

Section 1

Sector summaries: Adult learning in the community

Context

Adult learning in the community 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.

Adult learning in the community provision normally takes places in community venues, such as libraries, community learning centres or schools. The closure of these venues during the pandemic has had a big impact on partnerships' ability to deliver their normal programmes.

Over recent years, the sector has focused its funded provision on courses for adults to improve their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Partnerships also provide a small number of leisure and recreational programmes for personal interest, wellbeing, and inclusion, such as yoga classes, needlecraft or local history. In many cases, partnerships support voluntary groups or clubs to run their own leisure and wellbeing provision, by providing venues or advertising classes.

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Recent Welsh Government policy has been to encourage partnerships to merge into fewer, larger, regional partnerships. Progress towards this goal has been patchy as partnerships have focused their attention on responding to the pandemic.

From September 2020, we continued to engage remotely with leaders and co-ordinators in partnerships through our link inspector calls. We called most providers regularly to focus on the implications of the pandemic on learner and staff wellbeing, teaching and learning, and leadership throughout the pandemic. These engagements also supported two thematic reviews on remote and blended learning and learner mental health and wellbeing. In summer 2021, we joined a few online lessons and conducted remote calls with a few adult learning in the community partnerships to find out how they are continuing to support adult learners.

The pandemic reduced the number of learners and learning activities taking place considerably. In our engagement calls, providers report between a quarter and half of the normal number of learning activities taking place, which is in line with Welsh Government statistics (Welsh Government, 2021i). In addition to the challenges of delivering remote learning, partnerships found it difficult to recruit new learners or to run programmes such as family learning, which typically take place in schools.

As lockdown restrictions varied over the course of the year, partnerships varied their provision between centre-based and online delivery, depending on conditions.

Wellbeing

From September 2020, partnerships increased their focus on progression in learning, as well as continuing to support learners' wellbeing.

During periods of lockdown and when learning centres were closed, many learners faced increased social isolation due to not being able to attend classes in person. Others, such as those on ESOL courses, particularly at entry level, or those without the necessary technology or connectivity for remote online learning, found it particularly difficult to engage in learning remotely.

Most partnerships provided information to learners through online newsletters, and other communications. Most included elements of online safety in their programmes to help learners stay safe from online scams and fraud.

For those partnerships where learners were enrolled as a student in the partner college, counselling services were available in the college, although it is not clear how much adult learners in the community were aware or made use of these services. Partnerships without a college partner referred learners to external agencies or to social services support within the local authority's provision.

Developing designated wellbeing roles within adult learning in the community partnerships

Bridgend adult community learning partnership, along with adult community learning partnerships in neighbouring local authorities in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil, worked collectively to secure Welsh Government funding for a project to identify and develop a network of 'wellbeing champions' across the three areas to cascade knowledge, information and resources to their peers and advise tutors on ways to support their learners on wellbeing issues.

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Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Partnerships focused their delivery on their core provision of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and ESOL. By its nature, the sector delivers to adult learners in the community. Although schools re-opened between lockdowns, venues such as public libraries and community centres, where much delivery normally takes place, often did not. During periods where learning venues were open, partnerships used these opportunities to issue learners with digital equipment and to improve their digital skills so that they were able to participate online when lockdown restrictions tightened.

Unlike the school sector, adult learning in the community partnerships and their learners do not have access to the Welsh Government online teaching and learning resource, Hwb, and the tools that are available on it. This slowed the sector's ability to establish online learning platforms quickly. Poor internet access continues to be a barrier to full online participation for a few learners.

In the online sessions we observed in the summer term of 2021, learners engaged well with their tutors and with each other in synchronous online sessions. Overall, learners expressed mixed views about online learning. Some learners preferred the convenience of learning at home and the flexibility that this allowed, while others missed the interpersonal, social aspects of learning. A few learners, especially those with additional learning needs, lacked the independent learning skills and confidence to sustain learning at home without the direct support of a tutor in a classroom situation.

During the early summer of 2021, adult learning in the community partnerships began to re-open their community learning centres and gradually return to face-to-face learning, often blending centre-based and online teaching approaches. Partnerships considered how to reconnect with their traditional learners and adapt their provision to serve the needs of new learners whose lives may have been disrupted during the pandemic, and who are adjusting to a change of employment or direction and need to develop new skills. In their early planning for the new academic year, partnerships considered their approach to delivery and their provision offer. Most planned to retain some aspects of blended learning, even if COVID-19 restrictions are fully lifted and centres are open.

Adapting a course for remote and blended learning delivery

Cardiff and the Vale College delivered an Entry 3 course for ESOL in conjunction with Cardiff and the Vale adult learning in the community partnership. The team delivering the course re-designed the schemes of work and teaching plans to work effectively as a blended learning course to use in lockdown. The teachers divided the learners into 'bubbles', small groups of no more than five people, to be COVID-19 secure when learners are on-site. They reviewed the course and adjusted it to decide when to teach language skills discretely or as mixed skills. The team arranged to introduce new material to learners online as a whole group. Teachers took responsibility for delivering different elements of the course. Learners had additional opportunities to work in their 'bubbles' with a teacher on-site or online to practise listening, reading, and speaking. Teachers took account of learners' social, financial, and cultural circumstances when asking learners to do work online. For example, if learners lived with their families and had limited personal space, they could choose to join the class with videos turned off.

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Leadership

Over the course of the year, patterns of working for managers and tutors have stabilised and are now more regular and sustainable.

Partnerships' approaches to professional learning have evolved over the year. Partnerships report that a few teaching staff started from a low skills base in using digital technology, and that many had never used digital teaching tools. Partnerships collaborated well to bid for Welsh Government professional learning funds. They began to benefit from the support of digital teaching mentors, who received intensive training, and worked with colleagues to improve their digital teaching skills.

Developing a professional learning portal

Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales, which works with all adult learning partnerships across Wales, developed a useful central professional learning portal that their own teachers and those of their partners could access. This facility had the potential to help adult learning in the community partnerships across Wales develop shared understanding about online teaching, learning and assessment methods as well as developing quality standards further.

Follow-up activity

Following a desk-based review of evidence, one partnership was removed from follow-up in June 2021. One partnership remains in follow-up.

