



Regional Learning Partnership
Partneriaeth Ddysgu Ranbarthol

South West & Central Wales
De-Orllewin a Canolbarth Cymru



Ariennir yn Rhannol gan
Lywodraeth Cymru
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‘GET THE MESSAGE’

A Regional Learner Involvement Event



#ACLmessage2014

The above Wordle is a visual representation of what learning means to the adult learners who attended the regional learner involvement event.



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1.0 Introduction

The Regional Learning Partnership South West and Central Wales (RLP) is a transformational partnership bringing Education and Regeneration partners together to help provide a better future for learners and potential learners across south west and central Wales.

Recognised by the Welsh Government for its 'transformational' work with regeneration and education organisations, the RLP has been praised for its efforts towards efficiency and improvement in bringing together people who have an interest in the training and skills agenda, to maximum opportunities for learners and potential learners wanting to learn new skills progress their careers or enter employment.

The RLP is focussed on the learner and strives to place the learner at the centre of its activities. It does this by providing opportunities for learners from across the region to come together and have a collective voice on their own learning, to share learning experiences and to articulate their views on adult learning.

Get the Message – Regional Learner Involvement Event

On Thursday, 6th March 2014 the Adult Community Learning sub-group of the RLP hosted a regional learner event entitled 'Get the Message – *the importance of adult community learning*' at the Liberty Stadium, Swansea. This was the second learner involvement event hosted by the RLP and aimed to build on the views of learners captured at the 2013 event.

To view 'Get the Message' poster click here

In total 78 adults from across south west and central Wales attended the event with many additional learners participating by way of social media channels (Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) in the lead up to and during the event. Additionally, policy makers, adult learning providers and people who have an interest in adult learning also attended and contributed to the debate on the importance of adult learning.

Photos from the day - photos supplied by two NPT learners, Jonathon Bennett & Chris Thomas

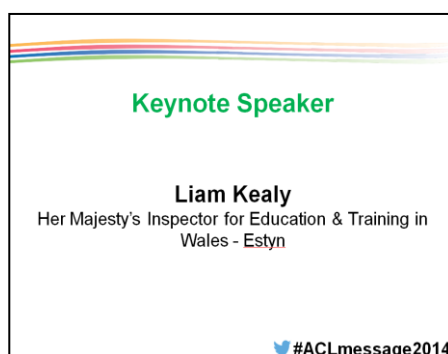
The primary aim of the 'Get the Message' event was to provide learners with the opportunity to connect with each other, to articulate the importance of adult learning and to influence national, regional and local policy makers by presenting to Government officials a report which summarises their views. There is a general concern amongst the adult learning community that in recent years, during times of austerity, adult learning has dropped down the political agenda and the real benefits of adult learning; enabling people to become confident, resilient and self-reliant are not being acknowledged by political decision makers. The 'Get the Message' learner event and the resulting report is seen by many learners as the first step to addressing their concerns.

2.0 Learner Involvement Event Programme

The 'Get the Message' learner involvement event was highly interactive and was designed to enable learners to participate in a variety of ways including live social media channels.

The **event programme** consisted of a plenary session in the morning, with presentations from Mr. Eifion Evans, Strategic Director, Learning & Partnerships, Ceredigion County Council and Lead Director of ERW, Liam Kealy, Her Majesty's Inspector for Education & Training in Wales and Cerys Furlong, Director of NIACE Dysgu Cymru.

Liam Kealy's presentation



Throughout the morning learners were encouraged to ask questions of the presenters and to post comments on Twitter, Facebook and on a 'Post It' note wall.

During the mid morning break learners were tasked to write, in one word, what learning meant to them. The purpose of this task was to capture the opinions of each learner and create a wordle, to show visually, the significance of learning to people.

The afternoon was designed to be more interactive and consisted of learners breaking out into four discussion groups and sharing views and ideas amongst themselves and learning providers.

To stimulate debate and encourage learners to express their views the discussion groups were provided with the following four questions:

- The impact of recent funding cuts to ACL;
- The impact of the Welfare Reform Act (one year later);
- What does ACL mean to learners?;
- What are the difficulties faced by learners and what can be done about it?

Comments and ideas submitted by learners during the group discussions were captured on flip charts. As cited earlier, learners were also encouraged to post comments throughout the day by way of a 'Post It' note wall, live Twitter feeds and Facebook.



View the post-it note wall comments, on what Adult Community Learning means to learners

Towards the end of the day the break-out groups came back together to present a summary of their comments and ideas to a panel of experts, which consisted of representatives from learning providers, Welsh Government, Department for Works and Pensions (UK Government) and Estyn. A question and answer session followed with the event ending in a lively debate.

From the information captured during the group and panel discussions, the comments, ideas and personal stories told by learners, three main recommendations have been drawn and highlighted in this report. The recommendations harmonise and amplify the messages from the learners.

3.0 Recommendations and the Way Forward

“Learner Involvement is all about social justice.....learners having an equal voice in the debates and decision-making processes that affects their learning and ultimately their lives”¹

The aim of the event was to provide a forum where adult learners could come together and collectively voice their views on the importance of adult learning and to build a body of knowledge based on their shared experiences, which can be used to influence public policy at a local, regional and national level.

In light of the current political climate and the uncertainty of the future of adult learning a number of recommendations and actions were developed to be taken forward to secure a future for ACL provision.

3.1 Recommendation 1

To strengthen existing mechanisms which allow adult learners greater influence on political decision making at local, regional and national levels of government whilst ensuring all learner involvement processes are completely transparent.

3.1.1 Action 1

To establish a regional ACL working group, which includes representatives of adult learners to undertake the following actions:-

- A review of formal and informal mechanisms for learner involvement currently being utilised in the region;
- Gather existing evidence on the impact of learner involvement activities on political decision making and to use this information as a benchmark with which to measure future progress;
- Develop a virtual ‘learner involvement toolkit’ which informs stakeholders on how to engage with local, regional and national policy makers and influence political decision making;
- Completion of an annual audit of learner involvement activities in the region the purpose being to share good practice and measure impact and progress;

Building on the Welsh Government (WG) response to Estyn’s Thematic Review of the Effectiveness of Learner Involvement Strategies² the WG to:

- include guidance for learner involvement strategies at a policy making level

¹ ‘Democratisation of education in South Africa: issues of social justice and the voice of learners? Accessed via: http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0256-01002008000100005

² Welsh Government, Response to Estyn thematic review of the effectiveness of learner-involvement strategies in adult community learning and work based learning; accessed via: <http://cymru.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/raisingstandards/estynremit/estyreports/the-effectiveness-of-learner-involvement-strategies-in-acl-and-wbl/?lang=en>

*“It’s time to make sure that the real value of adult learning, and its power to help people become confident, resilient and autonomous contributors, is heard loud and clear. It’s time for an acknowledgement that investment in learning for adults is fundamental to building resilient, thriving communities, and to hastening the country’s journey back to economic prosperity”.*³

There are key benefits to involving learners more in decision making; learners feel more respected, learn greater skills, are more committed to learning and achieve better outcomes. There are also wider benefits to involving learners which includes benefits to local communities and civic societies. However, there is the acknowledgement by learning communities that whilst learner involvement strategies influence learning organisations it has, up to now, had very little influence on public policy.

The benefit of involving learners has not been extended to the political decision making arena where it can be argued the real power, particularly in relation to funding decisions, lay. It is for this reason that there is a need to strengthen the formal and informal mechanisms, which allow learners to have their distinctive voice heard and to influence public policy.

An example of adult learners influencing policy decision making can be found in Scotland where the Scottish Government has established a cross party group specifically for adult learning. The Adult Learning Group consists of Members of Scottish Parliament (MSP) and is a place where MSPs can debate and discuss with adult learners directly on how best to protect and promote adult learning provision in future and to provide an opportunity where hopes and expectations of learners can be key drivers in influencing learning policy.⁴

In terms of the event itself a common theme in the feedback from learners emphasised their willingness to *“stand up and speak to decision makers and convince them of how important learning is to us as it enables us to take control of our lives.”*

Further feedback included *“If we were to sum up the goals of lifelong learning in a single phrase, it would be that it should enable people to take control of their lives.”*

Adult Education: A personal view

I am an adult learner, aged 71 years, who is currently enrolled with Learning Pembrokeshire, on an IT Course for Beginners. I have also studied with the Open University, attended various other Adult Learner Institutions and been a member of a local WEA group in the Midlands. I have attended both vocational and non-vocational courses.

³ The Power of Adult Learning Conference; Learning Link Scotland accessed via <http://www.learninglinkscotland.org.uk/publications/the-power-of-adult-learning.aspx>

⁴ The Scottish Parliament, members of Scottish parliament, cross party groups accessed via: <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/msps/cross-party-groups.aspx>

My own experience of Adult Education has always been a very positive one, and my current course is no exception. In conjunction with the core course curriculum we are encouraged by a very enthusiastic tutor, to take part in other activities related to environmental and cultural issues, and to support both local and national charity ventures. In addition, we consider ourselves to be of a group of likeminded individuals who have the opportunity to socialise and exchange views.

In general I feel the provision of Education beyond school and college years is a benefit not only to those who participate in it., but also a benefit to society in general. Education, like travel, broadens the mind, and can lead from one area of interest and participation, to many others.

With regard to my own topic of study, Information Technology, this is an growth area which is constantly changing and is well suited to Adult Education. Skills need, indeed must, be updated in order to keep abreast of the developments. The current trend towards provision of government and public services on-line, means there is a need for less computer literate sections of the public to be able to access information and to communicate with various organisations. Adult Education has a major part to play here, and not just for retirees - many middle aged people have a limited knowledge of using IT beyond their immediate work and leisure environments. Changing demographics, together with more advanced demands, could result in an excluded 'underclasses of poorly educated citizens with little knowledge of current IT. Adult Education providers should take advantage of this potential supply of students.

Generally, however, the sector needs to enhance its image and prestige. A structured network of qualifications, appropriate to the subjects offered, could be developed and promoted as being relevant and valued in society. For example in IT, more short courses and workshops dealing with innovative trends could prove popular, possibly backed-up by a basic qualification which might encourage students to further their knowledge, and indeed proceed to higher levels.

Unfortunately nowadays in the 'real' world, budgets, which have to be funded mainly from public taxes will always act as a constraint, and especially if each Educational sector is considered in isolation. A move to using commercially based Adult Education providers and requests for Sponsorship may be the only solutions to funding shortfalls.

The argument that reasons 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts', should be applied not only to the tangible but also to the intangible effects of Education. Thus the core benefit of imparting and learning knowledge and skills should be viewed at a wider level. Education, and especially Adult Education, can lead to more effective social integration, better health, more awareness of the wider society, provision of sector-related job opportunities and employment, etc. In addition, a well-educated and motivated population is an asset to any right minded country, and can lead to inward economic investment and international prestige.

Mary S – Pembrokeshire Learner

3.2 Recommendation 2

To give parity to the ‘Learning on Prescription’ health initiative in line with other health initiatives e.g. gym memberships on prescription.

3.2.1 Action 2

- Adult learning professionals to work together to develop joint strategies which raises the profile of adult learning. The strategies are to include a communication strategy which focuses on health and social care professionals as the main target audience;
- Adult learning partnerships to develop and promote a portfolio of learning activities which can be accessed by health care professionals for their patients/clients;
- Establish a lifelong learning forum with a broad coverage of interested parties, including learners that meet to examine integrated initiatives across the lifelong learning, health and social care agenda and to establish a reporting structure to Welsh Government (WG);
- Approach Local Service Boards (LSB) to determine the possibility of utilising the LSB’s partnership structure as the reporting mechanism for the WG.

At the event a learner champion spoke passionately about how learners felt ‘learning on prescription’ programmes could improve people’s health and sense of wellbeing, which in turn would result in financial savings to already stretched health and social care budgets.

Many learners spoke about how learning has helped them manage their mental and physical health issues and how for many individuals engaging in learning has a positive effect which impacts many aspects of their own lives as well as of their families. Learning can give emotional resilience, skills of assertiveness and confidence as well as employability skills. It can also provide social interaction and add meaning and purpose to life.

A Personal Story from a Carmarthenshire Learner

“To say it changed my life is no exaggeration. I had been unable to work for some time as a result of debilitating clinical depression. Through a lot of support and advice I enrolled for an adult education course in college. Without going through all the details, I ended up studying professional courses for a period of approximately 4 years, gained full time employment as a result of the education and worked in this field for 11 years.

It gave me confidence, increased my self esteem and I realised I wasn’t so dull after all. Please continue with funding for this important opportunity for people of all ages. How can you put a price on what was for me life changing”.

Adult Learners' Story 'The Will to Live'

The learner suffers from the medical condition ME (Myalgic encephalomyelitis).

Despite her health problems she manages to get to her classes, even though sometimes she 'feels very tired'. The learner feels the classes 'are very important to her at the moment'.

She said: 'They give me a will to live. If I didn't have my computer lessons, I don't know what I would do, as I suffer also from the dreaded depression. 'When I started to learn computers, I thought that a spread sheet went on the bed, and that the hard drive was what you parked the car on! Trust me.'

In the last year the learner has passed an exam in text processing, and now she is learning a little more with word processing, as well as, studying English, which is also helping her with her computer lessons.

She added: 'It is the best thing that could have happened to me. Also my teacher is a wonderful person.'

The learner expressed her concern following the Welsh Government's recent announcement that they were making cuts for Adult Community Learning. She said: 'I only hope and pray that there are no more cuts. If there was no more adult learning, I don't know what I would do?'

But it is not only for me. There are lots more people beside me, who have the need to learn, as it was not always possible years ago.'

Work produced by the learner

What Adult Learning Means to Me

Adult Learning has been a wonderful escape from every day stress, an escape from every day boredom, by providing enough knowledge to enable me to become enthusiastic about a particular project I now enjoy, SUGARCRAFT are..... It has opened up a new world of learning and knowledge for me. An interest I support. At 67 years of age, I have always been involved with people and in my work I was therefore involved a lot more. I never had the time to venture out to create a life with Craft, there was no time for this as I was too busy looking after my family and earning a wage to help provide from us. However SUGARCRAFT and my little class has opened up a new world for me. A new world of learning, a new world of pleasure and a new world of challenges.

I am now in my second year, I have become more confident with what I do, feel more comfortable. I have a wonderful Mentor in my class tutor Mair, who has shown lots of patience, tolerance and friendship toward us pupils. She is very talented in her field of work. It is my hope that one day i will become not her equal maybe, however just to build up lots of her experience and knowledge she has passed onto us. Time will tell on this subject. I have lots more confidence in myself as of now.

On joining the class last year, I never thought I could have achieved so much....i.e. Knowledge of Sugarcraft Art, confidence and capability in surfing the internet, this has all been brought about because of what was offered to me in the Adult Learning Scheme. For this I am eternally grateful...

I was always concerned about my future as I was not a character to remain at home 24 hours each day. I have in the past suffered quite a few setbacks and battles with depression and was always concerned about this whilst I had more time on my hands. However I seem to have overcome this horrible hurdle and now have lots of enthusiastic projects to concern myself with in my life.

There is an excitement in me now to further myself and to be able to achieve a dream that would make my pride shine wand this is to be able to provide my family and grandchildren especially with wonderful Celebration cakes in our future. My finest achievement would be for me to be the provider of their Wedding Cakes etc.

In few words my Sugarcraft class has provided me with a challenge, knowledge and given me so much enthusiasm and confidence. My social life has improved owing to the number of people I have become involved with on attending my class on a weekly basis, for this provision I am most grateful. I pride myself on all this and Thank Adult Learning.

Mary – NPT Learner

3.3 Recommendation 3

To understand the positive impact learning has on the lives of adults and how it can be utilised to elevate the financial pressures on health and social care budgets.

3.3.1 Action 3

- Conduct a desktop review of relevant data which evidences the impact learning has on adults' health and wellbeing including the cost/health benefits of learning;
- Develop a regional proposal, which draws on currently evidence, to present to health & social care political/financial decision makers to scope the opportunity for accessing health and social care budgets to fund learning opportunities;
- Develop a marketing and communication strategy targeting health and social care professionals and decision makers which promotes the long-term benefits of developing a working partnership between health, social care and adult learning professionals.

In the recently published report entitled 'The importance and impact of community services in Wales', the Commissioner for Older People highlighted the need for a cultural shift in the planning and delivery of public services which required moving to a more sustainable, innovative, long term approach which will secure better outcomes with few resources.⁵ The evidence, contained in the report, was drawn from a series of focus groups with older people across Wales and partners with expertise in community services and provided a strong evidence to support the argument that the long term financial benefits of investing in learning in later life far outweigh the costs. The report made referenced to current research which suggested that by investing in learning provision, older people's independence and capacity to look after themselves is strengthened which in turn delays the need for care or support. The actual figure of delaying the need for care by even one month could save Wales £1.8million per year.⁶

Recommendation 2 & 3 can be considered as a step forward in formulating an integrated approach to improving people's health and wellbeing through learning which covers across the policy areas of health, social services and education. Adult educators have long recognised the positive effect that learning has on the confidence, self-esteem and health of learners. It is now the time to garner all available research into a body of evidence to support this.

⁵ The importance and impact of community services in Wales, Older People's Commissioner for Wales accessed via:

http://www.olderpeoplewales.com/Libraries/Uploads/The_Importance_and_Impact_of_Community_Services_within_Wales.sflb.ashx

⁶ The importance and impact of community services in Wales, Older People's Commissioner for Wales accessed via:

http://www.olderpeoplewales.com/Libraries/Uploads/The_Importance_and_Impact_of_Community_Services_within_Wales.sflb.ashx

Iain - Learning Pembrokeshire learner #ACLmessage2014

I only moved to Pembrokeshire from West Yorkshire in August 2010 therefore my views may come from a slightly different perspective.

Participation in adult learning gives me an opportunity to get out of the house and meet new people with a similar desire to keep active and gain new skills. These skills are vital to people of my age in order to keep up with children and grandchildren. If we do not life could pass us by in so many respects and we could tend to be reclusive and thereby put more pressure on other state funds.

The availability of the course nearby was a deciding issue in my participation. If the course had been further afield I would not have bothered.

Therefore the vital issues for me are location and social inter-action. In my view not to have these courses available locally would amount to a form of social exclusion!

Impromptu Learner videos from **St Dogmeals** and **Brynhyfryd Family Learning**. The learners wanted to make their feelings about adult learning known and were unable to attend the event.

For more inspirational views click [here](#) to access a link that contains a number of personal stories from learners across the region.