

Adult Learning in the Community

Partnerships

Adult learning in the community (ALC) is delivered by 13 non-statutory partnerships and by Adult Learning Wales.

Membership of each partnership differs from area to area, but most include provision offered by the local authority, further education colleges, including Adult Learning Wales, and voluntary or community organisations.

Adult learning in the community normally takes place at venues such as libraries, community learning centres or schools. While most courses are delivered in person, nearly all partnerships deliver some of their provision in an online or blended way.

The Welsh Government funds partnerships through the annual Adult Community Learning Grant to deliver courses in literacy, numeracy, digital skills, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and other courses that help learners to apply and develop these skills.

Partnerships have been strongly involved with their local authorities' and further education colleges' bids for the UK government-funded adult numeracy initiative, [Multiply](#). This funding is intended to develop a range of new provision to engage learners and develop numeracy skills.

Learners at adult learning in the community partnerships

The most recent [Welsh Government data](#) shows that, in 2022-2023, the number of unique adult learners engaged with this provision increased by 53% compared with the previous year, to 16,005. The increases seen since the low point in 2020-2021 have partially reversed a longer-term decreasing trend. Lower numbers in recent years may be due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Follow up

During 2023-2024, one adult learning in the community partnership had made sufficient progress to no longer need follow-up activity from Estyn. Two partnerships inspected during 2023-2024 required follow-up.

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 6

Case studies

No. of case studies requested: 4

Published to website: 2

Engagement visits

Link inspectors conducted seven in-person or online visits with

[Carmarthenshire](#)
[Greater Gwent](#)
[Ceredigion](#)
[Rhondda Cynon Taf](#)
[Powys-Neath Port Talbot](#)
[Conwy & Denbighshire](#)

Providers with case studies:
 Carmarthenshire
 Greater Gwent
 Rhondda Cynon Taf
 Conwy & Denbighshire

those partnerships that were not inspected over the course of the year.

For the purposes of our inspection activity, we recognise the following 13 partnerships, and the designated further education institution for adult learning in the community, Adult Learning Wales:

Partnership	Local authority
Adult Learning Wales	n/a
Bridgend	Bridgend
Cardiff & Vale	Cardiff
Cardiff & Vale	Vale of Glamorgan
Carmarthenshire	Carmarthenshire
Ceredigion	Ceredigion
Conwy & Denbighshire	Conwy
Conwy & Denbighshire	Denbighshire
Greater Gwent	Blaenau Gwent
Greater Gwent	Caerphilly
Greater Gwent	Monmouthshire
Greater Gwent	Newport
Greater Gwent	Torfaen
Gwynedd and Môn	Gwynedd
Gwynedd and Môn	Anglesey
Merthyr Tydfil	Merthyr Tydfil
NE Wales ALC Partnership	Flintshire
NE Wales ALC Partnership	Wrexham
Powys-NPT ALC Partnership	Neath Port Talbot

Partnership	Local authority
Powys-NPT ALC Partnership	Powys
Pembrokeshire	Pembrokeshire
Rhondda Cynon Taff	Rhondda Cynon Taff
Swansea	Swansea

Summary

Most learners make sound progress in their lessons and have positive relationships with their tutors, but partnerships do not evaluate how well learners progress in the longer term well enough or offer enough provision through the medium of Welsh. Learners enjoy their learning and value the opportunity for a second chance at learning and the benefits to their wellbeing and mental health that it brings. There are significant concerns about the sector, in relation to partnership working, leadership capacity and continuity. A few providers have reduced or ceased provision, citing budget constraints. While providers have worked well to use Multiply funding to offer new numeracy provision, partnerships have faced challenges in recruiting learners and tutors, and in planning for a return to business as normal when the Multiply funding window closes.

Teaching and learning

Adult learning in the community sessions are normally taught in small classes, typically fewer than ten learners. The professional relationships between tutors and their learners were strong, and tutors knew their learners well. In most cases, tutors adapted their teaching to meet the needs of individual learners effectively and provide one-to-one support for learners as they worked. Frequently, tutors tailored the level and content of their delivery well to suit the needs, interests and preferences of learners.

Adults returning to learning in community classes usually have complex profiles of strengths and weaknesses in their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. On the whole, tutors were effective at identifying learners' individual strengths and weaknesses in these skills, using digital tools such as the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) or through their professional experience. Most learners understood what they needed to do to improve, through the use of an individual learning plan, or through feedback from their tutors.

Most learners made sound progress in their sessions. Over a longer period, such as a term, most learners made suitable progress in developing their skills against their starting points and in achieving their qualification aims. However, partnerships did not evaluate how learners progress through their provision well enough. They did not use information from management information systems (MIS) well enough to track and monitor learners' longer-term progress, for example to evaluate how learners progress onto different courses or levels of study within the partnership, or to track their destinations into further learning, jobs or both.

In most partnerships inspected during 2023-2024, inspectors found a suitable balance between non-accredited and accredited programmes, giving learners opportunities to attain relevant qualifications.

However, in a few partnerships, and in a few programme areas, such as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), learners did not have suitable accredited options.

Overall, even in areas where Welsh is widely spoken in the local population, partnerships offered little or no provision through the medium of Welsh, meaning that Welsh speaking learners or communities did not have the opportunity to benefit from adult community learning programmes in Welsh. Across our inspections during 2023-2024, inspectors found that a few teachers used Welsh as a language of learning, for example through using bilingual terminology or through using simple Welsh greetings and phrases. A few partnerships were developing innovative approaches, for example at Rhondda Cynon Taf, where the partnership worked collaboratively with organisations like Menter Iaith to offer adult learning in the community provision bilingually or through the medium of Welsh.

Care, support and guidance, well-being and attitudes to learning

The atmosphere in adult learning in the community classrooms was nearly always productive and positive. Learners valued the opportunity to return to learning, enjoyed their experience and appreciated the work of their tutors. Learners were supportive of each other, frequently offering their peers support and encouragement. Many learners also valued the opportunity for friendship and the social interaction that learning offers, and frequently described the positive effect that learning and attending their sessions had on their mental health and well-being. Where partnership working was less strong, opportunities to give cross-provider support to learners with additional learning needs were less well developed and less effective.

Partnership providers created safe and caring environments that supported the educational and personal development of learners. They promoted equality and diversity and successfully highlighted the importance of these in Welsh society.

Leadership

In both our inspections and link inspector visits, we found a few partnerships where reorganisation, changes in roles or failure to replace key personnel were having a negative impact on the partnership's work and provision for learners.

One local authority decided to cease its ALC partnership provision entirely and another provider reduced the extent of its in-person provision across its geographical range. In both cases, providers cited budget constraints as a significant factor in their decisions. These are concerning developments.

The quality of partnership working and leadership continued to be an area of focus and considerable concern. In the six inspections we carried out during 2023-2024, we left recommendations to improve elements of partnership working at three partnerships. Where we identified areas for improvement in partnership working, these typically included the following:

- There was a lack of clarity or formal agreement about each partner's roles and responsibilities
- There was a lack of strategic vision, leadership and direction for the partnership
- Planning to offer learners clear progression routes into, within and beyond the partnership was ineffective
- Provision planning was not coherent, meaning that learners or potential learners in some geographical areas of the partnership did not have convenient access to in-person provision
- Self-evaluation and quality improvement processes did not take a partnership overview, meaning

that partners did not have a clear understanding of the overall partnership's strengths and areas for improvement

- Partners missed opportunities to share resources, such as through collaborative or joint professional learning activities or colocation of provision
- Partnership marketing and promotional materials, or websites, did not allow learners or potential learners to see straightforwardly the full range of the partnership's provision
- Partnerships were not working closely enough with the full range of local providers, community or third sector groups to expand their Welsh-medium or bilingual provision

We also identified strong aspects of partnership working, for example at the Powys-Neath Port Talbot partnership, where we spotlighted effective use of service level agreements that made clear the roles and responsibilities of each partner.

Spotlight on service level agreements from Powys and NPT ALC partnership report

The partnership has service level agreements (SLAs), which define the arrangements between NPTC Group of Colleges and each of its two local authority partners – Neath Port Talbot and Powys. Each SLA sets out the responsibilities of both parties and includes arrangements for provision offer, expected outcomes, quality assurance and remuneration. These formal agreements ensure that there is clarity between partners and continuity between organisations in the event that key personnel change roles or retire.

Across the sector, we saw some improvement in the way partnerships use their websites to inform learners and potential learners about their provision. A few partnerships had redesigned their websites enabling users to search and browse courses offered by all providers in the partnership. Others had improved the visibility of links to their partners' websites so that users can navigate more straightforwardly between them to search for courses.

The funding available through the [UK Government's Multiply](#) initiative was very large in comparison to the annual Adult Community Learning Grant. The funding also had a short time frame and strict eligibility criteria for the type of provision that could be funded. Partnerships worked well to co-ordinate the provision they offer through Multiply, but frequently faced challenges in recruiting learners and tutors within the short timescales available, and in planning how best to secure an effective transition back to 'business as normal' when the funding window closes.

Overview of recommendations

The recommendations from the six inspections fall into these broad categories:

- Strategic leadership and planning – there were three recommendations related to improving partnership working and strategic leadership
- Self-evaluation and quality improvement – three recommendations related to partnership-wide approaches to self-evaluation, including evaluating learners' progression
- Welsh-medium provision – three recommendations related to improving or increasing Welsh-

medium of bilingual provision

- Quality and retention – two recommendations identified the need to improve course quality or retention rate
- Provision – there was one recommendation to improve the access to provision across the full geographical range of the partnership
- Additional learning needs – one recommendation was to improve support and monitoring for learners with additional learning needs
- Promotion and marketing – one recommendation was to ensure that potential and existing learners can easily access an overview of the full partnership’s course offer and progression pathways

References

Welsh Government (2023) *Post-16 local authority: adult learning funding allocations*.