

Consultation response

Ref: 5511

New challenges, new chances

Review of informal adult and community learning

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This consultation is the latest stage in the Government's plans to reform the Further Education sector. Age UK's response focuses on the Adult Informal and Community Learning (IACL) section. This primarily examines provision of non-accredited learning which is currently funded by the Adult Safeguarded Learning budget, ringfenced at £210 million per year. The Government wishes to reform the funding method, reporting of learner outcomes and transparency of the public expenditure involved while continuing to ensure that learning opportunities are available to individuals, including many vulnerable and hard-to-reach older people.

Key points and recommendations

- Informal learning is greatly valued by people in later life, and the Adult Safeguarded Learning budget has an important role to play to helping develop and deliver provision.
- Learning, including that funded by this particular budget, has a significant role to play in creating the Government's vision of a 'Big Society', and has a range of benefits to individuals in later life, for example helping tackle social isolation and improving mental health.
- Many older people view learning as a means to community engagement, whether through organising provision or simply taking part.
- In order to secure the Informal Adult and Community Learning (IACL) budget in the future, better quantitative evidence is needed to support the existing qualitative evidence base of the value of learning.
- It is often felt there is an inherent tension between measurement of outcomes and local flexibility. However, we believe this need not be the case as the onus for the former will fall on individual participants rather than providers – it is they who will ultimately need to self-report on the benefits once the course is finished, which does not necessarily need to involve the provider.
- Local freedoms and flexibilities are integral to creating a locally responsive model.
- Measurement of outcomes from publicly funded learning is crucial. The Government must decide how best to capture and value the wide range of possible results – this needs to give an accurate picture of the wider benefits of learning and the impact of public expenditure.
- We fully support the idea behind a 'National Learner Survey'. This could help fill in the gaps in other datasets regarding older learners.
- In addition (for example), longitudinal survey research with samples of participants, and Social Return on Investment research with particular providers could be undertaken to improve knowledge of the benefits of IACL.

- For most older learners, moving into employment is not the reason why people participate. IACL is not a substitute for vocational training.
- Placing too much emphasis on progression is dangerous, as the meaning is highly subjective. Our research tells us that while many older people wish to progress on to other learning experiences, making this a requirement of receiving BIS funding would undermine the aims of IACL.
- Older people often don't know when they're undertaking publicly funded provision. This should be made clearer.
- The Government should ringfence 10 per cent of the £210 million budget for 'innovation and infrastructure'. This would primarily be used for seedcorn funding for a range of local projects, and would re-establish provision similar to the Transformation Fund on a permanent basis.
- It is necessary to ensure that the infrastructure for delivery is sufficient, and some of the ringfenced 10 per cent should be allocated for this purpose.
- Age UK recognises the need for those who are able to do so to pay fees to allow public money to be targeted at priority groups. However, fees must be affordable and including a certain proportion of fee paying individuals should become a criteria for receiving public funds.
- Wider efforts will be needed in each locality to engage colleges and businesses to assist with infrastructure and delivery. For example, local Chambers of Commerce could help engage local small businesses with an interest in releasing their premises for use by learning classes.

1. Introduction

Informal learning is a very important issue for many older people. 28 per cent of people aged 50-74 and 11 per cent of people aged 75+ have participated in some form of learning in the past three years.¹ Anecdotal feedback and case studies of individual learners strongly suggest the value placed on this in terms of personal, health and social contribution to improving peoples' lives. In addition, many older people are involved in organising and delivering adult learning.

Age UK warmly welcomed the decision in last year's Comprehensive Spending Review to continue ringfencing the £210 million Adult Safeguarded Learning (ASL) budget. We agree with the Government that this money should be used to target those who are most in need of financial help, while maintaining high quality provision and ensuring value for money.

We further agree that there is a balance to be struck between delivering a range of learning provision, and ensuring that public money is well spent, and that this necessitates better measurement of the outcomes of the ASL funding, which at present is not clear enough.

Older peoples' views

In preparation for this consultation response Age UK conducted a survey of older people, and held two focus groups aiming to get a better representation of the range of views on informal learning held by people aged over 50.ⁱⁱ We used these to gain insight into the personal benefits of engaging in learning, and explore opinions held about the role which learning should play in later life. Finally, we asked people for views on how, in future, Informal Adult and Community Learning should be funded.

The below is a brief overview, but where appropriate we will refer to these throughout.

Personal

The overwhelming view was, perhaps unsurprisingly, that learning is very important to people in later life. There are significant benefits to people from participating, with the positive effect on mental health being commonly cited. People also felt it was an important means of remaining active, both socially and from a 'Big Society' viewpoint.

The majority of people believe that learning has significant health benefits, even where this cannot be directly proven, and that further investigation should be undertaken. NIACE's work in care homes has proven significant benefits from learning in terms of reduced use of medication,ⁱⁱⁱ but there is little research which finds a similar conclusion outside of the care setting.

While the universal view was that some Government funding was important for facilitating provision, few people in the focus groups were aware of what provision in their area received public money. To clearly demonstrate the value of the BIS-funded provision, it should be clearer when people are utilising these resources. As people realised that public money could be used to target certain groups, there was concern about restricted access to learning if BIS-funded provision was withdrawn because of difficulties meeting the cost (see below).

Access to and administration of learning opportunities

In many locations there is not sufficient provision to cater for a diverse range of needs, particularly in rural areas. For example, many older people who would benefit from learning are immobile and find it hard to reach classes, meaning some form of investment in transport would be necessary to help people who are socially isolated. Also, many older people who are digitally excluded may not be aware of activities or cannot be so readily informed of changes to planned activities as those who regularly use computers.

The mechanism of delivery is important. There were mixed views about who is the best placed institution to run provision, but there was broad agreement in the focus groups that quality of teaching is important.

Further Education (FE) colleges may have a part to play, but while this was acknowledged by our focus groups, many felt that people without a history of learning are likely to be put off by the location. As colleges have cut back the number of adult

learning places in recent years, this has entrenched the perception that they are places for formal learning only.

The idea of local authorities being placed in control of funding or delivery brought a mixed reaction, with a degree of fear that money would not go towards the core objectives of the IACL budget, but recognition of them being well placed to recognise local needs and adapt provision accordingly.

Funding

- 1) Fees: Cost to the individual is also an issue with many providers having removed concessionary fees, and some demanding upfront payment which for many is unaffordable. The Government-funded IACL provision has a clear role to play in reaching people excluded through such policies.
- 2) Targeted support: Our focus groups and survey both found near universal support for fees to be charged at variable rates, based on the premise that those who can afford to pay should. Participants in our research were happy for some form of means testing to apply to ensure that the opportunity to participate is extended to those who would benefit the most.

However, provision should be open for everyone to attend (at differentiated rates). For some provision to be only for people, for example, on lower incomes, would be considered stigmatising.

- 3) Infrastructure: establishing an effective local infrastructure to support adult learning will be a priority and failure to do so could jeopardise delivery in areas where it doesn't already exist. Participants felt that helping engage different community groups and local organisations, for example providing rooms and producing local good practice guides, as well as help from central government relating to all aspects of the IACL provision, will be essential.

In addition, some funding must be given to help projects get up and running. This will help ensure local provision is responsive to changing needs.

2. Consultation questions

Challenge 1

The need to clarify Government objectives for spend on IACL and its role in supporting wider Government policy objectives on the Big Society, localism, wellbeing, and social and digital inclusion.

- 1. Do you agree that BIS-funded IACL contributes to the development of the Big Society and complements the delivery of other Government policies, and if yes, which policies and how might IACL's contribution be measured?**

Age UK agrees that BIS-funded IACL contributes to the concept of 'Big Society'. Many older people view learning as a means to community engagement, whether through organising provision or simply taking part.

IACL funded provision reaches a diverse range of people, 40 per cent of whom are aged over 50.^{iv}

Age UK believes that informal learning has a cross-over into many other policy areas. There is an enormous range of policies and initiatives emanating from other central Government departments, local authorities, quangos and other publicly-funded organisations which are relevant to informal learning and where a link-up would, we believe, be mutually beneficial.

Three examples of this are:

1) *Department for Communities and Local Government*: The Localism Bill provides powers for people to have a greater say in their neighbourhood and shape the services they rely on. In order for this empowerment to be realised, however, we believe the Government needs to ensure that Localism is for everyone, not just for those who wield the most influence. IACL can help give people the skills necessary to partake in community activity, which we believe could have a significant positive contribution.

2) *Department of Health*: we believe it would be possible for learning to be 'commissioned' as part of an individual's Personal Health Budget. Their GP would have to sign it off, but in theory if can be proven to be beneficial to health then it could be a cost-effective way of improving wellbeing.

3) *HM Treasury*: Government policy is to enable consumers to take a responsible approach to personal finance. Local access to financial capability training, for people of all ages, is important in delivering this, which has a high potential for stronger links with IACL.

Community engagement

Our survey and focus groups found that many people in later life value the role of learning in increasing community cohesion, and believe it to be a means of reaching out across different community groups.

Many participants had a desire to pass on knowledge to younger people through taking part in mentoring schemes. Such schemes are typically held between older people and schools, but there is potential for them to be applied across other areas too. For example, a retired nurse suggested she would be happy to mentor newly qualified nurses on a voluntary basis to help them learn on the job. Such activities could be supported by the BIS budget, and we believe would contribute to enhancing community, and intergenerational, engagement.

Finally, learning has an important role to play in the democratic process. People (of all ages) can learn the skills needed to form active local lobbying groups, and in effect to become the 'armchair auditors' described by the Government. For example, the Eastleigh Southern Parishes Older Peoples' Forum undertook training in research method, conducted by the University of Teeside, and has since published a series of reports aimed at tackling issues with and improving local services. Such learning activities could be offered to local communities, and would help hold local public service providers to account.

Innovation and the Big Society

Innovation is also important, as this will help constantly update provision in light of changing local needs. Many learning projects would benefit most from seed-corn funding to meet start up costs, and those with sufficient demand would continue independently – as happened under the Transformation Fund.

The £20 million Transformation Fund gave grants of £10,000 and above to each of more than 300 projects. Each project involved committed support from volunteers, and often targeted particular community groups. Eighty of the projects targeted older learners, who were sometimes from vulnerable groups, and were regarded as being successful in improving their quality of life.^v

We believe the benefits and impacts of initiatives such as this are far ranging and fully embrace the principles of IACL, for example IACL can:

- Encourage communities to be better able to develop social and financial independence and be well placed to take advantage of opportunities afforded to them by Big Society banner,
- Encourage a disadvantaged group (in this case including some older people) to live an active and healthier later life through participation in community based activity
- Help achieve equality and diversity goals by tackling the perception that older people are not interested in learning and could support intergenerational learning approaches.
- Encourage communities to be more cohesive, more able to resolve challenges they face and more effectively involved in civic engagement.
- Help delivery partners and stakeholders to better understand how to address the learning needs of a specific group engaged in civic society, and have

proven learning models to share with similar organisations so learning can be rolled out to other similar forums across the country.

As such, we recommend that 10 per cent of the £210 million budget is ringfenced each year for the purpose of 'seed corn' funding. This would be approximately the same value as the Transformation Fund and could be run along similar lines, perhaps with a greater focus on targeting certain groups such as isolated or lower-income older people.

Measuring the contribution of learning

Measuring the contribution of learning is challenging, but it is vital the Government approaches this broadmindedly. A range of learning outcomes should be considered, including the health, skills, community and personal benefits, and to what degree publicly-funded provision tackles social isolation among people in later life.

In general, we believe the contribution to individuals' wellbeing is significant and should be fully accounted for in any measurement criteria.

Wellbeing

A recent study has found that music, arts and evening classes (one variable in the study's analysis) have a direct improvement on both quality of life and life satisfaction, as measured on the GHQ-12 wellbeing scale.^{vi}

This evidence ties in directly with the Government's 'Big Society' objectives.

There is further evidence demonstrating the quantified benefits of learning, for example that learning increases self-efficacy^{vii}, and also that it can lead to improvements in psychological wellbeing.^{viii}

However, such firm evidence on informal learning is rare, and it is important that gaps in the evidence base are identified and filled. In addition, it has yet to be contextualised into a form which can directly influence public spending decisions. In the meantime it is important that funding is not removed simply because outcomes are difficult to measure.

Social return on investment

One tool which perhaps could be used, to examine the impact of particular BIS-funded projects is a social return on investment (SROI) analysis.

Age UK recently commissioned such a project to evaluate the impact of the informal learning project 'Reach for IT', which provided digital learning to residents in care homes. This found an overall impact of £2.95 of value generated for each £1 of expenditure. Even when reducing the impact to minimum levels, the research still found £2.15 of additional value for every £1.^{ix}

While this superbly demonstrates the value of IACL, it would clearly be impractical to undertake such an evaluation in the vast majority of cases because it would be disproportionately costly in relation to the size and scope of each project.

Age UK recommends that a small proportion of the £210 million is spent on the thorough assessment of a small number of projects. For a provider, the possibility of having your project evaluated in detail could be made a condition of receiving public funding.

2. Should BIS-funded IACL be aimed solely at supporting specific outcomes such as progression to training and employment, or should it enable progression in a broader sense?

3. If the latter, what other types of progression are relevant and how could they be measured?

Age UK strongly believes it would be a mistake to direct all funding for informal learning towards employment-related goals. To do so would completely disregard the wider benefits of learning. There are other funding streams, for example basic skills, which cater for such aims – and indeed some informal learning funding does already go to this end.

Most people in later life do not participate in informal learning as a route back to work (although some do). Our survey identified that the primary interest is in progression on to other learning opportunities as well as for other reasons, for example to maintain mental wellbeing. Accredited schemes, such as those funded under the Adult Learner and Employer Responsive budgets, are better placed to equip people with vocational skills.

Public funding should therefore, in many cases, be used to engage people in the learning process and help them move on to other alternatively funded learning options. BIS-funded provision can be used as a hook for many disengaged individuals.

Progression, however, is a misleading word and should be cautiously interpreted.

For older learners it is often unclear what ‘progression’ really means. It could, for example, mean:

- Improving mental/physical health
- Increasing social interaction
- Improving relationships with family
- Discovering which knowledge to pass on to younger people and how to do so
- Learning a new skill

- Becoming more active in the community
- Or moving into employment

There are many other potential elements to a definition too.

Furthermore, they are all integral to the rationale behind IACL, and as many as possible should be considered in the funding reforms. This includes recognising them in the measurement of outcomes.

Our focus groups found that individuals are prepared to take part in follow up surveys to determine the success of the provision. Although there is some reluctance, most participants recognised that public expenditure needs to be accounted for and that taking part would be worthwhile.

Age UK believes that improving the transparency of public expenditure is of great importance and evaluating a wide range of outcomes is an important part of this. It is crucial to the future success of BIS-funded IACL provision.

- 4. What should be the respective national and local roles in relation to IACL?**
- 5. What (if any) steps could facilitate the changing role of central Government in IACL?**
- 6. What are the implications of seeking a wider local provider base?**
- 7. What would a localised IACL offer mean for providers, such as the Workers' Educational Association, delivering learning across localities?**

There is a balance to be struck between allowing local freedoms and flexibilities in delivery of BIS-funded IACL, and ensuring that the provision remains within a defined national scope.

In order to maximise the benefits of the provision and ensure it is responsive to local need, we believe that there must be sufficient flexibility for providers to deliver provision accordingly. However, this must be done within a framework for measuring outcomes and effectiveness of expenditure which is consistent across the whole country.

It is important that small providers are not frozen out. Each local area must monitor provision, to ensure that public funds are reaching a sufficient diversity of bodies.

However, we believe that clearly framed national guidelines, central (but not too restrictive) quality assurance rules and country-wide data collection techniques are critical if public funding for IACL is to be maintained in the longer term. The threat of the budget disappearing in the future should not be underestimated, and being able to properly underpin IACL expenditure and demonstrate its value across a range of outcomes is the number one priority.

Key issues and implications

There were concerns raised by many older people about the national-local balance, relating to several issues:

Guiding framework

We believe that BIS needs to set an overarching framework to determine the nature of IACL expenditure. However, to allow maximum 'room to manoeuvre' it should be broad brush, and specify only the principles behind IACL and broadly how success will be determined (see below).

Quality of provision

This issue was discussed in our focus groups. The scales were weighted in favour of ensuring minimum standards of delivery. If provision is not of sufficient quality, then it is a waste of both public funds and the individual's time. Therefore, Age UK takes the view that minimum levels for quality assurance should be nationally determined.

The Government should investigate whether Ofsted could have a 'light touch' role here.

Measurement of outcomes

Our research participants were broadly happy with the introduction of more robust measurement of outcomes. There was a consensus that it is perfectly reasonable for public expenditure to be properly accounted for. To allow cross-comparison of provision, this would have to be done within a national framework. However, too much emphasis on measurement could lead to the budget being spent almost entirely on this, and not on delivery!

In addition, the focus should be on the benefits to individuals and communities, rather than on participation or centrally-set outcome targets. We do not consider that this will necessarily create a tension – the key is not to set targets in the hope of achieving certain outcomes, but to sufficiently measure the outcomes that do occur so the effects of the budget can be better measured.

Age UK therefore believes that measurement on a national scale is essential to the longer-term survival of public expenditure on IACL, and we agree with the Government that ensuring good use of public funds is important.

Flexibility

In spite of the national-level bias in some areas, there needs to be local flexibility elsewhere. It is, for example, important that changing needs within a community can be reflected by the learning provision on offer, and that providers are not restricted in the type of learning or methods they use, so long as it meets the quality standards. However, we believe this can be achieved within a national framework.

Wide provider base

Age UK supports the notion of having a wide ranging base of providers in a locality. It is important not to be bound by pre-conceived notions of what learning is, and to have a disparate range of provision with the freedom of what to teach and how.

It would help avoid bias to existing large providers in an area.

There are substantial benefits to the individual, local community and society for widening the provider base including:

- Extending accessibility for individuals who need provision that is delivered in a manner, location and time that meets their needs.
- Attracting expertise from a more diverse delivery base that has close links with the local community it intends to serve, and that can support engagement activity on the ground (e.g. voluntary sector and smaller work-based providers).

A localised IACL offer could also allow vocational providers to offer individuals who do want to return to the labour market a clear ladder to climb.

It does, however, raise the issue of how to develop a fair and transparent commissioning model which can be widely accessed.

Equitable distribution of resources

There are currently some areas of the country which do not receive any IACL funding. The Government must determine whether all areas will have access to some BIS funding, or if it should be focussed on areas of particular disadvantage.

We, however, are concerned that spreading the funding too thinly may reduce its effectiveness. Therefore while all areas should be eligible to apply for funding should be for all, arbitrary criteria such as geographical location should not be used to determine allocation – criteria should be centred around need.

Challenge 2:

The need to ensure that Government funding is sufficiently focussed on the most disadvantaged. Comfortably off, educated learners are currently over-represented. However they pay fees which can cross-subsidise those who can't afford to pay.

8. Should BIS-funded IACL be targeted or universal, and why?

The provision should be accessible to all. To provide learning opportunities exclusively to those who are deemed 'hard to reach' will only serve to stigmatise and make the learning undesirable.

However, this does not mean that subsidised or concessionary rates have to be universal – the Adult Safeguarded Learning budget would be spread very thinly if this were the case.

The publicly-funded element can still be targeted to any priority groups – as long as local flexibilities are allowed – boosted with fees paid by non-qualifying participants. This would be along the lines of how the system currently functions.

9. What are the key challenges to generating fee income and what associated solutions would encourage more sophisticated approaches to income generation?

There is a sound economic and social argument for introducing some kind of sliding scale for fees for individuals that sit outside criteria for financial support. However, care should be taken to ensure it does not become a mandatory funding requirement. For example, it should not become the case that every application for BIS funding must include a proportion of fee paying participants irrelevant of whether these are the intended target group.

Ensuring equitable weighting across types of provision and geographical areas to correct for external differentials (for example more funding could go to an area of high deprivation or with a disadvantaged target group) is an important principle. Clear criteria will be needed to determine the types of provision and associated outcomes that are eligible for funding or not – these will need to be supported with appropriate mechanisms to ensure this gets fairly applied.

With increased reliance on generating fee income, the burden of administration is likely to increase, which in turn is likely to divert some funding away from provision and prohibit those providers without the administrative capacity to design bespoke fee and payment systems. We believe the Government will need to provide a simple, low cost system and should test this with small providers.

10. In a localised model, what are the key challenges and associated solutions that would secure accountability for taxpayers' investment?

Evaluation of the outcomes on a nationally comparable basis is essential. This may increase the burden of data collection, but we believe it is a price worth paying. This view was borne out by our focus groups.

The challenge lies in achieving this without compromising locally-led provision and flexibility of delivery.

The Government will need to determine what needs to be evaluated and provide guidance on how this should be carried out?

Challenge 3

The need to provide robust evidence for IACL. Social and economic impact measures for BIS-funded IACL are under-developed and Government does not collect data on non-Government funded IACL.

11. Which, if any, of options a) b) and c) above presents a proportionate approach to measuring impact? Are there any alternatives?

Age UK prefers option c) (might be worth summarising this in brackets to help readers without access to original CP).

As stated earlier in this response, we consider that measuring data consistently and accurately is critical to providing the basis from which the IACL provision can be analysed.

A 'National Learner Survey' would be a useful addition to existing data sources, which do not provide a good picture of older learners. Other sources – even learner-focussed provision such as the National Adult Learning Survey – make little or no effort to capture the views of people aged 65 and above, and it is increasingly important to develop this knowledge base.

In addition, such a survey could capture data from non-BIS funded provision too, providing an overall picture of learning among people in later life.

The advantage of having a new survey rather than expanding an existing one is that it could be designed to encapsulate the BIS-funded provision. However, if a similar result could be achieved through expanding what's already there and at a more reasonable cost, this route should be explored.

12. What core information should recipients of BIS investment have to provide in relation to learner characteristics and learning activity?

13. How can administrative data be used effectively to map fee income and learner disadvantage?

It is important to create a model that strikes a balance between gathering appropriate information and minimising the burden on the smaller community providers. Otherwise it will defeat the object of real local community activity as only larger organisations will be positioned to comply.

Core learner-level profiling information should establish, track and measure the perceived expected outcomes (personal and community based social and economic impact measures) against those it actually meets. Such monitoring will provide critical pathway data that can both help demonstrate impact as well as informing strategic planning and adjusting engagement tactics. This will allow providers to boost participation from under-representative groups.

However, much monitoring of learner information does not have stem from providers. More detailed information about learner outcomes could be gathered through other means, for example a longitudinal survey of selected participants (see questions 4-7).

It should cover as much personal and social information as is feasible, including (if possible):

- An overview of personal information on finances, health, caring responsibilities etc.
- Interaction with other services, for example those relating to health
- Longitudinal information, for example a brief occupational history and previous post-compulsory learning experiences

We believe this could help address gaps in the current research around informal learning, while BIS funding could, in future years, be responsive to the identified needs.

Challenge 4

The need to address funding anomalies. Funding is currently based on an historical, and in many cases inequitable, distribution.

14. What factors should be taken into account in the distribution of BIS funding for IACL?

In the context of nationwide distribution, every locality *should* be eligible to receive BIS funding for informal learning – but this does not mean every locality *will* receive it. However, it is important that a suitable infrastructure is in place to support any delivery which suits the needs of that particular community, which may mean investment in areas even where there is no current provision.

Within each locality funding should be targeted towards disadvantaged groups. Potential providers must be able to explain how the funding will help those deemed to be the priorities.

Over time, funding could vary from locality to locality to reflect the proportions of 'priority' residents, so for example an area with a high proportion of socially isolated older people could receive more funding than one without.

We believe that advising providers on a suitable fee-raising model will be an important role for the Government.

15. Which, if any, of options a), b) and c) above would best secure more localised delivery and are there alternatives that could be considered?

Each of the three options has strengths and weaknesses. We think, however, that it is necessary to ensure the delivery of provision which is coordinated across an area and responsive to local need, which could be delivered by b).

Option b) would indicate local authorities' involvement as the coordinator for each area. This has advantages, for example the thorough local knowledge, and disadvantages, in particular the risk that provision would be steered away from the budgets' true objectives intended by BIS. Ringfencing would be essential and safeguards would need to be added to prevented BIS funding (or the additional fee income) being siphoned off.

Option c) would indicate the budget being divided up among large contractors through the introduction of minimum contract levels. There is a danger that this would fail to deliver the necessary locally-tailored provision, and serve to reduce the expenditure for on-the-ground learning.

Also, the large contractors may restrict access to funding by smaller organisations, defeating the objective of engaging local communities.

Age UK is therefore cautiously in favour of option b).

Challenge 5

The need to create the conditions that will enable a much wider range of informal adult and community learning to thrive, whether this is supported by Government, self-organised in local communities, delivered in the private sector or enabled by harnessing the power of the internet.

16. Should BIS IACL funding be used to fund capacity building and innovation?

17. If yes, how should funding be balanced and what type of activity should be funded?

An element of funds allocated to build capacity and for innovation would be welcomed, not just for providers but for the community itself, especially if it were able to promote learning in a sustainable way. It should encourage providers to support IACL participants to innovate and create their own solutions for addressing new and future learning needs.

This would very much tie in with the notion of a 'Big Society'.

There is evidence to support the need for innovation and capacity in relation to community learning needs for older people:

- Our focus group participants often identified their local Further Education college as being the only suitable formal venue. However, they felt that many older people would not want to attend any form of learning there.

- At nine recent conferences attended by 650 older people across England, delegates repeatedly voiced their concerns that they felt ill-equipped to respond to the opportunities that Big Society and the localism agenda would bring. Overall 53% of survey respondents saw 'involvement in local events and issues' as a positive impact of learning.^x
- The 2011 NIACE annual participation survey stated that intention to participate in future learning decreases with age. For example among people aged 50-74 the participation rate is only 26% and among the 75+ it's a mere 8%, which pales in insignificance by comparison with 18-24 year olds at 58% and 25-49 at 49%. However, this decline is likely to be due to the unclear definition of what constitutes informal learning – building capacity for innovation could help broaden this and engage many more people in a learning activity.

Local Age UKs are well placed to be able to help provide such activities, but often seed-corn funding for projects would be essential to get the project off the ground, for example, for supplying learning materials.

Challenge 6

Ensuring that workforce training and quality assurance arrangements support the new vision for BIS-funded IACL

18. Is there a need for quality assurance arrangements to be changed in light of the potential changes to BIS-funded IACL? If yes, in what way?

19. What adjustments to current workforce development arrangements in England would best support the new vision for IACL?

We believe that some form of quality assurance is worthwhile, and that those delivering IACL should be able to demonstrate some level of competency or a commitment to improving their teaching.

Our focus groups were broadly in favour of ensuring that publicly-funded learning is delivered to an acceptable quality, and we agree it is perfectly reasonable to require a minimum level of quality for all such public expenditure. However, it is more important that outcomes are properly measured, and this is where the focus should lie.

Care also needs to be taken to avoid setting up a new tier of bureaucracy that diverts funds from delivery and to avoid 'formalising'

- the requirements of IACL to such a degree that the wealth of diverse and effective smaller, community based provision is lost due to the complexity, cost and time it would take to acquire and maintain it

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- ⁱ Aldridge F & Tuckett A (2011), Tough times for Adult Learners: The NIACE survey on adult participation in learning 2011, NIACE
- ⁱⁱ The survey was conducted in August and September 2011, and the two focus groups were held in September.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See 'Enhancing informal learning for older people in care settings', NIACE (2009-10)
- ^{iv} The Data Service, Statistical first release
- ^v NIACE (2010), Transforming lives: older learners
- ^{vi} Davies A (2011), Active ageing, wellbeing and learning in later life: paper to be presented at Cedefop/European Commission event 'Learning in later life', 21/22 September 2011
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