

# Learn Watch: community learning in Cheshire

## Lead organisations:

The Employment, Skills and Learning Service of Cheshire West and Chester Council

The Lifelong Learning Service of Cheshire East Council

## What was the catalyst / driver for reviewing the governance structure?

The lead organisations submitted a federated partnership model with the two councils in a lead accountable body role. We had reviewed our current governance structures and proposed a new model of approach. Our leadership, direction and challenge were to be provided through four main governance routes:

- officer-led;
- member-led;
- partnership-led;
- external body-led governance.

This latter route, which we would call 'Learn Watch', would include securing an external organisation to take on the role of scrutiny of the trust and tasked with calling to account the trust policy development, direction and results. The chosen external organisation was Learning Together Cheshire and Warrington (LTCW).

## What process is being used to carry out the review?

In terms of developing a proposed Community learning Trust (CLT) model, we reviewed all recent national policy regarding the new direction for community learning and also our existing governance models. We wanted to ensure our service was truly locally led and did make a quantifiable difference to people's lives. In order to achieve this, we felt we needed an external view in order to hold us to account for these key aspects. We are now in the process of implementing the working CLT operating model.

This pilot is led by a small strategy group with five representatives from the councils, one each from **NIACE**, the Skills Funding Agency and LTCW, and supported by seven thematic groups addressing those key issues where there is perceived opportunity for the trust to develop, and synergy arising from the skills and crossover-working of the two local authorities.

## How have stakeholders been involved in this process?

In terms of the governance review, teams from Cheshire West and Chester Council's Adult Learning and Cheshire East's Lifelong Learning have engaged with Learning Together Cheshire and Warrington regarding their active contribution to the external governance and scrutiny role of the new trust.

All partner providers have been informed of the new trust pilot and some have come forward voluntarily to support the process and contribute where they can see they have specific interests. Others have been invited to join the thematic groups where skills and strengths have been identified by the strategy group.

## What questions have arisen throughout this process?

- What exactly is understood by governance and how is it different to accountability?
- Are our current governance arrangements truly effective for a local authority-delivered Community Learning Service?
- How do we get the community voice represented in service design and delivery?
- Who holds us to account for policy decisions, strategic direction and our performance from a local view point, and who has an understanding of our world?
- Can this role be done by internal governance or do we need an appropriate external body in addition to internal governance?
- Do we have any appropriate external body that could develop this role for us?

- How would this new role be implemented?

## What conclusions and decisions have you come to so far?

- The governance arrangements in place before this review did not give us all that was needed for the new direction of the trust.
- We agreed to consider the involvement of an external body to help us develop, extend and carry out this governance role for the trust.
- We identified an appropriate organisation that we have tasked with developing the Learn Watch governance / accountability approach. Learning Together Cheshire and Warrington (LTCW), the organisation chosen to conduct this, operates across Cheshire, is a 'learning-focused' organisation and represents the learning community of Cheshire (both learners and providers of community learning).
- We see that this external 'Learn Watch' could perform this governance approach as part of their normal operational working and bring additional input from their regional engagement role in the sector.

## How has 'New Challenges, New Chances' impacted on this review?

The Community Learning Trust development builds on **New Challenges, New Chances** (BIS, 2011) and the new direction required for the delivery of community learning so this document is the basis for all the work we have done and will do in future to establish the new

model of governance which is appropriate to our new trust model.

While we recognised the difficulties with developing the governance model, it was always just there in the background and not addressed fully. The CLT has given us the opportunity to pilot something new in a risk-free environment.

## What will be the impact on learners?

- LTCW is the local strategic Voluntary Sector Learning Consortium and through them we have been introduced to many of the organisations we currently commission to deliver community learning.
- LTCW has a proven track record of providing a comprehensive information and support service for the local voluntary sector (matrix-accredited) and it has the trust of the sector.
- Working with them through Learn Watch will be a shift from top-down decisions to more collaboration. This relationship will be the catalyst for transparent accountability of our performance, keeping learners informed and maximising available funding by focusing on actual need.

## How will you know the new model is successful?

The development of Learn Watch will require key interventions throughout our delivery year. The model was developed and finally established in October / November 2012. The understanding of the difference between governance and accountability is now clear and the strategy group will now

establish a unique governance board with core and rotating members. Core members will represent those organisations that are subject to direct scrutiny by the Skills Funding Agency, and rotating members will reflect the changing priorities identified as priorities of community learning, as they are perceived in Cheshire. This board is to be developed by the end of February 2013. In addition there has been a need to clarify terms of reference for the governance and strategy groups and these were finalised by December 2012. These have been major issues for community learning -delivered by local authorities and the introduction and implementation of the whole governance issue will in itself be an indication of success.

It is intended that the impact of Learn Watch will be measured in terms of cost benefit as part of our assessment, using measures such as LM3 , £+, and pilot SROI at the end of the academic year, alongside the other initiatives of the trust. We intend that the investment will be translated into a cash investment return in terms of social value.

In addition, our internal partnership will analyse impact of governance through our self-assessment process and we will include the grading of the impact of governance through the scrutiny of the effectiveness of our leadership and management.

## Next steps

- Prepare final draft terms of reference for the governance board.
- Hold a governance workshop in early January 2013 with invited stakeholders.
- Clarify the roles, responsibilities and boundaries of the governance and strategy groups.
- Develop ways of ensuring that emerging and existing

partnership and community groupings are properly engaged in the direction of the trust. This requires a real, and not just a 'tokenist', approach.

- Ensure that the lead officers in the thematic groups share their experiences and activities and increase their interaction and inter-dependence throughout the year.

### **What three lessons learned would you share with other governing bodies considering a similar change process?**

1. Do we really understand the difference between governance and accountability? This needs to be addressed and clearly understood for the ongoing work of the trust to be relevant and effective.
2. How can we introduce such an 'independent' model within the bureaucratic, accountability and political constraints of a local authority? The role of community learners, as opposed to community activists or

existing community structures / partnerships and boards, will require a more collaborative approach to their work to see the real impact that community learning can have. It really is a new way of working and vested interests will only cause obstruction.

3. The time factor for the sponsoring bodies' involved in developing a new trust should not be underestimated especially, when there is no additional funding available. This will only have a chance of being fully successful where there are strong champions of the cause, and total buy-in by the teams involved.

**For further information please contact:**

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Community Learning in Cheshire