Help learners have their say on informal adult learning

Informal adult learning should be accessible to everyone. To make sure this happens, we need input from learners themselves – to find out what motivates them, what holds them back and what kind of changes they want to see.

This discussion guide is designed to help you get feedback from learners, which we can use to improve opportunities for informal adult learning.

Setting the context

What is informal adult learning?

Put simply, it is any kind of learning that people do in their spare time for fun, as a hobby, or to feel fulfilled or stimulated. It covers everything from yoga classes to book clubs to building a family tree.

Adult learning: why is it important?

- Adult learning makes an enormous contribution to our health and well-being as a society.

- It develops people's skills, stimulates them, and can make families and communities stronger.

New ways of learning

- More and more people are choosing what, where, when and how they want to learn.

- Technologies like the internet and digital TV are offering a wide variety of learning opportunities.

- Local authorities, reading groups, voluntary and community groups, colleges, libraries, membership organisations, museums, archives, sporting organisations and self-organised groups like the University of the Third Age enable people to pursue a wide variety of interests.

Government support for informal learning

- The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) has committed £210 million a year for informal adult learning over the next three years. Many other Government departments also fund informal learning.

- The Government has now launched a national consultation which will provide the basis for a major policy paper on the future shape of informal adult learning (IAL).

About this consultation

The consultation wants to get people's views on:

- how, where and what they want to learn

- how to make the best use of public funding for IAL

- how Government departments, voluntary sector and private sector organisations can make IAL more joined up at a neighbourhood level

- how to make sure that access to IAL is fair

- how to engage people who think that learning isn't for them

- how digital TV and internet technology can support IAL.

Why your voice counts

- This consultation is the beginning of a discussion that will lead to a new vision for informal adult learning for the 21st century.

- We need to make sure that learners' voices are heard.

- Please ensure your responses reach us by **12 June 2008** – You'll find instructions on how to respond at the end of this document.

About you and your participants/learners

Please provide:

The name of your organisation

_____

The area your organisation works in

_____

A brief description of the people who participated in this discussion:

How many people?

_____

What kind of learning or development they have been undertaking

_____

A brief description of where and how you ran the discussion

_____

_____

Discussion guide

Use these questions to prompt a full and frank discussion with learners. Try to get as much information as possible – there is plenty of space for you to add lots of detail as well as your own notes.

Each section contains questions, context and points to discuss. The questions are taken from the original consultation document, and help to provide some context for the discussion points we'd like you to talk through with your little group.

1. The basics

Questions

1. What kinds of informal adult learning are you involved in?

Context

Learners may not think of some activities as learning – to them, it may be a personal interest or just a way of passing the time. Asking them how they spend their spare time may be a good way of uncovering information about their learning.

We don't have to be in a classroom to learn. Many people are learning at home (using the internet and television), in galleries, museums, pubs and cafes (taking part in self-organised learning groups, talks, classes or quizzes) or outdoors (observing nature, improving their sporting skills or learning about exercise).

Points to discuss:

*   What do you do in your spare time? What are your interests?

*   Where do you spend your spare time? Why?

*   What do you do when socialising with friends?

*   What do you use the internet for? What kind of television programmes do you watch?

*   Do you have any interests that take you outdoors?

*   Do you do any learning in your spare time? Where?

Please record discussion notes here

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2. Motivation

Questions

2. What made you start your learning?

3. What are the benefits of learning for you?

Context

What motivates people to learn can vary greatly. Some people like to stimulate a part of their brain that isn't used in their day-to-day lives – by learning a language or doing handicrafts. Others use it as an opportunity to study something they've always had a passion for, or to learn now what they couldn't when growing up. Some appreciate the social interaction that learning offers.

Points to discuss:

• What got you interested in learning about X in the first place?

• Have you always had an interest in X?

• Do you have any particular goals when it comes to learning?

• What do you get out of it? Interaction with other learners? Motivation from a tutor? The satisfaction of learning a new skill? Being able to express yourself?

• How does learning contribute to your life in general?

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3. Access and barriers

Questions

4. How easy was it to begin your learning?

5. How easy was it to get the information you needed to start?

6. Has anything stopped you from learning?

Context

Being aware of the learning opportunities on offer is a crucial first step. But for many people, there are practical barriers to taking advantage of them – such as lack of money, lack of mobility, or an inappropriate or inadequate learning offer (for example, no nearby independent living skills training for people with learning difficulties). There may be emotional barriers too, for example a lack of confidence due to negative previous experiences.

It's no good if people start learning only to find that barriers later stop them. We want to know what prevents people from taking up or continuing their learning, and identify how to help them overcome these issues.

Points to discuss:

• How easy was it to begin your learning?

• Did you have to look for learning opportunities? If so, what kind of research did you do (eg learndirect or hotcourses.com)? Do you find personal recommendations more or less useful than other sources of information?

• Were there any considerations to take into account (eg money, timing, distance, accessibility)?

• Has anything stopped you from embarking on learning? If so, what?

• What issues did you face during your learning? Did any factors make it difficult for you to continue?

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4. The future

Questions

7. Government cannot spend more than it does now on informal adult learning. So what's the best way to use the public funding that's available?

- by funding college and local authority classes as now?

- by funding a local informal adult learning 'infrastructure', for example by providing better information about public sector, private sector, voluntary sector and self-organised learning opportunities, by offering cheaper rental for the use of public spaces for learning, by appointing neighbourhood 'learning champions' to encourage people into learning?

- by giving people the chance to purchase their own informal adult learning through vouchers or accounts?

- by doing something else? (please explain)

Context

There are many ways to encourage more people to take up informal adult learning, so it's important that we concentrate on the most useful and relevant ones. Talk through each option and discuss how it may work in practice. If learners have any other ideas, please ask for as much detail as possible.

Points to discuss:

- Is funding informal adult learning the Government's responsibility? Solely? Partly? Not at all? If not, who should fund it?

- Would you like to know more about learning opportunities available? How would you prefer to be informed?

- Would you like to have local people, 'learning champions', who could offer advice and support on learning? What would you expect from them? How would you like to be put in touch with them?

- What would be a good name for them instead of learning champions?

- Where do you prefer to learn? Is it important for you to learn in a local or community venue?

- Would you like to have a voucher to help you buy your own learning? If so, what kind of learning would you choose to spend it on?

Please record discussion notes here

Questions

8. What would be the advantages or disadvantages of aligning public funding for informal adult learning across different Government departments, for example Health; Communities and Local Government; Culture, Media and Sport etc?

9. What's the best way of planning and organising publicly-funded informal adult learning?

Context

Aligning funding across different departments could possibly help to link up initiatives and support.

Points to discuss:

- Get learners to think about the kinds of learning that are funded through different departments – such as healthy living, managing long term health conditions, developing community skills, improving sporting skills, learning dance, taking part in arts activity or finding out how to improve the environment

- What might be the benefits of developing more linkages between these funding streams at the local level? What about the problems?

- Do you think the word 'learning' covers all these activities well? Do you have any other suggestions?

- If it were up to you, how would you organise informal adult learning?

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Question

10. Government funding is limited. Should people contribute to the cost of their learning? How can we make sure that access to informal adult learning is fair?

Context

While the value of learning can't be measured, there are some definite costs involved. Ask what kinds of costs might be incurred, such as teacher's time, materials, equipment hire, venue hire etc. Also, consider the cost of learning compared with other leisure activities – ie if a cinema ticket costs £8, how much would people expect to pay for an evening on a course?

Remind learners that we can't make generalisations about reasons for learning. For example, an older person may take up learning to pursue an interest, maintain a skill, recover from a bereavement, keep healthy or simply to get out of the house and make new friends.

Points to discuss:

• Other than you, who benefits from your informal learning (eg your employer/your family/your friends/your community)?

• Why should you contribute to the cost of your learning? Why shouldn't you contribute?

• If you could afford to contribute, how much is fair?

• How important a factor is cost in deciding whether to continue learning?

• Government funding is limited; if it were up to you, what learning and which learners would you prioritise for public funding?

Please record discussion notes here

5. Technology

Questions

11. Do you use ordinary TV or digital TV to learn? If yes, please describe.

12. Do you use the internet to learn? If yes, please describe.

13. Is anything stopping you from making more use of TV or the internet?

14. Would you like to see TV and the internet integrated more into other kinds of learning?

Context

Technology may play a major role (in the case of online learners) or a minor role (for example as a supplement to core learning). Find out how comfortable learners are with using technology and how accessible it is for them.

Points to discuss:

*   If you use technology in your learning activities, what kind do you use? Internet? DVDs? CD-Roms? Webcam? Mobile phone?

*   How do you think you learn best (eg independently or guided, face-to-face or at home)?

*   What does technology offer learners?

*   What can't technology substitute (eg human contact)?

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6. The future of learning in general

Questions

15. Do you have any suggestions for improving the linkages between different kinds of learning (for example learning through TV, the internet, publicly-funded classes, self-organised learning, membership organisations, libraries, book clubs etc)?

16. How could people be encouraged to share their skills, knowledge and expertise with others? What would be the advantages and disadvantages? What support and training would they need?

17. Should self-organised learning groups like the University of the Third Age get access to public buildings and spaces at cost price? What about private providers?

18. How can we encourage people who think that learning "isn't for me" to get involved?

Context

There are many ways of learning and many different learning environments, from structured settings like classrooms and lecture halls to informal ones like the living room, the book club or the local swimming pool.

Draw on learners' personal experiences of these sources for ideas on how they could be joined up. Refer back to previous questions where they may have discussed possible solutions to barriers to access.

Points to discuss:

- What would encourage you to set up a book club or study group (eg cheap access to public spaces)?

- What would you get out of it?

- What do informal settings offer that formal ones don't?

- Would you volunteer in informal adult learning? What would you get out of it?

- What kind of support/training would you want?

- Ask learners to think of someone they know who says that they are not at all interested in learning. Can they think of any ways that they do in fact learn? Can they suggest ways to attract that person into some kind of learning within the broad definition of informal adult learning?

Please record discussion notes here

7. The future of learning for you

Questions

19. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about informal adult learning now or in the future?

Context

The best way to improve learning opportunities in the future is to learn from past experiences. Approach the subject positively and encourage learners to have an open mind. It's also useful to highlight what works well already – so we can maintain it and build on it.

Points to discuss:

*   What would make your learning even more fulfilling?

*   What would you improve?

*   What would you keep the same?

Please record discussion notes here

Thanks for your time

Your feedback will make a real difference!

Fold along line

How to respond

Make your voice heard! You can respond to this document either:

- by emailing the completed and saved PDF to ialconsultation@coi.gsi.gov.uk
  (This PDF has had user rights enabled which means you can type into the answer and discussion boxes using Adobe Acrobat Reader®, available free from the Adobe website. After completion you must save the PDF or your comments will be lost.)

- by post to our freepost address, using the label at the end of this document. Simply cut the label out, stick it on an envelope and enclose the completed questionnaire. If you have any further enquiries please contact us on the email address above.

Please make sure that we receive all responses by 12 June 2008.

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