

IMPACT FORUM MEETING 11 FEB 2016

Present: Trevor Neilands (Chair), John D'Arcy (OU), Brendan Murray (DEL), Emma Purdon (Extern), Sandra Bailie (NICVA), Norrie Breslin (Big Lottery), Emma McIlveen (BBC), Lorraine Lavery-Bowen (UU), Ann-Marie Doyle (Prince's Trust), Jeanette Sproule (OCN NI), Hilary Hanberry (Business in the Community), Jan Eldred (L&WI) and Colin Neilands (FALNI)

Apologies: Ann Osborne (NOW Group), Peter Shields (AMH), Anne McVicker (WRDA), Gerry Campbell (Colleges NI), Niall Casey (Invest NI), Paul Kelly (Libraries NI), Tess Maginess (QUB), Eddie Lynch (Age Sector Platform), Michael Donnelly (DSD), Emma Dunseith (BBC) and Martin Flynn (OCN NI).

Welcome

The Chair welcomed back 'old hands' and greeted new additions to the Forum and those attending today as alternates. He then gave a brief overview of the work to be undertaken in the next 2 years, reminding members that the NI Forum is just part of a wider UK project overseen by the Learning & Work Institute (formerly NIACE), that in turn comes under EAAL (European Agenda for Adult Learning). The three themes of work, health and communities are perfect foci for driving forward lobbying on adult learning in NI. One of the major issues that must be urgently addressed are evidence gaps to back up our arguments - particularly collated hard evidence.

Trevor expressed his thanks to the former Chair, Eileen Kelly, for her work in the first year of the Forum - and indeed her many years of devotion to adult learning in NI. He passed on Eileen's good wishes for the continued success of the Forum.

Introductions

All members gave some background information on their organisations in terms of adult learning and also shared their hopes for the Forum and what they could offer to its work.

Contributions offered were mostly in terms of sharing information, experience and evidence - as well as commitment to the Forum over the coming meetings.

Some of the hopes for the Impact Forum and reflections on its focus for the next 2 years included:

- agreement that the themes are exactly right



Forum for Adult Learning NI



Scotland's Learning Partnership



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

- need to have adult learning properly valued
- evidence base needs to be built
- engagement should be with the new councils as well as the Assembly
- value of the contribution of the community/voluntary sector in particular needs to be recognised
- providers in the community/voluntary sector need support to gather evidence - and for this to be collated
- part of evidence that is currently missing is longitudinal research to show impact beyond the immediate
- that in learning for work there needs to be more emphasis on sustainable employment and more reflection on the needs of employers
- that the Forum now needs to move into action - walking the talk.

Overview of New Contract Period - Jan Eldred

Jan spoke to the briefing paper which had been circulated earlier in the week. She explained that the three key themes of work, health and communities would be interwoven with on-going work around Essential Skills, Digital Skills and Youth Employment. Papers on the three core themes will come to the national IFs, prepared by staff from L&WI, advised by a Research Group that will soon be established. However the desire is that IFs also communicate to the Research Group highlighting gaps that they have identified. Ultimately all research and discussion will feed into a State of the Nation report that will be produced in late 2017.

Environmental Scan

An exercise was carried out to identify issues that are currently impacting on adult learning in NI. While identified under STEP heading it was acknowledged that many issues cut across these 'boundaries'.

Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ageing population - changing needs - social isolation • health issues such as obesity, diabetes, ADHD and autism • drug and alcohol abuse • suicide rates - esp young men • the settlement of refugees • increasing wealth divide • still many deprived areas where motivation and aspiration are low • rural isolation • changing nature of work - portfolio careers, flexible working, home working
--------	---

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • large number of public sector redundancies • people becoming unemployed later in life - need for retraining
Technological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • need to replace old skills with new skills • speed of change • digital divide • infrastructural challenges - particularly in rural areas • impacting on the assessment of essential skills • online security • emphasis on STEM
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • public expenditure cuts • impact of these cuts on the voluntary sector • economy is slowing down worldwide • increased competition for resources • with less money available will adult learning miss out?
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new councils with powers for community planning • migration/refugees • international terrorism • changes in departmental structures - DEL disappearing • new Programme for Government • new Ministers/MLAs • EU Referendum • need to identify champions for adult learning in all depts • need to lobby for longer term investment that is vital for real impact • relations with RoI - reach out to AONTAS

Drafting Agendas for the 3 Themes

Members came together under the themes to begin to identify issues/ideas under each theme that will then be further developed by sub-groups and will assist the content and structure of subsequent thematic meetings.

Adult Learning and Health

It was thought that we could be pressing on a somewhat open door in that the Health Minister is keen to look at radical reform and should be interested in approaches that help address stretched finances and resources. Measures for prevention are bound to become more and more important.

The impact of education generally on health and wellbeing and not just that focusing on health issues is increasing argued - see Sir Michael Marmot's The Health Gap.

Mental health issues are particularly high in NI, impacted by the past decades of conflict and now cross-generational. What models can be looked at? - Recovery College and FEMH pilots in England.

Carnegie Trust has looked at wellbeing in NI and produced a report (see LinkedIn page for details).

Raising aspiration through learning interventions can have huge social benefits, including in health as people have the increased confidence and abilities to access information and services.

What evidence gaps exist in NI? What examples of good practice or policy can NI share with the rest of the UK?

Adult Learning and Work

What are the issues?

- Essential skills – lack of employer recognition and issues around progression; access to learning via digital platforms is challenging for many; a lack of community-based provision means some communities in NI do not engage in learning
- Employability skills – not just people with low levels of skills but HE graduates too
- Level 3 is a driver but this is challenging when many people don't have essential and employability skills – the gap is getting wider in relation to many people's skills and the demands of employment
- Job awareness – how do people know what jobs they can do especially when made redundant or come from homes where work has not featured? Identifying transferable skills; recognizing that there are different routes to learning and work.
- Skills shortages to meet market demand – mismatch between what many people bring and what employers want
- Is initial education fit for purpose? Why is it resulting in so many young people who don't have the skills to begin accessing employment? How can we support and encourage parental involvement?

What research might already exist?

- 200k qualifications in essential skills in last decade – what's the progression? Do we know? (DEL to investigate?)

- Unionlearn – evidence of involvement, what helps, what work-place opportunities are available to motivate and engage and what’s the difference made?
- Employers’ Forum – what evidence of what skills wanted in NI? What opportunities do employers have to offer adults training and development? What evidence of the impact of learning in work – on individuals and on the organisation? (BIC to investigate?) Use the forklift company NACCO as a case study of investment in training
- Invest NI – what evidence can they bring of impact of learning on employers and the economy?

What research questions do we have at this stage?

- What research is there from those European countries which seem more successful than us, on the effectiveness of initial education e.g. Finland? RoI? What do they do differently from UK/NI? What are the comparative costs/government investment?
- What research is there comparing the engagement and employment of inner-city working class young men e.g. inner city Dublin with Belfast?
- Are there case studies or research on post-industrial areas re how learning has supported successful transition from traditional industries to post-industrial environments? What are the CSF? This could help East Belfast, a former industrial area and where there are many social and economic challenges.
- How can we make essential skills learning more exciting, creative...are there lessons to learn from Functional Skills in England which might inform the development of Essential Skills in NI?

Adult Learning and Communities

There was considerable discussion on how *communities* should be defined. Adult learning in communities has many benefits and impacts on the other themes of work and health. So it was thought that the focus should be more on how adult learning helps build communities - community development just could not happen without adult learning.

What sets this theme apart from the others is the focus on the benefits of collective, usually localised, learning rather than individual learning paths. The provision of community-focused adult learning helps build community cohesion and inclusion, can create a collective voice and raise aspiration.

In the NI context, and something that could be a unique contribution to the wider UK discussion, adult learning has also played a role in community relations, equipping people with the confidence and skills to engage across community divides - learning to deal with difference.

While community relations has been quite well researched the role that adult learning plays is does not jump out - it is so implicit within activities that most providers would not define their work as adult learning.

As with health there are strong arguments in terms of preventative work and the savings that can be accrued - in this instance in terms of policing, justice and physical infrastructure.

Evidence from NI in terms of case studies and good practice could be useful in other parts of the UK and the EU more widely to assist addressing conflict and social inclusion/integration.

Next Steps

Sub Groups

Colin will convene meetings of the thematic sub-groups over March-May period. He will contact those absent from this meeting, update them on developments and encourage them to join sub-groups. Each sub-group can determine the number and length of meetings. Members present indicated their preferences:

Work - BITC, OCN NI, Princes Trust, DEL, OU
Communities - UU, NICVA, BBC, Big Lottery
Health - Extern

Meetings

Preference was expressed to keep meetings to half-day/mornings. Several offers of venues were made - Princes Trust, BITC, Invest NI, NICVA. While the order in which the themes are addressed is flexible it was decided to start with health and the groups settled on **16th June as the date for the next meeting - to be held in Princes Trust (tbc).**

The Chair suggested that it would be important to plan a meeting in Stormont at some point later on once the new government was embedded and the IF had evidence to present.

Other Action Points

- Jan to ascertain how the Research Group wants to receive evidence or research question/requests from the Impact Forums
- Jan to send links to Recovery College work
- Jan to send links to BIS FEMH pilot work
- Colin to identify any additional I Forum members who might offer a helpful contribution, in the light of the discussion
- **All** to consider and reflect, from their particular perspective on any evidence/research, studies, case studies, projects, reports which might inform developments.

- **All** to register with the LinkedIn group that Colin has established to facilitate sharing of resources and conversations.

Date of Next Meeting

16th June AM at Princes Trust (tbc) - to look at the theme of adult learning and health