprehensive overview of each provider's quality and performance. PPR is being implemented to put into effect powers (Learning and Skills Act 2000) to assess the quality of the provision funded by ELWa, and take judgements about quality into account in deciding which providers to continue to fund.

There is much experience of working within quality frameworks such as Estyn across other providers, e.g. Learning Pembrokeshire and Pembrokeshire College. The Voluntary and Community Sector, however, are less familiar with the inspection framework, although that is not saying that they are not already meeting the quality standards. Although a small number of staff within the sector have undertaken relevant quality training, this does need to be widened out and the sharing of information and skills will be critical to ensuring that every provider within the Voluntary and Community sector is able to work within the Estyn framework.

⁴ The Learning Country: A comprehensive education and lifelong learning programme to 2010 in Wales, August 2001

⁵ ELWa web site, www.elwa.org.uk

8. Recommendations

The key recommendations from this research should be viewed in the context of the overall conclusions detailed above, 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.

- Further research should be carried out in order to fully map current provision across the sector. The present research to establish base line data on provision primarily relied upon responses to a questionnaire, which is always going to produce a partial response. It is likely that more labour intensive methods, such as personal visits, will be necessary to fully engage organisations currently delivering training, before a fuller and more definitive picture of current levels of provision can be arrived at
- Consideration should be given to the way in which information gathered on provision and learner needs could be mapped using a Geographical Information System (GIS) such as that used in the Local Authority. This would enable better identification of issues relating to geographical access, demographic factors, local resources, and local needs. Information gathered from within the Voluntary and Community sector could be usefully entered into a central database which could in turn feed in to wider information systems reaching current and potential learners, such as the Pembrokeshire Education Portal.
- True to the principle that an Information System is only as reliable as the information put into it, it is recommended that further work is carried out with organisations to encourage them to improve their recording of information relating to learner needs, met or unmet. Training may be required to encourage organisations to value such information and develop confidence in accessing and interpreting it.
- Support should be given to those organisations considering developing accredited learning in the future, as well as to those who wish to look at improving quality of provision overall.
- There are a high number of staff involved in the delivery of training, and efforts should be made to build on their expertise, and find out what may be needed in terms of support.
- In the context of working to the Estyn quality framework for adult and community learning provision, it is recommended that the Good practice guide for Voluntary Organisations and the Common Inspection Framework⁶ is adapted for use in Pembrokeshire. Whilst this guide is based on the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) in England, the general principles of the framework are similar to Estyn and could be easily adapted to provide an excellent introduction for Voluntary and Community organisations new to this approach, as a first step towards working within the Estyn framework.
- Much training is currently delivered at the premises of the organisation providing the training. The potential for capitalising on this and promoting the potential use of the training facilities to other providers or organisations should be explored as a way of providing an additional income stream to support activities.

⁶ Good practice guide for Voluntary Organisations and the Common Inspection Framework, York and North Yorkshire Voluntary Sector Learning and Skills Network, March 2003

- To ensure effective evaluation of 'soft' learning outcomes, it is recommended that work is undertaken with tools such as RARPA/Catching Confidence⁷ recently developed by NIACE.
- To continue to explore learner-led self-sustaining models such as the Learning Club model, and collaborative opportunities to maximise resources and skills/expertise.
- To undertake an audit of skills and interest across providers in developing on-line activities using facilities such as the Pembrokeshire Education Portal.

Recognising and valuing the contribution of the Voluntary and Community sector

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. The idea put forward by partners in ACL research in Pembrokeshire⁸ suggested the development of 'hubs of specialist expertise' related to particular subject specialisms, online network groups, and sharing policies such as working with vulnerable adults. This recognises the particular contributions partners have to bring to the network, and the work of these specialist hubs can be shared across the network to ensure an effective and consistent approach.

As well as recognising particular specialisms within the sector, there has to be a clear delineation and communication of the *generic values and culture* of the sector as a whole, defining a distinctive contribution within adult and community based learning in Pembrokeshire.

This research suggests that recognising the sector has an important role to play in developing the Pembrokeshire Learning Network, and defining this role, will require work in relation to raising awareness of the concept of a Learning Network, and it is recommended that a programme of awareness raising events and engaging in further dialogue is required to ensure adequate 'buy-in' to the concept.

Funding and Sustainability

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 meeting learner aspirations to ensure equality of opportunity is a reality in adult and community based learning.

Issues have already been addressed regarding re-thinking funding patterns to encourage partnership working, and a holistic learner needs led approach to strategic planning and funding. If the sector is to benefit from this and remain a key player it needs to define and market actively its own distinctive contribution to providing learning opportunities. Whilst celebrating and valuing the very diversity that is part of its 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.

⁷ Catching Confidence: the nature and role of confidence – ways of developing and recording changes in the learning context, NIACE, 2005

⁸ The Learning Journey: a collaborative approach to Adult and Community based learning in Pembrokeshire, Allman, March 2006