



Visit to community learning and development in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

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Contents

1. Background	1
2. CLD in the current context	1
3. Progress with recommendations from previous report	2
4. What happens next?	3



1. Background

This report follows a visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) to Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, to look at community learning and development (CLD) provision. This follows a previous inspection where it was agreed that further engagement was required. During the visit we met with local authority officers, CLD partners, staff, volunteers, learners and community representatives. Our engagement enabled HM Inspectors to learn more about how learners and communities have been supported through the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard about approaches that have been working well to support health and wellbeing, and learning. We also discussed progress in taking forward the recommendations from the original inspection.

This report sets out what we found during our visit.

2. CLD in the current context

The Comhairle nan Eilean Siar covers a significant geographical area, spread across several islands. COVID-19 significantly increased the risk of social isolation across the mainly rural communities. Staff in several organisations were redeployed to provide emergency COVID-19 support which at times disrupted the planning and provision of aspects of CLD. However, local partnerships, forums and CLD practitioners across the islands adapted quickly to meet the needs created by COVID-19 in 2020. CLD partners supported volunteers effectively as communities came together to address the care needs of individuals and families. Volunteers of all ages, practitioners and local businesses organised themselves to deliver essential provisions such as food and prescriptions and provide social contact during periods of school and facility closure. For example, the volunteer run Barvas Food Bank was set up in response to food poverty issues in the area during the pandemic. In the last 18 months, approximately 1,800 individuals within a radius of 50 miles have benefitted from 670 food parcels.

At the onset of COVID-19, CLD practitioners and volunteers worked hard to increase their digital capacity to communicate with learners and community activists online. They also came together well to enable residents to access digital equipment and advice. There are many examples of partners delivering effective online CLD provision. For example, during periods of facility and school closures CLD and health partners came together to develop online Friday Fun sessions for young people. Digital tools were used well to evaluate each session and support discussions around wellbeing. New CLD provision is also being developed, such as the online Climate Change Youth group. This group of young people are supported well by practitioners to explore environmental issues and to meet with elected representatives to ask for action. The Adult Learning service is continuing to deliver its programmes online. This includes the online delivery of Gaelic language classes, which has grown in its offer through increased partnerships between adult learning e'Sgoil and Lews Castle College. As a result, numbers are increasing.

Despite the pandemic, CLD partners are continuing to develop partnership structures to support local action to meet needs. Area forums and partnerships continue to adapt their plans and ways of working to be ensure they can respond to the local needs created by COVID-19. Creative approaches are enabling services and programmes to continue. For example, the recently developed plans and funding to enable the Historical Society to expand their exhibits

into an outdoor environment. A continuing challenge to supporting recovery is the risk of volunteers, practitioners and communities being fatigued from responding to the issues the pandemic creates. There continues to be a need to consider how they can all be supported as COVID-19 continues. A few community groups feel they would benefit from more input from CLD partners. There would be merit in reviewing the deployment of the collective resources of CLD partners to ensure groups are best able to get the support they need. Senior leaders should now consider how the work of communities, practitioners and partners throughout the pandemic can best be captured, celebrated and built on. This will help to retain practitioners and volunteers as well as inform CLD planning.

3. Progress with recommendations from previous report

The governance of CLD remains an area for improvement. Senior strategic leaders now need to ensure that robust mechanisms are put in place which can provide them with assurance that CLD provision best meets priority needs. A CLD steering group was formed at the end of 2020 to oversee CLD planning. This has resulted in greater understanding of the need for partners to come together to jointly plan and monitor CLD. The 2021-24 CLD plan has been discussed and approved recently at both committee and the community planning partnership and provides a broad set of shared CLD priorities. Senior leaders should now provide support to the CLD steering group to enable them to undertake their plan to identify leads and set clear targets for each priority early in 2022. This will help them to monitor the effectiveness of CLD planning and provision and ensure that the local authority can fulfil its statutory obligations.

There are strong examples of effective partnership working. Since our last visit, the parent lead group, Comann nam Pàrant, have established a strong and effective partnership with Stornoway Primary School. This is enhancing the school community, such as enabling 155 children at the school to take part in poetry and singing competitions at the recent Mod. Partner representation on the Outer Hebrides Adult Learning Partnership is increasing. Their plan benefits from clear aims, an outline of learner pathways and their approaches to evaluation and reporting. It links well to national and local outcomes. Although at an early stage, increasing ownership of joint outcomes and associated timelines aid accountability and support the governance of this aspect of community learning.

The learning and community development programmes delivered by CLD partners continue to be of a high standard and responsive to local needs. Partners are aware that there remains a need to develop a more systematic approach to joint self-evaluation. Whilst individual projects and areas of work are often evaluated well, overall CLD is under-reported and there is very limited capacity to demonstrate the collective added value of CLD. Reporting structures for CLD are clearer than on previous visits. This can now be built on to strengthen the communication, understanding and mutual challenge between local, area and strategic partnership structures. There is now a need to ensure clear, joint targets with robust performance measures are developed. This will support the ambition of CLD partners to better tell story of CLD to both strategic leaders and communities.

4. What happens next?

Understandably, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and its CLD partners have been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. They are implementing plans to support recovery. However, the local authority and its CLD partners need more time to take forward the areas for improvement. We will continue our engagement with this local authority and we will ask for a report on progress within six months of the visit. We will work together with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to agree what will happen next, which includes whether another visit is required.

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