

## **Innovation into Action !**

### A community learning alliance for Stockport?

The aim was to investigate the feasibility of a Community Learning Alliance in Stockport, and, in the light of our findings, suggest a way forward.

#### **Method**

To find out whether a Community Learning Alliance is practicable and desirable, a number of questions need to be addressed. For example: In what ways does community learning happen in Stockport? Do those involved in community learning think a learning alliance would be useful? Would they commit themselves to making it work? How does a learning alliance fit within the local strategic plans and national policy? How could it be resourced? Who would lead it?

#### **To find answers, the investigation was made up of the following components:**

- Overview of community learning in Stockport;

Consult stakeholders using a widely distributed questionnaire (responses by email, telephone or face-to-face), plus live discussions at the existing monthly Community Development Forums

- Collect examples of good practice
- Research existing opportunities for partnership
- Review policy nationally and in Stockport as it relates to community learning and partnership working
- Consider funding options
- Report in plain English, in a compact form that is easy to distribute

The consultation asked three main questions: What community learning is happening in Stockport? Is there a value in working differently? How might it be achieved?

The consultation was conducted according to principles of best practice, including:

- Consult as widely as possible
- Make it easy to respond clearly
- Ensure equal opportunity and access
- Balance transparency and data protection
- The final recommendations were intended to be practical; to avoid duplication and to build on what is there.

The project included a wide-reaching consultation of stakeholders, an in-depth strategic policy review and a study of similar situations.

## Findings

Three findings stood out.

First, the policy background both nationally and locally remains very supportive of working with the community and voluntary sector, especially if it is organised in alliances or consortia for maximum cost-effectiveness.

Secondly, those involved in community learning in Stockport identified communications and sustainable funding as significant barriers to learning, and also expressed their expectation that a learning alliance would significantly improve the situation.

Thirdly, a Greater Manchester Voluntary Sector Learning Consortium had already been set up and was in the process of being approved by the Learning & Skills Council. The organisers are very keen to invite voluntary sector organisations in Stockport to become members. Stockport is part of Greater Manchester.

### **From these findings, two recommendations followed:**

Set up an informal learning alliance in Stockport to concentrate on improved communications and locally sourced sustainable funding.

Encourage eligible voluntary sector organisations in Stockport to join the Greater Manchester Voluntary Sector Learning Consortium to concentrate initially on external sustainable funding and improved quality.

The targets for the learning alliance in its first year could be: an identity, a lead organisation, a membership, an event, shared training, a monthly communications channel, and access to a funding pot.

## What have PEP learned ?

In order to achieve economic success, equality of opportunity for all, and individual fulfilment Local Authorities need an active and vibrant learning community. Valuable learning takes place whenever people improve their skills for personal, family, community or work-related reasons. All different kinds of people benefit from learning and it can happen anywhere, not just in a classroom. Purposeful learning that is not part of formal education is often referred to as 'community learning.'

Many kinds of organisations are involved in community learning. These include teams from the Council, some informal college programmes, faith organisations, housing associations, the Primary Care Trust, arts groups, environmental groups and a wide range of large and small representatives of the community and voluntary sector. However often there is no exhaustive map of community learning.

Historically these statutory agencies and voluntary organisations have worked alongside each other for years but with little strategic overview and with some tensions due to their different priorities.

A Learning Alliance is a way of bringing all parties together to maximise skills and resources, improve quality and consistency, and improve access to learning. They can take different forms to suit local circumstances and priorities.

Usually a Learning Alliance includes the following features:

- a common strategic framework
- improved access to funding
- standardised monitoring
- better networking and coordination
- shared learning

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