

## MEETING THE NEED - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A survey of voluntary, health and community educational provision for adult learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

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Leading learning and skills

Part of the Learning and Skills Council Strategic Area Review in Surrey

“Meeting the Need” is a research project that looks at the education, training and development opportunities for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, focusing on provision within the voluntary, health and community sectors in Surrey. It had the following aims:

- Establish an overview of the existing provision for this group of learners made by organisations, which fall outside the standard educational provision (e.g. voluntary, health and community provision).
- Identify the type and level of unmet demand.
- Provide information to guide future planning provision.
- Look at equality of opportunity.
- Provide an idea of the number and profiles of learners with disabilities whose educational and training needs are met by such voluntary and community organisations.

### Methodology:

A telephone survey combined with eight in depth interviews of a cross-section of providers were used to gain an overview of the existing provision, identify the type and level of unmet demand and provide information to guide future planning.

### Telephone Survey:

54 organisations took part in the survey. 61% of these were from the voluntary sector, the remaining respondents being from health and community services. Only ten were involved solely in education. Altogether they provide education for over 4,500 learners with disabilities.

The main findings of the telephone survey included:

- Adults with learning disabilities were the group most widely catered for. Most organisations (81%) offer some form of basic skills training as part of their work, regardless of their client group.
- Courses in IT are by far the largest area of provision. This is followed by life skills and creative activities. Activities for adults with complex learning disabilities are tailor-made rather than subject based.
- Working on an individual basis, and being able to respond to the different support needs of each learner was seen as key to meeting learners’ needs.
- Transport was identified as the most significant barrier, together with low self confidence and a lack of accessible information.
- Ten organisations had courses which were over-subscribed. The need for a wider variety of courses for adults with learning difficulties was identified. Individuals who do not fit neatly into any specific category also miss out.

### In-depth Interviews:

Eight organisations were interviewed, representing a cross-section of types of provision, size of organisation and client groups. Together they provide education/training for over 300 disabled

people, with funding generally via Surrey Adult & Community Care Services, supplemented by funding grants in almost all the voluntary organisations.

Three main groups were identified as having particular unmet needs:

- Older people (40+) who had not benefited from the legislation on education entitling disabled people to formal education.
- Adults with profound and complex disabilities who are living in the community and in residential settings, where a lack of recognition that these adults have learning needs contributes to their exclusion.
- People with sensory impairments, who need specialist equipment or staff to access learning.

The main findings of the In-depth Interviews included:

- Inaccessible public transport was seen as a particular barrier to learning, combined with a lack of confidence, physical access especially to older buildings, and the need for specialist equipment and teaching skills.
- The low expectations of what disabled people can achieve can also restrict the learning and training opportunities offered to them.
- The ways in which such barriers might be overcome include: a flexible approach by staff trained in disability awareness, a friendly learning environment, extra support staff, appropriate equipment, local provision, modular programmes, long term funding to enable forward planning.
- The need for a comprehensive source of information on the education and training opportunities to provide a single source of reference was identified.
- In regard to supporting people with disabilities into employment, it was felt that employers need 'educating' in the value of taking on disabled employees plus an awareness of the government funding available.
- Learning was seen as an activity which need not always lead to employment, but can raise confidence and be a source of personal fulfilment. However in measuring outcomes, the achievements of many disabled people are excluded even though they may be of great personal significance.
- The key educational and training priorities identified were communication skills and independent living skills, especially for those with learning disabilities, but also for some people with physical disabilities. IT was also an area of importance to young and older disabled people.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations:**

The front-line staff with whom we talked, both in the survey and interviews, have a very clear understanding of the needs of their clients and the ways in which these needs could be met.

Continued, consistent & flexible funding for basic needs is essential, with additional resources directed at the groups identified as having particular needs. Partnership work with employers could open up job opportunities.

Transport needs to be addressed by agencies working together and in consultation with service users. A comprehensive and accessible central source of information is fundamental to improving access to provision.

**Surrey Learning and Skills Council would like to thank all the people who gave time from busy schedules to help us complete this piece of work, and for sharing their insights.**