

Rural Development Sub-Committee

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Inquiry into poverty and deprivation in rural Wales: evidence session on the Economically Active

Based on findings and experiences of GWLAD project (2005-2007)

Submitted by Dr. Brec'hed Piette,
GWLAD project director
School of Lifelong Learning, Bangor University

The GWLAD (Gaining Work, Learning and Advice) project was funded through ESF EQUAL 2 and was implemented by a Development Partnership working within the EQUAL thematic field of adaptability and lifelong learning.

Partnership

The partnership consisted of educational, statutory, community and voluntary agencies. The lead partner was the School of Lifelong Learning, Bangor University, and other partners included CAIS (drug and alcohol services), MEDRWN MON (voluntary sector umbrella group), BEN (Black Environmental Network), Chwarae Teg, Stonewall, the Open University in Wales and the Welsh Language Board.

Aims

The project's aims focused on providing learning and experiences relevant to gaining employment (or leading on to further learning), to socially excluded groups in rural north Wales, more specifically:

- by developing innovative approaches to lifelong learning;
- by empowering socially excluded groups;
- by focusing on linking learning and employment;
- by ensuring the principles of equal opportunities were upheld

Learning Activities

We carried out a wide range of activities that included developing and delivering a range of formal and informal learning opportunities. Many of our beneficiaries were economically inactive, and included those who lived in outlying rural communities. Some examples of new learning opportunities that we developed were

- learning programmes delivered in rural areas of Gwynedd and Anglesey to parents of young children,
- confidence building programmes for substance misuse users in Anglesey,
- informal learning activities bringing together members of ethnic minority groups from across North Wales (BEN activity),
- building a learning communities network in Capel Curig that developed learning activities for older men (Grwp Cymry'r Ucheldir), women (a business course), and young people (digital film and editing),
- skills training workshops and information and guidance activities for economic migrants and their families.

Barriers to Learning in Rural Areas

We also carried out research where we looked at the barriers to learning in rural areas. We found that learners in rural areas face many of the same barriers as those in more populated areas; these include financial barriers such as course fees and the cost of course materials, psychological barriers such as lack of self-confidence and overcoming previous negative educational experiences, and more practical barriers in understanding the structures and systems of educational providers. However there are additional barriers for those learning in rural areas. The two main ones we identified were transport and childcare. A large proportion of our learners and those we talked to did not have access to their own transport making it impossible for most of them to attend courses outside their immediate town or village. This was a particular issue for families where one adult used the family car for work, leaving the other adult with no access to private transport during the day, and also for recently arrived migrants who rarely had their own transport. Childcare was also a problem for learners who were parents of young children. Where childcare was available it was often in English only and therefore unacceptable to many Welsh speaking parents. Most people in rural areas rely on informal childcare using their own trusted networks of family and friends; unfortunately it was not possible via the project for the cost of this to be reimbursed as the childcare was not being provided by registered childminders.

It also became clear during the course of the research period of the project that many people found difficulties in accessing information.

This was a case for a broad range of services and facilities - from bus timetables to available courses and welfare rights. There is a need for information hubs in each community in accessible, non-threatening locations.

Duplication of learning provision appears to be fairly common with different institutions providing the same sort of courses in the same locations. People complained that providers kept putting on the same course, often at a basic level only, and progression to a higher level was only possible by attending the main campus of a college rather than being available in the local community.

Engaging with New Learners in Rural Areas

Most of the GWLAd work packages sought to engage with new learners. Some attempts were more successful than others. Those that were the most successful generally had the following characteristics

Local people already known in the community were most effective at bringing together an initial group of learners.

Working with already existing groups; these often became larger and attracted more people to them once activities were under way.

Empowering groups to make their own decisions about areas of learning but with advice as to the kinds of provision that could be made available

Skilled trainers and tutors - not always easy to find in rural areas.

Flexibility in delivering learning. Some new learners have difficulty in attending learning sessions and lack time management. These kinds of factors cause particular difficulties in rural areas when the additional costs of time and travel for both tutors and learners have to be factored in.

Approaches to Learning

In some of the work packages we investigated and trialled out different approaches to learning e.g. distance learning, blended learning, the use of virtual learning environments, and so on. These approaches are often put forward as being particularly appropriate for learners in rural areas because of the cost of providing face-to-face courses for small numbers. Our conclusions and recommendations in this area were

Distance learning approaches are some people's preferred way of learning, both for practical and more psychological reasons. However, many people value some face-to-face contact with tutors and other students even when they opt for a 'distance' or 'blended' learning course.

Learning technologies such as podcasts and Virtual Learning Environments may be seen most often as a useful addition to other forms of delivering learning rather than as necessarily replacing face-to-face learning

We would therefore suggest that while distance learning approaches are certainly valuable they should not be seen as the main way of delivering training and learning in rural areas.

Project Findings

The main findings of the project that are relevant to the concerns of this committee are

Lack of transport and limited availability of childcare are still significant barriers to engaging in learning in rural areas.

In order to engage rural populations in learning, the learning needs to be taken to potential learners in their own communities. Without additional funding, or project funding such as that afforded by EQUAL, these costs cannot be met by educational providers via their normal funding.

Lack of information about learning opportunities, and the knowledge of where to look for information act as barriers for many people. Access to the internet is increasingly relied upon to disseminate information but access is often variable and is dependant on the IT skill levels of the individual

Grass-roots initiatives take a long time to develop, but are more effective and sustainable in the long term. It takes time for people to build up confidence to participate fully, be it in learning, community regeneration, employment or volunteering. Much of the most effective work that is done to increase the employability of individuals or to develop their potential to learn is dependent on short term funding. This source of funding inevitably cause gaps in provision, loss of expertise, the raising of false expectations and lack of sustainability.

An emphasis on learning of skills for employment while important can lead to the devaluing of other outcomes of learning. In rural areas high quality employment opportunities are frequently limited. Social cohesion, self-employment, volunteering, and the generation of micro-businesses and social enterprises should be seen as equally desirable goals of learning activities in rural areas.

For further information about the GWLAD project please see our web-site www.gwlad.org.