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# Adult Community Learning in Wales

November 2016



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## Introduction

This report provides an overview of standards, provision and leadership in adult community learning (ACL) in Wales. It is written in response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government in the Minister's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2016-2017. The report informs the Welsh Government and other interested bodies on the availability of provision that supports the Welsh Government's agenda for tackling poverty and its wellbeing agenda set out in the Well Being of Future Generations Act (Wales) (2015), particularly in meeting the needs of older learners.

The survey draws on evidence from meetings with strategic and operational leaders from all the adult community learning partnerships in Wales, with senior leaders from the WEA/YMCA Cymru, and with the Welsh Government, as well as scrutiny of verified outcome data, service delivery plans, curriculum files and other relevant documents.

## Background

Each year, the Welsh Government provides local authorities with funding for ACL for people over 19. The Welsh Government provides guidance on the use of the funding in an annual letter ('Adult Community Learning Service Delivery Plans Guidance'). Local authorities are required to submit an ACL service delivery plan and a strategic plan to the Welsh Government annually. Local authorities must demonstrate that they are working in partnership with local providers to deliver adult learning in their area. The Welsh Government analyses and discusses these plans with the local authority.

The most recent letters (2015-2017) remind local authorities that the overarching priority for ACL is tackling poverty, that is improving employability by providing courses in adult basic education for adult literacy and numeracy (ABE), digital literacy (information and communication technology, known as ICT), and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Local authorities are required to outline the planned provision to meet local need and to detail proposed outcomes and progression routes. They must also demonstrate how the provision and progression will be monitored.

The letter also encourages local authorities to take account of the revised Older People's strategy (Welsh Government, 2013) to:

- consider providing for those over 65 through informal social clubs and groups as well as more traditional provision
- provide 're-skilling' and 'up-skilling' for learners who have the potential to remain economically active
- provide Welsh-medium provision
- make the most of links with the third sector, including housing associations, and other Welsh Government-funded provision such as Communities First programmes and schools, when designing their provision

The funding allocated varies between local authorities and is not related to the level of deprivation or local need. In many cases, local authorities support the central government funded provision with additional funding and subsidise courses for other learners to support their general learning and wellbeing. Recent financial changes have led to a decline in this wider provision that, although now termed as 'leisure' classes, provides a continuation of education and a 'second chance' for many learners who did not thrive during their formal education. These classes also provide many other social benefits to less advantaged people and those who are socially isolated.

Following the introduction of the Learning and Skills Act (Great Britain, 2000), local authorities, further education colleges, the WEA YMCA Community College Cymru, and other 'third sector' voluntary organisations were encouraged by the Welsh Government to come together to form non-statutory ACL 'partnerships'. These partnerships plan and deliver adult community learning across a local authority area or in some cases across several local authorities (see the Appendix for further detail). The establishment of these partnerships has resulted in more cost effective, better-focused provision for the adult sector and has reduced the duplication of courses. Partnerships direct learners to the providers best equipped to deliver the course they are seeking and help to provide clear progression routes for the learner.

The Adult Community Learning Wales Partnership was established two years ago. This group meets on a regular basis and is the network through which the sector shares information and discusses Welsh Government strategy and priorities. The Adult Community Learning Wales Partnership is developing an 'adult learning framework' that takes into account government policies such as 'Successful Futures' (Donaldson, 2015). Through this framework, the Adult Community Learning Wales Partnership aims to improve the transition from statutory provision to ACL.

Currently, there is increasing integration of most post-16 learning across further education colleges, work-based learning providers, and higher education institutions. ACL has generally not been included in these developments, although local partnerships have made efforts to align the ACL planning cycle with that of further education colleges.

In 2015-2016, the Welsh Government undertook a review of its current policy and funding strategy and of the configuration of ACL provision in Wales to help inform future policy developments (Welsh Government, 2016a).

## Main findings

- 1 Over recent years, success rates<sup>1</sup> for ABE, ICT and ESOL are around 10 percentage points below completion rates<sup>2</sup>. This is because on average one in ten adult learners undertake and complete their course, but they have either not attempted or may not have been successful in the level undertaken.
- 2 In most ACL partnerships, financial reductions have had a significant impact on provision and staffing levels. In many cases, ACL partnerships have had to reduce courses and the number of venues. Nearly all partnerships have reduced the number of teaching staff, leading to a loss of expertise, especially in digital literacy. Reductions in administrative staff also mean that venues are open for shorter hours. This restricts the timetabling of classes leading to a more limited choice of courses, and means that many learners have greater distances to travel to classes.
- 3 ACL partnerships maintain a strong commitment to providing learning for hard-to-reach learners, such as the long-term unemployed, single parents, minority ethnic groups, people with physical and mental health needs, the isolated and the elderly, and those who have had poor experiences of statutory education. In many cases, partnerships have formed new alliances with other providers that have access to funding, but do not have the capacity to deliver the required courses.
- 4 Nearly all ACL partnerships are committed to providing 'leisure' or wellbeing courses, such as those in modern foreign languages, creative writing, art, craft and needlework, general household maintenance, gardening, and yoga and fitness training classes, on a full-cost recovery basis. However, this arrangement results in inequality of opportunity for learners who are less affluent or have difficulty accessing suitable transport.
- 5 Leaders of some ACL partnerships have successfully persuaded a number of tutors and learners from long-standing classes to form self-funding clubs where the social function of the class has become as important as the learning itself. In these cases, learners take charge of hiring the tutor and venue and organising the class themselves, facilitated through the partnership. This reduces the need for public funding, while still providing activity that supports wellbeing.
- 6 ACL partnerships have continued to apply quality assurance procedures to maintain the quality of teaching and learning. They are using the outcomes of their quality assurance well to inform self-evaluation and make decisions about ways forward. However, wider financial cuts in local authorities mean that many senior leaders in the ACL sector have moved jobs or left the service, resulting in fewer experienced staff to assure the quality of teaching and learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Success rates are calculated by dividing the learners' number of learning activities (courses) followed and attained by the number of courses terminated (completed or withdrawn).

<sup>2</sup> Completion rates are calculated as the number of learning activities completed divided by the number of learning activities terminated

## Recommendations

### **ACL partnerships should:**

- continue to assure the quality of the teaching and learning to provide all adult learners with value for money

### **The Welsh Government should:**

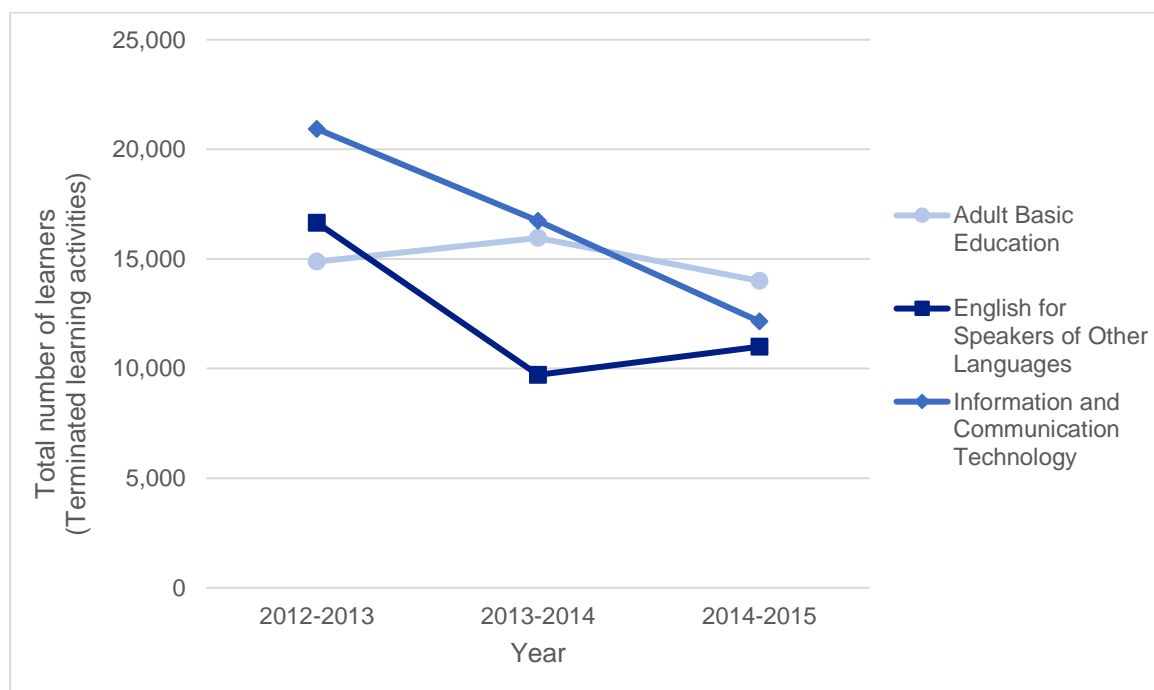
- review its policy and funding strategy for the ACL sector

## 1 Standards

### Enrolment and learner numbers

- 7 The Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR) verified data for 2012-2013 to 2014-2015 shows that the number of adult learners enrolling on ABE courses peaked at 15,958 in 2013-2014, while the number of enrolments were at their lowest (around 14,000) in 2014-2015.
- 8 Across the same period, the numbers of adult enrolments on digital literacy (ICT) courses were at its highest in 2012-2013 (20,931), but enrolments have since fallen year-on-year. In 2013-2014, the number of enrolments on digital literacy courses fell to 16,740 and fell again in 2014-2015 to 12,152. The number of adult enrolments for ESOL peaked in 2012-2013 (16,652), but dropped in 2013-2014 (9,714) before a slight increase in 2014-2015 (11,000).

### Number of learners (terminated learning activities), in ABE, ESOL and ICT sector/subject areas, 2012-2013 to 2014-2015



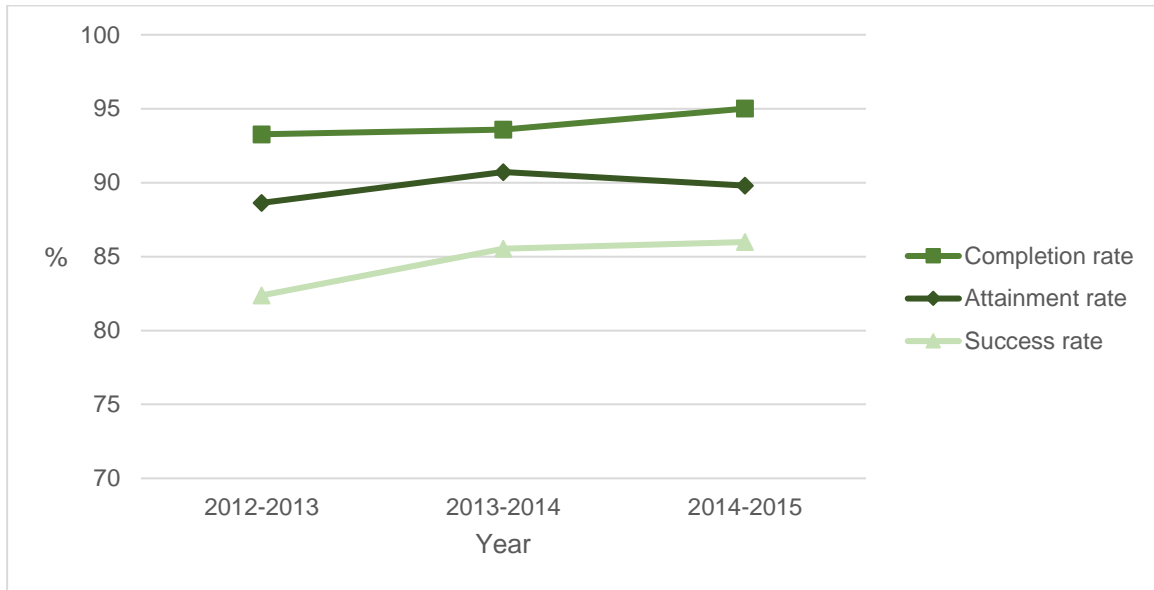
Source: Welsh Government (2016b)

### Completion and success rates

- 9 Completion rates for ABE, ESOL and ICT during this period ranged between 92% and 95%, while success rates ranged between 80% and 87%. During this period (2012-2013 to 2014-2015) success rates were on average, around 10 percentage points below completion rates. In 2014-2015, the success rate for ESOL was around five percentage points below the completion rate. Adult learners have many commitments in their lives, meaning that while they may complete a course they may not necessarily attempt the attainment.



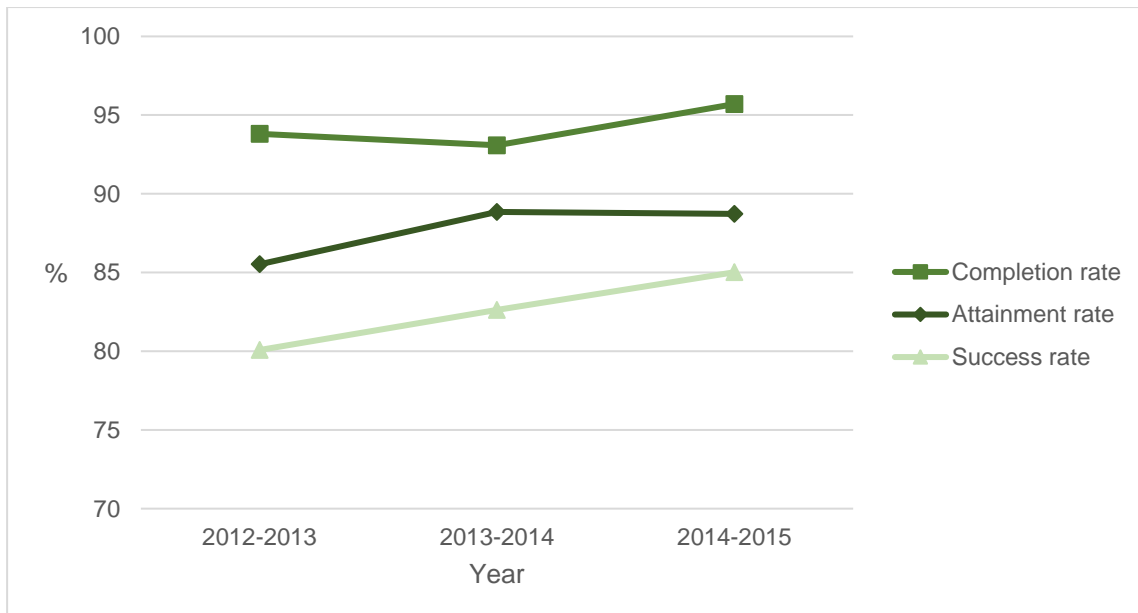
**Completion, attainment<sup>3</sup> and success rates in ABE sector/subject area, 2012-2013 to 2014-2015**



Source: Welsh Government (2016b)

- 10 Success rates for literacy between 2012-2013 and 2014-2015 show a two percentage points' increase year-on-year, although these outcomes remain, on average, around 10 percentage points below completion rates. Success rates for numeracy are more variable and do not show the same steady improvement.

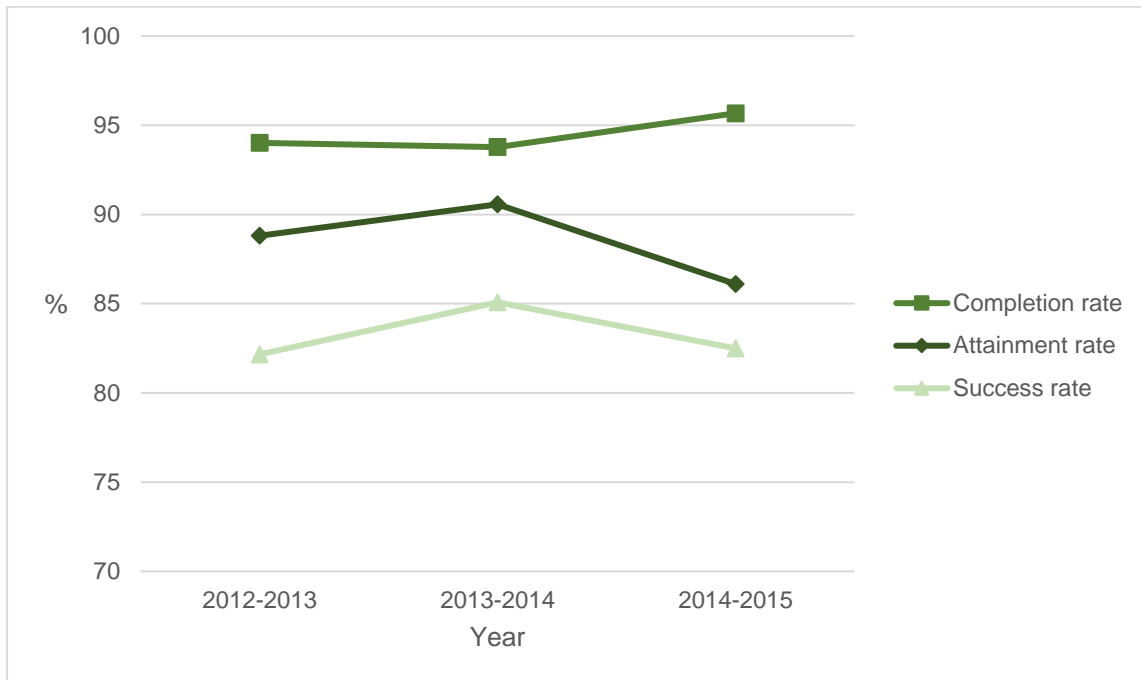
**Completion, attainment and success rates in ABE literacy skills, 2012-2013 to 2014-2015**



<sup>3</sup>Source: Welsh Government (2016)

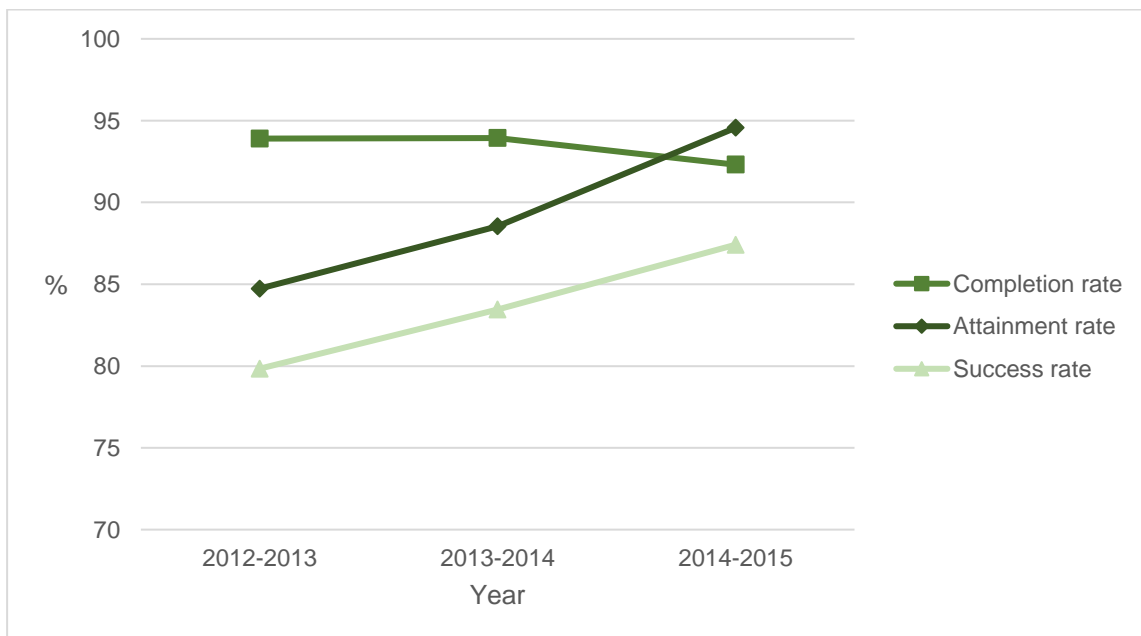
<sup>3</sup> Attainment rates are calculated as the number of learning activities attained divided by the number of learning activities completed.

**Completion, attainment and success rates in ABE numeracy skills, 2012-2013 to 2014-2015**



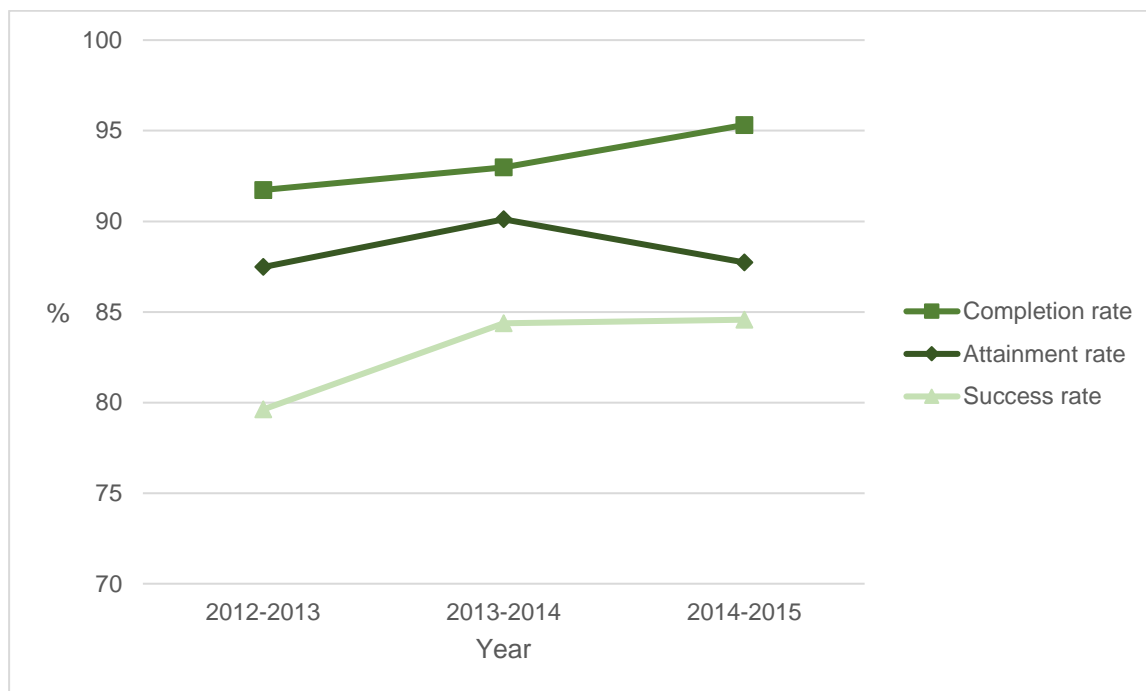
Source: Welsh Government (2016b)

**Completion, attainment and success rates in ESOL sector/subject area, 2012-2013 to 2014-2015**



Source: Welsh Government (2016b)

**Completion, attainment and success rates in ICT sector/subject area, 2012-2013 to 2014-2015**



Source: Welsh Government (2016b)

**Employability**

- 11 Data that might indicate whether adult community learning courses improve employability are not currently collected by the Welsh Government. However, the adult community learning partnerships provide anecdotal evidence regularly about the progress of individual learners who have gone on to take up employment or have benefited in other ways.

**2 Provision**

- 12 In 2015-2016, most ACL partnerships continue to work together to reduce the duplication of provision, to deliver as broad a range as possible of ACL activities and to provide progression routes for learners. In most ACL partnerships, a reduction in the government funding has had a significant impact on provision.
- 13 Nearly all strategic leaders in ACL partnerships across Wales have taken good account of the demographic and labour market information for their local authority and surrounding region when re-focusing provision for 2015-2016. This includes taking appropriate account of employment rates, and how many learners above 19 years old and above 50 years old need courses to improve their employability skills. They have also taken account of how many potential older learners wish to benefit from attending ‘leisure’ classes that contribute to their wellbeing.

- 14 Generally, leaders in ACL have tried to ensure continued provision of the Welsh Government funded courses that help learners develop their employability skills and help them enter the labour market. However, in many cases, partnerships have had to reduce the number of courses and venues where they are delivered.
- 15 As local authorities reduce the number of buildings for which they are responsible, partnerships have moved many of their classes into multi-functional venues, such as libraries. While these are often centrally located and have good transport links, the reduction in local authority staffing means that there are often reduced opening hours at the venues. This has an additional impact on the times when classes can be offered. In more highly populated areas, this means that learners may have to wait longer to join a suitable class and gain a qualification. Additionally, learners from more rural areas may have a greater distance to travel to attend class, thereby incurring greater transport costs, which may put them off enrolling on a course.
- 16 A very few ACL partners are piloting innovative ways to support learners who take longer to learn English or learners who want to develop their conversational skills in English further. In order to support this, they are training volunteer college students, who are studying for the Welsh Baccalaureate, to provide additional conversational classes in English. In return, the college students gain credit towards their studies through the development and accreditation of wider and volunteering skills. This helps the ACL partnership to reduce the waiting lists for their ESOL classes and it enables the learners to engage in purposeful activity in preparation for joining a class.
- 17 One effect of the introduction of new GCSEs in English and mathematics, combined with the requirement for learners to achieve higher grades before they can progress in work-based training or vocational courses in further education institutions, may be to create a body of learners who fail to achieve the new standards even after re-sitting the GCSE in further education settings. These learners and learners aged over 25 will need extra support outside of traditional further education and work-based learning providers. ACL services currently do not have the capacity to deliver this provision or the teachers experienced and qualified in the new curriculum requirements for the new GCSEs.
- 18 ACL partnerships maintain a strong commitment to providing classes for hard-to-reach learners. In most cases, ACL partnerships have maintained fruitful relationships with previous partners such as social service and health providers and training providers who may refer learners to ACL provision. They have also developed new relationships with other organisations in the locality that have funding, but do not deliver themselves the courses that their clients need. For example, a minority of ACL partnerships have maintained responsibility for delivering family learning classes, even though these are no longer funded by the Welsh Government, through alliances with a few schools who use their pupil deprivation grant to continue the provision. In other cases, partnerships are making new alliances with Communities First to deliver tailor-made courses to meet their clients' needs. They provide tasters of different learning to encourage progression into more demanding learning, in order to improve learners' chances of finding employment.
- 19 Nearly all ACL partnerships are committed to providing 'leisure' or wellbeing courses for learners in their locality. However, nearly all are unable to provide any subsidy for

classes and nearly all 'leisure' or wellbeing courses are now run on a full-cost recovery basis. In a growing number of cases, ACL partnerships are also unable to offer concessions, for example to the over 60s. Senior partnership leaders scrutinise levels of participation in the 'leisure' and wellbeing courses carefully and, where numbers mean that the course is not cost-effective, they either combine classes or close the class. This has led to the closure of many classes in arts, crafts and languages that led to a qualification. However, the impact is felt most strongly by the elderly and, in particular, women who are the majority participants in 'leisure' and wellbeing classes.

- 20 While most learner surveys confirm that many learners are happy to pay for courses, the rise in fees, coupled with the reduced times at which classes are run and a sometimes longer and more expensive journey to class, means that learners on low incomes cannot afford to attend classes. For older people who live alone or who are more isolated in rural areas, the lack of 'leisure' classes run on a regular basis represents the loss of valuable opportunities to socialise and keep minds and bodies healthy through new and challenging activities. It is also leading to inequality of opportunity for those who are less affluent.
- 21 However, where the social function of a class has become as important to learners as the learning itself, partnership leaders have been successful in persuading a growing number of tutors and learners to continue with the class as an independent club. In these cases, the learners and tutors set the class fees and partnership leaders support the club by hiring rooms in one of their venues. This ensures less drain on limited partnership resources, and the fee for hiring the room gives finances back to the providers for other use. However, there is no subsidy for those who are less able to afford learning and the cost of materials for classes often puts them beyond the reach of those who would benefit most from taking important first steps back into learning, employment or developing better social interaction.
- 22 Adult Learners' Week (now Festival of Learning, promoted by the Learning and Work Institute – England and Wales) celebrates the benefits of adult learning in Wales, but providers and partnerships have very limited budgets to advertise the availability of classes or to carry out the important work to encourage disadvantaged learners to participate to improve their life chances.

### **3 Leadership and quality assurance**

- 23 Senior leaders have a strong commitment to continuing to provide or support ACL to meet a broad range of learning and wellbeing needs. Many senior leaders have reviewed the provision in the light of decreasing public finances and have found innovative ways to retain provision albeit at a reduced level, for example by supporting other funded organisations to deliver courses in 'one-stop' venues such as libraries.
- 24 ACL partnerships are well aware of the need to maintain high quality of provision. In most cases, they have continued to apply existing quality assurance mechanisms such as classroom observations within and across the partnership, learning walks, and discussions with individual learners and groups of learners, as well as issuing

their own learner surveys. They have taken good account of the feedback to provide professional development for their staff. Leaders and managers use the outcomes of quality assurance well to help them evaluate the provision so that they understand their strengths and areas for development as well as being able to make well-informed decisions about future provision as a result of in-year changes to finances.

- 25 Partnership monitoring reports indicate that teaching is generally good across the sector and that the partnership is still able to provide useful professional development for its tutors. A few partnerships have provided professional development jointly to cut down on costs and to use expertise more effectively.
- 26 Wider financial cuts mean that many senior and operational leaders have either moved into new jobs or have left the service. This reduction in expertise is providing strategic leaders with a significant challenge in assuring the quality of the service in general and the quality of teaching in particular, as there are fewer operational leaders to carry out the work.
- 27 Nearly all ACL partnerships report that in 2015-2016 they have had to reduce the number of tutors either by not renewing contracts or through redundancy. The result, most often, is a loss of expertise within the sector, particularly in relation to digital literacy and modern foreign languages, as more experienced tutors leave. There is little or no opportunity to employ new tutors with the skills needed to meet the changing needs of learners, employers and to maintain progression in learning.
- 28 The reduction in numbers of middle leaders makes it more difficult to maintain high levels of quality assurance. However, most ACL partnerships place a high value on sustaining good quality teaching and learning for their learners. They have adapted quality assurance procedures and provided professional development and training for tutors using whatever resources are available.

## 4 Conclusions

- 29 Overall, there are a number of significant challenges affecting the future of ACL.
- 30 ACL is wider than the provision of basic skills courses, but one of the strengths of ACL has been its success in supporting adults who have missed out on basic education. While there are other government programmes to address employability, there is no overall strategy for the role of ACL in improving the employability skills of adults with poor basic skills.
- 31 Funding ACL annually, rather than on a longer-term basis (for example, a triennial basis), makes it difficult for partnership leaders to plan a coherent and sustainable strategy for adult learners, especially as the sector is non-compulsory and vulnerable to reductions in public finance.
- 32 Recently, ACL partnerships have begun to work with groups such as Communities First to provide bespoke courses to meet local communities' needs. The uncertainty surrounding the European Social Fund reduces the ability of partnerships to provide education that tackles poverty in Wales.

- 33 Partnerships struggle to find enough qualified and trained tutors to deliver courses in Essential Skills and digital literacy. The number of staff is declining, while the level of need is increasing.
- 34 The capacity of the ACL sector to provide sufficient ESOL classes that offer good progression opportunities for learners into further education or employment is limited. These classes play an important role in tackling radicalisation and extremism by introducing learners to Welsh culture.
- 35 Much of the partnership work with hard-to-reach learners and learners with additional learning needs is initially about building the confidence of such learners. This usually means offering courses in the learner's locality where they feel safe. Staffing cuts mean that expertise in these specialist areas is being lost and professional development opportunities for those tutors who remain are also reduced.
- 36 Providing 'leisure' courses that contribute to the wellbeing of learners and support a first step back into education for those who are less affluent, is a considerable challenge for partnerships. Many partnership leaders are committed and find creative ways to provide classes that engage people at all stages of their life in learning and in healthy living, but it is difficult to sustain these classes in the longer term.
- 37 Although the Welsh Government encourages providers to offer Welsh language provision, there are very few opportunities to continue learning through the medium of Welsh within the ACL sector, especially in partnerships where the predominant language of the community is English. Where such provision is not available, there are only limited contexts for learners to practise and develop fluency in Welsh in a supported context.
- 38 Currently, higher education providers and organisations, such as U3A (University of the Third Age) and higher education online courses, are not included in any pattern of ACL provision. This is an important exclusion as these institutions bring progression routes and possible economies of scale to more specialised courses and qualifications.

## Appendix: Adult community learning partnerships

There is no official list of ACL partnerships in Wales or a breakdown of the total number of learners for each partnership. However, the following list shows the current 15 partnerships and the geographical areas they cover:

- Gwynedd and Môn (Gwynedd and Anglesey)
- Cyswllt Dysgu (Denbighshire and Conwy)
- Flintshire
- Wrexham
- Powys
- Gwent five counties (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport & Torfaen)
- Cardiff and the Vale (Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan)
- Rhondda Cynon Taff
- Neath Port Talbot
- Merthyr
- Bridgend
- Swansea
- Carmarthenshire
- Ceredigion
- Pembrokeshire

The Workers Education Association (WEA), Cymru and the YMCA, Wales Community College works with the partnerships across Wales.

Data for ACL is not collected for overall partnership provision. Data is collected in the Welsh Government's LLWR database, grouped by provision type. The table below shows the types of provision. Some individual providers appear in more than one provision type.

1	Directly delivered by local authorities
2	Delivered by local authorities via a franchise arrangement with a further education institution
3	Other ACL delivered by further education institutions



**Number of learners in local authority community learning by age group, 2012-2013 to 2014-2015**

**Note:** Only includes learners in community learning delivered by local authorities, either directly or in collaboration with further education Institutions. Data excludes community learning provided directly.

<b><u>Age</u></b>	<b><u>2012-2013</u></b>	<b><u>2013-2014</u></b>	<b><u>2014-2015</u></b>
Under 16	95	65	60
16	325	320	215
17	275	270	170
18	285	305	265
19	340	310	265
20-24	2,150	2,055	1,735
25-39	7,690	7,190	5,915
40-49	5,320	4,710	3,470
50-59	5,015	4,565	3,075
60-64	3,275	2,555	1,275
65 and over	6,580	5,620	2,895
Unspecified	120	95	35
<b>All learners</b>	<b>31,475</b>	<b>28,050</b>	<b>19,375</b>

Source: Welsh Government (2016b)

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