

Informal Adult Education in Wiltshire

What is Informal Adult Education?

1. Informal adult education (also known as informal adult and/or community learning) refers to courses which are offered as leisure activities and not those which are focused on developing basic skills or qualifications relating to employment.

Why should we be concerned about Informal Adult Education?

2. Informal Adult Education contributes to economic and social well-being in communities. It can help with a variety of objectives including:
 - adult social care
 - health and well-being
 - crime reduction and community safety
 - democratic engagement
 - economic development.

What does Wiltshire Council do?

3. Currently, Wiltshire Council offers informal adult education through public libraries, its Family Learning Team and at Urchfont Manor College (which is due to close in September 2012).

Who else is involved?

4. Other providers who offer informal adult education include Wiltshire College, the Workers' Educational Association and Learning Curve, in addition to which there is a huge range of activities organised by groups and individuals taking place in communities across the county.

Does the council have to provide it?

5. Informal Adult Education is a non-statutory service for a local authority meaning that the council is able to decide the extent of its involvement in the planning and provision of the service.
6. Local Authorities may take a range of roles in relation to informal adult education, including direct delivery, strategic commissioning, shaping the new all age careers service, coordinating with the Work Programme and as key players in Local Enterprise Partnerships.

What does the Government do?

7. The government, through the Department for Business, Industry and Skills (BIS), provides financial support for informal adult education (which it mostly refers to as "community learning"). The government's support for community learning in Wiltshire is much lower than that provided to other comparable local authorities. Government funding to Wiltshire Council currently supports the provision of Family Learning which is focused upon improving the basic skill level of parents to enable them to support their children's learning.

8. BIS is reviewing its strategy to support community learning and is intending to use the public funding subsidy to support access, and progression in its widest sense, especially for people who are disadvantaged.
9. In the 2012/13 BIS will pilot different locally-based 'community learning trust' models to channel funding and lead the planning of local provision in cities, towns and rural settings. If this proves to be effective the model will be rolled out across England to begin full operation from summer 2013. The new trusts are intended to take account of the views of local government, local communities and local business leaders to ensure the purpose and objectives for the budget are implemented in ways that meet local need.

Why are we being asked about Informal Adult Learning now?

10. At its meeting in January, the council's cabinet decided to close Urchfont Manor by the end of September 2012 while recognising that future Adult Education Service provision, including local flexible delivery in line with the BIS proposals, will be determined by cabinet after consultation with service users, area boards, local communities and partners;
11. Wiltshire Council is taking this opportunity to undertake a review of its provision and support of informal adult education across the county.
12. This report seeks the views of the Area Boards on the council's future policy towards informal adult education.
13. The council is establishing a community campus in each community area. These premises could be used to offer accommodation for a variety of activities, including informal adult education.

Options for Consideration

14. Option 1 – Wiltshire Council to take no action in relation to informal adult education

The council does not have to get involved with Informal Adult Education. There are a number of adult education providers which are able to offer activities as and when they wish. Some receive government funding to support their provision while others rely upon payments by participants or support from other sources. The council has no current budget of its own to support informal adult education.

For:

Activities organised by Wiltshire College and other providers will continue
No financial risk to the council

Against:

Unable to seek government funding
Council and communities have little influence over what is offered
No continuation of activities run at Urchfont Manor College

15. Option 2 – Wiltshire Council to be a direct provider of informal adult education.

The council could continue to offer adult education direct to the public on a similar basis as the courses offered at Urchfont Manor College. The council would decide what would be offered, make all the arrangements and promote the courses. Unless a subsidy was available, the full cost would be charged to participants. Activities could be held on a residential basis, utilising suitable residential accommodation in the county, or on a non-residential basis.

For:

The council could use information from communities to decide what to offer
Some courses from Urchfont Manor College could continue in different venues
The council could ensure the quality of activities being provided.

Against:

Financial risk for the council
Depends upon the ability of participants to pay
The council will need to develop a system to organise courses, take bookings, etc.
May be seen as being in competition with other providers

16. Option 3 – Wiltshire Council to facilitate the provision of informal adult education at a local level.

Rather than be the organiser and provider of activities, the council could work through its network of area boards and community area networks to identify the demand for specific informal adult education provision in each community area. The demands will include provision for leisure learning and that needed to reach disadvantaged members of the community. The council could establish partnerships with adult education providers to share this information and meet this demand. Providers would be able to offer activities with reduced risk and in venues to suit the participants.

This approach would require the active involvement of members of the community area networks if it is to be delivered in a affordable way.

For:

Uses expertise and experience of other providers
Little financial risk to the council
Reduced financial risk to providers
Builds upon network of community areas
Providers and council able to bid for BIS funding

Against:

Level of activity may vary from one area to another
Will have to establish system to identify demand
Different providers use different systems

17. Option 4 – Wiltshire Council to coordinate and promote informal adult learning opportunities offered across the county.

Currently, every provider publishes their own prospectus and promotes their activities independently. With the support of education providers, it may be possible to collate this information to provide a single compendium of informal adult education in Wiltshire, both residential and non-residential. Such a publication (available on-line) could not only serve to improve access to informal adult education but may also encourage more education providers who would be able to promote their activities in a cost-effective way.

For:

Single source of information for participants

Joint promotion may increase take-up

Providers able to reach more people

Low cost to providers

Against:

Initial development costs

Difficulty in linking to providers' systems

Willingness of providers to contribute

What do you think?

18. The area board is invited to comment upon the options presented above.

19. The area board is invited to indicate which of the options it would wish to recommend to cabinet.

Next Steps

20. A questionnaire survey is available for completion by service users and members of the public.

21. The cabinet will receive a report in September 2012 on the outcome of the survey, together with the responses from area boards which will inform its decision on the council's strategy for informal adult education.

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