

Real partnerships in community learning and development – empowering the voluntary adult learning sector in Scotland.

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Voluntary adult learning organisations are being asked to play an increasingly active role in the planning and development of learning opportunities within their communities (both of interest and geographical), as well as providing a service that meets the needs of a diverse range of users. Many voluntary organisations have been very actively involved in the work of Community Learning partnerships to date and will continue this work in the new Community Learning and Development partnerships. However, current evidence suggests that the participation of the voluntary sector in the development of Community Learning Strategies and Plans has not been consistent across the country, and there are important issues that need to be addressed to ensure that the sector is able to play a full and active role.

The voluntary adult learning sector works closely with communities and often provides the link for those wanting to reach the most excluded groups in society. They can be the key to reaching individuals who have yet to benefit from the development of new lifelong learning opportunities. They therefore have an important role to play in Community Learning and Development Strategies and Plans, but will only be able to do this if they are a member of a ‘real’ partnership. By this I mean a partnership where all partners are equal, valued and feel able to contribute in an open and safe environment. Those working in the voluntary sector need to be empowered to participate – to be in a position to be able to influence the work undertaken by the partnerships that can be so important to both individuals and communities. In this research project we are exploring issues around participation, engagement, effective partnership working and the effect of this work on the practices of voluntary adult learning organisations, with the aim of helping them to become empowered and active partners. It is hoped that our findings will support the continuing development of the partnerships and will be of interest to all partners whether from the voluntary adult learning sector or not.

Background

Since 1999 (see Scottish Office Community Education Circular 4/99) Local Authorities have been responsible, through a lead officer, for coordinating a Community Learning Strategy partnership that brings together a range of learning providers from the statutory and voluntary sectors together with representatives of the community. Local partners are required to produce Community Learning plans (focusing on a particular geographical community or community of interest) that, if effective, deliver learning opportunities that meet the needs and aspirations of the community, and make a contribution to the government’s objectives for social inclusion, lifelong learning and active citizenship. The strategies and plans should be based on a rigorous analysis of need and available resources, and demonstrate engagement with key agencies, the voluntary sector and the community (HMIE, 2002).

This development resulted in many voluntary adult learning organisations having an additional strand added to their work in the form of participating in the partnerships, either strategically or at the planning stage. As early as 2000, concern was already being expressed in some quarters that, although the voluntary sector had been designated as a key partner in the development of Community Learning strategies and plans, many organisations were having difficulties meeting this new challenge. Community Learning Scotland commissioned a report looking at these issues from the viewpoint of both statutory agencies and the

voluntary sector. The report identified a need for additional resources to facilitate attendance and involvement by the voluntary sector (particularly as those not participating were representatives of some of the most socially excluded groups), and capacity building to ensure inclusivity and equal representation of the sectors (Kinnairdie Consulting, 2000). Following on from the findings of this report, and as the national intermediary for the adult learning sector offering, amongst other things, support and development services, Learning Link Scotland (LLS) worked with a number of partner organisations on a range of developments to support and monitor the participation of the voluntary sector in these processes. These included,

- training workshops (held in 2000) organized by LLS, the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO), Youthlink Scotland and Community Learning Scotland (CLS – now part of Communities Scotland). The workshops enabled participants to reflect on voluntary sector involvement with Community Learning Strategies and Plans, and identify concerns and training and support need.
- The establishment of the Voluntary Sector Community Learning Support Partnership (VSCLSP) which began its work by providing small grants to voluntary organisations and networks seeking to carry out tangible projects and activities which supported the voluntary sector to participate more effectively in community planning processes. The VSCLSP partnership comprised LLS, CVS (Councils for Voluntary Service) Scotland, SCVO, Youthlink Scotland and the Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation. Funds were obtained from CLS and the grants used during 2001/02. Organisations used their grants to undertake a wide variety of projects including awareness raising activities targeted at disabled and homeless groups, a consultative conference for users of mental health services and the production of information on community learning in Urdu and Bengali.

In June 2002 the Scottish Executive announced that it would be issuing new Community Learning and Development Guidance to replace Circular 4/99. It confirmed its commitment to community learning and development (an approach that requires a commitment to empowerment, participation, inclusion, self-determination and partnership) and the important role it can play in promoting key priorities in areas such as social inclusion, lifelong learning, active citizenship and community regeneration (Scottish Executive, 2002). Community learning and development is defined by the Executive as informal learning and social-development work with individuals and groups in their communities. The Guidance, Working and learning together to build stronger communities, was issued in January 2003 and the consultation period ended just as this paper was being prepared. Communities will be expected to build on the work of Community Learning strategies and plans to develop Community Learning and Development strategies that will cover a three-year period starting on 1 April 2004, with the partnership deciding how many Community Learning and Development plans are needed for their area. The Guidance recognises that the voluntary sector is a major contributor to community learning and development processes and expects them to be represented at both strategic and planning levels. However, it does acknowledge that this may be problematic,

The diversity of the voluntary sector, and the reality that many voluntary organisations are national rather than local, has sometimes proved difficult in terms of the sector's ability to be as actively involved as it would wish. (p17, Scottish Executive, 2003).

LLS and others that support the voluntary sector are concerned to ensure that those working in adult learning, the voluntary sector and their partners, are able to build upon the good work that has already taken place, and that those who have struggled with the Community Learning planning process can learn from the experiences of others. The VSCLSP (now joined by

Volunteer Development Scotland) have therefore undertaken this new research project, with LLS taking the project lead. The project runs from February to June 2003.

The Research Project

The research will explore a number of key questions focusing on whether voluntary organisations have been involved in Community Learning Strategy and Planning partnerships to date, and which processes have enabled effective partnership working. It will examine what effect being involved in such processes has on the internal structure of the organisation and on external relationships, and what are seen to be the benefits of involvement in the planning process.

We will also be looking to identify examples of best practice in engaging the voluntary sector in the partnership and planning processes. Some work has already been done in this area, for example by Communities Scotland (Community Based Adult Learning: measuring outcomes and analysing partnership, 2003) and HM Inspectorate of Education (Towards Community Learning Plans, 2002), but none has focused on the topic from a voluntary sector and Community Learning and Development planning perspective. When reporting on their investigations into the impact of Community Learning plans on community based adult learning Communities Scotland state that,

Further exploration should take place of the experience of developing Community Learning Plans, across a range of partners, building on HMIE's *Towards Community Learning Plans*. Such work could focus, though not exclusively, on perspectives from the voluntary sector and communities. (p3, Communities Scotland, 2003)

It is hoped that this project will make a contribution towards this recommendation, and be used as a resource by partners as a means of promoting and sharing good practice. In establishing the criteria for good practice we are making use of evaluation tools produced by the HMIE and the Scottish Community Development Centre. *How Good is our Community Learning and Development?* (HMIE, 2002) has been designed to support self-evaluation by providers of community learning and development and is used when inspecting local authority services (it can also be used by other organisations and agencies working in the field and has been used by LLS as a self-evaluation tool). *Learning, Evaluation and Planning* (LEAP) (SCDC, 2001), is a framework developed to help Community Learning partnerships plan for achieving and assessing desired outcomes. We will also be using criteria determined by those working in the voluntary sector who have a wide experience of the processes involved. By identifying best practice we hope to provide planning partners with practical examples and guidance in working in their own particular locality, and encourage them to share their experiences and skills across the adult learning sector.

Methodology

The following research processes are included in the project.

An independent evaluation of the VSCLSP small grants initiative (see above).

A mapping of existing voluntary sector participation in Community Learning and Development planning processes to provide an overview of the current rate of engagement and activity of voluntary sector partners. The VSCLSP is undertaking the following activities,

- i. a national survey of local authority lead officers and national voluntary sector networks (CVS, LLS, Youthlink, SCVO and VDS);

- ii. structured interviews with stakeholders in the statutory and voluntary sectors in sample locations throughout Scotland;
- iii. focus group discussions with cross-sectoral partnerships in sample locations.

Identify best practice examples of engaging the voluntary sector on the planning process. The VSCLSP is undertaking the following activities,

- i. establish criteria for recommended best practice for voluntary sector engagement, referring to the experience of practitioners working in the voluntary adult learning sector, the HMIE document *How Good is our Community Learning and Development?* and LEAP;
- ii. set research questions for interviews, focusing on possible solutions that help overcome perceived difficulties;
- iii. undertake a national survey of lead officers and national voluntary sector networks;
- iv. hold structured interviews with local partners identified through the mapping process. Targeted interviews will include lead officers, CVS's and large national and small local voluntary organisations.

Identify voluntary organisations involved in the planning process to participate in focus group discussions on the effects of participation on their organisation.

Emerging Findings

This paper is being written in the middle of the research process and although findings will be available at the FACE Conference we are not yet able to provide conclusive answers to any of our questions. However, a number of cross-sectoral groups have been brought together to discuss the process of Community Learning and Development planning and people's past experiences of partnership working in this area. Initial findings concerning best practice indicate that effective partnerships have the following qualities, clarity of vision and a shared and agreed agenda; an ethos that ensures people are valued, trusted and respected; a clear and shared understanding of roles, responsibilities and priorities; a focus on the needs of the community not on those of a particular individual or organisation; accessibility to all those who want to participate, and the commitment of all partners to the work of the partnership.

Participants at these events, and during one to one meetings have talked about the pressures faced by those working for small voluntary organisations, but also about the benefits that can be gained from working in Community Learning partnerships.

Concerns expressed by voluntary sector practitioners include, with a large number of partnerships being created, and with limited time and resources, which meeting is the most important to the organisation and to the learners?

Are learning opportunities (courses, workshops and so on) restricted because the worker, who may only be part-time or working as a volunteer, has to attend partnership planning meetings and use finite resources to do this?

If the voluntary sector has only one or two seats at the partnership table, how can the needs and experience of such a diverse sector be taken into account?

The benefits of participating in the partnerships include, an opportunity to network and make new individual partners thereby increasing learning opportunities for the community; a greater understanding of the work of other partners; an opportunity to get your voice heard.

As stated above, these are only initial findings and a more detailed report will be available at the Conference. It is our intention to make the report available as widely as possible to encourage other partners and partnerships to share their experiences, but also to inform policy and decision-makers and others of the needs of the voluntary adult learning sector and Community Learning and Development partnerships, and the valuable resource that already exists within those partnerships.

References

HMIE (2002) *How Good is Our Community Learning and Development?* (Edinburgh: HMSO)

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