Community Learning Reform
Support and Resources for Providers

Developing a locality approach to strategic planning for community learning

Introduction

A co-ordinated approach to strategic planning from providers and other relevant local organisations and employers is essential to plan a cohesive, inclusive and locally focused learning offer across an area.

Developing collaborative approaches that are truly responsive to local needs can be a tricky and time consuming process that requires a substantial shift from prevailing practice. Securing the buy-in and participation of a range of partners with different organisational cultures, priorities, starting points, levels of knowledge, expectations and practices can be challenging and time consuming, especially when vested interests and competition are added to the mix. However, commitment, attention to building working relationships and persistence will result in a community learning plan that serves residents well by:

• matching learning to local needs;

• building in progression routes to further learning, employment and/or wider outcomes

• aligning services;

• optimising resources to ensure that local people can access learning that will:

   • empower them to make positive changes that improve their life chances and quality of life;

   • strengthen their communities by enhancing democratic and civic participation;

   • build stronger, more inclusive and resilient communities.

Benefits and challenges

Community Learning Trusts reported the following benefits and challenges of local planning.

Benefits
The benefits included:

   · more provision and choice were available to local people that reflected their needs, interests and priorities;

- unnecessary duplication of provision was reduced;

- planned progression pathways were established;

- productive new partnerships were developed and existing ones strengthened;

- providers extended their reach into communities;

- local people became more involved in planning and evaluation;

- community learning had a greater impact in the locality;

- more income was generated - through fees/shared funding bids/accessing funding sources available to partners etc.

Challenges:

The challenges included:

- securing buy-in from elected members, senior officers, college principals and staff and managing the politics;

- building relationships and structures required a long development time.

- designing an effective streamlined process and managing capacity, time and costs;

- managing vested interests and collaboration with 'competitors';

- establishing a shared language with employers and partners from other sectors and defining the roles of different partners;

- supporting community members to access strategic planning and evaluation structures and meeting demands raised in community consultation;

- measuring impact.

Developing a model

The priorities and approaches to locality planning and solutions to the challenges must be area specific. The following considerations will assist partnerships to develop your strategy for a locally responsive community learning offer.

Profile your locality

Understanding the area profile and the implications of this for planning learning provision is a critical foundation of strategic planning. The model and plan will take account of factors such as demographic, social and economic data, the strategic shape and priorities of the locality, and existing planning and consultation arrangements and community learning provision.

Sheffield CLT worked with the Successful Families project in the city to make learning central to the 'Troubled Families' agenda .

Blackburn with Darwen CLT developed learning to develop the skills of local residents to support them to take over community assets in their area as the Council instituted a phased withdrawal.

The West of England CLT worked to establish learning in local neighbourhood plans was able to identify how community learning can support wider priorities such as improving local play facilities.

The Brighton and Hove Adult Learning Strategy 2013 - 2016 is cross- cutting and designed to support many of the city's strategic priorities

Establish a planning infrastructure

Partnerships need to put in place an infrastructure to support development and implementation of the strategic plan. They can draw on the work of the Community Learning Trusts pilots to design a model to suit local circumstances. The CLT evaluation report[1] details the different infrastructure types adopted by the pilot CLTs with the advantages and disadvantages of each (pages 135 - 137). The models include local authority led partnerships, local authority and community partnerships, joint working across local authorities, FE college or social enterprise led partnerships and a consortium of equal partners as in Brighton and Hove where six partners from different sectors had equal status.

The Community Learning Trust (CLT) for West Sussex, 'Liberate', is a Lead Accountable Body led by Aspire, a social enterprise and charity that emerged from the Local Authority.

Working arrangements

The Community Learning Trusts tended to work through a core group of decision makers, a board, strategic group or steering group, supported by one or more operational or task groups working on specific areas of strategic development and day to day operations. The evaluation report concluded that strategic partnerships flourished where there was a lead organisation with an identified person taking a leadership role.

Working in partnership to move to a collective focus for community learning across a locality needs careful consideration to make it work. It is essential to build trust and that takes time. Bringing different organisational cultures requires sensitivity and flexibility. The power dynamics can be complex, especially where organisations of different size are involved, are more used to competing than collaborating and are accountable to organisations whose priorities might not align with those of the area planning board.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-learning-trust-pilot-evaluation

The Brighton and Hove Adult Learning Group (ALG), a partnership of 6 Skills Funding Agency funded providers and local community organisations is the strategic planning body for adult learning in the city. The operational activity takes place in two sub committees: the Operations Team for Community Learning and the Forum for English Maths and ESOL.

A Birmingham Trust Board has been established, chaired by the Cabinet Member for Development, Jobs and Skills, to strategically oversee the work of the CLT. A core operational group, comprising all main partners, meets regularly to lead the activity of the CLT. A local operational group has been established in each area to share knowledge and resources and develop a learning offer which addresses local need.

Joint working

Shared planning and delivery can require providers to adapt both their processes and provision. This can necessitate sensitive negotiation and robust decision-making processes. Community Learning Trusts collaborated and pooled resources to support one or more of the following:

• a clear vision to support the strategy;

• joint curriculum planning to ensure an equitable distribution of learning opportunities, geographically and across interest groups by avoiding unnecessary duplication and filling the gaps;

• shared IAG services and clearly defined progression routes to higher level and/or accredited provision, employment and/or wider opportunities such as volunteering;

• securing benchmarking data including through data sharing;

• consulting and involving local communities and other partners, including LEPS;

• joint marketing;

• widening delivery networks and commissioning;

• establishing a financial strategy to make best use of public funding across an area, including common fee structures and fee remission policies;

• shared quality improvement mechanisms such as shared self- assessment processes;

• income generation and ensuring value for money;

• shared facilities including MIS;

- shared Continuing Professional Development (CPD), voluntary and community sector capacity building and volunteer training;

- joint impact measurement.

Research commissioned by the Brighton and Hove ALG provided comprehensive, comparable baseline data and information about participation by different groups of learners in order to address the needs of learners in the City.

The West of England CLT produced joint community learning data reports showing the current map of provision and the profile of learners taking part.

The Cheshire CLT chair was on the LEP board so could act as a link between the two and the West of England CLT had regular involvement with the LEP.

Community ownership and involvement
In many areas, increasing community ownership and involvement by engaging them more directly in deciding the shape of local provision and being accountable to them in relation to quality and impact, is a potentially radical development from existing work with local people and groups.

Arnstein's ladder of participation,[2] developed in 1969 and widely used and adapted since is a useful tool to support consideration of different types of local involvement for different purposes, ranging from information giving to decision making powers.

- **Board membership**
  Including local organisations, employers and residents in the membership of the decision-making body brings valuable grass roots perspectives to the planning processes. As this will involve a very small number of people and is not representative of a whole community, additional strategies will be needed to include a wider range of residents.

Blackburn with Darwen Community Learning Trust's Board includes local people and elected members to ensure local communities can have a real influence on decision making and how services are run. 'Ward Solution Meetings' encourage residents to raise issues. Local voluntary and community sector organisations (VCOs) can vote on how resources are allocated.

- **Planning structures and networks**
  The planning partnership can work through existing planning structures and networks such as Local Learning Partnerships, Community Assemblies, and Parish Councils to involve local people and groups in decision making. Where there are no appropriate structures new ones can be created. It is

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[2] http://www.partnerships.org.uk/part/arn.htm

important that membership criteria are transparent, they have a clear remit and are accessible to people with different needs and skills.

The Sheffield Community Learning Trust (CLT) works with Local Learning Partnerships and the city's seven Community Assembly areas providing strategic sponsorship of community learning across the city. Third sector organisations are involved in the partnerships, taking part in strategic planning and delivery. Representatives from the Community Assemblies form part of the governing body of the Trust alongside local community organisations and agency funded partners.

The Cumbria Community Learning Trust integrated community learning into three community planning partnerships involving parish councils, community organisations and local residents in decision making. This work linked 140 village hall committees, a range of groups in the district's market towns, and five community exchanges, which are hubs for businesses, community activists and other local bodies.

Five community learning forums have been formed In Sunderland to support the Community Learning Trust. Representatives from a range of organisations take part in each forum and local people are encouraged to contribute.

In Kent an informal stakeholder group meets to identify opportunities for partnership working to better meet community learning needs and links with forums through which communities can engage with decision making and engagement activities.

- **Consultation activity**

Consulting communities about the learning needs or the quality and impact of the learning on offer is also important. Using a range of approaches is necessary to address the challenge of securing participation and representation. You can also draw on the knowledge and insights of community groups, activists and learning champions who can identify the learning needs of their community and act as a communication link between the planning Board and residents.   The multitude of consultation tools available include surveys, consultation events in local venues, social media, peer research, participatory appraisal and community of inquiry. A partnership approach can spread the lead of demands on funding and staff time. and funding.

Derby CLT used a Community of Inquiry approach to find out local views on challenging issues such as ESOL and the learning needs of particular estates where there was low participation in community learning.

The West of England CLT piloted a number of neighbourhood planning exercises that involved community based organisations and local people to shape community learning.

Start point questions

Partners can select from the questions below to support their development of a locality approach to planning community learning.

Locality profile
• What are your geographic boundaries and how will you address the differing demographic and economic profiles of specific wards or parishes in the overall plan? How will you take into account that people often choose to cross boundaries and borders to undertake learning?

• What data do you have, for example on demography, housing, labour market, health, civic participation etc? Are there any ongoing or projected changes, for example to the demographic profile or labour market, that will generate learning needs?

• What other community learning providers and other potential partners, including LEPS, employers and the voluntary and community sector are in the area and what planning and consultation structures and networks exist?

• What are the local priorities, policies and plans and how will community learning align with them (for example families, anti-poverty, public health, skills, employment, LEP planning)? How will the plan connect with those of neighbouring local authorities/boroughs and cross authority/borough plans?

• **Infrastructure**

• What governance arrangements will be most appropriate and effective?   How will these work alongside members' own governance arrangements and how will any differences be managed?

• What criteria will you use to decide membership of the strategic planning group and operational groups? How will you ensure that different interests are represented and that people with authority to make decisions take part?

• How will you ensure that relationships, roles and responsibilities are agreed and understood, e.g. by recognising different knowledge, contacts, strengths and capacity, establishing a shared language and developing working protocols?

• What training will you offer to board and task group members to support strategic planning?

• How will you manage the politics and the movement from competition to collaboration?

• What lines of communication and accountability between the strategy group and others will work best- local authority, partner's own governing bodies, local

communities, external agencies including SFA and how can these best be managed without creating a huge bureaucracy?

- What is your timetable for development - moving to a locality approach can take considerable time?

- What will the planning structure cost and how will you resource it?

Developing and implementing the plan

- What process will you use to develop a realistic and achievable plan?

- How will you enable a wider range of partners, including LEPs, to articulate the connections between community learning, business and skills to support planning.

- What arrangements will you put in place for commissioning provision (where applicable) and bringing in new providers?

- How will you ensure consistency and quality and foster and monitor equality and diversity across the different partners?

- How will you measure the impact of the provision and provide evidence of change and how will you involve local communities and partners?

- How will you manage information including publicising the community learning offer, achievements, feedback on consultations etc. and make it accessible to all?

 Community representation and involvement
- What different types of community representation, involvement and participation in decision making do you want? How will you attract providers, local residents, organisations and employers to get involved and how will you support and value different levels of involvement?

- How will you create a culture of co-creation and listening? - How do local people, organisations, employers and other partners gain ownership of the strategy, know what they will do to help develop it and how can they contribute to making it work?

- What approaches will be most effective to consult local community members and organisations?

- What planning networks/structures are already in place? Do we need to create any?

- How will you resource community engagement and involvement?