

ANNEX 11 – Minutes of an oral evidence session with Francis Lawlor, Principal of Surrey Adult Learning, on 6 February 2023

Adult Learning and Skills Task Group – Surrey Adult Learning oral evidence session

2pm on Monday, 6 February 2023

Witness:

Francis Lawlor, Principal (Surrey Adult Learning)

Key points raised in the discussion:

Funding

1. Nationally the Adult Education Budget has halved between 2011/12 and 2019/20, what impact has this had on SAL?
 - Francis: SAL had about 20,000 learners in 2010, 6,700 last year, pre-covid around 12,000. There is a funding consultation ongoing with aim of driving more economic led outcomes. Nothing about community vision or health and wellbeing, loneliness etc. Ability to facilitate provision generating friendships is under constant strain. The AEB could be renamed National Skills Fund, under consultation, so the purpose of funding for adult learning is driven in a more myopic sense with an expectation of what is its economic and skills value. Chris: Will redirecting to what the business community want push aside the other side? Francis: That is certainly what the funding consultation document implies. The push is to do more accredited – literacy and numeracy, digital, ESOL – and implies if you want to do the others, you'll be expected to pay the full cost. Scandinavia and Northern Europe do a lot of civic education and recognise its importance in the rounding of communities. I'm not sure our drive towards economics is for the best.
 - Jonathan: Can you explain why have you got one third of people but half the budget compared to 2010?
 - Francis: The allocation of community learning funding (£2.1 million) is down to what your provision costs, not participation, it's not formulaic. What you spend it on is audited. Pre-Covid 2018/19 we were one of the most efficient users, amongst the best in the country for cost per learner. Now we are about average, less efficient, because where we used to have 8/9 learners on a course we now have 5.
 - Chris: Why has there been a decrease in demand?
 - Francis: It is worse in West and East Sussex and Hampshire, half of what they were. We surveyed to find out why participants have not come back post-pandemic - 570 respondents, not yet analysed. My feeling is that habits of learners have changed; I don't believe they have gone elsewhere, I haven't seen participation in FE colleges increase.
 - Fiona: Is it linked with a lot of people decided to stop working during the pandemic?
 - Francis: They feel the classroom is not as productive as remote learning. Difficult to entice them back. Life values have changed, people want to see family and travel etc.
2. You say in your report 'Surrey Adult Learning (SAL) agrees the AEB split between adult skills and community learning with the ESFA; for SAL it is 75:25 in favour of community learning' - so three quarters of the Adult Education Budget is spent on

community learning – why is that, when the vast majority of these courses are charged for - are they not self-funding?

- Francis: They're not paying what is known as full cost recovery. We might charge £8 an hour when it costs £20 and the state makes up the gap. We would have to increase it by about 120/130%.
3. Your report says there is competition among post 16 providers, is this because they are competing for ESFA funding? Professional Training Solutions in Farnham for example offers maths and English courses. Is it better to have provision hyper-locally, or is there not enough money to do that?
- Francis: The majority of competition comes from FE colleges, NESCOLT, Guildford College (Activate Learning) and Brooklands College, they all get the same funding as we do from the AEB. There are no recruitment areas, they're competing for the same learners as us.

4. What funding is available for adult learners with SEND and is this sufficient?

Curriculum priorities

5. How has the emphasis on community learning come about?
- Francis: The reason for this ratio is because of demand, our residents want more community learning, and we don't have anywhere near as much of a pool to access GCSEs/digital skills as somewhere like Birmingham or Liverpool. Our learners are of this type. We do not have the levels of deprivation and disadvantage that other areas have in order to meet that demand. Our learners are over 50, they want to do this and they're prepared to pay, so the market has driven the 75:25 ratio. The nature of our provision has to be different if we want to attract people to access adult education. In Croydon their split is the exact opposite at 75:25 and they get their learners from the DWP, our needs are very different. The demand of their residents to do community learning is smaller.
6. Do you feel pressure to change the 75:25 ratio because of the government's emphasis on upskilling (DfE skills for jobs white paper - although Robert Halfon, Minister for Skills, does seem to value community learning) and do you expect the ratio and your curriculum will have to change to meet local employer needs?
- Francis: Yes. The curriculum needs to be influenced more by communities and employers and we need to get them to say what they require in the marketplace that we're in. I'm looking at the LSIP and in cases they [businesses?] don't really know what they need. I feel we need to sell what we do better as well.
7. How do you think the tension between catering for economic and social needs can be resolved?
- Francis: The quality of the partnerships isn't as strong as in areas I've previously worked in, in the Midlands and East of England. Agreeing where our area of expertise is, where each of us can have our specialisms and still exist, that wasn't there two years ago. However, three of the FE colleges have had new principals in the last six months and that's given an opportunity to establish a collaboration.

8. Ofsted inspectors said, ‘Leaders should ensure that they refocus their allocation of public funding to meet the needs of those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable and least likely to participate in education to meet the requirements of adult learning provision’. What exactly did Ofsted mean by this? Has it been addressed?
- Francis: How many of our learners are part of the index of multiple deprivation – it was relatively small. Surrey has relatively small pockets – Staines, Canalside, Old Dean. Our learners aren’t coming from there as much, the majority are coming from around our sites. Working with the community team, economic development team and Rebecca Brooker in health and wellbeing in order to target the 20 wards and analyse how to take the learning to them. All seven of our sites are in relatively affluent areas. We need to look at that and have at least one or two in areas of relative deprivation. Finding it difficult to do this currently.
 - Jonathan: Is SAL not linked into the libraries transformation?
 - Francis: I’m on the library transformation board and liaise with Sue Wills. We are looking at two sites: looking to move Sunbury into town centre and co-locate, will take a couple of years; looking to move into one centre in Farnham, currently next door. Tried for two years to co-locate in Camberley but has led to nothing.
9. In your view are there enough Lifetime Skills Guarantee funded level 3 courses on offer in Surrey? According to the government’s webpage SAL does not deliver any of these. Who decides what can be offered under the scheme – local providers or the government? Have you done any marketing to raise awareness of this entitlement? In your view should it fall to the FE colleges to provide the economic benefit pushed for by national policy?
- Francis: Our qualifications are at a low level, literacy and numeracy and not necessarily up to a Level 3. If we have learners wanting to do a Level 3 we send them to FE colleges. I don’t have the tutors and we don’t necessarily have the experience or skills in this area. I would move into it if I thought that there was a shortage and a demand, but I haven’t found that. Principals say they struggle to fill their level 3 courses.

Participation

- 10. According to the Learning and Work Institute, adult participation in English, Maths, and ESOL learning has declined by 63 per cent, 62 per cent and 17 per cent respectively, from 2012 to 2020. What are the comparative figures for Surrey? (Figure 2 shows your adult skills learners increased since 2018/19).**
- 11. How do you know what courses people want and how do you know where to locate classes?**
12. What partnerships do you have with community and voluntary sector organisations which could engage with hard-to-reach groups?
- Francis: ESOL learners come from charity sector. Not as strong as in other places, we need to improve participation in this area. Charity sector see us a competitor, they also want AEB money and want to run it themselves.
- 13. The select committee recommended in March 2021: *Work with partners, within and external to SCC and with the Surrey Economy and Growth Team to develop a coordinated plan for the future, to ensure that the Adult Learning***

Service remains responsive to changing health, social and economic needs. Can you tell us what you've been doing with the communities team to meet learning needs in Spelthorne and Canalside? What other disadvantaged areas have you identified and has this work been replicated there?

14. Your report says, 'Residents with low qualifications are finding relatively well-paid roles' – what kinds of roles are these? What is this statement based on?
- Francis: When I talk to Jobcentre Plus and leaders of DWP to see who they've got on their books that we can help, there aren't very many. When I ask the economic development team, have labourers on construction sites got a desire to improve their qualifications, I find not, because they're relatively well-paid and so do not see the financial advantage of it. The point is jobs are changing, but it is a hard sell.
15. Please explain the basis for the belief that 'There are no barriers concerning cost, despite the cost of living crisis'? Table 3 in your report shows commercial learners are falling year on year. Have you not found the numbers enrolling decreasing since the economy nosedived? Have you changed your prices in last few years?
- Francis: it is. In last 10-15 years, biggest age group has been 60-69, female, middle/upper-middle class. If we'd increased cost five years ago, not sure participation would have plummeted much, but if did it now, it certainly would.
16. In December 2021 the Director of Education said, 'We are working with the Property team to find accommodation that can meet the needs of adult learners up to 2030 and is shared, co designed and co-produced with internal services such as Libraries and Surrey Choices' – please expand on what has been done in this area since then. Linked to this - The House of Commons Education Committee's 'A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution' (2020) recommends *the Department must ensure there is a community learning centre in every town to ensure the first rung of the ladder is there for adults furthest from qualifications and employment. What's the state of play in Surrey?*
- Francis: I gave representation at that time. That recommendation about a community learning centre in every town has not been taken up by the DfE, primarily because we thought we already had it.
 - Jonathan: You'd have to have 25 sites between SAL and the FE colleges. What is the distribution of learners? Are there gaps at the moment?
 - Francis: 10/15 years ago we used to have 18/19 sites. In 2010 we gave the ones in East Surrey to ESC and they closed them. We have 7 sites now. ESC do less community learning, do more adult skills provision. That has brought about tension for the whole of Surrey because you can't access the same community learning provision in East Surrey. ESC are spending their funding more on adult skills because the demand is there.
 - Jonathan: ESC serves a younger age range. Would be useful to have locations of the sites before and also a heatmap of where learners come from by different institutions.
 - Francis: I have the data on own provision, would not get the data if asked for it due to the competitive nature.
 - Francis: I think Leatherhead and Dorking have lost provision from both providers. I was under the assumption ESC was taking over that area.

- Chris: There are areas of deprivation in Leatherhead and Dorking. I've seen comments from members of the public that the provision isn't there.
- Francis: We as a Council do not necessarily have a strategic remit to influence, the influence comes from the funding, ESFA give us money and give ESC money and there's an independence to that. Clare Curran and I are meeting the ESC principal every term now, since January 2023, to discuss the strategic fit.

17. Surrey's Director of Education also said in December 2021, 'Our aim in the next three months is to develop a stronger working relationship with DWP and Jobcentre plus so that we can meet the needs of the hard to help and hard to reach adults more effectively.' Has this been achieved and if so, how?

- Francis: Our relationship with the DWP is very good. It's about, is the scale of demand high enough for us to offer provision? I feel it's not high. The market drives it and the need is not here in Surrey.

18. The House of Commons Education Committee recommended developing qualifications that can be taken in modules to enable adults with busy working lives and caring responsibilities to build up qualifications over time. Is this something SAL does?

19. How do you encourage and facilitate adults with SEN to participate?

- Francis: We have supported learning provision led by curriculum manager Chrissie Walsh – about 50 learners with moderate to severe learning difficulties. Recording progress and achievement. Work closely with Surrey Choices. It's about making sure that they are enjoying the learning and enriching their lives.
 - Fiona: Many with SEN have found school particularly difficult and an unhappy experience – does that affect their willingness to participate in AL?
 - Francis: Yes, they are usually over the age of 30 because of that.
 - Fiona: Is there any way to address that?
 - Francis: We haven't got the funding for 16 to 25-year-olds that FE colleges have. Not sure where to find the learners in order to entice them. We get most through Surrey Choices and charities.

Skills needs

20. Please can you explain this paragraph: 'In other local authorities the need from employers, jobcentre plus and communities seeks out local authority provision and that is not currently the case in Surrey.' Why is this not the case here? In your view does this need to change?

- Francis: Leads to get learners often come from four sources – employer, communities, DWP, individuals accessing website or through word of mouth. Most of ours are from the latter and we're remarkably successful at it. Don't get much from employers – their needs are above level 2 and want level 3 or 4 apprenticeships, hardly anything from DWP – not many unemployed, we're going to the communities but it's quite small. That's extraordinary compared to other areas, where the other three sources are relied upon to bring in learners.

21. What careers advice is SAL providing to adults, advice for people who want to upskill, reskill or move into employment?
- Francis: We have a team that provides careers education, advice and guidance. We just got matrix accreditation renewed last week. We look to support those on accredited provision particularly; it is quite hard for those engaging in community learning, they often don't want any careers advice. Over 60% are over 53. They don't appreciate it being offered. We'll have to see how we can do that right.
 - Jonathan: Volunteers referred by DWP at a furniture reuse charity in Redhill gain life skills. Is there an opportunity to work with the charity to upskill them?
 - Francis: Yes, we're exploring that at the moment. I know of some Grandads who were doing their English GCSE to enable them to volunteer in their retirement.
22. Whereabouts does SAL provide ESOL? Is there a waiting list or are you meeting demand? Is funding available for ESOL sufficient? Why is East Surrey College providing it in Guildford?
- Jonathan: There are lots of Afghan asylum seekers in hotel clusters in Horley.
 - Francis: I think we've just taken on 50 ESOL learners from that hotel.
23. What is the uptake for the essential digital skills qualification - has this increased over time and how is it promoted?
- Francis: It is promoted and there is an increase in it, especially from those doing ESOL learners particularly those wanting to do English and Maths and we're able to cross-sell. The more people we get doing those functional skills, the more we get doing digital.
24. Do you offer Skills Bootcamps (National Skills Fund)?
- Francis: We do not offer bootcamps, we don't have the facilities to do it.
25. Do the colleges and job centres fulfil adult skills needs entirely in Surrey or is there a need for SAL to offer this as well? Is it efficient to compete with other groups for government funding for this or should the council instead focus on making referrals?
- Francis: What you could say is that the skills needs for Surrey are met by the FE colleges and the adult learning provision we've got helps facilitate a more bespoke, specific area of provision that's needed and you leave it to the colleges to meet the skills agenda in a bigger way. That's dangerous because if the skills fund is going down a certain route and that's going to happen, I'm not sure there's going to be funding to meet community learning provision. So there are issues there we need to tackle. It's a fundamental, existential question. Our balance in order for us to exist properly needs to be nearer 50/50, and if we are going to do that and keep some of that community learning provision, we will have to charge full cost recovery - double our fee income and have a strategy that says if you want to do jewellery, pottery etc. you'll have to pay the full cost. And I think we're moving down that route.
 - Jonathan: A financial assistance model would become more important. What is it currently and how envisaging it changing?

- Francis: There is not a model at the moment. We'd need to have a complex fee system to ensure that community learning is not just for the people who can afford to pay. We'd need to create a sophisticated financial package that allows assistance for those who cannot pay. If National Skills Fund comes into being, community learning is going to be under severe strain and we're going to have to charge more to make it work and how to differentiate, makes it quite messy for the learner.

26. Does SAL offer or plan to offer any courses that embed green skills, climate emergence or carbon literacy?

- Francis: No.
 - Jonathan: Green skills are not just for industry, they're for consumers as well e.g. cooking with local seasonal ingredients, how to use energy more efficiently in the home.
- Francis: We facilitated the warm hubs.

27. Chris: Do we have the tutors to deliver provision for community learning?

- Francis: There are enormous holes. Not only are learners making different life choices, our tutors are as well. We're finding it far harder to recruit and so are FE colleges.

This page is intentionally left blank