

## **NEW CHALLENGES, NEW CHANCES**

### **Review of Informal Adult and Community Learning**

**AUGUST 2011**

#### **Response form**

Q1. Do you agree that BIS-funded IACL contributes to the development of the Big Society and complements the delivery of other Government policies, and if yes, which policies and how might IACL's contribution be measured?

Learning should be central to the development of the Big Society if individuals are to feel "free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities" (NIACE). Informal Adult Community Learning supports one of the key principles of the Big Society; putting more power into people's hands. Learning is essential to developing confidence and skills to influence decision makers and to help everyone understand and contribute effectively if they are to get the most of out of the changes.

The Big Society is about much more than a bigger role for volunteers and the voluntary and community sector. Local people having a greater say over the decisions and services that affect their quality of life is to be welcomed.

For learners, empowered consumers will be able to create the learning offer for their communities. To be part of these developments individuals need to be able read, write and be able to use digital technology. Without the skills to develop networks, and groups with social enterprise models, the new rights and responsibilities will be harder to discharge and only available to those in society who have the skills to take advantages of the new freedoms and responsibilities.

We would support the NIACE view that learning for active citizenship is central to the Big Society. The Big Society is based on the importance of

local communities taking a more active part in government. Informal adult learning has a part to play in helping to address those inequalities of social class, income, age, gender race, faith and disability. With cuts to funding and services from the statutory and voluntary sectors there is a danger that those suffering multiple disadvantage will be at a further disadvantage and unable to play an active part in the Big Society. Research shows that a more unequal distribution amongst adults of learning and skills has a correlation to higher rates of civic unrest and lower levels of social trust.

In Rotherham groups who have moved on from organised funded courses to become self-organised groups have struggled to keep going. It is easy to underestimate the resources in skills and capacity needed for self-organised learning groups to thrive. If volunteers are to be supported from initial expression of interest to being an effective part of self-organised learning again there needs to be support with structures and processes at local level. Commitment from individuals needs to be supported with training for the roles required. The danger is that without this there will be the dominance of a few 'professionals' within communities. To avoid this there is a need to make sure Informal Adult Community Learning supports as wide a range of learning as possible if citizens are to take on responsibility.

The strategy for improving mental health talks about new five ways to wellbeing model that is going to be promoted nationally. Learning is seen as one of the five ways to wellbeing. The need to ensure continued access to learning for the sake of learning and to ensure recognition is still given for learning even where it may not necessarily lead to job outcomes will have a positive impact on wellbeing and contribute to wider targets relating to health and wellbeing. Learning in itself has a direct positive impact on wellbeing but it indirectly impacts on wellbeing through improved job prospects and reduced health inequalities where the most disadvantaged are targeted.

Community involvement is key to the new strategy for Public Health (Healthy Lives Healthy People) e.g. formation of health and wellbeing boards. Access to Informal Adult Community Learning could link to this by empowering people in disadvantaged communities to get involved. A life course approach to tackling health inequalities is recommended by the strategy and access to learning with a view to gaining employment is key to this. We welcome the intention to promote the expansion of volunteering opportunities as an effective route to gaining skills and employment, for example by supporting the training of volunteer Community Learning Champions to engage local people in learning activities, acquiring new skills and embarking on new career routes.

“Strong families are where families learn to become responsible people” – David Cameron May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011. Family learning is important in the growth and support of learning families. Family learning is a powerful tool in increasing confidence for families and an important way of engaging adults in further learning to improve their own skills. Many parents progress on to other learning and increased involvement in school is another way in which the

capacity required to deliver the Big Society is built through Informal Adult Community Learning.

Informal Adult Community Learning can support the digital agenda, particularly for those who are not formally engaged with learning. Learners do need to be supported with physical access and the skills and confidence to use technology. There is a concern that the focus on e-learning is seen as a replacement for community learning provision. Good quality e-learning resources are important but as a tool to support access and not a replacement. A reliance on e-learning will not help with the social and soft skills employers are looking for.

## **Q2. Should BIS funded IACL be aimed solely at supporting specific outcomes such as progression to training and employment, or enable progression in a broader sense?**

We would agree with the consultation that IACL can make a real difference to people's job prospects, especially for those who have had few chances in life or who come from the most deprived and excluded sections of society. Narrow job focussed outcomes could be self-defeating as only with a wider offer including a range of engagement opportunities will there be the learning that allows personal growth and the development of softer skills so valued by employers.

In Rotherham IACL is important in engaging with new arrivals supporting community cohesion with learning opportunities open to all new arrivals. Families can engage with organisations within the wider community including schools, health and libraries building an understanding of and relationships with the settled communities.

## **Q3. If the latter, what other types of progression are relevant and how could they be measured?**

In the concentration on progression that can be measured it is important not to forget the contribution to personal growth that IACL can make. Longitudinal studies on individual learners will give valuable information on the range of progression made by learners. This could include: increased confidence, motivation, steps to learning, improved health, volunteering activity and self employment. Learner journeys will demonstrate what works for individuals and provide evidence for funding decisions.

The Office for National Statistics is due to undertake a survey that will run each year, part of which is around the impact of learning on mental health. In the adoption of impact measures for IACL it will be important to make sure that these wider indicators are included in measuring impact.

#### **Q4. What should be the respective national and local roles in relation to IACL?**

We welcome the greater freedoms and flexibilities. These will help in maximising resources at local level and will help with responding to local needs. However the complexity of the system is not complementary to getting the best outcomes for the learner. Strengthening accountability to local communities is a natural adjunct to the focus on customer satisfaction; the impact on the individual learner.

The promotion of greater provider diversification needs to sit alongside a focus on the quality of the learner experience. In this way greater diversification will provide more quality opportunities for learners.

With less money in the system and more fees what will be the best way to inform learners of the most appropriate route for them? There is no mention in the consultation of how Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) will be provided or funded in the future. IAG, including engagement and outreach, is a critical element of IACL delivery, particularly in trying to support and encourage the progression of reluctant learners.

The importance of this will be even greater when learners have to make decisions they will find difficult to change because of the financial commitment they will have had to make. Information, Advice and Guidance needs to be part of any nationally set framework and could perhaps be made a mandatory element of all courses, with a specific funding allocation provided.

#### **Q5. What (if any) steps could facilitate the changing role of central Government in IACL?**

For any changing role in IACL central government does need to look at the clash between the priorities of different areas of government. There is currently a clash between DWP and SFA priorities, for example, the mandatory requirement for a learner to attend a Work Programme. This could have a negative impact and disengage individuals from further learning. In addition there are the financial pressures of needing to take out loans for Level 3 qualifications, with the subsequent impact on well being.

#### **Q6. What are the implications of seeking a wider local provider base?**

Increasing the range of organisations and groups involved in delivering learning is to be welcomed if such growth is accompanied by a focus on maintaining the quality. Without a national and local commitment to maintaining the quality of provision there is a danger that more disadvantaged learners in less affluent communities may only be able to access lower quality provision. Funding for IACL does still need to be tied to quality improvement.

**Q7. What would a localised IACL offer mean for providers, such as the Workers' Educational Association, delivering learning across localities?**

**Q8. Should BIS-funded IACL be targeted or universal, and why?**

The increased focus on learners is welcomed. If provision is to be more targeted then it does need to be explicit as to who the target group are. If provision is to be targeted at the most disadvantaged then who decides this and at what level is important. Local circumstances should be taken into account in deciding target groups.

If the government is serious about focussing on the most disadvantaged then there needs to be a fresh look at fees. We would suggest there needs to be a reciprocal initiative on fees.

There should be consideration of the impact on those learners who may have a qualification at level 2 or above but may need another qualification to secure a job. How do they move on?

In terms of attracting potentially "reluctant" learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, a possible approach could be to provide free engagement and taster courses for all, but then apply fees with appropriate remission for longer courses.

Where possible, local fee policies should be developed with the involvement of learners and local residents. This would encourage service users and communities to develop solutions for income generation and is consistent with the Big Society agenda.

**Q9. What are the key challenges to generating fee income and what associated solutions would encourage more sophisticated approaches to income generation?**

If fees are not to stop learners accessing provision there needs to be a clear understanding of the loans system and how this will operate. Learners need to have clear information on how and when they will have to pay loans back. Many learners who need to access provision will be put off unless they have a clear understanding that they do not need to provide the funding up front to take part in their course. The consultation does not mention scholarships or bursaries for the most disadvantaged students. Without this information as

part of the approach to income generation there is a danger that IACL will not be accessed by those who most need the provision.

### **Q10. In a localised model, what are the key challenges and associated solutions that would secure accountability for tax payers' investment?**

The advantage of a localised model would be the freedom to focus on local need and priorities.

Within a commissioning-based approach, the lead body would be responsible for ensuring transparency and accountability.

Initial plans should be developed with the full involvement of all stakeholders and clear, deliverable outcomes identified.

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems should allow for regular challenge by learners and the wider community, with comprehensive reports at the end of each funded period demonstrating progress towards achieving the desired outcomes. This monitoring and evaluation cycle should then inform future commissioning plans.

### **Q11. Which, if any, of options a) b) and c) on page 13 present a proportionate approach to measuring impact? Are there any alternatives?**

In any decisions on measuring impact we should not lose sight of the intended outcome of Informal Adult Community Learning to contribute to personal growth and improve life chances for individuals and families. It is important not to make the mistake of shaping the offer by what can be measured. It is difficult to measure personal growth and the contribution to community cohesion, social inclusion, health and wellbeing but however measured this should be the primary outcome and not a side issue.

Evidencing of spend and targets needs to be reduced if we are to avoid the situation where a disproportionate level of funding is committed to the completion of statistical returns.

### **Q12. What core information should recipients of BIS investment have to provide in relation to learner characteristics and learning activity?**

We would be keen to reduce the amount of information currently collected. The ILR has become too unwieldy and presents a challenge to learners and providers alike. The suggestion is that collecting information such as gender, age, nationality/ethnicity, employment status, geographical location

(postcode), health / disability and starting point would be sufficient to provide the basis of a learner profile, which could be developed as the learner progresses through the system through the unique learner number.

Details of the learning and activity supported could be restricted to learning aim, length of course and guided learning hours.

### **Q13. How can administrative data be used effectively to map fee income and learner disadvantage?**

Current systems would allow for the mapping of learner data in relation to geographical communities but to map this against indicators of disadvantage would be more time consuming and involved. Although the data generated would be of interest this could run the danger of a disproportionate amount of funding being absorbed by the administration of the funding as opposed to delivering learning.

### **Q14. What factors should be taken into account in the distribution of BIS funding for IACL?**

Freedoms and flexibility allows funding to be maximised. We welcome the move if this is to be translated into local decisions. If local decisions are to be effective there needs to be sufficient funding to allow support for the most disadvantaged alongside the scope to try out innovative work. Without this there is danger that any new model will only deliver the same outcomes as the current model which engages with a disproportionate number of learners who can afford to pay.

Allocating an amount of BIS funding across each local area, based on local demographics and other specific criteria such as deprivation would seem to be the best option.

It would then be for local stakeholders to agree a local plan, which would determine priorities based on identified learner needs.

It may also be useful to provide the opportunity for sub-regional groupings of local authorities and other partners to develop a limited number of collaborative arrangements, which best reflect travel to learn patterns and local geography, and are consistent with emerging city region structures.

Some areas of specialist provision (e.g. for LDD young adults) may also transcend regional boundaries and benefit from wider collaboration.

### **Q15. Which, if any, of options a), b) and c) on page 15 would best secure more localised delivery and are there alternatives that could be considered**

Funding allocated directly to individual providers may address some local needs but may not provide a cohesive offer across an area.

Involvement in the design and delivery of local programmes by the full range of voluntary and community sector organisations and other non-statutory providers, is crucial. However, this can be achieved via effective local partnership structures, together with – where necessary – specific funding for capacity building. This could be complemented by national initiatives such as the support offered by LSIS and NIACE.

Any commissioning or provider model does need to be able to adopt the role of ‘honest broker’ representing the interests of the learner rather than providers. If a single local commissioning body is adopted there will need to be a careful balance between the economies of scale and the responsiveness to local circumstances. A South Yorkshire model would involve areas with very different needs and target groups. To find common ground target groups could be quite generic and the model would fail to be responsive to local needs.

The overriding factor in any funding model should be to maximise the amount of funding spent on the delivery of learning as opposed to monitoring and commissioning systems.

### **Q16. Should BIS IACL funding be used to fund capacity building and innovation?**

The amount of funding available for the delivery of learning at a local level does not fully meet the needs and wishes of learners. It is appropriate to use the funding to improve the quality of the learning experience but if the funding was further dissipated to wider capacity building for organisations the amount of funding available would be diluted. With the current funding pressures on the community and voluntary sectors there is a danger that funding could be used to maintain organisations without increasing or improving the range of learning opportunities.

### **Q17. If yes, how should funding be balanced and what type of activity should be funded?**

The NLDC model of supporting some capacity building has been helpful in growing the number of organisations able to deliver learning opportunities. IACL does need to have funding to allow for innovative activities and for trialling work with groups that may need different approaches to engage. IACL can support digital inclusion and self-organised learning. The majority of learners, particularly the most disadvantaged do need tutor support to access learning. These provide additional tools rather than a replacement for tutors.



**Q18. Is there a need for quality assurance arrangements to be changed in light of the potential changes to BIS funded IACL? If yes, in what way?**

Quality assurance systems need to ensure a consistent offer of quality learning opportunities.

Whilst it is important to not insist on unreasonably stringent standards that smaller organisations would struggle to meet, particularly for delivery of shorter courses, any revision of quality needs to focus on ensuring the same quality of opportunity is available to learners across IACL. Without this consistency, learners will not be well served.

**Q19. What adjustments to current workforce development arrangements in England would best support the new vision for IACL?**

IACL needs a well qualified workforce to deliver quality learning opportunities. However the strength of IACL is the ability to grow capacity within the system. We still need to value the skills needed to support community groups to write development plans and moving on to DTTLs / PTTLs developing tutors. The impact of fees and loans on reducing the diversity of the tutors, their backgrounds and experience needs to be considered in any review of the system. It is this richness that gives IACL its strength in delivering and progressing learners.