

Informal adult learning – Shaping the Way Ahead

**A submission from Brighton & Hove Older People's Council
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General

Brighton & Hove Older People's Council is an elected body which is concerned with services and concerns affecting older people in the city. We have long been troubled by the way "Life Long Learning" has failed to live up to its title. Our brief is to cover services and activities for those aged 60 years and upward. We accept that the interests and enthusiasms in this group are as wide as those who are younger. Some are keen to take part in adult learning activities whilst others will feel it is not for them. We accept that however disinterested some may be, the opportunity to learn should always be available. It should be noted from the outset that those recently retired [or seeking further paid work] will be willing to take part in classes in the evening. After the age of, say, seventy the majority will not be keen to go out at night and will be looking for opportunities during the daytime.

Chapter 1 A Rich Tapestry

More about the factors driving diversity can only be achieved by more research. Classes in our experience are expensive. A system of vouchers to be spent on classes would offer encouragement. We fully support the activities of U3A. There are five groups in the city. A major problem facing the extension of their groups and the formation of other groups is the lack of facilities for meetings in our city. With more community centres with accommodation there could be more groups. Libraries should make more use of areas and meeting rooms with room charges at a lower rate than commercial for community activities. Connectivity between an activity and a learning group could be improved by better advertising. Our experience is that there is little take up by service providers for those with teaching qualifications willing to volunteer to help. In summary finance, facilities and publicity are the conditions required to foster innovative work

Chapter 2 Contribution from other Government departments.

Government support for informal adult learning could be given by reducing pricing for courses and the subsidising of charges for accommodation. It is

claimed that there is government funding for adult education used by older people yet colleges and other bodies give the impression they are finding it difficult to continue their work because of lack of funding. In the city The Bridge and Whitehawk Inn, both in deprived areas, have an uncertain future due to lack of funding. The future of the Hove Connaught Centre is also in doubt. Again it is said that the provision of concessions for older people cannot be given more widely because of the lack of outside support. Frequently concessions are only granted to those already receiving help and grant aid. The major effect of such decisions is to severely penalise those whose private pension just takes them over the line below which financial support could be given. We believe that better use could be made of school premises. We recognise the work done by the Community Channel but its programmes are never publicised in newspapers and magazines. It is not easy to get just simple schedules from the channel.

Chapter 3 DIUS-funded informal adult education

Adult education as a 1970's model or a thriving new model? In our experience opportunities for adult education have fallen since the earlier date. Every change is basically driven by money. An adult education centre has driven a U3A with similar groups to their paid ones out of the building. Competition is feared. Class costs continue to rise. Groups based in a local library face higher charges for accommodation. It is no longer possible to pay for a class on a weekly basis making it more difficult for those with limited means. Our city council once had an adult education officer. It would appear this is now being covered by another office with different duties. There is no practical committee where adult education issues can be debated.....it can only be raised in a totally unsuitable children's trust [schooling and other issues]. The council leaves it to colleges to provide classes having it would seem no budget for adult education. Use of adult education centres can be difficult for those needing to use a car. Classes are for 2 hours. Local parking is restricted to 2 hours. Efforts to enable students to extend the 2 hour parking whilst they try to get to and from the building have met with no success. We totally support the idea of vouchers to attract new learners that could provide part payment for adult educational activities. Thought could be given to booking for classes on line – not possible, we believe, in this city.

Chapter 4 Ensuring equality of access

Finance is a major barrier. Better community facilities could bring learning closer to the people. We have in the city a facility which is really part of a village within the city limits. This always seems able to offer a range of educational opportunities. Local authorities need to be encouraged to take informal adult education more seriously. As those now younger move into older age they will take with them ability to use computers. At present many in the older group are not computer competent although the number is growing. Facilities in libraries, Age Concern, etc mean that it is not necessary to have one's own computer to use the web. Whilst the web can offer learning facilities it does not overcome loneliness which is a bonus for classes. Whilst we are not convinced that learning opportunities should be offered in residential homes [where many residents often have some form of

dementia] we feel that there could well be an opportunity to provide learning in sheltered housing.

Chapter 5 Contribution of new technology and broadcasting

The barriers against making the most of technology again are largely financial. The Open University ran programmes relating to their courses on television in the small hours. This could now be exploited by those on, say, Sky with the Sky+ box set to record the series. Clearly more research is needed to identify learning opportunities that might be developed in the years ahead. Broadband can carry more educational programmes but outside of libraries, etc you have to pay for broadband and need the appropriate equipment. Using regional television, trails to learning opportunities in the region could be run but liaison between educational authorities and television would be involved and difficult. Local radio has not been mentioned yet here are greater opportunities for the development of informal education. During the early experimental period of local radio, BBC Radio Brighton carried educational programmes in the evening provided by the University of Sussex and Brighton Polytechnic. Most BBC local stations could still do this if properly motivated. We do not see any future for the suggested use of education through interactive television or mobile telephones. More publicity is required to discover how local educational groups could make use of EU funding.

In conclusion

The Council feels that opportunities for informal adult learning are very important for older people. At the moment we see the field regressing rather than developing. There are three factors which need to be addressed.

- Finance remains a key issue
- Linked to finance is the need for better community facilities
- Once finance and facilities have been assured then opportunities need better and more efficient publicity

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