

Adult and Community Learning – what this means for Learning Partnerships

1

THE REMIT

Expanding Adult and Community Learning

Learning Partnerships are charged with the task of widening participation in learning, increasing attainment, improving standards and meeting the skills challenge – linked to national learning targets. It is also expected that they will operate pro-actively and will be able ‘to harness the varied strengths of a wide range of local partners’ to co-ordinate action in pursuit of their shared objectives and, in so doing, ‘be able to achieve greater coherence and value for money’.

The work of Learning Partnerships is set squarely within the context of three important policy commitments: lifelong learning, widening participation, and the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal. Explicit to the agenda of each of these is the concern to strengthen the capacity of all citizens to compete and flourish in a period of rapid economic, social and political change. This is a period of increasing uncertainty and risk, in which the growth of knowledge, the development of the knowledge economy, and the many consequences of globalisation, are all increasing the democratic, learning and skills divide between rich and poor, north and south, men and women, young and old, majority and minority groups, and the well educated and the badly educated in ways that are increasingly visible in every local area. In these circumstances, a major challenge facing Learning Partnerships is the responsibility to create an agenda that makes a priority of social inclusion, active citizenship and learning for social change.

However, the fact that Learning Partnerships are being encouraged to set their own agendas – which take account of local issues and concerns – also helps to clear the way for imaginative and responsive solutions to national and global priorities as they affect educational provision at local level. The task implies responsibility but also opportunity. The ways in which Learning Partnerships choose to interpret Adult and Community Learning (ACL), and how ‘wide ranging’ they set out to be when it comes to including local partners and listening to local stakeholders – especially learners and potential learners – will be the measure of their commitment to expanding adult and community learning for new and different learners, whilst also retaining the commitment of existing learners.



This means that Learning Partnerships must agree a comprehensive definition of Adult and Community Education as a basis for their work: something which will involve discussing priorities and stretching the guidance provided by the DfEE and in the Learning and Skills Council prospectus. For example:

- 'Working with employers' will be more inclusive if it is also understood to mean working with trade unions, and when it embraces wider employment-related and workplace learning issues as well as the skills agenda.
- 'Responding with flexibility' to ACL that is not covered by 'formula funding' will be more likely to champion development and non-accredited provision if it is situated squarely within the overall ACL strategy rather than tacked on as an after-thought.

Main tasks to be done

The main tasks allocated to Learning Partnerships can be identified in relation to demand, supply, feedback, strategic planning and innovation.

- It is important to identify the needs of individuals, local (diverse) communities and employers in ways that represent them effectively, and which help to promote the activity of learning.
- The Partnerships should also encourage local providers to work together for coherent, cost-effective and responsive provision in ways that fill gaps in provision and deal with duplication.
- Consultation with, and feedback from, learners – in a range of settings – is a critical component of effective and responsive provision and will require the most imaginative and sensitive procedures to be set in place.
- Partnerships are required to represent all of these components strategically in their (long-term) local learning plans, from which future changes and innovations can be approached.

Specific tasks to be done

To pursue the main tasks allocated to Learning Partnerships, it will also be necessary to agree a co-ordinated approach to ACL and, in the future, to develop new proposals that meet identified needs. This will include:

- co-ordinated provision around Basic Skills
- an agreement about setting local learning targets
- ensuring a coherent strategy for student support and transport
- the planned provision of an effective Information, Advice and Guidance Service (IAGS)
- making available information and encouragement to activate Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs).

Learning Partnerships will also need to:

- work with LEAs to dovetail with their Lifelong Learning Development Plans
- work with the University for Industry (Ufi) on establishing learning hubs
- facilitate bids to the New Opportunities Fund
- dovetailing work with the Employment Service and the New Deal.

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The government's guidance to Partnerships assumes that all of these tasks will be done in the context of a comprehensive and explicit Equal Opportunities Policy and Implementation Plan which will inform and underpin every ACL activity.

Learning Partnerships should therefore ensure that their plans are comprehensive, that they include reference to all the main and specific tasks they are required to do, and that the commitment to equal opportunities is explicit throughout.

Future directions

In the run-up to the creation of the new Learning and Skills Councils, Learning Partnerships should have positioned themselves well to know about, and to represent, the full range of community interests for their area; and to act as advocates for those interests by engaging with local providers and stakeholders in ways that pro-actively and genuinely represent and reflect the diverse interests and aspirations of learners.

Local learning plans with a strategic commitment to consolidation, innovation and development will be able to embody this local knowledge and commitment with real authority.

In order to be most effective in pursuing these interests, Learning Partnerships will need to tackle a number of issues.

- They will need to make sense of the planning context and the roles of different agencies.
- They will need to develop effective intelligence drawn from local mapping of provision, with appropriate benchmarks and targets.
- Policies and practice will need to be developed for engaging with partners and members – especially with the representatives of 'smaller' and 'less powerful' organisations.
- Policies and practice will need to be developed for engaging with learners and potential learners – in ways that are comprehensive, democratic, inclusive and genuine.
- They will need to create a development strategy and an agenda for action that is agreed, owned, vigorous and responsive to innovation and change.

All of which implies producing a strategy and agreeing an agenda within the context of a nexus of partners, learners, other stakeholders, other local initiatives and external agencies.

2

PRINCIPLES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The planning context

Learning Partnerships are expected to contribute to a range of plans:

- their own local learning plans with 3-year objectives
- transition planning for the new Local Learning and Skills Councils in which they will play an important part
- in relationship to the LEA – lifelong learning development plans (initially in relation to Standards Fund support, and ultimately to connect the relationship between the LEA and the local LSC)
- in relationship to the TECs – workforce development plans (ultimately to be subsumed within LSCs' integrated workforce development plans)

- basic skills action plans (as proposed by the Moser Report) and to be included as 'a chapter' within local learning plans
- in relationship to the Connexions service for their areas for young people up to 25
- partner institutions' and agencies' strategic plans
- Ufl hub and IAGS business plans
- Small Business Service (SBS) plans in the future
- in relationship to the County Council or Unitary Authority – annual plans for Early Years Development, Childcare Partnerships, Sure Start programme plans
- regional economic and skills strategies
- action plans for particular initiatives: e.g. Education Action Zones, Health Action Zones, Single Regeneration Budget, New Commitment to regeneration partnerships, City Challenge, Excellence in Cities.
- in relationship to the Local Authority – best value, community consultation and community plans – relating to economic, social and environmental priorities and wellbeing (all of them an important channel for engaging with local communities, and for developing a holistic view of ACL at local level)

Given the complexity of the planning context and the overlapping and sometimes competing nature of the process, Learning Partnerships need to be clear about:

- whether their local learning plan for ACL will be based simply on 'filling gaps' in existing provision or – more ambitiously – provide for a 'step change' and 'development strategy'
- how other plans (e.g. LEA Lifelong Learning Plans, Ufl and IAGS business plans, etc) relate to their plans, and how these might be produced collaboratively
- the ways in which other plans provide pro-active opportunities for promoting the ACL agenda locally
- how to build the local planning processes into their structure

Information, benchmarks and targets

Building up comprehensive local intelligence about demand, participation, retention and achievement is an urgent task for local Learning Partnerships. In addition to national census and survey material, they will have access to a number of sources on adult participation which are not consistent in presentation but which need to be collated for local use. These include:

- FEFC Individual Student Records
- FEFC analyses of Widening Participation strategic partnerships
- Basic Skills Agency benchmarking information
- LEA returns to the DfEE about their contribution to Lifelong Learning provision and LEA-funded FE
- TEC trainee data
- Employment Service data, including New Deal participation
- TEC surveys of business performance, employer needs and perceptions and household surveys
- Local Authority economic reports, 'quality of life' and 'best value' surveys
- Information from the DETR index of deprivation
- Reports from the Social Exclusion Unit, especially in relation to the National Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy
- Other local, regional and sectoral research, for example for regeneration initiatives, regional skills strategies, NTO skills supply data

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RICHARD OLIVIER



In relation to information-gathering there are two priorities for Learning Partnerships:

- to stocktake – using all the available data they have collected – so as to be able to tackle participation issues
- to position themselves with as much authority as possible in order to inform and influence the local LSC

Further stocktaking

From 2001 baseline data should be available for local learning partnerships with which to set participation targets but these will need to be adjusted in relation to the local context and cross-referenced with other, relevant local information if targets are to inform action. The gathering of local information must include both current performance (measured in terms of curriculum areas, qualifications or learning outcomes, progression, length, mode, etc – information which will be labour-intensive to capture outside of formal systems) and direct and indirect methods of identifying needs and demands.

Collecting and managing data

Learning Partnerships should give a high priority to the collection and management of data. In order to do this task well – in ways that will be useful and help to inform action planning – Learning Partnerships need to:

- decide on a policy for managing data which shares information among partners and which takes account of the diversity and range of ACL
- audit and appraise available sources of data, especially research, which have been produced locally (Local Authority research and intelligence units will provide valuable advice about how to do this)
- ensure that participation data is mapped against indices of economic and social wellbeing
- identify the gaps in information on participation (eg informal learning in the voluntary and community sector, work by private training companies, trade union programmes, business in-company training) and decide how to fill them
- make the understanding of the role of the voluntary and community sector a priority – especially in relation to the importance of its presence locally, its significance when it comes to tackling social exclusion, and in order to help



the sector understand its own potential

- use all this information to set participation targets that are locally grounded and specific
- identify gaps in information on skills needs – this will become increasingly important in relation to the new LSCs

Partnership members and structures

Learning Partnerships are encouraged to have as broad a membership as possible. In most cases this takes the form of a smaller, inner steering group and a wider, formal membership. These are structures which need considerable attention if they are fully to engage a wide range of interests and experience in ACL, and in order to make the most of their responsibilities and

opportunities. The stocktake and action on data will reveal potential partnership members. In developing the best ways to involve and engage them, Learning Partnerships should pay attention to:

- differing interests, cultures, expectations and languages
- 'signing up' a wide ranging number of members and building their capacity for active involvement
- acknowledging the wide range of activities and groups who have an interest in ACL and avoiding tokenism
- finding intermediary representatives for specific interests (eg community councils, CVS, regional TUC) and supporting their role
- recognising and tackling the barriers to active involvement eg. time, cost and travel
- good communication – by giving straight-forward, clear, regular and up-to-date information and feedback to partners

In order to achieve engagement, involvement, influence and inclusion, Learning Partnerships – if they haven't done so already – could think of setting up:

- an ACL sub-committee with responsibility both for strategic advice and defined areas of the local learning plan
- sub-local sub-committees with some degree of devolved responsibility
- sub-local ACL forums linked to local community planning
- forums or sub-committees to represent disability issues, community action groups, voluntary organisations, ethnic and minority interests, etc
- practitioner networks
- consultative conferences

Learning Partnerships should widen the participation and secure the active involvement of their membership in ways that reflect the diversity and complexity of ACL – and should work out realistic ways of doing this.

Engaging with learners

Engaging and involving learners in the work of the Learning Partnerships is important for two reasons:

- Active engagement, participation and ownership helps to support community capacity building, neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion.

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- Responsiveness to learners – in terms of their aspirations, priorities, experiences and ideas – is essential to any effective provision of ACL. These are reasons which go beyond conventional market research, customer satisfaction or student evaluation systems. They imply a more equal and democratic dialogue with learners, the recognition by providers of their accountability to learners, and the creation of a partnership approach to consultation and feedback. To set in place committed and responsive relationships with learners Learning Partnerships should:
 - agree the principles, purposes and trail of accountability involved in engaging learners and how this will be facilitated and funded
 - audit and evaluate current consultative activities used by partners and identify gaps
 - use this information towards bench-marking and direction setting
 - avoid duplication and tokenism
 - exploit capacity-building opportunities such as Community Champions
 - set up, or support the setting up of, learners' forums
 - treat learner engagement activities as learning events by promoting real debates linked to genuine action

Learning Partnerships should develop a strategy and a programme for learner engagement which tests a variety of methods and demonstrates provider accountability.

3

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

How all of this gets translated into good practice will vary according to the judgement, the capacity, the commitment and the circumstances of local Learning Partnerships. This briefing assumes that making the most of their responsibilities and opportunities is in the best interests of adult learners and in the best interests of Learning Partnerships that want to secure their authority and credibility in the future.

Development strategy

In acting pro-actively to produce a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to ACL, and in the context of their local learning plans, Learning Partnerships should think of adopting a three-year development strategy:

- **Year One:** Define the role of the Learning Partnership. Work on the infrastructure. Deal with all immediate gaps and development tasks.
- **Year Two:** Begin to address substantial, key issues raised by data analysis and consultation. Make significant progress on the learning targets. Continue to develop the infrastructure.
- **Year Three:** On the basis of a well documented overview of ACL in the partnership area, begin to coordinate partners work for coherence and effectiveness. Move from 'gap-filling' to a step change in levels of participation, new learning opportunities and continuing learning opportunities. Set new targets. Continue to develop the infrastructure.

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Making judgements

In making judgements about coherence, comprehensiveness and co-ordination, Learning Partnerships should consider the ways in which their approach makes a contribution to:

- social and economic inclusion – using their participation data to plan programmes with and for groups with lower levels of participation or attainment
- equal opportunities and entitlement policies – for example, in terms of the accessibility of learning opportunities
- curriculum range and articulation – including basic skills and the lessons learned from FEFC non-schedule 2 projects.
- local area (or neighbourhood) strategies for 'wellbeing' or regeneration

An agenda for action

The development strategy should also create an agenda for action on ACL issues – to maximise opportunities, support innovation and to develop the capacity of both new and existing providers. This should include the commitment to :

- promote learning – for example by creating effective Information and Guidance Services, using Adult Learners' Week and Sign Up Now campaigns.
- support learners – by ensuring equity and coherence in financial support; and in personal and learning support.
- support equal opportunities – by taking action on accessibility and disability, policies to address racism and sexism, curriculum development in the context of multi-culturalism, policies to promote social inclusion.
- support curriculum development – in relation to ICT, new learning styles, self-directed and mentored learning, basic skills, citizenship education, assessment and accreditation development, links to New Deal, the interface with HE – including the new Foundation degree and part-time routes, links with Ufl and neighbourhood IT Centres.
- promote staff development and quality issues – by sharing good practice and project dissemination, inter-institutional and inter-sectoral staff development, peer evaluation
- secure project funding – by establishing priorities and development objectives

Learning Partnerships should see themselves as the embodiment and creators of Learning Communities: they should promote a dynamic development strategy for ACL based on significant growth in participation, with an action agenda that turns principles into practice.