

Review of Voluntary Sector Organisations (Community Learning and Development)

Learning Link Scotland

29 June 2010

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1. Introduction

In January 2010, the Scottish Government (SG) commissioned HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) to undertake a review of Learning Link Scotland (LLS). HMIE and SG agreed the quality and performance indicators to be used in the review from the framework of indicators within the HMIE publication *How Good Is Our Community Learning and Development?* (HGIOCLD?).

The fieldwork for the review took place between 20 and 22 April 2010.

HM Inspectors visited the LLS offices and interviewed all members of staff. They also interviewed a range of members and stakeholders in Edinburgh, Dundee, Glasgow and Falkirk. They analysed questionnaire responses from nine stakeholders.

2. Context and background

LLS is the national intermediary for voluntary sector adult education. Established in 1994, they are a Scottish registered charity led by an executive committee of volunteers. Its charitable purpose is *'to advance the education of adults in Scotland through membership of voluntary adult learning organisations'*. LLS works nationally to promote, represent and develop their community of adult learning organisations. They host national as well as local and regional events and create opportunities for the adult education sector to share good practice and network. Membership is open to voluntary organisations engaged in the provision of, or with interest, in adult education in Scotland. Members play a key role in contributing to the SG's strategic targets and objectives particularly related to lifelong learning, social inclusion and citizenship. Currently, there are 96 member organisations.

As a small voluntary organisation LLS currently employs four staff. Staffing levels have dropped significantly over recent years reflecting the economic downturn for Scottish charities. Short term funding is a major challenge for the organisation although they have secured support from the National Lottery for a five year period. LLS are working to increase their social enterprise capacity and are currently undergoing a change in status to become a company limited by guarantee.

3. Key strengths

- Well targeted work with member organisations leading to very good outcomes for learners.
- The range and quality of events run at national, regional and local level.
- Very effective partnership working with members and stakeholders.
- High regard for LLS amongst the adult learning sector and SG colleagues.

4. How well did Learning Link Scotland meet the needs of its stakeholders?

LLS is having a positive effect on the voluntary adult learning sector. They influence national policies and strategies through involving members in a range of consultations. LLS are performing well against targets set in their Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with SG. They contribute effectively to a range of national groups and committees, they have exceeded the targets set in the SPA for contributing to the national policy agenda for 2009/10. Participation in events run by LLS has fallen since 2005/06 when the organisation was larger and had more staff. However, there is an improving picture since 2008 with participation by individuals and organisations both increasing. Membership of LLS is also increasing. Almost all respondents attending awareness raising events report increased knowledge and understanding. Robust recording and monitoring systems are helping LLS to gauge progression for learners. In the *Making Numeracy Count* Project almost all participants had increased their facilitation skills. Most also said that the training would considerably contribute to improving practice. LLS now need to develop methods to assess impact in the longer term.

Participants are performing well in projects run by LLS and their partners. Member organisations involved in Explaining the Difference (ETD) are learning and achieving. Participants are now re-prioritising and more effectively measuring outcomes. One organisation can now better demonstrate their contribution to the Single Outcome Agreement (SOA). Another is improving confidence through better planning and evaluation. Good outcomes in terms of improved levels of confidence for learners are also evident from The *Embedding the Curriculum Wheel* Project in partnership with the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). Participants attending events and seminars run by LLS regularly report increased understanding and knowledge as a result.

LLS members are becoming more confident and active. Some executive committee members are making improvements to their own organisations as a result of their involvement. This is helping to increase capacity in the adult learning sector. Participants involved in ETD, *Embedding The Curriculum Wheel* and *Making Numeracy Count* are more active and influential in their local communities. However, there is scope for LLS and their partners to record these impacts more systematically. Consultancy support sessions such as 'An Inspector Calls' are providing good learning opportunities. Whilst these are well received there is potential to develop the approach further. LLS are highly regarded and would benefit

from widening their reach to ensure greater coverage of Scotland as a whole. This could helpfully be linked to a re-focused communications strategy.

How well did Learning Link Scotland impact on staff and volunteers?

LLS staff are motivated and skilled. They have a strong sense of pride in their work. Although a small team, they are making an important contribution to supporting the voluntary adult learning sector in Scotland. They are well supported by the Director who is highly regarded by partner agencies and SG colleagues. Effective systems for supporting staff are enabling them to deliver a good service. Staff are given appropriate induction and time to settle into their jobs. A comprehensive range of policies and procedures support staff well. Records of training and development are used well, helping staff to reflect successfully on their performance. Relationships are very positive and staff work effectively as a team to complement and enhance skills. The executive committee members are experienced and committed. A skills overview is shared and circulated to staff and other volunteers. All committee members receive an induction handbook and training, and are regularly consulted on business and strategic plans. The committee would now benefit from time set aside for further planning and reflection.

5. How effective was Learning Link Scotland in key aspects of management?

Inclusion, equality and fairness

LLS effectively engages a wide range of participants. Training and event programmes are successfully targeted to involve minority groups. Monitoring of membership data shows that groups working with disabled and ethnic minorities remain active and involved. Membership data is analysed to assess geographical spread and reasons for not renewing membership. LLS actively promote inclusion, equality and fairness through a range of appropriate policies. Feedback from training and events indicates that they are relevant, affordable and accessible. LLS are keen to run events in more remote areas, thus lessening concentration on the central belt of Scotland. A sharper focus on this would benefit LLS in continuing to widen participation. An analysis of the needs of the adult learning sector would also help with targeting of specific under-represented groups.

Participation of service users and other stakeholders

LLS is highly regarded within the adult learning sector. They provide important opportunities to bring members and stakeholders together. Stakeholders report that they respond positively to suggestions and ideas from others. They reflect on current ways of working and make changes where appropriate. The views of partners, members and other stakeholders are valued. LLS are proactive and actively seek out feedback from participants, using the data to make changes to future programmes. Members receive information regularly on the work of LLS. Some pass this on to their membership and in one organisation this can reach over 300 people. Members of the executive committee are involved and included. They receive updates from staff in a usable and manageable format. The committee seek out appropriate advice, for example, in the recent move to company status.

Attendance at committee meetings is routinely reviewed and analysed. The views of members are routinely sought, for example, on Government policy documents. However, LLS could improve feedback to members on the outcomes of these. Planned improvements to LLS website may increase their ability to involve stakeholders more fully.

Operational planning

Planning is good at all levels. There is good articulation between the various levels of planning in the organisation. Performance information is used well to demonstrate progress against the strategic aims of LLS. Staff engage well in the planning, delivery and evaluation of their work. Targets are set so that staff can see where their responsibilities lie. They are clear about their respective roles. A wide range of tools including job chats, project meetings and events planning meetings are used to good effect. Procedures within LLS for self-evaluation and reflection are strong. Analysis of participant evaluations from events and projects is used well to identify trends and future planning. There is scope, however, to encourage greater involvement from the membership of LLS in planning processes.

6. How effective was the leadership of Learning Link Scotland?

LLS are a conduit to the voluntary sector and have a strong voice at a national strategic level. They use their knowledge and influence well to shape future policy. They are making a major contribution in helping the voluntary adult learning sector articulate how the outcomes of their work are contributing towards SOAs. LLS works well with its partners to deliver services and complement rather than compete for resources. Regular risk assessments are undertaken and acted upon.

Major changes to funding in recent years is changing the work of LLS and they are now more focused on key priorities. Five year Lottery funding should help build sustainability whilst ensuring they keep the focus on their unique role in third sector adult learning. The executive committee provides very good leadership to the organisation. Members are clear about their roles and responsibilities and are fully involved in the move towards company status. A clearer role for the committee in terms of accountability would help LLS move forward and build sustainability.

7. What is Learning Link Scotland's capacity to improve?

The self-evaluation undertaken by LLS demonstrates a good understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement. They continue to seek improvement through effective partnership working. Their commitment to grow the organisation at a sustainable rate is helping to consolidate their core business. The focus on evaluating and assessing the contribution of their members to national outcomes is an important driver for the future. They now need to ensure that they maintain their focus on developing their key role in the voluntary adult learning sector.

8. Main points for action

Learning Link Scotland should take action to address the following main points for action.

- In conjunction with partners, develop a system for demonstrating longer term impacts and outcomes.
- Further improve communications with members to ensure greater geographical coverage and greater involvement in planning processes.
- Further build on LLS strengths in the adult learning sector to ensure long term sustainability.

9. What happens next?

HMIE will take no further action in relation to this positive report. Colleagues in SG will continue to monitor progress in relation to grant funding.

Appendix 1: Quality indicators used to evaluate Learning Link Scotland

HM Inspectors use performance measures and quality indicators when making judgements in their reviews of national voluntary organisations. The quality indicators used were selected from those published in June 2006 in the publication *HGIOCLD?2*. This publication is available on the website www.hmie.gov.uk.

Improvements in performance	very good
Impact on participants	very good
Impact on the community	good
Impact on paid and voluntary staff	very good
Inclusion, equality and fairness	good
Participation of service users and stakeholders	good
Operational planning	good
Leadership and direction	very good

Sheila Brown
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HMIE

This report uses the following word scale to make clear judgements made by inspectors.

excellent	outstanding, sector leading
very good	major strengths
good	important strengths with some areas for improvement
satisfactory	strengths just outweigh weaknesses
weak	important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses

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