



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

Report

The purpose of this session was to build on responses to the recent consultation "Informal Adult Learning – Shaping the Way Ahead" and internal cross-Government and stakeholder discussions and begin to plan how to put emerging ideas into practice.

As with all Open Agenda reports, this report aims to reflect from an **independent** standpoint the main ideas and views put forward during the event, with the understanding that not everybody involved in the discussions may have endorsed *all* of the ideas included.

Nor should they be viewed as a policy statement on behalf of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills or anyone else.

Phrases that are italicised are direct quotes from the event, and a list of participants is included at the end of the report.

Context and focus

We recognised that it was important to set the focus of our discussions on a cross Government approach rather than more narrowly on the role of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills in supporting a thriving culture of informal adult learning.

The report of the extensive consultation 'Informal Adult Learning – Shaping the Way Ahead' was published on 9th October, the first day of this event. Our discussions drew extensively on the ideas, recommendations and insights put forward by participants in the consultation, and on outcomes from the on-going discussions of the cross-Ministerial and Departmental groups tasked with developing a cross-Government strategy for growing and supporting informal adult learning.

Our brief for the event was to take these emerging ideas and design a framework that could put them into practice.

The report starts by outlining the principles which it is felt should underpin Government intervention (pages 2 – 3). It continues with an outline of the elements that, together, would provide a strategic framework to put these principles into practice, under the broad headings:

- Widening participation through bottom up planning: partnerships and an investment strategy (pages 3 – 6);
- accountability (pages 7 – 8),
- making optimum use of new technology and media (pages 8 – 9), and
- communication (pages 9 – 11).

As well as an outline description of each element, we have also included a checklist of action points that it is felt should be tackled first to get started in the development of a strategic framework.

On behalf of DIUS and the COI we would like to thank all who participated in this event, and the wider consultation, for your ideas and insights. They are of immense value in moving this important strand of policy into practice.

Principles

During the consultation, a large number of people strongly recommended that the Government should establish a set of principles which defines its role in supporting informal adult learning. At the outset of our discussions at Windsor, the following nine principles¹ were advocated.

1. **Putting the individual "at the heart" of Government strategy to support informal adult learning.** By this we meant not only learners but also those **not** involved in any type of informal learning activity.
2. **Ensuring those with least "are actively sought out and encourage" to participate.** In this context we used the word 'least' to describe those who have had least education, and who benefit least from our economy. The drive would not necessarily be to persuade them to take part in learning for its own sake, but as a route to achieving a personal aspiration or goal. This would include sporting, artistic and social aspirations.
3. **Building on what has inspired, and "is learner-choice led".** The Government should not try and second guess what will inspire people to become involved in informal adult learning. Instead what has and is working well should inform how the Government might best support different types of informal learning activity. In addition, there "*must be mechanisms in place to enable policy to be shaped by individuals*"; both those already involved in informal learning activities and those who still need to be persuaded that it's for them.
4. **Ensuring Government support is "part of a much wider picture of informal learning"**² Whatever form Government support might take (subsidised provision, concessions for individuals, use of places and spaces, etc.) it needs to relate closely to elements of the much wider picture of informal learning. Government intervention should not place provision or people in a separate silo because either is in receipt of public funding.
5. **Ensuring "universality of access"** As well as actively seeking out and encouraging those with least, the Government should also ensure that all members of different communities can access different types of informal adult learning. This will involve providing different types of support including places and spaces for self-organised groups, ensuring adequate public transport is available, and a range of other services that may be necessary to facilitate a thriving culture of informal adult learning.
6. **Developing a system for quality assurance that is fit for purpose.** Adult informal learning funded through some public sector routes is subject to the same inspection criteria, standards and regime as formal learning. These criteria and standards create "*an artificial and unhelpful divide*" between different types of provision within the broad spectrum of activity that makes up informal adult learning. It was strongly advocated that "*kite-marking should be introduced across*" the spectrum of all informal learning activity as a way of not only "*endorsing the quality of provision, whatever its source of funding*" (including self-organised, independently and voluntarily funded groups), but also providing a way of sign-posting individuals to provision that meets an approved standard.
7. **Placing informal adult learning "within the context of a continuum".** Just as Government supported informal adult learning should not be seen as separate to the wider spectrum of activity, informal adult

¹ These principles should be taken as a first draft. They seek to capture words and phrases used during our discussions and the intent of participants. However, we recognised that the principles would need further drafting and this would be best carried out by a smaller group.

² Our working definitions of informal adult learning, targets and communities are included as an appendix to the Report.

learning needs to be viewed as part of a continuum. There needs to be "*connected opportunities*" for individuals to move laterally into other types of informal learning and, if they desire, to progress into more formal types of learning.

8. **Aligning public policy strategies, nationally, regionally and locally.** In order to maximise the impact of Government support, Departmental policies need to be aligned, together with regional and local policies. This will help to create a continuum of learning opportunities, and minimise the risk of gaps or duplication in the types of support available.
9. **Bottom up planning.** Planning how best to deploy Government support has to start at a local level to gain maximum impact from the support available. This will include support to develop infrastructure, to target marketing, ensure access and subsidise the cost of provision. The mix of support needed is likely to differ from one local area to another.

As part of a bottom-up planning process, consideration will also need to be given to meeting the needs of communities **not defined by locality** but by common interest, characteristics and aspiration. Planning for these communities may require local areas to work together regionally or nationally.

Elements of a strategic framework

During our discussions the question was asked: "*What do we mean by a strategic framework?*" The consensus was that, in this context, we meant a plan of the way we could put the principles we'd agreed into practice.

We identified four main 'pillars' or elements that would need to be included in the plan.

- i. Widening participation through bottom up planning by partnerships and a locally designed investment strategy;
- ii. Accountability;
- iii. making optimum use of new technology and media;
- iv. communication.

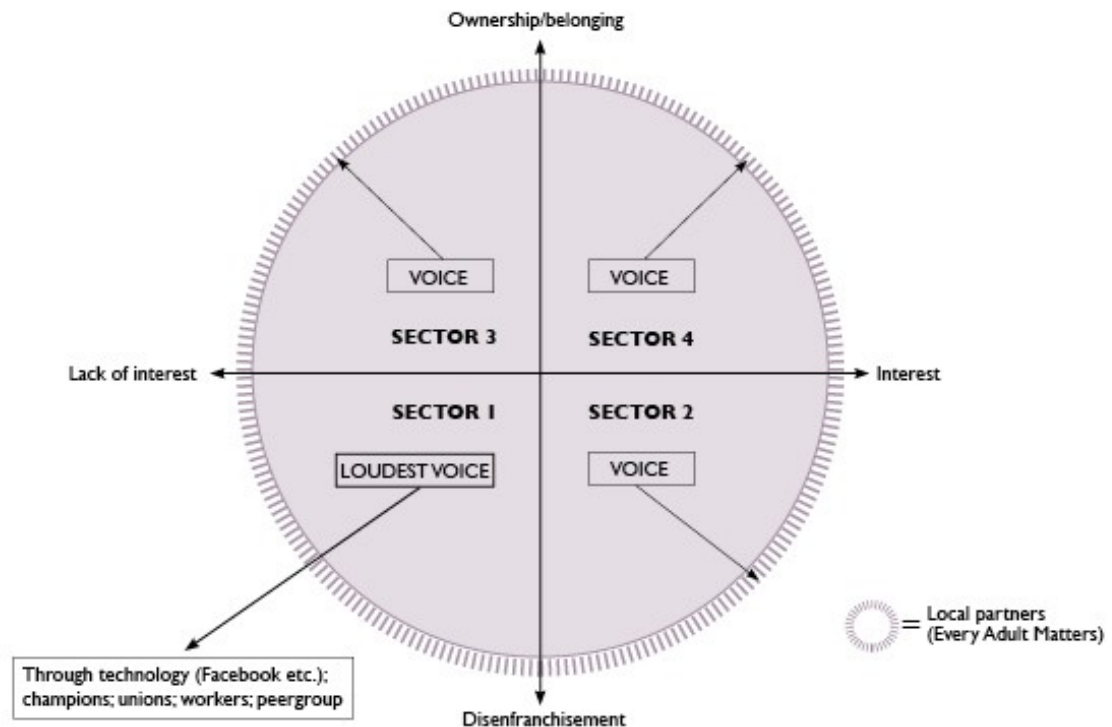
i. Widening participation through bottom up planning through partnerships and a locally designed investment strategy

Widening participation has intentionally been placed within the context of bottom-up planning. As the diagram overleaf illustrates, we segmented the market for informal adult learning into four broad sectors:

- Sector 1: those who feel disenfranchised from and are not interested in being part of a culture of informal learning
- Sector 2: those who feel disenfranchised from, but are interested in taking part in informal learning
- Sector 3: those who are part of a culture of adult learning, but are not actively engaged in any activity
- Sector 4: those who are part of the culture and actively engaged in activities.

It was agreed that the growth of all four sectors is important to develop a thriving culture. What will differ is the types of support each sector might need to encourage and sustain its growth. The aim of Government

intervention should be about *"helping to transform people's lives"*, improving both *"the quality of their lives and life chances."* Provision in all four elements should be mapped as a part of *"a continuum of opportunities"* that will facilitate further personal growth and self-confidence and/or open doors to formal learning if individuals are inspired to take this step.



Voices articulate need → partners draw together evidence base for Government support.

Surrounding the four sectors is a local partnership comprised of key *"stakeholders who understand the scope and detail"* of different types of national, regional and local support. In the diagram we have included the phrase *"every adult matters"* to capture the breadth of value they place on informal adult learning (its contribution to social cohesion, economic and social well being, health, quality of life, etc.) and to reflect the successful approach of putting the policy Every Child Matters into practice.

It was proposed that views of individuals about the type of Government support that would help to sustain and grow learning in each of the sectors would be fed into local Learning Hubs and from there into Local Strategic Partnerships.

An eight step plan was put forward to shape and deliver different types of Government support in a way that responds to what groups of *"individuals say will be of most value"*.

STEP 1 *"Identify common characteristics of members of the groups in each of the sectors."* Particular attention should be given to members of sector 1, but not to the exclusion of the other three sectors. *"All four sectors will need different types of Government support to create a thriving culture"* of informal learning and a continuum of opportunities.

STEP 2 *"Listen to 'their' voices through a variety of channels."* There wouldn't be a single mechanism for canvassing individuals' views but a variety of approaches would be deployed to gain as full a picture as

possible of the type of support and provision that would inspire people to take part in informal learning activities, and what they need to help them so that they can continue taking part.

It was recognised that stimulating interest amongst people within sector 1 will require using communication techniques that reach into the communities they live and work in. This will include 'virtual' communities that have developed through the use of technology, as well as communities bound by locality, interest, and common characteristics of their members.

STEP 3 *"Understand the type of investment needed to stimulate interest and take-up by people in sectors 1 – 4."* The type of support likely to be needed by people will vary both between and within sectors. Those in sector 4 may be inspired to set up new groups and be looking for *"places and spaces"* in order to do so. Those in sectors 2 and 3 may be inspired to become involved through new types of provision, or provision offered *"in different ways, in different places and at different times."* Some may need help with transport or access to the internet. *"Understanding the aspirations and interests"* of different groups of people in sector 1 will be essential in stimulating their interest in informal learning activities.

The idea would be *"to identify and quantify the types of support"* that are needed across all sectors in local areas and for other types of communities *"brought together through technology or other drivers."*

STEP 4 *"Understand and share the outcomes and targets partners are tasked to achieve."* In order to maximise the scope for meeting demand, stakeholder partners need to understand the outcomes and targets Government Departments and other public agencies wish to achieve through their investment and support of informal learning.

It was proposed that this shared understanding should be facilitated at national level. Led by the Department of Innovation Universities and Skills (DIUS), the cross Ministerial and Departmental Groups should provide guidance to show how health, community empowerment, culture, media and sports, work and pension *"policies can be knitted together and, at the same time, clarify the expectations and outcomes attached to each policy strand."* Underpinned by shared values and principles, this guidance will help to inform Local Strategic Partnerships about the parameters of the support that is available, and how best to marry up the guidance with what communities are telling them is needed to support a thriving culture.

STEP 5 *"Match the type of support required with that available from different sources."* It is at this stage that local partnerships *"may need to make some tough decisions"* about how best to invest different types of Government support and how to plug gaps. Having a comprehensive picture of what individuals in different sectors feel is needed will be of enormous value in informing decision making and helping to ensure a fair and balanced approach. This picture will also be important to help voluntary and private sector partners to see how they could most effectively contribute to supporting and developing a thriving culture.

STEP 6 *"Identify where provision sits within the continuum, and options for growth and/or progression for those interested."* As far as is practical, all informal adult learning, whether it is in receipt of public funding or not, should be placed within a continuum of learning. Rather than try and capture the complete picture of what a *"learner journey"* might look like, it was strongly advocated that the first step should be to identify clusters of progression options, moving laterally as well as in the direction of more structured formal learning.

This exercise is probably best carried out by those involved in delivering informal learning activities. Naturally, they will need information and support to help them gain a picture of where the activities they're involved in sit within a broad continuum. However, by involving them directly in this process they can provide

a reality check about the continuum that people would be inspired by rather than an imposed idea of how they might progress. This approach would also help group leaders and tutors to advise people about further opportunities that they could explore.

STEP 7 "Produce an evidence base for funders." By working through the previous steps of this planned approach, Local Strategic Partnerships will be able to produce an evidence base to support their funding plans that details how different types of support available (infrastructure development as well as the cost of provision) will be implemented to achieve maximum impact. The evidence base could also be used to bring to the attention of policy makers any unforeseen gaps that they may wish to plug.

At this stage it is envisaged that local plans and evidence bases would be fed into a regional or national agency or partnership with the capacity to review and approve the plans. One possibility worth exploring is whether this is a role that the newly established regional pathfinder Empowerment Partnerships could be shaped to take on. The agency or partnership would work closely with relevant Government Departments and be able "to turn on the funding flow" on approval of local community plans.

Local Strategic Partnerships will need to work laterally with each other to identify the shape and size of communities not bound by geography but other characteristics. They will need to ensure that the support that these communities may require to grow and thrive is not overlooked in favour of more visible local communities.

STEP 8 "Feed back to all sectors of communities the rationale for funding to ensure openness and transparency" At the moment this step is often missing when activities are closed due to a lack of funding. We recognised that there are always going to be difficult choices to be made about how Government support of all types can be best deployed. While people may be disappointed about a decision, they are far more likely to accept it if they understand the rationale behind it.

ACTION POINTS FOR GETTING STARTED

The following action points were put forward as a way beginning to put the ideas outlined into practice.

- *Gain Ministerial buy-in of the value of the concept of a broad continuum of learning.*
- *Identify a Cabinet lead to take forward a cross-Departmental approach of 'knitting' together the implementation of policies to bring together strands of informal adult learning, and the outcomes and targets it is desired that they yield.*
- *Establish a national advisory task and finish group to take forward and develop the ideas for local partnerships and planning.*
- *Involve the Local Government Association in the development of ideas and processes.*
- *Develop a prototype evidence base and test it out with local partnerships, Government Departments and national, regional and local funders to ensure a shared understanding of its purpose and that it is fit for use.*
- *Explore the idea of creating informal adult learning champions*
- *Commission a 'think tank' piece of research to identify an effective way of recognising and sharing good practice rather than re-inventing wheels.*
- *Identify pilots that are linking service provision and learning, eg: National Health Primary Care Trusts and learning providers*
- *Shape and consult on the idea of 'an entitlement' for informal learning activity*

ii. Accountability

The starting point for establishing an accountability framework was to identify the **impact** we want to achieve through informal learning activity. This includes:

- Empowerment
- Independence
- A sense of belonging
- Tolerance
- Improved well being
- Mental robustness
- Economic benefits
- Sustainable community resources

Having agreed on the range of impacts the next step would be to explore the most efficient and effective way of measuring progress towards achieving these goals. On one issue there was consensus: Ofsted inspection standards and process *"are not fit for purpose in this context."*³ Instead, it was proposed that a new system of kite-marking all informal adult learning provision delivered as meeting an approved quality standard should be introduced. Agreeing the components that would be included in a new kite mark, and the quality standard providers would need to achieve, was strongly recommended as a priority for action.

Using a new kite-mark as the foundation, the following approach was proposed as providing a more relevant and effective method for measuring progress.

At local level there should be a "duty to collaborate" between all the key players involved in the delivery of informal learning activity. These would include:

- Learning providers
- Independent sector organisations
- Voluntary sector organisations
- Self-help organisations such as University of the Third Age (U3A), reading groups and others
- Primary Care Trusts
- Housing
- Libraries
- Sport
- Arts and Culture

The key output of this collaboration would be *"an adult plan"* as described in the previous section under local partnerships and planning. This plan, which would be *"far more encompassing than simply a 'learning plan'"*, would be submitted to Local Strategic Partnerships. There was a strong view that much could be learnt from the successful joining-up of children's services, and there was strong support for the idea of establishing Directors of Adult Services to mirror this success.

³ In Scotland a community development model is used for the inspection of informal adult learning. This was felt to be more appropriate but still fell short of providing the right vehicle for inspection of progress towards the impact goals described.

In the immediate future, it was suggested that the Audit Commission is best placed to appraise and monitor the delivery of local plans, as the Commission has a much more holistic remit than, for example, Ofsted.

Local plans would form the basis of a national plan with accountability strands attached to each of the Government Departments that have a stake in informal adult learning and the impact that a thriving culture creates. Funding would flow through a single national funding body to Local Authorities, and expenditure would be commissioned by Local Authorities, advised by Local Strategic Partnerships in line with their submitted plans.

ACTION POINTS FOR GETTING STARTED

- *Gain Ministerial buy-in to the concept of local Adult Plans and what this will include.*
- *Explore what a new kite-mark might include (perhaps building on the Scottish community development model), how willing all types of providers would be in signing up to achieving it, and test it out as an alternative approach to Ofsted inspections.*
- *Test out the accountability model with local partnerships.*
- *Establish a national task and finish group, including local stakeholders from different areas and regions, to work through difficult issues regarding minimising bureaucracy, agreeing quality assurance, etc.*
- *Work through how communities that are bound by factors other than geography can be included in this approach.*
- *Draw on the lessons learnt from testing out the model prior to rolling out this new approach.*

iii. Making optimum use of new technology and media

The starting point for exploring how to make optimum use of new technology and media was to stress that *"not everything needs to be done or is best done using new technology or through media."* Where both have enormously important roles is in raising awareness that *"learning is an instinct that you're born with."* Stimulating and responding to that instinct requires a *"sophisticated understanding of what inspires and facilitates social [and educational] interaction for different people."*

Within this context, the use of technology and media should **not** be considered as *"an 'add on'."* It should *"replace some of what we do now in other ways"*, where it is shown to be more effective than what we do now for particular groups of people. Even though we were clear that we **weren't** *"advocating a clean sweep for all to be replaced by new technology and media"*, there will be some who perceive any replacement of how things are done now as a threat, and consideration needs to be given as to how to allay their fears.

Five strands of activity were put forward to optimise the use of new technology and media.

- **Use media to inspire people to get involved in informal learning activities.** Of course this will be building on what already happens. You only have to look at the success of "Who do You Think You Are?", coverage of the Olympic and Para-Olympic Games, and countless quiz shows to name but a few examples of how radio and television inspires and stimulates people to learn. The idea would be to develop new ways of *"getting broadcasters to inspire people to get involved."*
- **Stimulate self-organised groups interest in how technology can 'add value'.** It was proposed that *"leaders of self-organised groups should receive a good practice pack"* to give them ideas about how they

might develop their group learning offers. The pack could include details of how they can *"share digital resources, inspirational collections of exemplars, and user reviews."*

- ***"Help funded learning organisations understand the value of technology and change."*** In addition to the support recommended for self-organised groups, the professional development of staff was also strongly advocated. In particular, it was felt that both *"peer and learner support packages of training"* should be made available to teaching staff.
- ***"Enable much greater access to information about all types of informal learning."*** By providing a single information portal, technology could provide a significant advance in helping inform people about all types of informal learning, and provide a mechanism for cross Governmental and agency dialogue and planning. The information areas within the portal could provide details of **all** informal learning opportunities by type, location and links with other provision within the learning continuum. Indeed it was envisaged that this resource would form part of the new Adult Advancement Service. The portal could also provide links to other related information such as health, work opportunities, etc.

A 'closed' section of the portal could provide a forum for information exchange and planning for both Government Departments and public agencies involved in the planning and funding of activities, and for practitioners in delivering different types of activity.

- ***"Help more people to use computers, the internet and digital media"*** Providing people with the tools, skills and confidence to use media and technology is essential in optimising the use of the media and technology as a key component of informal learning activities. This needs to be highlighted within the cross Government digital inclusion action plan.

ACTION POINTS FOR GETTING STARTED

- *Set up a new technology and media taskforce; agree the remit of the taskforce and the roles of its members and produce an action plan to take each of the five strands outlined above forward.*
- *Draft and co-ordinate a Department of Innovation Universities and Skills' digital inclusion plan building on the cross Departmental digital inclusion action plan.*
- *Extend the remit and effectiveness of harnessing technology for use as a provider of information and informal learning activities.*
- *Raise the profile of new technology to adult learning practitioners and promote exemplars.*
- *Begin to build exemplars, user reviews and information about opportunities into the portal and test out with groups of individuals.*

iv. Communication

We recognised that taking forward the changes we advocated that the Government should make to support a thriving culture of informal learning will require a comprehensive communication plan to ensure that the changes are viewed as a positive step forward and attract the support of a wide range of different stakeholders. We identified no less than eight or nine broad groups that we felt needed to understand and feel part of 'the journey' that moving from where we are now to where we want to be will involve. Overleaf are the messages we felt that we want them to hear.

Learners: *"We want to hear your voice."* We recognise that how we can best help you will vary. Some are cash rich, time poor while others are cash poor, and yet others need help with travel or childcare. What we want to do is provide support in a number of ways that helps as many as we can. We also want to ensure that *"a lot more is on offer"* by encouraging *"more self-organised learning, greater use of technology and media, and opening up of more places and spaces."*

Practitioners: *"Your work is valued."* We know that it hasn't always felt that way and we know that *"we will need to win back your trust."* The Government is committed to supporting a thriving culture of informal adult learning and hopes that you will endorse and support the changes that we are advocating to bring this about. We also want you to understand that we are not looking to replace you with the use of technology: we want to strengthen and widen what can be offered through technology and would value your input as to how this can be best achieved.

The public (those not involved in informal learning activities): Through local promotional activity rather than a national campaign, the messages should include: *"What would you like to do (do rather than learn), and where and how would you like to do it?"*

Press and media: We want you to run stories that will be of personal interest about *"the power of adult learning. How it can change and transform lives."* We also want you to consider keeping a 'bank of stories' that can be *"linked with breaking news to emphasis the topicality and relevance of informal learning activities."*

Additional ideas included a weekly newspaper column in one of the broadsheets to *"influence thinking amongst particular audiences"*, and using local media to pick up news about concessions and opening up new places and spaces.

Ministers: *"Informal adult learning is of importance to all Government Departments. Its health is important to taking forward a significant number of policy areas, and it makes a big contribution in helping to deliver Government priorities and achieving Public Service Agreements."*

"Involvement in informal adult learning can save public funding of, for example, costs to health and crime prevention. It also makes a contribution to productivity. We can provide some statistics" to support these assertions, and provide an evidence base for negotiations with the Treasury.

Other politicians: It was strongly advocated that messages also need to be relayed to other politicians, including those currently in opposition to the Government. These messages included *"Informal adult learning can help to mend 'broken Britain'; and is an important issue to a wide range of voters."*

Local Authorities: *"This a real opportunity to shape informal learning in your area."* It is of enormous value *"in creating a sense of well being"* amongst your constituents, and this is an opportunity to exercise greater freedom developing new approaches that increase the depth and spread of well being within local communities than you may feel you have at the moment.

Local Services including self-organised groups and the 3rd Sector Under the umbrella of local services we included the providers of advice and guidance (including those providers that will be delivering the new Adult Advancement Service) as well as those delivering activities. We also included in our thinking all providers of activities, including those in which learning is incidental to the main objective that people want to achieve by joining a group.

While we recognised that the messages we would want to give will need *"to be differentiated according to the service"*, two key messages were common to all: *"we want to hear your voice, and include you in planning how to take forward the changes proposed."*

Next steps

While our discussions focused on a cross-Government approach, it was generally accepted that the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills will need to play a leadership role in gaining cross-Government support for the approach advocated by those involved in the consultation and endorsed during this event.

New partnership approaches are already being developed with other Departments and Services. For example, opening up new places and spaces with the Library Service, and exploring the potential for greater planning connectivity through the Empowerment Partnerships being established through the Department for the Community and Local Government.

There is also scope for the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills to take the lead in testing out the recommendations put forward for a new bottom-up planning process and the idea of kite-marking providers in a way that reflects their role as 'community developers' rather than learning providers.

Naturally, in the beginning this will not include all informal learning activities in a local area, but it could provide a valuable spearhead in setting the direction and pace of travel. And perhaps, at this stage, this is what is most needed. Leading the way in both stimulating interest in informal adult activities, and giving local areas far more voice and autonomy about how they might use public funds to do so, could be just the message needed to begin to move towards creating the thriving culture of informal adult learning that we all want to achieve.

Participants List

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Appendix: Definitions of Terms Used

In order to avoid our discussions going off track into a debate about semantics, phrases and words that we frequently used were defined as below:

- (i) **informal adult learning:** 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:** includes voluntary sector financed, state financed, self-organised and self-financed activities – and everything in between.
 - (ii) **targets:** 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:** includes geographical communities and communities of people with common interests, characteristics or aspirations.
-