Adult learning is delivered by 15 partnerships across Wales and Addysg Oedolion Cymru / Adult Learning Wales. Membership of the partnerships differs from area to area, but most include provision offered by the local authority, further education college and voluntary organisations. The latest published information shows that, in 2018-2019, 13,050 learners enrolled in adult learning programmes (Welsh Government, 2020qq). This represents an increase of 3% compared with the previous year.

The sector is in the process of reconfiguration, with the Welsh Government revising historic funding arrangements to focus better on tackling poverty and deprivation. This process is taking place over two funding years. The new arrangements require partnerships to focus on the provision of literacy, numeracy, digital skills, English for speakers of other languages and Welsh language courses for adults.

This year, we inspected two adult learning partnerships.
Sector summaries: Adult learning in the community

Standards

Standards are good in both of the partnerships inspected. Most learners produce written or practical work of at least a sound standard and make at least appropriate progress in their learning. Many learn, develop and apply new skills and a minority of learners make strong progress. A few learners make slow progress.

Nearly all learners in parenting and family learning classes in one partnership, including a specific group for young fathers, acquire new knowledge about how to improve their parenting and caring skills. They try out parenting techniques with their families, reflect carefully on the results and make very strong progress in developing their critical thinking skills. In family learning classes, parents and grandparents improve their confidence and make steady progress in developing their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills with their children.

In English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes, a majority of learners make worthwhile progress. They use language patterns, grammar and vocabulary well, appropriate to their level of study. They develop their speaking and listening skills well. A few become disengaged during lessons when the pace of teaching is not appropriate for them or when others dominate class discussions. Most learners develop basic reading skills suitably and many learners on intermediate courses gain deeper understanding of meaning when reading.

In numeracy sessions, most learners make steady or better progress and develop confidence and ability well given their previous, often negative, experiences with mathematics. In literacy and communication sessions, the majority of learners write well according to their level and ability. They use well-formed sentences to shape short written responses to tasks, for example when describing the history of rugby and football in Wales and their role in Welsh culture. Most learners make steady or better progress and work towards accredited literacy and numeracy qualifications. A majority continue their studies over a period of years and build on their prior learning and attainment.

Retired learners in community settings use tablet computers competently to search e-shopping sites or to list items for sale. In practical sessions such as sewing, most learners develop strong hand-sewing and machine skills and learn economical ways of sourcing and using materials.

Many learners use individual learning plans and journals to plan and reflect on their learning, and they find them a useful aid to identifying short-term targets and to monitor their own progress. As a result, many apply the skills they learn in their classes to their everyday lives, such as when reading, managing their money and increasing their independence.

Learners on a few courses, such as family learning, ESOL and skills clubs, practise basic Welsh words and phrases. For example, they use Welsh greetings and days and dates, and a ‘Welsh word of the week’, or receive feedback from their teachers using basic Welsh terms. In community classes, a few Welsh-speaking learners talk with each other and their tutors in Welsh, and freely switch between languages as part of bilingual conversations. However, learners on a majority of courses have little exposure to the Welsh language through their programmes.
Sector summaries: Adult learning in the community

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning are good in both of the partnerships inspected. Most learners are enthusiastic about their work and participate wholeheartedly in sessions. As a result, they enjoy their learning and demonstrate this clearly in their contributions to activities during sessions. They respect and interact well with teachers and other learners, support each other well and make new friends. Most work well in pairs and small groups. They maintain their concentration during sessions.

Nearly all learners feel safe and welcomed in class. Most benefit from a useful induction and understand safeguarding and health and safety procedures.

Many learners attend community-based courses following referrals from specialist support agencies, partner organisations and schools. Often these learners come to their programmes with multiple needs and health issues, including low self-esteem, anxiety or depression. Nearly all gain in confidence, and many are able to relate better to others and to integrate more successfully into society as a result of their learning. Many learners in community skills classes, such as patchwork and quilting or sewing machine skills, find their learning therapeutic. For example, learners with mental health issues and physical illnesses find that the courses alleviate stress and help them forget their everyday worries.

In one partnership, engagement officers make sure that vulnerable learners bond well with their peers and tutors. This means that learners persevere with their learning despite their many barriers. A few learners with physical and mental health issues find that attending classes to prepare for work or improve reading skills helps to reduce stress, for example in dealing with written correspondence such as medical records and letters.

Many learners with previous poor experiences of learning benefit from returning to study. Many begin to develop perseverance and resilience and become less dependent on additional support. Many gain the confidence to progress on to other learning, apply for work or seek more satisfying and sustainable employment. Overall, learners attend their classes regularly and show commitment despite personal and family issues that can be barriers to attendance in adult learning.

Many ESOL learners, who have had to start new lives in an unfamiliar country, engage well with activities in classes, which are relevant to their current life situation. As a result, they gain self-confidence and begin to restore their self-esteem.

Most learners, including those who have previously struggled in education, explain how their course is supporting their wellbeing and personal development. Many are able to demonstrate the impact their learning is having on life outside the course, including learners in digital skills courses who use their newly acquired skills to keep in touch with relatives.
Teaching and learning

Teaching and learning experiences are good in both of the partnerships inspected. Most tutors use their comprehensive subject knowledge to plan well-sequenced and appropriately paced lessons that take account of learners’ individual needs while providing a suitable level of challenge. They use a wide range of learning activities and refer well to learners’ previous knowledge and experiences to plan new learning.

Most tutors manage classes and activities well. They are effective communicators who form a strong rapport and positive relationships with their learners. They create comfortable learning environments in which learners feel safe. For example, most tutors teaching family and parenting classes are highly skilled practitioners who have the ability to support and nurture learners and help them build resilience.

Many ESOL tutors plan and structure their lessons appropriately, so that learners develop skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking naturally through discrete and mixed skills activities. In a minority of ESOL classes, tutors do not always plan lessons that help learners to develop their linguistic skills from their individual starting points. For example, lessons often focus too much on grammar and sentence structures at the expense of developing learners’ speaking and listening skills.

Many tutors use questioning techniques to help learners develop their problem-solving, thinking and evaluative skills. They give constructive and encouraging verbal feedback to help learners understand what they need to do to improve their work. Many monitor and support learners well as they work, and provide helpful individual coaching. Most tutors encourage learners to develop their skills further by studying outside of class. This gives learners more confidence to use what they learn in leisure and work activities.

Most tutors provide helpful regular written feedback to learners. In a few cases, their written feedback does not provide clear guidance to learners about their next steps in learning. Most tutors track learner progress and use individual learning plans to help learners review their own progress.

Most tutors use a wide range of resources to support and enhance learning, and take advantage of learners’ mobile devices, interactive white boards and helpful teaching software. In a very few community settings, the lack of Wi-Fi connectivity hinders learners’ opportunity to use their mobile devices fully in digital literacy sessions.

Many tutors plan activities that engage learners, with links to a range of topics, such as festivals, living in Wales or climate change. Partnerships provide an appropriate range of activities that support learning, such as international evenings where ESOL learners and members of the public experience and appreciate each other’s food, language and culture.
Sector summaries: Adult learning in the community

Partnerships use individual partners’ expertise to offer an appropriate range of literacy, numeracy, digital skills and ESOL courses to meet local needs and reflect the Welsh Government’s national priorities. Overall, they recruit well to these courses. However, in one partnership, much of the provision is in a small number of main centres, while provision in other community-based centres is limited.

Partnerships also provide a very few self-financing courses, and work usefully with a small number of other partners to provide a few additional opportunities for learners in local communities. Examples of these include supporting learners and tutors to turn a very few long-standing courses into clubs with a more social purpose and working with the local health board to deliver healthy eating programmes. In a few cases, partners have begun to work with national and local businesses to upskill workers’ literacy, numeracy and digital skills in the workplace. Partnerships also provide useful progression routes into other adult learning courses as well as on to further and higher education provision.

Care, support and guidance

Care, support and guidance are good in both of the partnerships inspected. Tutors and support staff across the partnerships have a clear focus on developing learners’ skills, confidence, health and wellbeing.

Nearly all tutors are aware of, and take good account of, learners’ individual needs and commitments. Many promote the importance of regular attendance well. They are mindful of learners’ commitments in their daily lives and are usually flexible when working to help learners get the most out of their learning.

Many partners have effective systems to identify, check and monitor learning support, wellbeing and attendance patterns. However, partnerships do not always use information from individual partners to monitor patterns in attendance or wellbeing across the whole provision.

Partnerships identify learners’ support needs through course applications, guidance interviews and tutor observations as well as through learners’ self-declarations. Where appropriate, learners have an initial assessment at the start of their programme. Across the partnerships, there are inconsistencies in the use of initial assessment to identify learners’ starting points accurately.

Partnerships source and provide valuable support to help learners overcome a range of barriers to their learning and their personal development. For example, many tutors support learners’ specific needs well, including those with social anxiety, literacy difficulties and hearing impairments. In early years and family learning programmes, tutors assist parents to build strong peer support networks, which impact positively on learner engagement.

Partnerships and tutors recognise and celebrate the achievements and successes of their learners. This is of particular benefit to vulnerable learners in helping build their self-esteem. Many learners participate in local celebration activities and a few achieve recognition at national celebration events.
Partners draw suitably on learner services teams and appropriate external agencies to support learners with specific problems such as drug or alcohol misuse. They also provide learners with useful advice about student finance and how to apply for financial support. In a few cases, partnerships draw on additional learning support funding to support relevant learners directly. However, overall, they do not manage additional learning support funding well enough. In particular, they do not track additional support systematically enough to understand fully the impact of the funding on learners’ progression and wellbeing.

Many learners benefit from impartial advice and guidance and useful induction activities when they join their learning programme. Nearly all learners either receive useful learner guides or are signposted to online information about funding, learning support and health and safety. In a few cases, partnerships do not always provide a convenient way for learners to find details of all learning opportunities available in their localities.

Nearly all staff receive worthwhile training on safeguarding and the Prevent strategy. Many tutors raise learners’ awareness of keeping safe, including from radicalisation and extremism, as part of induction activities.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good in one of the partnerships inspected and adequate in the other. Leaders and managers in both partnerships have a clear vision with appropriate aims, objectives and policies that focus suitably on meeting many local learners’ needs in line with key national and local priorities.

Partnerships have established an ethos of working collaboratively in delivery of courses in agreed key priority areas. In one partnership, there is a clear focus on essential skills and ESOL, and in the other there is an ethos of ‘acting today for a better tomorrow’. Leaders understand their roles well and work together to drive forward strategic priorities.

Both partnerships have an appropriate focus on delivery targets, quality improvement and collaborative curriculum planning. They have clear cycles of quality assurance activities supported by generally appropriate structures and processes.

Leaders set appropriate expectations for staff and learners and most staff understand their roles and responsibilities clearly and undertake them well. Where leadership is good, leaders have maintained high standards of provision and know their main strengths and areas for improvement well. They define relevant and measurable actions for improvement in realistic timescales and allocate responsibility for their delivery appropriately. The partnership operates a rigorous system of teaching and learning observations, with all the main providers having clearly defined observation cycles. These observations identify good practice and areas for improvement suitably and help inform the continuous professional learning programme.
Where leadership requires improvement, although partners operate their own quality assurance processes, the methodology and quality of lesson observations vary too much between partners. For example, lesson observation evaluations focus mostly on teaching and do not review learner progress and engagement strongly enough. As a result, the partnership has a limited understanding of learner progress across the range of providers. Overall, self evaluation processes at partnership level are not evaluative enough and there is an over-reliance on data to judge standards of teaching and learning.

Partners provide valuable professional learning activities for staff, including on themes such as bilingual teaching, health and wellbeing. Where leadership is good, partnership members work well together to monitor the impact of professional learning activities on learning and teaching. Where improvement is required, there is a lack of clarity at partnership level about priorities for professional learning and partners do not share good practice well enough.

Partnerships have a sound understanding of their income and expenditure, and manage their budgets for adult learning provision appropriately. They have appropriate levels of suitably qualified staff and resources.

In a few instances, the partnerships have been successful in obtaining additional sources of funding, such as a digital development grant from the Welsh Government. They use these funds well to widen provision and provide valuable access to learning opportunities. Accommodation is generally suitable to support teaching and learning. Leaders in one partnership have been particularly successful in establishing community hubs to ensure that provision and facilities are located in the areas of greatest social and economic need and are easily accessible to learners.

In 2020, Estyn undertook a thematic survey ‘Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life’ (Estyn, 2020f). This report identifies that leaders and staff in community schools that have strong parental engagement build the skills, confidence and self-esteem of parents. The report also highlights how well-designed family learning programmes help parents improve their ability to support their children. These programmes often support parents to move into employment or further learning.