



Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

Rotherham Community Pilots

Rotherham is a metropolitan borough in South Yorkshire, with a population of 257,600 (2011 census). The borough is divided into 21 wards, with about half of the population living in and around the main urban area of Rotherham Town. The remainder live in the small towns and rural areas which make up half of the borough area.

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC) receives a Skills Funding Agency adult safeguarded learning grant to deliver community learning in the borough. The strategic lead for the grant comes from Children and Young People's Services working together with the External Funding team and Strategic Commissioning team.

RMBC secures provision through a mixture of direct delivery and subcontracted arrangements with a range of voluntary and community sector providers. The in-house delivery is generally focused on family learning with the subcontracted activity picking up most of the Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities and Personal and Community Development Learning delivery.

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

Rotherham is currently in the exploration stage of this process but the publication of **Skills for Sustainable Growth** (BIS, 2010) and **'New Challenges, New Chances'** (BIS, 2011) made it clear that the Government were keen to explore different locally-based governance models. They were keen to explore new structures which could take the lead in the planning of local provision and through which they could channel Adult Safeguarded Learning funding. BIS invited applications for pilots of Community Learning Trusts in April 2012, and fifteen pilots are now in place: these will be evaluated in spring / summer 2013, with an eye to potential national roll-out.

“By piloting a range of different community learning trust models we intend to put communities in the driving seat. We want local people to have a real voice in deciding the kind of learning they want. We want each

trust to recognise and meet the differing needs, wishes and aspirations of its various communities, working with local people, local organisations, local businesses and local services in a way that strengthens and builds civil society.”

Ministerial foreword to **Community Learning Trust Prospectus**, issued by BIS in April 2012

In order for Rotherham to respond effectively to any changes instigated by central government beyond 2013, we decided to review the current delivery model and explore potential alternatives. This was done with the full support of the Rotherham Family and Community Learning Skills and Strategy Group (FCLSSG). RMBC applied to become one of the Community Learning Trust Pilots but was unsuccessful. Notwithstanding that, the members of the FCLSSG agreed that there would be value in developing the pilot activity – not least since the ‘new’ approach was consistent with BIS policy direction.

The initial proposal was to pilot activity in three distinct areas of the borough, the intention being to support each of the three communities to establish a local version of a Community Learning Trust. The ‘trusts’ would be expected to take on the responsibility of developing a local learning strategy which responded to local needs.

It was agreed that the review would be managed by RMBC with direction from FCLSSG and a steering group drawn from appropriate stakeholders, including representatives from local communities. It was also agreed that each of the models adopted by the local ‘trusts’ would be evaluated by the steering group and a report would be completed, with recommendations made to FCLSSG to carry the process forward.

What process is being used to carry out the review?

Each of the three communities had an existing community learning forum, with a membership drawn from local residents and members of voluntary and community groups as well as learning providers. It was agreed that these forums would be approached to consider taking on the role of a local ‘trust’. A series of meetings with current forum members was arranged for early September 2012, and the pilot activity and potential changes were discussed at these meetings. A number of issues were raised; most significantly, it was agreed that if this role was to be considered the Community Learning Forums would need to increase their capacity in order to take on the additional roles and responsibilities.

It was agreed by the forums that they should each organise a number of promotional events which would publicise the existence of the forums and add to the membership. Each area was given the freedom to plan a local event in a way which would have most chance of reaching the widest possible audience. All three of the events were held in October and November. Despite substantial publicity, attendance at the events by local residents was disappointing. Each of the forums is now to meet and review their progress and consider the next step.

How have stakeholders been involved in this process?

All of the activity to support this process has involved a range of stakeholders including learning providers, statutory organisations, voluntary and community groups as well as residents.

It has been vital to ensure the involvement of as many stakeholders as possible to be sure that the response does reflect the needs of the whole community, not simply a minority.

The opportunity to update stakeholders has been planned into the activity and the next step forward cannot be taken without their agreement.

The activity in Rotherham has so far failed to produce a group which is willing to take on the role of trust, even as a pilot activity. This has resulted in the need to review the plan. There is to be a meeting with the provider forum, the Rotherham Adult Learning Partnership, to establish if there is an alternative model which could be explored: a model which will provide a borough-wide response but will have clear connections to the communities. If we fail to establish a workable model, there is a danger that some outside organisation may seek to take on the role.

What questions have arisen throughout this process?

The most significant question we need to address is the issue of capacity – specifically how to engage local residents in new governance arrangements. There have been some serious concerns raised by the forum members about their capacity to take on the role of a ‘trust’, especially if that includes a financial responsibility. There is a willingness to become involved, but only in a less formal way. There is clearly a general apathy, if not resentment, with the expectation that the community would take on this role in a purely voluntary capacity. It seems to be just one of a number of initiatives which purport to seek the community to take the lead without providing them with sufficient support to do the job well.

In light of the low level of engagement from local residents, it is now being thought that there could be an advantage in involving learners as a discrete group to add a different dimension to the envisaged ‘trusts’. To secure this degree of engagement, we are considering developing the role of the ‘expert learner’ to provide us with an informed and

enthusiastic membership to guide the ‘trusts’. This enhanced role for the learners would be one of providing direction to the groups and individuals responsible for strategic planning, organisation and the delivery of learning. Each of the learning providers would be asked to nominate or recommend a learner who would become part of a steering / focus group which would meet on a regular basis and provide input on behalf of learners.

There are also issues around scaling up, specifically the structures that would need to be in place to bring the communities / neighbourhoods together to address the needs of the whole borough. There are well-established groups with a borough-wide focus on adult community learning already in place, but the current membership tends to be predominantly learning providers with no real connection to communities.

The ability to subcontract to only one level (an SFA funding rule) will have serious implications for the potential involvement of community groups. At this stage many of the community groups do not have the capacity or inclination to deliver learning, so would need to work in partnership with providers. This is something that would need to be addressed if a change to the current system is not to become provider-led and dominated.

What conclusions and decisions have you come to so far?

Rotherham has in place established structures which can be developed to play some part in the development of a Community Learning Trust. It would seem that the challenge lies in making an effective and sustainable connection between providers and the community.

There needs to be further exploration of the roles and responsibilities of different groups and organisations within any potential model.

Although it may seem that we have not made much progress, the activity has allowed us to check out our assumptions. It has also allowed us to identify potential problems early on in the process and given us the opportunity to react to those problems and amend our original ideas.

We are still at the investigation stage but we have already explored one of our options through action research, unearthed some problems and are now regrouping and setting up another plan.

How has ‘New Challenges, New Chances’ impacted on this review?

Without this document it is unlikely that the review would be taking place. The changes highlighted by new BIS policy have made providers in Rotherham think about how the safeguarded community learning money can be used more effectively.

What will be the impact on learners?

The involvement of learners is the key to the success of this venture, and the latest proposed action – developing the role of the learner in the planning stage – can only be beneficial to the outcome. With learner involvement we can be confident that the learning opportunities which are developed are responding to their needs and are being developed with the learner at the core. The envisaged development of the expert learner role should raise the expectation of learners, and in turn increase the quality of delivery.

How will you know the new model is successful?

If we are successful in our activities we should be able to respond effectively to any of the future demands placed upon us by BIS or the

Skills Funding Agency. If required, Rotherham will be able to present a structure that can take on the responsibility of the delivery of community learning which will not only be responsive to the needs of central government, but will also be a valuable resource for the communities of Rotherham.

Next steps

- We plan to develop a new plan incorporating the lessons learned from this first attempt.
- We will establish a process for the engagement of learners.
- We will consider a way of connecting the community with the providers.

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

- Never make assumptions.
- Not all potential partners will be as keen to become involved as you would like.
- Consider whether potential partners have the capacity to respond to your requests.

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