

**Adult Learning and COVID-19 - A survey conducted by Learning Link Scotland.**

The survey was conducted over the initial two-week period of lockdown. We asked participants what sort of provision they were able to offer, what their challenges are in the current crisis and what sorts of support they require to sustain their adult learning provision.

**Provision**

The table below shows what sorts of provision their organisation was able to provide.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| In what ways have you been able to continue or develop service provision? | |
| By phone call | 23% |
| By virtual meetings, for example, using Skype or Zoom | 27% |
| By using group apps such as WhatsApp | 8% |
| By using social media such as Facebook | 8% |
| By converting to distance learning | 12% |

We found that adult learning opportunities are providing a real life line for a lot of people, especially the most vulnerable and isolated learners.

In the survey we asked about the challenges as well as support needs.

**Challenges**

When asked what challenges has their organisation faced in continuing to operate, the responses fell into the following three main themes. These have been summarised below.

**1. Challenges around funding, staffing levels or digital resources.**

* Many learners have no access to digital technology or use of the internet and so provider have been trying to provide paper-based activity and learning packs for delivery to learners. However, access to learning packs, photocopying or printing is limited because of home working.
* Without one to one first point of contact it has been difficult to take on new learners.
* Most organisations have had challenges in gaining access to digital devices or mobile phones for learners and staff and learners do not always have the skills to use digital devices for learning, even if they have them.
* Organisations have had issues in operating because of poor connectivity, internet systems set up for home use cannot always support home working, especially if there is more than one home worker or children are using the Wi-Fi to study.
* It is more time consuming to delivery learning online/remotely as opposed to delivering face to face so that puts demands on staff time.
* GDPR is an issue and staff want to be sure what the position is around using personal IT equipment, email addresses and mobile numbers.
* Some organisations have confusing rules about the use of social media.
* It's been even more important to make sure information is accessible and inclusive.
* Some community based organisations have worked with partners at colleges to adapt courseware and enrolment process so that existing and new learners can access/ complete coursework from home with tutor support.

**2. Challenges for working with learners remotely**

* The biggest challenge has been finding ways to maintain contact with the most vulnerable learners. They tend to be the least likely to have internet access and, where they do have access, they sometimes don't have the skills or the confidence to make full use of the available resource. In some cases, organisations can only make contact by phone but these learners often have no credit on their phones so, whilst staff call learners regularly, they have no way of contacting staff if they need to talk to someone.
* Learners often do not have the digital skills required to learn remotely.
* Learners who need to look after children at home are finding it difficult to think about their own learning. In addition, learners who have employment, financial and health worries find it difficult to focus on their own learning,
* A significant number of learners do not have internet at home and as groups are off and libraries closed, they are extremely socially isolated.
* Right now everything is super overwhelming for people.
* Using phones is not always the right option, vulnerable and isolated students often cannot afford to use their minutes on their Smartphones to do any online activities or send and receive information to work on.
* Literacy and ESOL challenges can make it challenging to work remotely.
* Learners do not have the confidence or skills to learn independently in new ways.
* Losing contact with vulnerable homeless learners is devastating, they may not have anyone else to turn to but we can’t make contact with them.
* Not all learners have access to email in order to be sent work and also don't have printers at home so are trying to access worksheets using phones.
* It is challenging to keep learners motivated without having the regular face to face contact and the encouragement from other group members, especially for those who have very basic learning needs or mental health difficulties.

**3. Issues for staff**

* Organisations need to consider how to meet outcomes for our funders and have had to communicate this situation to funders.
* Organisations are not able to offer a full range of classes as learners as well as some staff and volunteer tutors are not confident with online delivery.
* Converting to non-face to face delivery has been huge. Even with all the technical help available there was no time to prepare learners for it. Organisations are still working on it.
* Lack of technology for staff is an issue, as well as for learners.
* Tutors and staff have needed additional support to be able to transfer to online learning.
* Staff do not have the confidence to facilitate virtual class learning and need longer to learn to do so.
* Organisations have had to explore and put into practice new ways to work together remotely e.g. through Zoom and Microsoft Teams.
* Organisations have found that because lot of what they do is around pastoral support, this can be done over the phone, however, face to face contact is the preferred method of working with learners.
* It has been a steep learning curve many teams to keep up with the pace of change.
* It is challenging for staff to identify learners’ needs and develop appropriate responses.
* Partnership working is challenging as meetings are often cancelled and organisations have to use different methods of communication.
* Keeping up with the ever-changing world of the DWP and getting information out as widely as possible to frontline staff and learners is a challenge.
* Staff are not always allowed to use social media with learners.

**Support**

When asked what support organisations need to continue to operate during this period, the responses fell into the following main themes. These have been summarised below.

**1. None or don’t know**

* A very small number did not need further support than they were receiving and one organisation was unable to identify they support they needed as the situation changes so rapidly.

**2 Funding**

* Many organisations identified that they need income in order to continue paying the staff while they were home working.
* Organisations worry that grant funds will dry up as panels won't be able to meet.
* CLD services have been significantly reduced over a long period of time. Capacity has been reduced and the service is not in a good place to respond to the consequences of this crisis e.g. mental health and wellbeing, unemployment, youth issues etc. Giving CLD increased statutory status could help clarify CLDs role, ensure appropriate support and funding is deployed.
* Extended and flexible funding that will enable organisations to have more flexibility with how to use funding to best meet service users’ needs and give staff the security they need during this period.
* Organisation need funding for digital technology.
* Give students some money or directly somehow some minutes for their phones so that they can continue learning as the others can.

**3. Staffing**

* Organisations identified health and well-being support for staff as really important as people feel isolated.
* Many volunteer tutors are not familiar with digital technology.
* Organisations have identified that keeping the status quo of our staffing levels is a necessity.
* Organisation need flexibility in working methods and working hours. For example, some tutors are contacting learners after teatime because the learners now have children at home.
* Staff are struggling with having their kids and/or spouses at home.

**4. Resources**

* Staff do not have the resources they need, for example, staff who live rurally have found their internet speeds don't support video calling or downloading of large files which means no matter what organisations do, productivity will decrease.
* The following resources would be great:
  + IT and media support to maintain contact with other organisations.
  + Free Wi-Fi provided everywhere.
  + Devices for staff and learners.
  + Support with upgrading IT systems.
  + Information on and assistance in getting materials, resources, access to learning platforms.
  + Innovative resources and ways of connecting with people virtually.
* Paper resources. Prisoner education is a real issue, organisations need paper-based learning resources that can be photocopied and distributed to seriously disengaged adults in their accommodation halls in prison. prisons have no internet and many prisoners will have to socially isolate.
* Support in targeting those furthest from the job market/ socially isolated to offer access to the programme and therefore the opportunity of using technology to participate in economic, social and civic life.

**5. Skills**

* Staff need to be able to use social media more easily. 6. Finding online resources challenging e.g. using Zoom. Also there are issues with all of our learners being able to access the internet, so posting out hard copies of resources is a challenge.
* Peer to peer support opportunities to exchange information and practice.
* Those organisations who regularly run digital provision need support to adapt digital courses to allow new learners to access free and accredited courses from home. Those digital providers have already been inundated with enquiries from people keen to access the courses since the enhanced measures for working from home were advised.

**6. Information sharing**

* Organisations need help with the promotion of online classes
* Many of the learners that we work with will have experienced a shift in priorities over the past few weeks and therefore learning may not be top of their agendas. It is important to maintain as much contact as possible and to be able to signpost to other agencies if necessary.
* Many would like to know what other providers are doing and to be able to share what they're doing. It's nice to know that we're all in the 'same boat' so to speak while we adapt to this new way of working and living and it would be helpful to hear about solutions that CLD staff have found in other areas.
* Some would find a meeting of adult learning providers across Scotland helpful. It can be difficult to keep in contact with colleagues in other local authority areas other than 1:1 conversation by phone or email. Perhaps we could set up regular Zoom meetings.
* Organisations need clear information and ways to connect with other organisations and support agencies to enable us to make the most of our connections.