



Visit to community learning and development in Argyll and Bute Council

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1. Background

This report is based on a visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education to Argyll and Bute Council, to look at community learning and development (CLD) provision. This follows a previous inspection where it was agreed that there would be further engagement. 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

Argyll and Bute Council is the second largest local authority area in Scotland. It is estimated that 20% of children in Argyll and Bute are living in poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on families and communities, increasing further the risk of poverty. In response to the pandemic the local authority set up 'build back better' as a sub group of their overall recovery framework. CLD partners are well represented, helping to ensure the contribution of communities in responding to the pandemic. At the onset of the pandemic, aspects of the CLD offer moved to online delivery. The workforce development needs identified by CLD partners and practitioners were addressed to equip staff with the knowledge and skills to deliver a digital offer. A few CLD staff were seconded or redeployed to other local authority services, such as the Caring for People team, who jointly delivered much needed services during this period. However, this reduced CLD capacity. Approximately 1,000 volunteers from across Argyll and Bute also registered to support the Caring for People COVID-19 community response. Partners in each of the four geographical areas worked collaboratively to respond to local need, providing vital services such as shopping and picking up and delivering prescriptions for those who contracted COVID-19 or who were shielding. High numbers of community groups were communicated with via email. This, alongside a regular community development bulletin, provides a useful resource with links to updated guidance on COVID-19, training and funding sources. There is now scope for the bulletin to extend to community learning and wider work of CLD.

A significant change for CLD includes a service transfer of community learning to LiveArgyll from 30 June 2021. A service level agreement between the local authority and LiveArgyll sets out management and delivery responsibilities. At the point of transfer, staff were restructured into two themes; adult and youth. Although at an early stage, there is a strong indication that this is having a positive impact on how these services are now being delivered. Responsibility for the delivery of community development remains within the local authority.

The new CLD plan 2021-24 takes account of the impact of the pandemic and builds on strong partnership working. Its five key themes reflect the CLD needs across Argyll and Bute. The Third Sector Interface (TSI) is leading the further development of the volunteer framework, which will include succession planning for volunteering.

3. Progress with recommendations from previous report

The leadership and governance of CLD is improving. There is increased confidence in the leadership across staff at all levels, both within the local authority, where legislative responsibility remains for CLD, and within LiveArgyll. CLD senior leaders meet regularly to ensure accountability. At a local level CLD practitioners are working better together. Communication between senior leaders and staff has improved. Community learning staff now feel valued, listened to and trusted. Staff feel empowered to lead and be more creative in the development and delivery of CLD.

A newly formed CLD strategic partnership is responsible for the development of the CLD 2021-24 plan, its monitoring and reporting to the local authority. Partners representation has improved. The vision, values and aims in the CLD plan are better understood across the partnership. The plan is well informed by feedback from a consultation process. Where there are gaps, there are plans to revisit during year one. Key milestones and a timeline for other areas of priority are outlined. However, it is important that these areas are monitored by the local authority and CLD strategic partnership regularly to ensure they are progressed timeously. The partnership's sub group approach offers a more effective structure for partners to lead in addressing key areas for improvement. For example, a focus on workforce development is a positive step in the development of a more coordinated and systematic approach to the training and support offer. Similarly, the improvements required to strengthen the collective adult learning offer across the partnership now need progressed at pace.

CLD partners engage well in the stronger processes in place for self-evaluation, which is leading to improved practice at all levels. This provides increasing confidence in the leadership of CLD. The CLD competencies are at the core of CLD practice and provide a shared language in partnership working. LiveArgyll have set ambitious targets to have all community learning staff become members of the CLD Standards Council for Scotland. CLD partners are now more outward looking, with leaders and staff engaging with and learning from other local authorities. They are better connected to other CLD networks such as the Northern Alliance.

Although at an early stage, reporting on progress to the local authority will be informed by CLD partners contributions against the five themes and the key performance indicators within their CLD plan. These themes inform the targeting of partners' resources and CLD service and team plans. This is now clearer and more measurable than in the past. The use of management information systems is improving. As a result, staff better recognise their contribution to shared outcomes.

Partnership working remains strong. Partners continue to work together to maximise their combined resources including Argyll College and work with Hermitage Academy. Jean's Bothy continues to offer learners, including those with mental health issues, a safe space to learn and gain accreditation. Young people's engagement in the Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) is ensuring that their voice is heard by local authority officers and their partners. The YAP are now starting to influence decision-making and have produced a 'young person friendly' version of the Children's Services Plan. CLD are collaborating more effectively than in the past. However, the CLD partnership has scope to develop a better planned approach to this way of working.

4. What happens next?

Understandably, the local authority has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These have had a significant impact on the work of the local authority. The local authority and its CLD partners are implementing plans to support recovery. They are addressing the recommendations from the original inspection successfully. As a result, we will make no more visits to the Helensburgh and Lomond area in connection with the original inspection.

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