

20 January 2010

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## Informal Adult Learning

### Summary

This paper provides the board with a briefing on the proposed changes to the type of adult learning known as Informal Adult Learning and our current work on this agenda.

### Recommendations

Members are asked to note the proposed changes and initial work carried out and to comment on the future work plan for the programme of work.

### Action

Members and officers to take forward the actions summarised in this report.

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## **Informal Adult Learning**

### **Current context for adult learning**

There has been a continuous fall in the number of adult learners in recent years: a reduction of 1.4 million since 2004 (NIACE figures, March 2009).

The emphasis for funding through the Learning and Skills Council has been on younger people and the skills agenda. Informal adult learning has not been a priority in recent years.

This type of learning is currently facilitated through a safeguarded pot of funding managed by the Learning and Skills Council and mainly delivered through local authorities. This is known as Adult Safeguarded Learning (and has previously been called Adult and Community Learning and then renamed Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL). It is a national ring-fenced amount and has been frozen at £210 million for several years and is made up of PCDL, Neighbourhood Learning for Deprived Communities, Family Literacy, Numeracy and Language Programmes and Wider Family Learning.

In April 2010, the Learning and Skills Council will be abolished. Adult Learning will be covered by one of its two successor organisations, the Skills Funding Agency.

An independent Inquiry, funded by NIACE, into the future of Lifelong Learning reported in autumn 2009. It argues that our current system of lifelong learning has failed to respond to the major demographic challenge of an ageing society and to changes in employment patterns. It examines the total expenditure on lifelong learning and also highlights the beneficial gains and long term saving of using learning to improve well-being. It concludes that the current system for lifelong learning is over-centralised and insufficiently linked to local and regional needs.

### **Background to the proposed changes**

The White Paper on Informal Adult Learning, the Learning Revolution, was launched in March 2009. It followed a detailed consultation, spearheaded by John Denham when he was Secretary of State at the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, now the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

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The stated aim of the White Paper is to build a culture which values informal adult learning in all its forms, with a wide range of organisations promoting it. It aims to support people to drive their own learning, in particular by making it easier for people who want to start 'self-organised' groups. The vision is to link up the learning provided by the public, private and third sectors to broaden choice, make better use of technology to support learning and ensure there is a wide choice of high-quality learning opportunities for everyone whilst also increasing access to informal learning for disadvantaged groups.

Much debate has occurred about the use of the term "Informal Adult Learning", for the purposes of the White Paper, it is seen as the learning funded through the Adult Safe Guarded learning pot plus the informal adult learning that takes place in other locations such as libraries, the cultural sector, community settings, through in informal groups, on-line learning.

The White Paper recognises the leadership role of local authorities in securing this broad range of opportunities for people.

### **The proposed new leadership role**

In February 2010 local authorities will be invited to become the Lead Accountable Body (LAB) for Informal adult learning. This means receiving the funding, planning and shaping all the informal adult learning in the area to meet local needs. The academic year 2010-11 will be seen as a development year for setting up the local plans. In 2011, all the Skills Funding Agency funds for this type of learning will flow through the LABs. This includes the £33 million currently going directly to further education colleges and other providers.

The current responsibilities of the LABs are still being shaped and we do not yet know the relationship between the Skills Funding Agency and the LABs. There is a commitment from the government to de-regulate this area. We do not yet have details on what this means precisely.

However, we do know the principles behind the new thinking:

- LABs will have greater flexibility in how the funding is used;
- in return, they will be expected to increase the learner numbers;
- provide better value for money by "stretching the pound of government funding", this could be by in kind support such as opening up new spaces for learning groups.

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This change will provide local authorities with new opportunities to use this external funding stream in a way that joins up different priority agendas, for example, to support learning for the well-being and health agenda, to support communities to engage in citizenship, to enhance work in extended services, support communities through the effects of recession. It could have a much broader reach than adult learning services are currently enabled to provide.

### **Our work on this agenda**

We held a conference in October 2009, funded by BIS, to initiate the discussion on the leadership role.

We are working closely with Government and the Learning and Skills Council on the development of the role and requirements of the Lead Accountable Body.

On 14 January 2010 we are facilitating an event for the Learning and Skills Council to seek the views of a range of local authorities on the setting up of LABs.

Working with the Museums, Libraries and Archive Council and NIACE, we have produced a set of publicity cards and a publication due in February, *Learning Communities* exploring the role of Informal Adult Learning in supporting communities through the effects of the recession.

We are publicising the changes to members through Cllr Roger's article in First, through a briefing sheet to be circulated at the end of January and by working with individual local authorities when needed.

With IDeA and NIACE, we are setting up an on-line community of practice to update and facilitate discussion for practitioners across local authority services on informal adult learning and the changes.

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## **Financial Implications**

This work is being funded through the secondment funded by the NIACE and through funding from government departments.

## **Implications for Wales**

The changes proposed in the Learning Revolution White Paper apply to England only.

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