

A Summary of the National Adult Education Conference held 20 March, 2013 at Newbattle Abbey College

1. Background to Conference

- 1.1 As part of its 75th anniversary celebrations, Newbattle Abbey College hosted a national adult education conference, planned in partnership with key national agencies: Education Scotland, WEA, Scotland's Learning Partnership and Learning Link Scotland. The conference was designed as a cross-sectoral event, to which strategic representatives from all relevant sectors and agencies would be invited.
- 1.2 The conference aimed to: demonstrate the role of adult education in implementing Scottish Government policies and national initiatives; share innovative practice; identify challenges and opportunities facing providers; agree priorities for the development of adult education; produce an action plan to achieve these priorities.

2. Cross-Sectoral Representation

- 2.1 The 80 delegates who attended the conference represented a wide range of providers and national bodies: CLD, colleges, higher education, voluntary sector, local authorities, employers, Education Scotland, SFC, SDS, STUC, SAMH, learners' groups and adult education networks. Conference workshops and presentations reflected innovation across these sectors and agencies.
- 2.2 Prior to the conference, Newbattle consulted 15 strategic representatives from the sectors detailed above to discuss their priorities for the development of adult education. Their views are reflected in the conference priorities, noted at 5.1 below.

3. Conference Programme

- 3.1 The keynote address was given by Michael Russell MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. The Cabinet Secretary highlighted the role of adult education in transforming lives and noted its contribution to 3 Scottish Government policy areas: Post 16 Reform, CLD Strategic Guidance and Curriculum for Excellence. He also stressed its relevance to the National Performance Framework, family learning and GIRFEC. The Cabinet Secretary encouraged delegates to engage in meaningful debate and to strengthen opportunities for adult learners.

3.2 HMI Phil Denning presented an overview of the emerging policy landscape to which adult education should relate. This included Public Sector Reform, the review of community planning and single outcome agreements, the Children and Young People's Bill, the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill and post 16 learning. He likewise highlighted the role of adult education in relation to GIRFEC, early intervention and inequalities in health and life chances. He noted the success of adult learning in inspection evidence in areas including literacy and numeracy, health and wellbeing, culture, sport, community regeneration and community media. He stressed the need, however, to link provision to Curriculum for Excellence, to extend ICT in adult education practice, to research the benefit of adult education and to review workforce preparation.

3.3 The 8 conference workshops highlighted successful approaches, innovative practice and the value of partnership working. The workshops featured:

- John Wheatley College
- Development Trust Association Scotland
- Scottish Union Learning
- Fife Adult Learning Network
- Workers' Educational Association
- East Lothian Council Learning Partnership
- Learning Link Scotland
- Newbattle Abbey College

3.4 The 3 TED Talks highlighted innovative practice in:

- The Parents as Early Educators Programme (PEEP) in City of Edinburgh Council
- Designing Our Learning Future in Teviot and Liddesdale
- Community Media in Aberdeen

3.5 The final conference sessions focused on: identifying challenges facing providers; agreeing priorities for developing adult education at local and national level; planning how to achieve these priorities. A summary of the outcome of these sessions is detailed below.

4. Challenges facing Adult Education Providers

- 4.1 All of the workshops and TED Talks highlighted successful and innovative approaches to planning and delivering adult education for individuals and communities. These included: family learning; community media; learning as a town; workplace learning; local learning partnerships; community capacity building; literacy programmes; using Futures Tools to re-design adult learning services; employability; transition routes for vulnerable adults. While these successes were welcomed, it was recognised that providers faced several challenges in developing adult education.
- 4.2 The main challenges identified were:
- the effect of budget cuts in local authorities/voluntary sector/ colleges on community-based adult learning (CBAL)
 - the effect of re-structuring in local authorities and colleges on adult education networks and partnership working
 - the absence of a national voice and policy framework for adult education
 - agreeing a common language for adult education
 - insufficient documented evidence to demonstrate the impact of adult education and its relevance to Scottish Government policies
 - promoting digital inclusion
 - the impact of welfare reform
 - the impact of College Outcome Agreements
 - maintaining a flexible approach to provision, in addition to employability, for vulnerable and isolated adults
 - highlighting the value of adult education in Community Planning Partnerships
 - limited adult guidance provision
 - lack of current research on adult education in Scotland
 - developing progression routes from CBAL to further learning/ employment/training/volunteering

5. Priorities for the Development of Adult Education

- 5.1 It was agreed that the following should be included in the conference's strategic priorities for adult education in Scotland:
- establishing a national cross-sectoral voice for adult education
 - defining adult education in Scotland and its impact on adults

- producing documented evidence and research, showing the impact of adult education on Scottish Government policies and national initiatives
- sustaining cross-sectoral partnerships which agree targets for adult education and track its impact
- building community capacity and leadership to deliver change in response to local and national priorities
- developing and sustaining flexible CBAL programmes through Community Planning Partnerships
- selling the value of adult education to policy-makers and funders
- extending access to marginalised adults and older learners
- promoting digital inclusion

5.2 The above issues will be incorporated into the conference's agreed strategic priorities for adult education in Scotland. These will contribute to the meaningful debate, outlined and sought by the Cabinet Secretary in his keynote address, and to on-going consideration by Scottish Government.

6. Conference Evaluation

6.1 Most delegates gave a very positive evaluation of the conference, welcoming its cross-sectoral nature, its promotion of innovation and collaboration and its focus on producing priorities for improvement, which would be followed up with Scottish Government. Workshops were considered to be very valuable and almost all delegates welcomed the opportunity to share the challenges and opportunities facing adult education.

6.2 Some would have welcomed more opportunity for debate about the nature of adult education and for further exploration of workshop themes. More time was requested to agree priorities for the future. It was recognised that the conference agenda was broad and that a one day event could not deal fully with all of the topics included. Many delegates requested subsequent national and local events to promote adult education and support its development.