

Good Practice

Good Practice: Education and Training in Sparsely Populated Areas

Evaluation and Good Practice Team: Quality and Standards



Learning+Skills Council

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Acknowledgements

This guide has been prepared by GHK Consulting for the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) Evaluation and Good Practice team. The authors would like to thank all the members of the GHK team who undertook case study fieldwork and contributed to the research into barriers to education and training in sparsely populated areas, which provided the background to the guide.

We would like to thank all the colleges and providers of education and training, and the other partners, for their participation in the research and production of this guide. Without their assistance this project would not have been possible.

Finally, we would like to thank the staff of the Quality and Standards Directorate of the LSC, and the members of the LSC Rural Issues Task Group, for their assistance and support.

Introduction

This good practice guide has been developed from the findings of research commissioned by the LSC into barriers to education and training in sparsely populated areas, and the ways in which providers have addressed and overcome these barriers. Case studies were developed following interviews with colleges and providers, learners, staff of local Learning and Skills Councils (local LSCs) and key partners in six local LSC areas. The guide provides examples of successful activity, and shows how providers have overcome the problems facing them.

In order to stimulate thinking on how barriers can be overcome in different local contexts, the guide includes a set of questions for colleges and providers and those involved in education and training to consider. The guide does not offer prescriptive models but rather examples of good practice which can be adapted for use in a particular local context.

Part 1 summarises the barriers for providers and learners in sparsely populated areas identified in the research. Parts 2 to 7 provide case study examples of good practice in overcoming different types of barrier. Each part suggests a list of questions for colleges and providers to consider before implementing similar action themselves.

Finally, the bibliography in the Annex provides references for publications mentioned in the guide, and adds some suggestions for further reading.

Part 1 Barriers to Learning

- 1 This section outlines the primary barriers to learning in sparsely populated areas. It draws on the findings of research carried out into the barriers facing both learners and colleges and providers. These are discussed below under the following broad headings:
- scale of operations;
 - isolation and breadth of provision;
 - transport;
 - costs of provision;
 - low income generation;
 - information communications technology (ICT) connectivity and use;
 - college and provider staff workloads;
 - lack of local facilities;
 - employer involvement;
 - low aspirations; and
 - basic skills.
- 2 Some of the issues identified, such as the low aspirations of individuals, are not unique to sparsely populated areas. Some of the barriers to learning in a sparsely populated rural area, however, may differ significantly from those found in an urban area.

Scale of Operations

- 3 Where the population within the immediate catchment area of a college or provider is small, numbers of learners and class sizes are also usually small. Schools with sixth forms and sixth form colleges face significant problems when the numbers of potential learners are small. The cost of providing courses for a small number of learners can be high. Some colleges in sparsely populated areas find it hard to cover course costs.

Isolation and Breadth of Provision

- 4 Many colleges and providers in sparsely populated areas are some distance away from other providers and are not in competition with them. In particular, colleges are often the sole provider for their area, and feel that it is their responsibility to offer the broadest possible curriculum. Many colleges and providers struggle with the definition of what constitutes a 'broad and inclusive' curriculum within the context of a sparsely populated area.

Transport

- 5 In sparsely populated areas, the cost of travel to reach a college or provider and the lack of a comprehensive public transport system can be barriers to participation. For both learners and colleges and providers, travel times and costs may be high, even where the distances involved are short.

Costs of Provision

- 6 Colleges and providers in sparsely populated areas feel they face disproportionately high costs for certain aspects of provision. For example:
- colleges and providers may feel they need to lay on transport services to get learners to locations where training is taking place, and the costs of these can be high;
 - travel costs are higher for staff if they have to travel long distances to provide training;
 - if there is outreach training in a number of widely dispersed centres, the costs of hiring the centres and running training in them may be high;

- marketing education and training provision to widely spread communities can be expensive. For example, it may be necessary to advertise in several local newspapers; and
- it may be necessary to buy mobile equipment and resources for outreach centres.

Low Income Generation

- 7 For most colleges and providers in sparsely populated areas, the potential for gathering income through fees is low, and many learners are not able to pay more than a token amount. This is also the case with some learners in some urban areas. But in sparsely populated areas where learner numbers are low, the lack of fee revenue may have an adverse effect on the range of courses offered.

Connectivity and Use

- 8 Colleges and providers in some areas do not have access to high-speed broadband Internet connections. The costs of provision can be high, as colleges and providers are then reliant on more expensive wireless connections.

Lack of Local Facilities

- 9 Learners in sparsely populated areas do not have easy access to facilities for enrichment options, such as good sporting facilities or cultural events such as concerts for music students. Most colleges and providers are able to offer students a programme of activities, including outings to events and visits to other areas to use facilities there. Such activities incur transport costs. Where there are local facilities, such as village halls, their maintenance and refurbishment can be an additional financial problem.

Employer Involvement

- 10 Colleges and providers in sparsely populated areas have particular difficulties in offering work-based learning. Providers struggle to find local businesses to act as sponsors for, and champions of, work-based learning.

Low Aspirations

- 11 In all areas, not just sparsely populated ones, there are many people who are not interested in learning to develop their skills further. Survey work with non-learners in all areas suggests that for many people, lack of motivation is more important than financial issues in explaining why they do not want to participate in learning. This may be particularly true of young people whose parents and grandparents did not undertake post-compulsory education and where there is no tradition of young people progressing to FE or training.

Basic Skills

- 12 It can be difficult to engage people in learning when they need help with basic skills. Such individuals are reluctant to enrol for courses in basic skills because they do not want others to find out that they need help. This may be particularly the case in small communities, where people may feel that they will be easily identified.

Part 2 Employer Involvement and Employee Development

- 13 Involvement of employers with colleges and providers is crucial if the Government's agenda for developing the workforce is to be carried out effectively and future skills needs are to be met. Employers have the potential to be an important resource for education and training, and for providing enhanced opportunities for lifelong learning. However, colleges and providers in sparsely populated areas often struggle to establish productive involvement with employers and employees.
- 14 This part presents two different ways of involving employers and employees. The first example shows how a partnership between a major employer and a public sector training provider in the isolated area of High Peak in Derbyshire led to the creation of an important new learning resource. The second describes how a small sixth form college in Shropshire was able to engage with a dispersed set of employees working in small companies.

Case study 1

An employer-based learning centre – Swizzels Matlow, Derbyshire

Swizzels Matlow has a positive attitude to education and training, and part of the company's vision is that open learning should be available to its employees to further their own knowledge and skills. Using ICT for training offered a way of making this vision a reality, and the company established a learning centre on its New Mills site in April 2002.

Setting up a learning centre on the employer's premises enabled some of the key barriers to participation in learning by employees in this sparsely populated area to be overcome. In particular, problems associated with lack of time for training, inconvenience of travel to training providers and insufficient motivation of employees to attend formal classroom-based provision have been resolved.

The first stage was to set up a partnership to run the project. The main partners were:

- *Swizzels Matlow, a key local employer, that provided the facilities, project management skills and the learners;*
- *Derbyshire County Council's Adult Learning Community Education Service Centre, a training provider with the skills, experience and organisational ability to offer outreach learning and provide tutorial support; and*
- *learndirect, which offered access to a wide range of online learning resources.*

The partners' enthusiasm, willingness to understand each other's viewpoints and will to succeed all contributed to the project's success. Crucially, during the partnership's formative period the partners took time to visit each other and get to know each other's organisations. This was important for developing the relationship and also for recognising what each partner could

offer. Key to the success of the project was an understanding of the difference between private sector employers and public sector learning providers in terms of their respective working cultures.

The partners made a successful bid for local initiative funding (LIF) from LSC Derbyshire to provide initial funding. The partnership between Derbyshire County Council and Swizzels Matlow continues, and together they will develop the centre further and aim to secure a wider range of resources for the project.

Consultation with employees was also central to setting up the project. Firstly, employees' learning needs were identified through a survey. Secondly, learning champions were appointed both at Derbyshire County Council and at Swizzels Matlow. Their role was considered crucial to making the project a success, in terms of their responsibility for its day-to-day running, internal publicity, reporting on progress to the steering group and conducting further surveys of employees' needs.

The local media were used to alert people to what was happening at the learning centre and high-profile local figures and the local press were invited to its opening.

The centre aims to encourage employees to take up learning opportunities and thereby enhance their skills and self esteem. Flexibility is important; employees learning at the centre can follow courses at their own pace, and can use the centre either when tutor support is available or on a drop-in basis. The presence of a tutor is crucial – comparatively few people initially used the centre on a drop-in basis, and numbers were greater for tutor-run courses.

Provision of courses at the learning centre has expanded to meet increasing demand from employees and, less than a year after its opening, nearly one fifth of the workforce are in learning.

Employees with learning requirements that cannot be met by the centre are offered guidance on alternative routes, such as courses offered at the Adult Learning Community Education Service Centre in New Mills or at local colleges.

Questions to consider

- Which key local employers have the capacity to establish a learning centre? Is it possible to use existing workplace resources for learning (for example, networked computers, high-speed Internet access and technical support)?
- How can the needs of potential learners be best identified?
- Which key workers could be responsible for promoting and managing learning opportunities within the organisations?
- What can be done for potential learners whose identified needs cannot immediately be met?
- Will there be security issues if members of the community have access to learning centres provided by employers?
- How will the partnership be sustained?
- How will funding be sustained?

Case study 2

Work-based learning – Ludlow College, Shropshire

Ludlow College is a small sixth form college in South Shropshire where the numbers of school leavers and adults returning to learning are low, and it is difficult to sustain sufficient learner numbers on courses. The college's involvement in project-based activities has opened up opportunities for working with a diverse range of learners to meet a variety of local needs. As this case study shows, however, securing the involvement of small-sized employers in a sparsely populated area in education and training takes a lot of time and effort. Those employers who are willing to promote learning may need a great deal of support and assistance.

Care homes provide much of the employment for adults in South Shropshire, along with the tourist industry and service sector. Care home employment is concentrated in small companies, often family run businesses, and is dispersed across a wide area. The majority of this employment is part time and temporary and involves unsocial hours. There is not a strong tradition of adult education in the area. Employees face practical barriers to learning and few would be prepared to attend college. Breaking down the barriers to learning facing employers and employees was seen as critical.

Ludlow College has set up a national vocational qualification (NVQ) programme at levels 2 and 3 for care home staff, based on an Intermediate Diploma in Care that was originally developed by Basildon College. After the first year of the programme, over 20 employers were involved, and this number was set to rise.

Researching learners' needs and identifying the market for training were essential first steps to setting up the NVQ programme. Recent care standards legislation requiring 50% of care

workers to be qualified to level 2 by 2005 meant there was an identified market need. It was this that prompted the college to set up the NVQ programme and the local LSC to become involved with care home employers. The second stage was to get employers to encourage their employees to undertake training. A project manager was appointed with responsibility for making and maintaining contact with employers. Employers responded well when approaches were made to them on their own premises.

The college made use of different funding streams to enable it to set up the initiative. Firstly, it carried out a Rural Development Project, funded by the Regional Development Agency (RDA). This was followed by a Rural Opportunities Project funded by the University of Wolverhampton and LSC LIF.

Apart from a college induction programme covering theory work, all learning takes place in the care homes. The project manager has a lot of personal contact with learners through workplace tutorials on a one-to-one or small group basis. A telephone help line is available to learners.

A 'paper free' assessment process contributes to the success of the initiative. The computer system provides a checklist of the assessment criteria and requirements, and facilitates identification of learners' training and support needs. ICT is used to collect evidence of learners' acquisition of skills on video and oral tapes. All this evidence is stored on a CD-ROM at the end of the programme. Evidence is collected in the workplace, assessment is prompt and effective, and learners can easily see what progress they are making. They do not have to spend time and effort providing paper-based evidence of their acquisition of skills. Gathering evidence through audio-visual methods is especially helpful to learners whose basic skills are weak.

Crucially, learners are able to make use of the wide range of resources available at the college. Their support needs are met and they benefit from

the expertise of college staff. Employees are assessed to find out what their support needs are. If an individual employee needs help with basic skills, he or she can receive this at the college. If a group of learners need such help, basic skills tutors go out to them at the care home.

Questions to consider

- What new types of delivery will be required to remove the barriers to learning faced by specific groups of employers and employees?
- Can the project contribute to meeting local needs or new legislative requirements?
- How can existing employer networks, such as Business Link, the Small Business Service, the Chamber of Commerce or trade associations be usefully involved?
- Has existing good practice in the same area been identified, and can new activities build on this?

Part 3 Transition to Post-16 Education and Training

- 15 Young people in sparsely populated areas face barriers to progression beyond compulsory education that do not usually exist in more urban areas. For example, the choice of colleges and providers and courses available is often more limited than it is for young people in towns and cities, and there may be little or no public transport. Some young people, already disaffected by experiences of school, may become further disenchanted if vocational education and training options are not easily available to them. It is important to offer young people in sparsely populated areas as much chance as possible of participating in further learning.
- 16 This part of the good practice guide looks at ways in which partnerships have been developed to smooth the transition to post-16 learning, especially for those young people at risk of not participating in learning at all. The issues addressed are key to the 14-19 agenda of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to develop more varied and flexibly arranged provision, with networks of colleges and providers offering a mix of academic and vocational learning. Availability of transport for learners is also crucial as few young people will have private transport. This part outlines some potential solutions to transport problems facing learners.

Case study 3 Increased flexibility through vocational programmes – East Devon College

In line with the DfES 14-19 agenda East Devon College runs an 'increased flexibility' programme for 14-16 year olds as part of a national project. A vocational curriculum has been developed for Year 10 pupils in subjects such as hospitality, engineering, and hair and beauty. The pupils are either taken to the college by bus or, preferably, staff from the college go out to schools involved in the scheme. Whilst this also happens in urban areas, it is particularly important in sparsely populated areas where public transport may not be available. Pupils complete one module of a vocational general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) course in this way.

Although vocational GCSEs are designed for students of any ability, the pupils taking them tend to be lower achieving students who are at risk of becoming disaffected. The college works with these students to raise their self esteem and prove to them that they can achieve further qualifications. The aim is to encourage these young people to stay on at the college when they reach 16.

The college would like to expand the programme to offer vocational GCSE course modules in other areas, such as ICT, business, leisure and tourism, engineering, and health and social care. In 2001/02, 180 students took part in the scheme and around 230 pupils across nine schools in the area expressed an interest in doing so.

Case-study 4

School-college links – Craven College and Wensleydale School, Yorkshire

The link between Craven College and Wensleydale School starts in Year 10, and is funded through the North Yorkshire Business and Education Partnership. The school has a sixth form, where hitherto students have only studied general certificate of education (GCE) A-Level subjects. Partnership with Craven College means that the school can now offer a wider range of provision, including vocational courses. The vocational programme is run by staff at both the school and the college.

The school now offers the post-16 City and Guilds Diploma of Vocational Education course. Subjects covered include tending animals, plants and land, extracting and providing natural resources, construction, engineering, manufacturing, providing and transporting goods and services, communication and entertaining, health and social care, and business services. The range of subjects offered through the course is likely to increase, and there is an expectation that a further 20 students a year will enrol on the programme.

Craven College also provides a three-term programme aimed at introducing school pupils to the college and encouraging them to stay on in learning. The pupils are brought in by bus to Craven College one day a week. In the first term the students are given careers guidance. In the second term they are introduced to the college's range of courses. The third term sees them in a work placement with a local firm.

Questions to consider

- What problems face young people in the transition between school and further education or training in sparsely populated areas? How have these problems been identified?
- Should priority be given to finding solutions for the problems faced by particular groups of learners (for example, those at risk of disaffection)? How can these groups best be identified?
- What is the most appropriate curriculum to offer these learners?
- Does a lack of vocational options lead to young people becoming disaffected with learning?

Part 4 Transport

- 17 The availability of transport is a major issue for young people who want to continue in learning beyond the age of 16. In a study for the National Youth Agency (Storey and Brannen, 2000), 40% of 15-16 year olds in rural areas said that the availability or non-availability of transport played a part in their decision whether or not to enter post-16 education. The following case studies show ways in which the transition to post-16 education for young people has been made easier through transport schemes. Further possible solutions to transport problems in sparsely populated areas are described in two good practice guides produced by the Countryside Agency, *Two Wheels to Work* and *Ways to Go* (Countryside Agency, 2002, 2001).

Case study 5 'Wheels to Work' – Shropshire

Shropshire has a well established 'Wheels to Work' scheme, currently funded through the Countryside Agency and managed by the Rural Community Council. The scheme's rural transport broker, who is responsible to a steering group, administers its three key elements: a moped loan scheme, a driving lessons scheme and a minor grants scheme.

The main thrust of the project is to provide 16-25 year olds with the loan of a moped if they are unable to take up options for education and training because of lack of transport. The loan, which is subject to a contract, is usually for six months, and participants have the option of starting to save small amounts to buy a machine of their own at end of this period through the local credit union. Support is also provided to assist young people who have access to a vehicle, but need funding to be able to use it. They might, for example, need help in paying for driving lessons, or a one-off grant to assist with the cost of repairs to an unroadworthy vehicle requiring an MOT.

Key features of the 'Wheels to Work' scheme include:

- *a rigorous application procedure, including interviews at home and at work and a formal contract stating the conditions of use and specifying that spot checks will be carried out to ensure proper use of the moped;*
- *training, maintenance, provision of safety equipment (offered through the moped supplier); and*
- *networking with Connexions, colleges and work-based learning providers, so that they are aware of the scheme.*

Case study 6

Innovative bus schemes – North Devon College

North Devon College made a successful application to the Rural Bus Challenge and received a £1 million grant. It used this money to supply the local bus company with a number of new buses and to provide smart cards for students costing on average £100 per student. The card entitled students to one free return trip to the college each day, with no restrictions on the distance travelled. This resulted in every village with a population of more than 250 having one bus an hour to the college, leading to a 30% increase in the number of individual bus trips to and from the college. At the same time, car use declined. However, whilst more students used the bus to get to college, the numbers of learners overall may not have increased as a result of this initiative.

Questions to consider

- Where is the most appropriate location for the learning to take place?
- Is there adequate public transport on the routes learners are likely to use and if not, what alternative means of transport for learners need to be looked at?
- How will alternative means of transport be funded?

Part 5 Adults Returning to Learning

- 18 Community-based education can offer an accessible, less daunting route for adults to return to learning and gain qualifications than traditional classroom-based education. Existing community centres can be used as a venue for courses and may appear more congenial to the returning learner than, for instance, a large FE college. Community-based education also engages people in learning by building on the close community ties that often exist in sparsely populated areas.

Case study 7 Community Development Centres – Cumbria

There are over 70 Community Development Centres (CDCs) throughout Cumbria. They were not established as outreach learning centres and their primary aim is community development. Most centres are based in primary schools, and are open in the evenings as well as during the day. This approach is in line with government policy on Extended Schools, which seeks to open schools out to the wider community. CDCs provide a range of courses, mostly in computer training, but also in subjects such as modern languages, health and aromatherapy.

CDCs were established following research into community involvement in primary schools. A pilot project, funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF) and school budgets took place. CDCs now receive mainstream LSC funding. The first CDCs were established in urban areas, before being set up in sparsely populated areas. Initially courses were free but learners are now charged a minimum fee of £15, because it is believed that people may not value education and training that is provided free of charge.

CDCs are overseen by a board, and its members include the director of education and representatives from across the local statutory and voluntary sectors, including primary schools, FE colleges and employers. At the local level, the centres are managed by Cumbria Credits (a legally constituted organisation). CDCs share a common philosophy and structure. Each centre has a manager (usually part time), and an advisory forum (with members drawn from the local community, including employers). Large informal partnerships and networks have been developed around each CDC, and learners are part of these.

Most of the courses offered by CDCs are ICT based. Adults often cite their need to acquire computer skills as the reason they have returned to learning. They want to learn new skills for themselves, or because they want to help their children. Excellent resources are an important feature of CDCs. Each centre is usually equipped with 12 PCs, high-speed Internet links, video conferencing facilities and standard software packages.

An effective recruitment technique can be to start with an existing network around a fixed location. For this reason primary schools prove an ideal location for the centres. About 75% of learners are women, reflecting the fact that CDCs initially recruit mothers of children at the school. People from other groups in the community are more difficult to recruit. For example, CDCs have found it hard to attract younger men and older workers of both sexes who have been made redundant.

Once recruited, few learners drop out. Much of the learning takes place in small groups, and learners think that they will let others down if they drop out. Most people who leave CDC courses do so for positive reasons such as entering employment.

Attainment rates are important for CDCs. Some learners have gained a qualification for the first time in their lives. Between 2001 and 2002, the CDCs were used 36,000 times by some 4,000 learners. Learners are offered information, advice and guidance to help them with their next move. Learners' progression is facilitated through links with other providers such as FE and sixth form colleges, other adult education providers, learndirect and the Open University. There is also large investment in tutor training, and around 70% of CDC tutors have been CDC learners themselves.

Questions to consider

- What are the key aims of the provision, for example, community development or learning? How do these aims complement or differ from the LSC's aims?
- What type of learning should be provided to meet these aims?
- Does the provision meet needs identified through research?
- Has the model been piloted and evaluated?
- Which type of venue is likely to prove most congenial to adults returning to learning? What facilities are needed in venues for the type of learning provided?
- Can existing networks of people near the facility be used to recruit learners?
- What progression routes are available to learners after their initial course? Can partnerships be set up with other providers to offer guidance on progression?
- How will the project be made sustainable? For example, will learners be given the chance to train as tutors? Will mainstream funding eventually be sought?

Part 6 Basic Skills

- 19 A key target group in sparsely populated areas is people who want to develop their basic skills. Poor basic skills can lead to individuals feeling isolated, unable to participate in further learning or play a full role in their community. There is also a perceived stigma in asking for help with basic skills, which may be exacerbated in small communities because people who seek such support are more easily identifiable.
- 20 Some providers have addressed this issue by 'wrapping up' basic skills in other provision, for example, ICT or vocational learning. Making basic skills an integral part of other learning can be very effective. Resourcefulness and collaboration are needed to offer effective basic skills provision in sparsely populated areas.
- 21 It is difficult for providers to identify people who need help with basic skills in sparsely populated areas, and those who enrol on basic skills programmes may find it hard to hide the fact from their friends and neighbours. Accordingly, some providers have identified target groups in the local population and have taken specific action to help people from these groups overcome barriers to improving their basic skills.

Case study 9

Link into Learning – Cornwall

Link into Learning is a well established adult learning and basic skills programme operating in Cornwall. The scheme is run at a variety of centres throughout sparsely populated areas, including village halls, community centres, pubs and schools. Link into Learning has had an excellent Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection. Outreach is key to the scheme.

As the scheme has evolved, it has become more creative and innovative in the way it helps people improve their basic skills. None of the courses offered by Link into Learning are marketed as basic skills provision. To do so would discourage many learners, either because they do not consider they need help with basic skills, or because of the embarrassment of being seen to need such provision. Instead, the provision is marketed as, for example, an ICT course, or as a family learning course.

For example, part of one of the family-based courses is on making kites, but within this are measuring and other numeracy exercises. Courses on ICT skills are a popular and effective way of bringing learners into the scheme. Learners are proud of the fact that they are learning ICT skills. Learners on these ICT courses will tell their friends about them and this leads to word of mouth marketing, which is highly effective.

Part of the success of Link into Learning has been the individual help that learners receive. Learners joining the adult education courses go through a screening process to find out to what extent they have covered the national curriculum. This process is effective in identifying learners' needs for help with basic skills that may not be immediately obvious. The screening process also identifies learners' preferred learning styles, so that learning methods can be individually tailored to suit these.

It is extremely important that basic skills provision in sparsely populated areas should be designed creatively and innovatively. For example, Link into Learning is currently devising basic skills provision that aims to attract men, and this will take the form of a course about football management. The course will be run as a competition with a prize at the end.

Guidance on progression for learners is offered in partnership with other providers. In many sparsely populated areas, the key partner is the adult education service. Link into Learning brings in local providers to talk to learners about progression as they reach the end of their course. Help with seeking employment is also offered.

Questions to consider

- How can people with basic skills needs be identified? Can they be identified through partnership with other agencies?
- Will the provision target specific groups of people? How can these specific groups be targeted?
- Is there scope within current provision for tutors to experiment and be creative in the design of courses, in order to respond to learners' needs more effectively?
- How can basic skills provision best be marketed?
- What is the most suitable location for provision?
- How can learners have their needs assessed in a way which does not make them feel uncomfortable?
- Are there progression routes for those who want to continue in learning?

Part 7 viability

- 22 Colleges and providers in sparsely populated areas must still aim to offer a broad range of courses leading to qualifications, even though the number of potential learners for these may be small. In effect, these colleges and providers may have to find ways to run courses with low numbers that would be considered uneconomic in other, more populous areas. In sparsely populated areas, the funding rate per learner is the same as it is in urban areas, yet there are fewer opportunities for achieving economies of scale.
- 23 This part looks at various ways in which colleges and providers have made it economically possible to run courses with low numbers of learners, by, for example, sharing costs and resources and through the use of partnerships.
- 24 An important way to improve provision, while making it as cost-effective as possible, is through formal partnership arrangements with other organisations. The main benefit to be gained from formal partnerships is that provision can be increased without significant additional expenditure being incurred because resources, both human and physical, can be shared.
- 25 These case studies show how colleges and providers are striving to reduce costs and achieve better economies of scale in order to make provision in sparsely populated areas financially viable, and therefore sustainable.

Case study 10

Shared resources and technology-based solutions – Shropshire

Walford and North Shropshire College provides courses at a learning centre in Wem. This is a joint operation, part funded by the county council and part funded by the college, with assistance from the UK Online capital modernisation fund. The costs of providing social facilities, running the reception area and of administration are shared with the county council. There is an ICT suite with a learndirect centre as well as a teaching room. ICT training at a range of levels is provided at the centre, as well as courses covering a combination of ICT and basic skills.

The college provides certain courses through e-learning. It has over 500 distance learners, many of whom are on 'single student' courses, and they receive a great deal of tutorial support. To make these courses viable, a wide range of solutions are used, including video conferencing and a high-speed wireless link between the college's main sites and Staffordshire University. Increasingly, colleges and providers in sparsely populated areas supply the learning facilities, but use staff from other organisations to carry out the training itself.

Bishop's Castle Community College in Shropshire is able to run some courses for which there are low enrolments, (such as GCE A-Level German, psychology, sociology and electronics) through distance learning. The college produces study packs which learners can work through on their own, and uses video conferencing in teaching and learning. A part time member of staff keeps in touch with learners to give them support. These courses are run in collaboration with Ludlow College and Shrewsbury Sixth Form College. Experience has shown that for distance learning to be effective, learners must be provided with well structured learning materials and receive good support when they need it.

Ludlow College is linked to Shrewsbury Sixth Form College. There is a joint management team, and three senior managers work in both colleges. Through this arrangement, Ludlow College's management capacity is significantly strengthened. The college is able to benefit from management services, such as those of a part time finance director, which it could not otherwise afford.

Case study 11 Partnership arrangements – Devon

Partnerships have enabled providers in Devon to co-ordinate and rationalise their provision to ensure that between them they are able to offer a wide range of viable courses. For example, East Devon College is strong in languages, and so some sixth form students from Crediton attend the college for language courses that would be uneconomic for their school to provide. Reciprocally, learners from East Devon College go to the school at Crediton for music courses where these are a strength. Exeter College, East Devon College and North Devon College have a working agreement whereby they contact each other if they close a course, so that learners on it can transfer to one of the other two colleges if they want to.

East Devon College also has links with the University of Plymouth and has plans to provide four university courses at Tiverton. This area of work will be expanded to include foundation degree and BSc courses in subjects such as social work, tourism and business studies. The college may also run catering courses with the university (there is a shortage of 2,000 chefs in the south west), as well as computing and early years courses.

In 2001, several colleges pooled their resources to mount a TV marketing campaign that cost

£65,000. Following this, applications for courses increased by 10% and the colleges felt that this was a direct result of the marketing campaign.

A feasibility study involving East Devon College, South Devon College, Exeter College and Bickton College is being carried out. This will look at the viability of setting up a new centre of excellence in agriculture, engineering and construction. The views of students, parents and employers will be taken into account. At present, the local land-based college (Bickton College) concentrates on land-based courses, while the other colleges offer courses across a variety of occupational areas, such as motor vehicle engineering and construction. The idea is that colleges would cease offering courses in agriculture, engineering and construction and put resources into the new centre where these would be run as part of a coherent curriculum. The courses would be of particularly good quality, located in one place, shorter and more intensive. The centre would also have residential facilities for students who want to benefit from its courses but who live some distance away. It is envisaged that such a centre would have considerable practical benefits for students and class sizes would be economically viable. Employers would also benefit from the skills the students would acquire.

Maintaining partnerships in a remote area such as North Devon is both time consuming and costly because of the time staff have to spend on travel. The lack of high-speed Internet connections in the area means that video conferencing is not yet an option. With support from the RDA, LSC and Ufi, a regional support unit is being established. It has two goals: to improve networking, and to provide support and training for tutors.

Questions to consider

- Is there a strategic overview of provision in the area?
- Has an area-wide inspection and/or mapping exercise taken place?
- Have the views of learners been sought?
- Are there subject areas where there is a lack of provision or significant duplication of provision?
- Could strategic partnerships be formed to tackle any gaps in provision or duplication? Which partners should be involved?
- How can partnerships be established across sectors of education, for example, schools and FE colleges, or higher education and FE?
- Are there areas where cost sharing can take place, for example, marketing all FE in a local LSC area?
- Can ICT be used to make provision viable, for example, through video conferencing?
- Are there enough tutors to support distance learners?
- Are the learners suited to distance learning, and are suitable learning materials available?

Annex

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Reference MISC/0615/03