



The Learning Partnership, Bedfordshire and Luton

Community learning trust governance

Learning-for-All is the new Community Learning Trust for Bedfordshire in line with **'New Challenges, New Chances'** (BIS, 2011). In all, four Skills Funding Agency approved providers have signed an accord to work together to create a community led partnership which puts individual and community needs first in determining future learning priorities.

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

The invitation from BIS in May 2012 to propose Community Learning Trust (CLT) pilots led stakeholders to review options for developing a partnership vehicle which would allow Skills Funding Agency approved providers to pool resources, reduce duplication and make better use of funding in order to fill gaps and provide a more comprehensive service. Currently community learning provision in Bedfordshire is fragmented and lacks effective planning or co-ordination. It needs to be transformed into a strategic tool for developing

a vibrant, thriving and prosperous community. We need to develop an infrastructure that brings together Skills Funding Agency approved providers – stakeholders – and community providers to offer a wide range of learning throughout the local community.

When the CLT prospectus was launched we sounded out partners on taking this opportunity to develop an infrastructure that would allow us to work more closely together. We viewed governance as a developmental process over the lifetime of the pilot and beyond, and that it should involve the following steps:

- establishing a stakeholder group to bring together Skills Funding Agency funded providers of community learning to plan provision;
- consulting providers, elected representatives, and community organisations on how the trust should be run;

- agreeing arrangements for governance which would not detract from the need to focus on delivery and impact measurement;
- developing practical ways of working that reflect the stakeholders' commitment to a model of governance that is open, inclusive and transparent; and
- engaging with learners and potential learners to incorporate their views into the structures of the trust and influence our priorities.
- Agencies: with statutory responsibilities (Skills Funding Agency, Department of Work and Pensions, Bedford Borough Council, Central Bedfordshire Council)
- Providers: delivering learning in the community (funded and non-funded, including through volunteers and learning champions)
- Communities: organisations in the community (neighbourhood-level groups working with or through members of the community).

It took about six months to move from initial discussions to putting decisions into action.

An extensive consultation confirmed the attitude of learning providers. Key objectives for community learning are that it strengthens the role of learning and skills development and thus that it is a catalyst for personal development, economic growth and community cohesion. A desk review of literature, strategy and policy documents endorsed the conclusion that community learning in the area required re-organisation and new leadership if it was to contribute to these objectives. We discussed various models and most stakeholders and providers favoured a community-led partnership that would bring together a community of learning providers to promote learning in the community. This partnership would comprise:

- Stakeholder group: a core group of four Skills Funding Agency funded providers (Barnfield College, Bedford College, Central Bedfordshire College and the Learning Partnership)
- Other stakeholders: non-Skills Funding Agency providers (University of Bedfordshire, Bedfordshire Chamber of Commerce and the Community and Voluntary Sector)

The Learning Partnership led the development of the partnership.

All Skills Funding Agency funded providers active in community learning were consulted. Initially that involved face-to-face consultation and email exchanges and participation in a structured consultation questionnaire using an online survey. Subsequently four stakeholders have agreed to modify their contractual arrangements with the Skills Funding Agency aligning their community learning funding to the community learning trusts.

One provider, Bedfordshire Adult Skills and Community Learning (ASCL) has been involved in an internal review of the future of adult and community learning which has delayed discussions about how they might relate to the community learning trust for Bedfordshire. If the priorities approved for ASCL link to those of the new trust we would want to develop a unified approach to community learning in Bedfordshire.

What process is being used to carry out the review?

The Learning Partnership has well established means of consulting partners. Consultation events or face-to-face meetings are used to decide priorities for partnership initiatives, where all can attend and all can give their

views. We used this approach to determine that we should bid to build a community learning trust in Bedfordshire. Now that the project is active, stakeholders meet monthly as a stakeholder group to agree collectively how we move the project forward.

Through discussion and on the understanding that the trust would be a vehicle for bringing together Skills Funding Agency funded providers responsible for community learning funded provision. In Bedfordshire that meant the Learning Partnership, Barnfield College, Bedford College and Central Bedfordshire College.

At this early stage of the process we have not required other specialist external advice. Our decision to proceed with a community-led partnership links well with our extensive experience of partnership working accumulated over the last ten years. As the pilot proceeds and we gather evidence that the trust is delivering on expected outcomes, stakeholders will turn towards longer-term considerations, at which point we may require external specialist support.

The process started in August 2012 and is scheduled for completion by July 2013. The initial review took about three months. The Skills Funding Agency funded Stakeholders Group has agreed a nine-point governance process to guide trust activity:

1. Skills Funding Agency approval (achieved August 2012);
2. set-up of Skills Funding Agency Stakeholders Group (achieved, October 2012);
3. consultation with other stakeholders (pending, December 2012);
4. consultation with community learning providers (pending, December 2012);

5. preparation of Heads of Terms (planned, January 2013);
6. implementation of governance arrangements for pilot (planned, January 2013);
7. undertaking of options analysis – longer term (planned, July 2013);
8. evaluation of pilot (planned, July 2013); and
9. decision made (August 2013).

The Skills Funding Agency and BIS are hosting bi-monthly workshops looking at the formation of CLTs, data management, performance, Pound Plus £ (added value) and impact measurement, and to allow lead partners in the 15 pilots to share innovation and good practice. NIACE is playing a supporting role and external evaluators are also actively working with trusts to measure their performance and the difference they have made in their areas of operation.

How have stakeholders been involved in this process?

All Skills Funding Agency funded providers of community learning have been included in the consultation. These organisations are designated as stakeholders in the process given they have a contractual responsibility for the delivery of community learning in the area. Further consultation is taking place with local providers, the university, Chamber of Commerce, local authorities and SEMLEP (South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership). Milestones in the consultative process include:

- initial one-to-one meetings with all stakeholders;

- online questionnaire (using SurveyMonkey) for stakeholders asking questions about preferred governance arrangements;
- stakeholder meetings initially for four Skills Funding Agency funded providers delivering community learning in Bedfordshire;
- community learning providers launch and consultation meeting to engage wider network on trust priorities and governance; and
- ongoing email exchanges that are and will continue to encourage continuous dialogue.

Steps will be taken to further consult with local authorities and link the trust to community objectives and to the skills strategy emerging from SEMLEP. Community organisations, including the Bedfordshire voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations, will be invited to join the trust to build stronger ties with the community to better meet the needs and wants of local people.

Skills Funding Agency stakeholders have agreed to pool and align their resources to help deliver a more coherent and relevant community learning offer. Other key partners will help the trust embed its provision into the workplace and the community, and deliver effective pathways into higher education. Voluntary sector involvement will open new possibilities for volunteering and participation in clubs and societies at neighbourhood level.

Developments are fed back to stakeholders via meetings, email and face-to-face discussion with the managers identified by stakeholders as their representative. Papers provided by the Skills Funding Agency are cascaded to stakeholders to create a transparent, open and sharing way of working. Each stakeholder has access to all the information needed to engage

in the leadership and management of the trust.

What questions have arisen for you throughout this process?

Taking the ground-breaking step of varying our contracts with the Skills Funding Agency to align the spend of four providers of community learning has been a key challenge. This will allow us to account for our activity through a single trust, while retaining our contractual responsibilities as individual providers, each with its own separate set of contractual responsibilities.

Other challenges have included:

- How to develop a functional community learning trust in less than 12 months that delivers measurable results to evidence the value, impact and future potential of this radically new way of working.
- How to involve community providers and the community in an inclusive, open and transparent infrastructure that puts learners needs first, in order to create a demand-led approach to the design and delivery of learning in the community.
- How to develop the Bedfordshire Trust in collaboration with its neighbour the Luton Trust as an example of a scaleable, federal model which could contribute to the skills strategy of SEMLEP to help deliver growth, prosperity and community cohesion.

The Skills Funding Agency and BIS are further developing their approach to how they want to measure impact and added value or pound plus. These issues continue to require a flexible response as we deepen our understanding of the requirements.

The Learning Partnership has risk-assessed its involvement in the trust as a standard and routine part of its approach to new work. By taking part in the pilot, the partnership considered that we could contribute to safeguarding this funding and position ourselves and our partners at the leading edge of the debate on the future of community learning. Risk was a key factor in the one-to-one discussions with stakeholders and providers. The outcome has been to confirm our analysis and strengthen our collective commitment to this initiative.

What conclusions or decisions have you come to so far?

Stakeholders have agreed governance arrangements. We have a consensus on developing an open, inclusive and transparent approach to governance. Further consultation is taking place with the wider network, university, chamber, local authorities and SEMLEP. Once this is complete, we will publish heads of terms to govern relationships between stakeholders, providers and external agencies. The impact of this approach has been to consolidate interest and goodwill and lay strong foundations for the development of the trust.

How has 'New Challenges, New Changes' impacted on this review?

'New Challenges, New Chances' (BIS, 2011) has been absolutely central. Without it the Skills Funding Agency would not have launched its Community Learning Trust pilot programme. We welcome the recognition afforded to community learning as a pillar of the FE sector rather than seeing it as a bolt-on extra with little strategic value.

What will be the impact on learners?

The trust as a community-led partnership will help stakeholders work more closely together and with the wider network to deliver a common approach to community learning. The impact on learners will be a more joined-up approach to learning based on sharing intelligence on current provision and leading to:

- reduced duplication by providers freeing up resources to increase the range of provision available;
- better coverage of learner needs through a closer attention to gap analysis to identify additional needs;
- improved curriculum offer with a more flexible link between provision and the wants and needs articulated by adults themselves;
- better links between community learning and follow-on programmes or progression pathways into mainstream provision; and
- specialist and commercial provision to service niche markets where learners can afford to pay and would welcome a broader choice of learning, including for leisure or pleasure, or personal or career development.

How will you know the new model is successful?

Governance arrangements will be included in a review of the pilot and we will judge the success of our model according to:

- stakeholders' views about how well they are involved in the decision-making process;

- providers' views about how well they are included in the arrangements for consultation;
- the community's views on how well the trust engages with the community; and
- learners' views on how well provision is responsive to their needs.

Views will be collected through a variety of mechanisms, including at events, meetings, focus groups, online surveys and questionnaires and through individual and group feedback.

Next steps

There was a launch and consultation event on 6 December 2012 with providers from the wider network, local authorities and funding agencies. This will give an opportunity to further discuss local priorities and engage key players in scoping future priorities and in forming the next phase of building the trust infrastructure, to create a structure consistent with our founding principles. We will strive to be open, transparent and inclusive, and make the trust a genuine partnership for community learning.

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

1. We are better and stronger together.
2. New formations take time, investment, patience and trust.
3. Partnership working must work equally for stakeholders and providers.
4. Trusts are based on trust, and we should place our trust in the community!

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