

Progress towards being more of a learning city

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2004 a survey was undertaken with key intermediaries across the learning infrastructure in Birmingham. These were people with a range of involvements in structures, organisations or processes that played strong roles in determining how learning was viewed, presented, organised, and changed across the city. The results are summarised below.

2. Birmingham's learning infrastructure makes strong and active commitments to:

- supporting existing forms of learning and making these more open to wider sets of participants and inclusive for people with a range of needs
- linking education, training, employability, demographic changes and work-focused skills, increasingly on a locality or thematic basis
- incrementally improving the overall quality of provision
- achieving improved outcomes, for more people, particularly across the 11-25 age group
- joint focusing on collaboration at local area levels, and focusing additional activity on some target areas
- linking various statutory, voluntary and private provision in ways that reinforce recognised roles and specialisms.

3. General observations

Learning has a high profile and is seen as a valuable activity. But this is not always promoted as such to the public at large and the widespread network of information points continue to present learning as a set of relatively disconnected set of options.

Learning opportunities that are most heavily promoted remain mostly of one kind, reflecting particular views of the nature and purpose of learning. Wider forms of learning exist, but are largely dependent upon developmental or marginal funding.

As a system that is itself learning, the senior leadership of the network of organisations concerned with learning provision do much to anticipate longer-term and larger-scale changes and to adapt the pattern of learning opportunities that will help prepare for such changes. Below this level of leadership the system falls off towards activities that are more concerned with managing systems rather than managing change.

There is a sense that Birmingham feels that it can (or has to?) go it alone rather than acknowledge the extent to which it can learn from elsewhere, and a feeling that it fails to recognise much of the learning that is already happening within the city (and thus misses opportunities to incorporate this into wider thinking).

4. Birmingham is felt to be relatively strong at:

- celebrating achievements in learning, at a range of levels. This tends to be celebrating specific activities within the wider set of learning activities and is rarely a celebration of system-wide progress.
- having fairly ambitious plans; higher expectations than in the recent past; and a culture of striving to improve skills levels. More disaggregated data is being used to formulate possible, disaggregated solutions, rather than relying on 'block' solutions. There is sometimes a loss of momentum between the plan, the implementation, and the outcomes.
- demonstrating rapid progress and leading-edge work in specific cases, but with still a large degree of variability across the system overall.
- offering services that, overall, are improving and which get positive feedback from those involved.

5. Birmingham still has some way to go concerning:

- ensuring that particular groups do not remain marginalised by a lack of skills. More is still to be done to put larger scale actions in place that produce real, sustainable improvements for specific target achievements. Some groups consistently underachieve across a range of learning settings; high skills are distinctly associated with particular areas, institutions or groups.
- addressing unresolved conflicts between diversity of learning opportunities and cohesion within the learning system; between strategic developments and idiosyncratic ones. Different bits of the learning infrastructure still act in ways that are relatively disconnected from each other, from wider networks and from wider thinking. Support mechanisms operate on a 'reporting up' rather than a 'sharing across' model. More remains to be done to articulate clear interactions between wider strategic drives and how these get determined/implemented in local settings; and how locally fostered developments feed into wider 'knowledge'.
- the extent to which 'learning' is seen predominantly as small groups of individual learners being taught, in designated centres, by 'qualified' teachers, with a necessary set of restrictions. There are few examples of people learning from each other as a recognised and valued model. There are relatively few examples of learning to support group/community activities.
- the extent to which learning opportunities come with limited choice. There are too few 'fast track' mechanisms or options that offer variability of timescale or content.
- the influence of 'ownership' of services, developments etc.
- the system is in transition from hierarchical/silo/fixed operations to flexible/responsive/policy-led operations. Within this, there is wide variability of clarity around priorities, accountabilities and aspirations.

- the ways in which the learning infrastructure operates relatively closed knowledge loops, valuing the views of existing participants/likely participants. Some (in the loop) consistently get information whilst others (out the loop) consistently get very little. Finding things out relies too much on chance encounters. Whilst there is serendipity in these, more often learning is lost. Practitioners sometimes feel compelled to attend events in case they are 'missing out'. Even within the same organisation information can still be regarded as 'secret', with reduced commitments to sharing knowledge, exploring ideas or seeking the views of others. At the same time, the degree of cross-agency work has increased and this is making it easier for insights from one field of expertise to be transferred to another, although there are few structures to really ensure that this happens.
- the use that is made of anecdotal, over-specific case studies drawn from a limited viewpoint, rather than use being made of frameworks drawn from policy issues that may have wider applicability as thinking/review tools. Documents tend to be 'passive' reports (to be filed/processed) with occasional reports taking intelligent overviews (producing further learning that can be built into future developments). More use can be made of robust data to improve development of provision to ensure impacts for individuals and groups.
- the way that skills and understandings are lost with a frequent repeating of similar processes or functions. Experience and wisdom are under-recognised and underutilised. Knowledge is presumed to lie with particular people. Little emphasis is being put on critical thinking. Generating new understandings by groups focusing on a specific topic is not common practice. Little effective use is made of reviews, think tanks, cross agency attachments/secondments and so on – with little sharing of knowledge and understandings in ways that have rapid impacts on change.
- reconciling the fact that whilst (at the 'leadership of learning' levels) Birmingham is well-informed about the need for, and direction of, larger-scale wider changes, at the service delivery level change is still regarded as a challenge to established practice and authority, as a difficulty, regarded with some surprise, and often dealt with retrospectively.

September 2004