

Community Learning and Development Progress Visit Report

West Lothian Council

5 March 2024

1. Context

HM Inspectors visited West Lothian Council to undertake a community learning and development (CLD) progress visit during January 2024. During the visit, we talked to learners and community representatives, CLD leaders, managers, staff, and volunteers, and other key stakeholders. HM Inspectors evaluated the effectiveness of local authority CLD partnerships' approach to self-evaluation and planning for improvement, and considered progress made against identified priorities in their CLD plans.

2. Findings from the progress visit

How effective is the leadership of the local authority and their CLD partners in improving outcomes?

Areas of positive progress

The leadership of CLD in West Lothian is effective with a clear drive and direction for improvement. Overall, the governance of CLD is strong with further improvements underway. CLD in West Lothian is well embedded and connected across a range of key strategies and plans. Partners on the CLD Steering Board lead on the development of the CLD Plan. They meet regularly, working effectively together to provide oversight, review priorities and report progress to the Community Planning Partnership (CPP). Partnership working is well-established and a strength. Relationships across the partnership are based upon mutual respect and trust. Chief Officers and elected members value highly the contribution of CLD to achieving the strategic aims and priorities of the council and the CPP. The CLD Plan is clearly aligned to council and CPP priorities with a clear ambition to address inequalities. Partners have a clear understanding of how their work contributes to the CLD Plan and how it connects to other key policies, such as the Tackling Poverty Strategy. Partners are working effectively together to develop a Children and Youth Participation Network. This has potential to ensure that the views of children and young people better inform and influence policy and service development.

Effective partnership working is supporting the development of learning opportunities, community engagement and improved community safety. This is addressing local needs and improving outcomes for learners and communities. Partnership working with schools is now well embedded. This is contributing to improvements in overall attainment, achievement and securing positive post-school destinations. Planning for improvement is evidenced based and aligned to local priorities. A range of systems and processes are used well to target resources and to support improvement. The CLD service and partners routinely evaluate the quality of provision through gathering feedback from learners and staff self-reflection. CLD practitioners and volunteers benefit from a wide range of workforce development opportunities and are connected well, both regionally and nationally. This is increasing their skillset and confidence to respond and adapt to change. As a result, they are better able to co-design programmes with learners to meet local needs. Local third sector organisations, such as the Crofthead Farm Community Centre management committee, collaborate well with local partners and schools to sustain and develop further local amenities. Local community development trusts are supported well to build capacity. For example, the West Calder and Harburn Community Development Trust recently secured £5.5 million to improve community assets to increase sustainability and investment in the local economy.

Areas for development

Members of the community and young people do not currently participate sufficiently in the governance of CLD. The CLD Steering Board should consider how to routinely and regularly ensure continued engagement with communities as part of CLD planning. CLD partners do not currently report on the joint impact of their work. Fully capturing and reporting on this would help to strengthen further the understanding of their collective impact. Partners do not currently have a strategic overview of volunteering. They recognise that further work is needed to strengthen this strategically and operationally.

How well does the performance of the local authority and their CLD partners demonstrate positive impact?

Areas of positive progress

The CLD service, partners and the wider CPP have access to a range of data. Data is gathered systematically across a range of programmes and used well, alongside demographic data, to inform plans and priorities. Data and intelligence are discussed routinely and interrogated at various levels, helping to ensure that progress is monitored effectively. CLD partners use case studies well to demonstrate the impact of their work. These are reported regularly to a variety of boards and committees alongside qualitative and quantitative data. A wide range of partners, including the third sector, are effectively using a referral and tracking system to signpost learners to appropriate and timely interventions. This is reducing duplication and helping partners to target collective resources effectively to support those most in need. The CLD service, and partners with service level agreements, are using well the national CLD key performance indicators (KPIs), developed by CLD Managers Scotland, to report progress locally and nationally. Data gathered over the last two years shows increasing trends across the majority of these KPIs. Local employability partners make effective use of a risk matrix to systematically gather data to identify existing and emerging needs. They have used this data well to increase the number of assisted wages subsidies available for young people with additional support needs and provide bespoke interventions to those facing additional barriers.

The council and partners have a clear focus on tackling inequalities. They are proactive at seeking to remove barriers and to support the most disadvantaged communities and individuals. Programmes are targeted well and supporting young people, adults, and communities experiencing challenges to learn, succeed and to progress. For example, young people benefit from actively participating in a wide range of targeted and universal youth work programmes. Young people are less anxious and applying social skills in different contexts more confidently. The Digital Inclusion Partnership is supporting those most digitally excluded. This is enabling learners to access devices and to develop skills for life. A social prescribing approach is being used effectively to increase the number of older adults benefitting from a wide range of Ageing Well activity to improve their health and wellbeing. Group members are sharing skills, increasing their physical fitness, which is helping to reduce the impact of loneliness. Local third sector organisations are increasing access to services and reducing barriers. For example, Dedridge Regeneration Group are actively securing environmental improvements, such as ensuring that the community centre and garden are inclusive and accessible. Partners are engaging effectively with local people to make communities safer. For example, developing learning activities for young people in Fauldhouse is helping to reduce instances of fire raising and theft. Similarly in Blackburn, partnership working is supporting community safety, particularly around bonfire night and firework safety. This approach is also providing volunteer opportunities for young people. Young volunteers also contributed their views towards a fireworks Bill in the Scottish Parliament.

Adult learners have clear goals supported well by individual learning plans. They are gaining confidence and accreditation from completing a widening range of courses, and developing a range of skills including literacy, numeracy, and information technology. Adults are also building resilience and their learning is helping them to overcome mental health challenges. A few adults are progressing to volunteering and to employment. Learner success is celebrated well with opportunities for adults to share their learner journey in case studies and at events. Adult and family learning is enabling parents to support their children's learning. Young people enjoy participating in projects, including health and wellbeing, and youth engagement, suited to their needs and interests. The majority of young people know where they are progressing in their learning and are gaining valuable life skills. They are more confident and experiencing improvement in their mental health, increasing aspirations for their future. A few young people are contributing positively to their communities through volunteering or securing employment. CLD partners and schools work collaboratively to develop approaches to improve participants' health and wellbeing, tracking children's and young people's progress against the wellbeing indicators. Partners have successfully secured additional funding through Sports Scotland, or use Pupil Equity Funding, to encourage young people to be more active more often. For example, the introduction of masterclasses in kickboxing, mindset and sport has helped to reduce barriers to participation, has increased attendance and reduced exclusions in schools.

Areas for development

CLD partners do not yet have a shared data set which includes clear impact targets. The council and partners should set collectively appropriately ambitious joint targets to meet the needs of young people, adults and communities. There is a need to extend further the use of achievement awards across all partners to more formally recognise all learners' achievements.

3. What happens next?

The local authority and their CLD partners are making sufficient progress with their CLD plan and have the capacity to continue to improve. As a result, HM inspectors will take no further action in relation to this progress visit.

Simon Ross
HM Inspector
5 March 2024