

Healthy, Wealthy and Wise:

The impact of adult learning across the UK

Report of the Northern Ireland Impact Forum, 2017



Northern Ireland

Context

The Northern Ireland Assembly has the authority to legislate in a field of competences known as “transferred matters” - in effect this covers all governmental areas, including all aspects of learning, with certain exceptions (e.g defence, telecommunications, taxation). The Northern Ireland Executive collapsed in January 2017 and, at the time of writing, talks between the political parties aimed at restoration of the Assembly and Executive have failed to produce agreement. The interim responsibility for day-to-day decisions lies with senior departmental civil servants. Prior to this, following the Assembly election in 2016, there had been a public consultation on a draft Programme for Government. The draft Programme had proposed an outcomes-based approach in terms of delivery and an undertaking to work across departmental boundaries. The Northern Ireland Impact Forum welcomed this approach in its response.



Policy Drivers

- **Rebalancing the economy** away from over-reliance on the public sector through the attraction of greater foreign investment and the expansion of indigenous companies
- **Improvement of skills levels**, especially at higher levels, in support of the above
- **Addressing the current unemployment rate** of 5.3% which is above the UK average of 4.4%. The current economic inactivity rate stands at 26.9% compared to UK average of 21.3%.
- **Tackling under-achievement among school leavers:** in 2015/16 32.3% of pupils left school with fewer than five GCSEs at grades A-C or equivalent including English and Maths
- **Implementation of a Public Health strategy** to tackle health inequalities and major public issues
- **Implementation of a transformational plan** to reconfigure primary care and hospital services in a more patient-focussed manner, with earlier interventions
- **Building a shared society** and peaceful future by addressing the divisions arising from recent years of conflict
- **Implementing community planning responsibilities** which have been devolved to local Councils; recent plans have shown broad commitment to supporting growth in skills and learning in all its diversity.

Key Challenges

- The lack of an Assembly and Executive since January 2017 has hampered efforts at advocacy for adult learning.
- While some Government departments and agencies recognise the role of adult learning, what is currently absent is an explicit recognition and commitment to the enabling and developmental role which adult learning can play in the delivery of key political, social and cultural objectives.
- There is no comprehensive data to measure levels of participation in adult learning across the different sectors where learning takes place ie in workplaces; communities; colleges and in voluntary organisations. This reflects the fragmented and often competitive nature of provision, with sponsoring and funding bodies not recognising any need to share data. It also demonstrates a lack of recognition for informal and non-accredited learning as pathways to improved health and wellbeing, employment or community and civil engagement.
- The rapid changes happening in technology and demography require investment in workplace learning and, in later life in particular, learning for health and independence.
- The centrality of economic policy has led to a narrowing and devaluing of non-employment related learning. The clear economic worth of adult learning to health/wellbeing, community development and good relations is not recognised.

- The prevalence of the 'silo mentality' in Government Departments has led to unnecessary evidence duplication, ineffective use of resources and narrow and inhibiting models of measurement and accountability.
- Much of the funding for adult learning, particularly in the voluntary sector, is project based and short term. This continually threatens the sustainability of good providers and good practice and is economically unsound. It also negatively impacts on community initiatives to build a more cohesive and respectful society.
- This work and many employability schemes are under threat post-Brexit as they currently rely, heavily, on European funding.

Action Required

1. A commitment from the Executive that Northern Ireland becomes a Learning Society which promotes, funds and celebrates learning, in both formal and informal settings, throughout the lives of its citizens for the betterment of their health, economic, social and cultural wellbeing.
2. Adopt a Lifelong Learning strategy - recognising that, with current and future technological and demographic changes, learning must extend throughout and across life and is essential for individuals and communities to achieve their full potential.
3. Undertake a comprehensive survey of provision across all sectors to establish a baseline, leading to a review of current delivery and funding to develop a system that both enables the individual to progress into and throughout work and enables the development of stable, inclusive communities.
4. Provision across the sectors should be evaluated (and funded) in accordance with impact indicators; successful innovation should receive funding to become mainstreamed.
5. Identify alternative funding to ensure continuity of delivery in key areas of employability and peacebuilding.
6. Encourage collaboration between policymakers and professionals across education, health, work

and employment and community development. This should be the norm and expected by government and funders in line with the spirit of the draft Programme for Government.

7. Facilitate a Forum for Adult Learning - to promote adult and lifelong learning, advise on policy (including the creation of a Lifelong Learning Strategy), facilitate collaboration between providers and develop best practice through association with the other nations of the UK.

Integrated Approaches - The Belfast Agenda



Following decisions in the Northern Ireland Assembly, in 2015 and the formation of 11 new local authorities, community planning is now a statutory obligation. Belfast, as with other authorities, has created a partnership with 14 other organisations, including health, housing, social care, education, sport, libraries, tourism and Invest NI, to develop a four-year plan. 'Belfast conversations' were held and a new vision, with ambitious aims, for the city to 2035 has emerged. The focus for 2017-21 will be on four key themes of: Growing the economy; Living in the city; City development and Working and learning. Each theme has a commitment and supporting workstreams. Working and learning includes, not only employment, skills, employability and HE/FE but also a commitment to addressing educational inequalities and becoming a Learning City.

Living in the city embraces integrated approaches to addressing health inequalities, enhancing mental wellbeing and reducing social isolation, whilst Growing the Economy includes creating employment opportunities and harnessing innovation. The proposed integrated approaches include many aspects of learning for and with adults. Consultation on this plan concluded in April 2017 and the feedback will inform the next steps of development.



The Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland conference, Belfast, October 2017

L&W LEARNING AND WORK INSTITUTE



L&W SEFYDLIAD DYSGU A GWAITH
LEARNING AND WORK INSTITUTE



Forum for Adult Learning NI



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

21 De Montfort Street
Leicester LE1 7GE

T: +44 (0)116 204 4200

E: enquiries@learningandwork.org.uk

W: www.learningandwork.org.uk

@LearnWorkUK