



How Government might best support a thriving culture of informal adult learning

Open Agenda Deliberative Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle
9th – 10th October 2008

Background Paper

Welcome

We are delighted to welcome you to this confidential ideas-building event. The purpose of this session is to build on responses to the recent consultation "Informal Adult Learning – Shaping the Way Ahead" as well as internal cross-Government and stakeholder discussions and begin to plan how to put the views and ideas put forward into practice.

For those who haven't been to an Open Agenda event before, the reason that we are holding this session at St. George's House is that the aim of the House is to create an atmosphere of trust in which well-informed people can bring fresh thinking to key issues that will have impact on our future. It is **NOT** the sort of place where delegates with badges listen to speeches. It **IS** a place where you can try out new ideas without fearing the consequences.

In order for this happen, we place great stress on the need for our discussions to be confidential. At this event, we want to be able to work creatively, and this means we may disagree with each other at times. We may be persuaded by an argument and want to change our minds on an issue. Everyone will need to feel that they are able to speak plainly without feeling they are rocking the boat. There can be no feeling of hidden agendas operating.

We have a hugely important and sensitive task before us. If we're going to succeed, we need to feel that we can trust each other, really put our propositions through the mill, and be mindful of the changes we are proposing for others to deliver. This is why we place such an emphasis on confidentiality.

The Dean, Canons and Warden welcome you to St. George's House as their home. We hope that you'll feel that you can enter into the spirit of the place as a safe and welcoming environment, and that the experience will be both creative and enjoyable.

Our goal for this event

The purpose of this event is **to firm up principles and a framework for Government support of informal adult learning**. This is an ambitious goal, but we will not be starting with a blank sheet. We will draw on views and ideas expressed by many during the consultation, from which a set of principles and the beginnings of a framework have emerged. Building on these, we want to have achieved the following by lunchtime on Friday:

- Agreed a set of principles upon which Government support of informal adult learning should be based;
- Agreed the broad aims and specific objectives of a framework built on these principles
- Identified the big changes and actions that will be needed to move policy into practice, and
- Agreed key messages that support the Government's approach and help foster a thriving culture of informal adult learning.

We are confident that we have right people joining this deliberative debate to achieve this, so long as we keep our focus on the outputs that we want to yield from our discussions. On pages 2 and 3 you will find the agenda for the event and, on pages 6 - 9, the approach we feel will give us the best working structure to get the most from our time together. We very much look forward to working with you in helping move new cross-Government policy into practice.

Agenda

9 th October	From 11.30 am	Arrival at St. George's House
	12.15 pm	Light sandwich lunch
	1.30 pm	<p>Opening Session in the Vicars' Hall. Agree goals, scope and ground rules for our discussions.</p> <p>We will begin our discussions by exploring possible principles for Government involvement in informal adult learning. Our starting point will be to consider the draft principles outlined on page 5. Are these the right ones? If no, what should the principles comprise?</p> <p>Build on emerging views to either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → affirm principles for Government's role in supporting a thriving culture of informal adult learning, or → put forward additional or alternative principles that is felt are better fit for purpose
	3.00 pm	Tea
	3.15 – 4.50 pm	<p>We will be joined by David Lammy MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the second session In this session we will explore the impact of applying the principles we've agreed on specific groups of adults. In the light of our findings, we'll identify any safeguards that would need to be put in place to ensure that the application of the principles yield the desired outcomes. We'll then move on to identify the specific areas of development that need to be worked through in developing a strategic framework to apply these principles. Before breaking for tea, draw up a shortlist of areas that need further development, such as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → creating 'bottom-up' planning, funding and accountability infrastructures for all informal learning, accommodating self-financing and self-organised learners, state-financed learners and all in between. → working through local planning and funding arrangements to grow the number of learners (including self-organised learners) taking part in informal learning funded through the state, self-finance or other sources to ensure that 'those with least get most' and the funding methodology is felt to be fair by members of a community. → establishing closer working relationships between key players at and between local and national levels → identifying groups of individuals who would enjoy learning through media and new technology, and how new styles of learning can be offered locally as part of a broader portfolio of opportunities <p>These are just suggestions. There are other critical issues that you feel should take precedence in the thinking and ideas required for a new cross-Government strategy, and there will be an opportunity for participants to put these forward before you are asked to vote for area of development you wish to focus on.</p>
	4.50 pm	Tea

	5.05 pm	Sung Evensong in the Chapel for those who wish to attend
	6.00 pm prompt	Evening Session In groups, focus on chosen area of development. Each group will be asked to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → ensure that their specific area of development upholds the principles we've agreed → put forward a clear proposition → outline actions, key players and suggested timeline to put proposal into practice → highlight any challenges that will need to be overcome, with possible solutions
	7.40 pm	Pre-dinner drinks in the sitting room
	8.00 pm	Informal Dinner (it is the custom of the House to say a short grace before Dinner)
	9.45 pm	Private Tour of St. George's Chapel
10th October	8.00 am	Communion in the Chapel (optional)
	8.30 am	Breakfast
	9.10 am prompt	Morning Session Share ideas that emerged from our discussions the previous evening and identify key areas that require capacity building and development Identify the key messages that Government and stakeholders need to begin to send out to staff, the media and individuals to describe the principles and the changes proposed in a positive way that encourages people to invest in learning and help create a thriving culture of learning
	10.30 am	Short break
	10.45 am	Final Session Agree timeline and key actions needed to take place over the coming months in to agree and implement the framework
	No later than 12.30 pm	Lunch

Our givens

If we are going to achieve the ambitious goals that have been set for this event, we will need to accept that there are areas of discussion into which we do not want to stray. Although these areas are of key importance in their own right, in this context they are likely to prove distractions that will prevent us producing the outputs that we're looking for from the event. There are two areas in particular that could distract us.

1. **SEMANTICS** I'm sure you've all had the experience of joining discussions where you're not 100% certain that everyone is talking about the same thing or, even what they are talking about. The only thing to do in these circumstances is call a halt on discussions to check whether when using a word or phrase we do all mean the same thing and what that is. While it is essential for clarity, the problem with doing this is that it

also stops debate and ideas building. It can also lead us quickly off course, with the main purpose of the debate forgotten. For this reason I would like to suggest up-front that we take as a givens in this debate definitions of :

- (i) **informal adult learning** as "Structured or unstructured part time, non-vocational learning which does not lead to qualifications, or at least where qualifications are incidental to the learning. This kind of learning activity can take place anywhere – in a local college, community centre, pub or on the North Yorkshire moors. It embraces all kinds of activity ranging from family learning, sports and recreation to the arts, humanities and foreign languages."
 - (ii) **informal adult learning** to include voluntary sector financed, state financed, self-organised and self-financed activities – and everything in between.
 - (ii) **targets** to mean increasing participation (cross-Government Departments) in informal adult learning. Unlike Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills (DIUS), some Government Departments do place additional targets on specific types of informal adult learning that contribute to their achievement of particular Public Service Agreements (PSAs).
 - (iv) **communities** to mean geographical communities and communities of people with common interests, characteristics or aspirations.
2. **NOT GOING OVER ESTABLISHED GROUND** Recognising the wealth of expertise and experience amongst us, we want to **take as read** well documented truths, issues and challenges regarding informal adult learning. For example, we know different groups of people want different things from taking part in informal adult learning. No one size fits all. We know the major issues and the challenges. These have been articulated strongly and well through the consultation. Our focus needs to be on possible ways forward and identifying the next steps.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of 'givens'! You may want to include others, and there will be an opportunity for you to put these forward immediately prior to and during our discussions.

Suggested principles

It was strongly recommended during the consultation that the Government should develop a set of principles to define their role in supporting informal adult learning. The following have been drafted for us to consider:

1. **Ensuring those who have least get most**, meaning least education, least benefit from our economy, least voice. Public investment should be targeted on addressing inequalities. One of the goals of Government in all things is to help create an equitable and just society.
2. **Aligning strategy and public funding from different sources** both across Government and at regional and local levels to maximise its impact in supporting informal adult learning.
3. **Creating 'bottom up' planning, funding and accountability frameworks** that ensure that different groups of people in communities, including those who have least, have a real say in how Government funding should be spent to support informal adult learning. This includes making the most of what technology has to offer when it can provide what an individual wants from informal adult learning.
4. **Placing public funding within the context of a universal single framework** that accommodates self-financing learners and state financed learners and all in between. Public investment should not be viewed as a silo, or in anyway separate to informal adult learning financed in other ways.

Emerging strategic framework

At the event, we want to draw on the principles we agree should govern how the Government might best support informal adult learning to design a strategic framework. There are some tough and complex issues that we want to tackle to take the rhetoric of the principles and make them a reality. These have been headlined in the agenda on page 2 and the type of questions we want to answer through our discussions are given below.

- **creating 'bottom-up' planning, funding and accountability infrastructures.** How could this work? Who are the key players? What should be their roles and responsibilities at local, regional and national level?
- working through local planning and funding arrangements to **grow the number of learners** (including self-organised learners) taking part in informal learning in a way that ensures 'those with least get most' and the funding methodology is felt to be fair by members of a community. How can we achieve this balance?
- **establishing closer working relationships** between key players at and between local and national levels. How do we set about making this happen? Do we need to create consistency in approach? If yes, what do we need to be consistent about?
- supporting groups of individuals who would enjoy **learning through the media and new technology**, and identifying how new styles of learning can be offered locally as part of a broader portfolio of opportunities. Who are the individuals who would find this exciting? How do we tap into nationally delivered services at local level?

Of course, there are any number of ways in which we could tackle the issues outlined above. They overlap in focus and there maybe other key questions you will want to raise that we will need to work through.

What is important is that we don't spend too much time trying to get the scope of our discussions to everyone's satisfaction, and leave too little time for coming up with answers we're looking for. Please try and be relaxed about areas of overlap.

A group will be able to progress ideas far more successfully if they take on a narrow focus, albeit overlapping or closely linked with areas other groups are tackling. Groups that tackle a wide brief find it far more difficult to break new ground. Our task as one large group will be to see how well the ideas 'stitch together' and, if more than one approach is proposed, which is most fit for purpose.

There will be an opportunity for us to 'map out' the issues individuals want to focus on, and then to vote to join a group to come up with some practical proposals. We want to be as efficient as possible in managing this part of the event to maximise the time you have to develop your thinking about the most effective way of tackling the issues.

Our approach to this event

Important key notes of our approach to these events are informality and confidentiality. So we dispense with the usual 'round robin' of introductions and format of opening presentations.

Instead of going through the creeping death of introductions, we will just put first names on badges to make it easier to see each other's names. When you arrive, you will find your name badge on a table in the Patricia Hotung Room on the ground floor of St. George's House. Alongside the first name badges you will also have a first name participant and contact list.

We are delighted that the David Lammy MP, Under-Secretary of State for DIUS will be joining us for our discussions on Thursday afternoon. Following the style of Open Agenda events at St. George's House, the Minister will **not** be

delivering a speech. Instead, he will take part in our debate on whether we've now got the right principles in place to begin to apply them in the development of a strategic and operational framework.

What the Minister will be charging us with is the challenge of planning how to put these freshly articulated principles into practice. The challenge is both creative and practical. If we are going to ensure that the Government is supporting a thriving culture of informal adult learning, it will require us all to be prepared to see and, in some instances, do things differently.

PLEASE be prepared to see issues from different viewpoints

At this event, we want to tackle issues by drawing on our collective expertise and experience and, most importantly, by being willing to consider propositions **from different viewpoints**.

I'm sure you're all familiar with events where participants act as strong persuasive advocates for a particular group, organisation or sector. That's not what Open Agenda events are about. We actively encourage participants to view issues from different angles, and try and put organisational loyalties to one side. At this event, the viewpoints we will **all** need to consider will be how **collectively** we can ensure that the role of Government is fully effective, and drive the policy forward and make it happen in a coherent and connected way.

Advocates only represent one viewpoint. Their aim is to persuade others round to their way of thinking by the power of their arguments. While this is a valued role, it is not helpful for ideas-building. It can often result in people becoming locked in battles of views, where no one is prepared to shift in their thinking, or give up an inch of ground!

This is why we hope everyone joining the event will be as open minded as possible, and accept that we are engaging in areas of debate in which **no one is certain of all the answers or the best way ahead**. This can sound risky to some – and feel even riskier as we go through the process – but the great pay-off is that it really does give us the opportunity to break new ground in our thinking.

We want to begin this event as we mean to continue – with a fast flowing informal discussion, in which we **all** feel that we have a responsibility to put forward ideas and, in doing so, **take risks** in breaking new ground.

Our opening question

Before we launch into how we can apply a set of principles in developing a strategic framework, we first want to agree what they are. The clearer we can articulate **the principles**, the better we can design a framework that exemplifies them. Our opening questions will be:

Are the suggested principles outlined on page 4 the right ones? If no, why not – and what should the principles comprise?

If we're all comfortable that the principles suggested begin to define the focus and approach for Government support, then we'll move on to explore the impact their application could have on specific groups. However, if a number of us feel that there are alternative or additional principles that are better fit for purpose, we can share what those should be.

We determine the agenda

One of the key principles of Open Agenda sessions is that we determine the agenda as we go, in order to get the most from our time together. This means that, at any stage of our discussions, **we can change the structure of a session if we feel that it will help us achieve stronger outputs** – with one important proviso. We find that groups go away far more satisfied with what we have accomplished by the end of an event if we start off with a commitment to achieving **as much clarity as possible** in our discussions, and really push ourselves in **breaking new ground** and **moving ideas forward**.

Working in idea-generating groups

As part of the ideas-building process, we will break into 'idea-generating' groups during the session to tackle key questions raised through our discussions.

We use these groups because it gives everyone an opportunity to think through different points of view and have their say, when this would be impossible as one large group because of time constraints. We will use our time in small groups to sharpen up issues and develop ideas that we want to pick up and run with. Please use your time in groups to sound out your ideas and do **not** be tempted to try and develop a group view. If you do resist the temptation we can benefit from a number of different – even opposing – ideas that emerge from small group discussions.

For those who haven't been in on an Open Agenda session before, it's worth saying that it really helps us to leave the groups behind, if you make a point of **not sitting with members of your group** afterwards, and agree to outlaw the phrases "we think" or "my group thought that". "We think" makes it difficult for group members to change their minds without feeling disloyal to their group. Also, "we think" has more authority than "I think" and, completely unintentionally, can make it less easy for others to challenge or discard ideas.

We will also break into groups for longer periods of time to '**build ideas**'. In this instance, it is more likely (but not certain!) that there will be agreement amongst members of the group. What we ask is that when you come to share your thinking with the rest of us, you **just give us the idea**. Please don't feel you need to share the journey your group has travelled in developing this idea! If we are not clear about its rationale, we can always ask questions.

Listening, going with the flow and sharing debate

We need to manage our time together carefully as one large group, if we're going to develop the momentum we need to move our discussions forward. Developing ideas needs careful listening. Let's try and stick to the rule that when someone comes in on the discussion, they **follow on** from what the person before them has said, before moving on and starting a fresh train of thought. This event is **not a stage for position statements** – even with a Minister amongst us!

Please also resist the temptation of making more than one point. As soon as someone says "*I'd just like to make two or three points at this stage in our discussions*" the ideas stop flowing, as we are drawn to recap on what's gone before.

Of course, when we're together as one large group we want **as many people as possible to participate**: ideas building is not a spectator event. So we'll try and ensure that the more confident, natural talkers amongst us don't squeeze others out.

Meeting everyone's expectations

We are bound to arrive at Windsor with very different (and strong) views about the Government's role in supporting informal adult learning. It can be frustrating for those who like to focus quickly on what they feel is **the** key issue that needs to be tackled, and want to get on with sorting it out. The difficulty with this approach is that one person's key issue is another's back burner!

So, we would like to ask that we all try to be as relaxed as possible during the afternoon discussions, and let as many as possible have their say, so that we can build up a head of steam **as a group** in identifying the issues we want to explore in greater depth.

Overleaf are the Conventions of St. George's House for consultations and ideas building events held here at Windsor Castle. At the beginning of the event, we will ask you if you are happy to adopt them as ground rules for our discussions.

We very much hope that you'll be open to giving them a go, as experience has shown that their application can make an enormous difference to both the quality of debate and the ideas that emerge.

St. George's House Conventions

1. Please be open to changing your mind

We hope that during your time at the House you will see yourself as a “free spirit”, open to the possibility that the opinions you hold most dearly, on the topic under discussion, might actually be wrong. Once we each take that step, we find that it is much easier to persuade others to question their own assumptions, as well.

2. Please do not attribute remarks to individuals after the event

At all House events, we ask groups to agree at the outset that comments made in plenary or small group sessions will not be attributed to individuals afterwards. We have a firm convention that people should not be quoted without their permission, and commend this to you most strongly.

3. Please take risks with ideas

The most successful Consultations at the House have been those where individuals feel sufficiently relaxed, and supported by others, to be able to take risks with ideas. This requires a high degree of trust among a group, and we hope that from the outset you will seek to build that trust.

4. Please try and avoid any false consensus

We hope that if you find a consensus emerging in your discussions, you will check to ensure that it is soundly based. It can sometimes be very difficult for individuals to resist the pressure to agree with their peers, and we hope that healthy debate will not be stifled by a false consensus.

5. Please use “plain English”

At just about every event, one of the biggest struggles is with the weight of technical language that some speakers tend to use, and others leave unchallenged for fear of displaying ignorance. We ask **everyone** joining a Consultation at the House to avoid using acronyms, and to be ready to intervene in debate to ask colleagues to use “plain English”.

Canon Hueston Finlay, Warden of St. George's House