



Report



Learning Connections, Scottish Government

Next Steps in CLD MIS

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Introduction

Rocket Science recently produced a resource for Community Learning and Development (CLD) which provided a specification and guidance for developing a management information system (MIS). The aim of the resource is to provide guidance to organisations in the Community Learning and Development (CLD) sector to understand, collect and use the quantitative input and output information they need to effectively deliver their work.

This work stemmed from Learning Connections' Performance Information Project. The project had the following objectives:

- To develop a **national framework** to
 1. guide CLD partnerships in their approaches to performance information.
 2. make the generation of meaningful core data at national level possible.
- To **support implementation** of that framework by partnerships.
- To enable greater shared understanding of approaches to performance information, through the **dissemination of effective practice**.
- To establish a programme of **longitudinal research** to develop better understanding of the impact of CLD.

Rocket Science was asked to provide a secondary output: the production of a separate report setting out recommendations for next steps in achieving the overall aim of the performance project. The main audience for this report is Learning Connections, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), and other national bodies.

During the investigation for the most useful content for the MIS specification and guidance Rocket Science spoke to 7 CLD organisations/departments. Of this 7, 6 were from local authorities and 1 organisation was a national voluntary organisation. Prior to this commission Rocket Science conducted two pieces of research for Learning Connections which aimed to provide a comprehensive picture of where and how identification and recording of: inputs, outputs and outcomes takes place in relation to community learning and development (CLD) activity:

- Research/analysis with local authorities, including work relating to community work/community capacity development, community-based learning for adults and youth work.
- Examination of current practice in voluntary sector organisations whose primary purpose is community capacity building. To enable a relatively in-depth analysis this was done with a focus on three local authority areas (Glasgow, Dundee and Angus).

This brief report draws on our experience in these areas and highlights our thoughts on potential next steps. Some of these areas outlined will have implications for Learning Connections, HMIE and other stakeholders such as funders. They are designed to stimulate discussion and we recognise that there may be other contributing factors, that we are unaware of, that impact on the viability and suitability of these options. We would be happy to discuss any of these suggestions with Learning Connections and their partners.



Areas for consideration

National Lead

'I'd like to see Learning Connections create a system that Scotland uses. I don't mind them telling us what [information] to collect' (CLD local authority manager)

The majority of the individuals we spoke to expressed a desire for a national lead in provision of more than guidance and a framework for collecting output information. Local authority respondents who do not have sophisticated systems in place were keen for Learning Connections to go beyond the provision of a specification and provide a physical system that CLD organisations could use and build on. They felt there would be significant cost savings compared to each local authority doing their own thing; not to mention the thousands of voluntary organisations that would be supported. It would also provide a good foundation for individualised development of a system if required.

However, caution is needed as some areas have already produced MIS systems to suit their own purposes and would be unhappy if this national lead was to supersede their efforts. It is important that this national lead is primarily targeted at those providers with no system or one in its infancy. We did not find huge discrepancies between the fields to be included in Learning Connections' specification and those used by CLD providers with a more advanced system.

Those areas that have developed their own systems also comment on how useful it would have been to have national lead on this area. In fact, one local authority manager, with a developed system, asked *'why wouldn't there be a constructive discussion to create a central system?'*

There are obvious pitfalls to avoid when developing a national system:

- Care must be taken to assure people this is not about national comparisons
- Don't want an over-reliance on quantitative data when most of CLD activity is concerned with the difference made (qualitative) as quantitative data does not provide information on the impact of CLD activity. It will be important to ensure that any national development emphasised this fact and clearly articulated the benefits and limitations of an output MIS (see section on outcomes below).

IT considerations

There are a few IT options that we feel Learning Connections could consider:

- Excel-based system using the fields and functionality described in the specification. This relies on CLD organisations having appropriate software.
- Web-enabled system. This relies on robust IT support systems to ensure information is secure.
- Both options have training implications for entering data, reporting on the information contained and analysis required to turn that data into intelligence.

There are particular issues for the voluntary sector as MIS is usually reliant on a good IT system. Learning Link surveyed the community-based adult learning voluntary sector, on behalf of Learning Connections, on their systems for gathering information on inputs, outputs and outcomes. They found that even those organisations who had the most fully developed electronic systems often relied on paper-based forms and files in some



instances. 65% of respondents reported using paper-based systems for recording output information.¹

We are not sure of the IT capability of the voluntary CLD sector to be able to make use of any national IT-based resource. Our earlier work investigating the gathering of such data within voluntary organisations with community capacity remit identified that these organisations were in the process of moving towards greater use of IT but that for many this was a relatively recent development.

Outcomes

The specification and guidance focused on input and output data; it did not cover outcomes of CLD activity. Most of the respondents appreciated the value of this development of MIS; however, many are interested in whether there will be a national lead on gathering systematic information on outcomes. Those who are already operating output MIS are now considering how to include outcomes and would appreciate support in this area. *Delivering Change* is reported to have been well-received and will provide a good basis for development.

Cultural shift

There is a need to continue to instil a culture of performance management within the CLD sector. Although there is evidence of a shift in attitude to performance management this is not reported to be prevalent across all levels of the CLD sector. CLD managers we spoke to in earlier research indicated that they saw the value in developing more robust means of collecting and using data. However, the willingness and cooperation of staff determined the effectiveness of the data. If staff are not bought into the system then this casts doubts over the quality of data collected from participants and entered into the system.

Some suggested action that may support a culture shift:

HMIE inspections

HMIE inspections already investigate 'How Good is Our Management' (Key area 8) and CLD providers are asked to consider their information systems and the effectiveness of these systems in evaluating CLD performance. This is a positive inclusion in the inspection process but may suggest that the evaluation of CLD performance is merely a management concern. The aspect of self evaluation explicitly suggests that the inspection process will include examination of performance data. Consideration should be given to how the inspection process can encourage all levels of staff to view collation, interpretation and use of performance data as an important part of their role.

¹ Learning Link Scotland *Survey of Management/Performance Information Systems – voluntary adult learning sector* (March 2006)



Another aspect that HMIE could investigate is whether managers feed back the information collated and how it is used to manage the service. Culture shift will only occur when staff are clear on how their efforts have made a difference to service planning and delivery. Communication about management decisions is also a critical factor.

Training and professional development

We are not clear on the extent that practitioners are trained in performance management as part of their CLD qualification or as ongoing continual professional development. Our discussions with CLD managers would suggest that this is not an area where training or development has been prioritised. It has usually been introduced in response to development of a system, i.e. *'we have developed a system and this is how you use it'*. We would suggest a more integrated approach to practice, which starts at pre-qualifying level, would produce a greater impact on the culture of CLD.

The new Standards Council for those working in CLD is being established to improve training and skills for those active in CLD practice. Three main functions have been identified:

- To deliver an approvals structure for professional qualifications, courses and training and development opportunities for everyone involved in CLD.
- To consider and establish a registration system available to practitioners delivering and active in CLD practice.
- To develop and establish a model of supported induction, CPD and training opportunities.

We would suggest that the interim standards council should consider how performance management is integrated into the approvals structure for professional qualifications and the future model for CPD. The CeVe competencies create an important basis for this, particularly 4 and 6:

4) to organise and manage resources

The community educator requires to be able to develop and plan a work programme; organise and deliver quality activities and projects; recruit and manage human resources such as part-time staff and volunteers; identify funding and resources; apply relevant legislation and policy; demonstrate skills in self-management; manage financial resources; and manage equipment and physical resources.

6) to use evaluative practice to assess and implement appropriate changes

The community educator requires to be able to use appropriate quality assurance and performance measurement techniques; plan and apply a range of participative methods of evaluation; use information technology; demonstrate skills in report writing and presentation for a variety of audiences; and use findings to influence practice.

Qualifying students from Community Education courses should know how to use MIS, what it tells them and how it can impact on decision-making. A key aspect of CLD is understanding need (needs assessment), MIS is another tool to assist in the measurement of impact of CLD activities on that need. Higher Education institutions are well-placed to develop this type of course as they have access to other departments with



greater levels of expertise in performance management, e.g. business schools, IT departments, etc.

The IT skill-set required of CLD practitioners to perform this function must also be included in pre-qualification training. Training regarding the use and analysis of CLD data should be integrated with basic understanding of the use of IT packages such as Excel. The integration of these two areas will ensure CLD practitioners know how to collate data but also use their professional judgement to convert this to intelligence useful for managing the service.

Role of funders

There is a view that funders ask CLD providers to report on different aspects of service performance. As well as the resource implications of a variety of requirements, it is also a barrier to developing one system. Learning Connections should ensure that their own reporting requirements are aligned to this MIS specification, including literacies reporting. There can be additional areas of reporting but the core reporting questions should link to the same areas of data collection. They should also engage in discussions with key funders, such as the Scottish Funders' Forum, to update them of the specification that they have commissioned, encouraging them to build on the outlined input and output information fields.

YouthLink Scotland, the national youth work agency, is now responsible for the administration of two Scottish-wide grants programmes. It would be helpful if their reporting requirements should link with this specification, encouraging youth organisations to have a more systematic approach to MIS.


As well as initiating more coherent reporting mechanisms it will also persuade CLD providers, especially in the voluntary sector, that there will be direct time-saving benefits of developing a CLD MIS using this specification.

Voluntary Sector support

The specification was developed to meet the needs of all CLD providers regardless of their IT capabilities. Some of those involved in the development of the specification felt that unless a core database is given to voluntary organisations, particularly smaller organisations, they would be unlikely to develop one for their own organisation.

There is also an issue for the voluntary sector about access to a robust IT system as mentioned earlier. Learning Link identified a lack of IT equipment and software or funding for capital equipment as a key barrier to development in this area. Even where organisations had access to IT equipment this usually required upgrading. It will be important for Learning Connections to understand the picture of IT capability in the voluntary sector before embarking on any developments in this area.² However, this

² Learning Link Scotland *Survey of Management/Performance Information Systems – voluntary adult learning sector* (March 2006)



should not prevent Learning Connections from developing an IT-based resource for those who have the hardware capabilities.

Data Protection

Organisations are clear that they have a responsibility to comply with data protection legislation. Many are anxious about developing an electronic MIS in case they are breaching any rules in this area and it can often prevent organisations from embarking on any data collation. The specification includes an appendix relating to data protection considerations. It will be important for additional, relevant data protection guidance notes to be produced with any future IT-based MIS.

Information-sharing

There is likely to be greater demands placed on organisations and departments to share information. This is not solely related to the management of risk factors, such as in child protection cases, it will also be useful for avoidance of double-entries on systems and could support improvements in tracking participants' learning journeys, for example. Also the requirement of Single Outcome Agreements for local authorities and joint reporting across 5 Scottish Government outcome areas is likely to result in increased demand for evidence to support the attainment of these outcome areas. Learning Connections must ensure that they remain abreast of shifts in thinking and support CLD practitioners to consider their important role in achieving, and reporting on, these outcomes. The sector does not want to be under-valued because wider stakeholders are unaware of their contribution to these outcomes (national and local).

This may push the need for a unique identifier for reporting purposes to avoid duplication. It is our understanding that Learning Connections were working with the Scottish Qualifications Authority to move this forward. This work will be a valuable addition to this area.

Equality categories

Information about the profile of CLD participants in relation to equality categories is not routinely gathered. This will have an impact on CLD providers' assessment of community need and on judgement of the impact of CLD on these needs. The reasons for this lack of systematic data gathering in this important area are not clear. It could be related to lack of confidence about asking for the information in an appropriate manner, lack of a system to gather it or a lack of appreciation about how the information could be used. Regardless of the reason, CLD providers should be encouraged and supported to begin to gather this information and make assessments about the take up and targeting of CLD activities. This encouragement could come from Learning Connections and via the inspection process.

Immediate next steps

Our discussion with CLD providers indicated that they valued the development of this MIS specification and thought it would be relevant and useful. We would suggest that after the launch and distribution of this guidance Learning Connections conduct a quick survey of the CLD sector to ascertain:



- If they intend to use the specification, if not, why not;
- What else they feel they require to implement such a system; and
- Broader questions about next steps which could be related to the points outlined in this report.

Ultimately the implementation of a shift in culture will require encouragement for change in behaviour at all levels of CLD. This is likely to require a mix of 'sticks and carrots' and a number of nationally-lead initiatives and approaches that build on local experience and developments.