

Survey of Management Information Systems in Community Learning and Development (CLD)

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Overall summary

Background

1. As part of the CLD Performance Information Project (PIP) it was recognised that as well as identifying *what* information should be used to indicate the performance of the sector, it was important to identify *how* this information should be collected and used. Crucially this had to take account of the current stage of development of the CLD sector in relation to collecting and using information, and its capacity to develop further.

2. The Management Information Systems (MIS) survey was developed by Learning Connections to gain a snapshot of the current level and nature of the systematic collection and use of data in the community learning and development (CLD) sector. The overall aim of the survey was to identify the capacity of the field to collect, manage and use performance information specifically relating to CLD.

3. The survey had the following objectives:

- Survey a substantial sample of CLD providers across the local authority & voluntary sectors;
- Identify how CLD providers currently define, identify and record **inputs** to CLD activity;
- Identify how CLD providers currently define, identify and record **outputs** of CLD activity;
- Identify how CLD providers currently define, identify and record **outcomes** of CLD activity;
- Report the current stage of development of performance/management information systems;
- Identify good practice which could be built on across the CLD sector; and,
- Identify priority support and development needs which, if met, could allow the CLD sector to develop improved management or performance information systems.

4. The overall survey was broken down into four constituent parts:

- The local authority CLD sector;
- The voluntary adult learning sector;
- The voluntary youth work sector; and,
- The voluntary community capacity building (CCB) sector.

5. This paper sets out an overall summary of the results from these four strands. The paper focuses on drawing out common key themes and addresses each of the objectives set out above.

Survey design

6. The approach to each strand was slightly different reflecting the unique conditions of each but was based on a core set of questions based on the survey objectives. The surveys were carried out on behalf of Learning Connections by:

- Rocket Science UK Ltd: local authority CLD providers and voluntary sector CCB providers
- YouthLink Scotland: voluntary sector youth work providers
- Learning Link Scotland: voluntary sector adult learning providers

7. The surveys of local authorities, and voluntary sector adult learning and youth work providers took a national approach, and was successful in gaining a sample of providers from across Scotland.

8. The voluntary community capacity building (CCB) survey proved to be more problematic, in part because no intermediate body exists for CCB. This meant that no national dataset of CCB

providers existed. Any comprehensive survey of these organisations would therefore require an exercise identifying all the organisations to be included. This was not feasible over the whole of Scotland.

9. It was therefore decided that a sample of local authority areas would be selected and all voluntary sector CCB providers within this group would be first identified and then surveyed based on the surveys used in the other three work streams.

10. Across each of the surveys, however, each group was asked a similar set of questions. This related to the data they collected specifically on:

- Input information (e.g. staffing, finance);
- Baseline information (e.g. learners details, equalities information);
- Output information (e.g. courses delivered, attendance); and,
- Outcome information (e.g. measure of confidence, skills development).

11. Organisations were also asked about the details of the information they collect, how they collect it, how they store and how use it, and how they would like to develop their systems.

12. Across the four streams around 130 organisations participated in the survey (24 local authorities, 35 voluntary adult learning organisations and 70 voluntary youth work organisations).

Key findings

Overall finding

13. At local level a range of systems have been independently developed to meet organisational and sectoral needs for performance information relating to CLD. There is wide variation in the sophistication and comprehensiveness of these systems. However there are also many common elements between systems, particularly at a thematic level (i.e. the **type** of data collected), though less so at a detailed level (i.e. the specific **definitions** used).

Input information

14. Most organisations collect some information on their **inputs** for delivering CLD activity. Across all types of organisation the main areas recorded are funding, staff resource (both salaried and volunteers) and equipment and materials provided. Recording of information on materials and equipment is more prevalent amongst voluntary organisations than the local authorities.

15. The information is mainly collected through administrative systems. In local authorities central human resources and finance functions were noted as sources of this type of information, although again central collation is not systematic and the information is held both electronically and on paper. This information appears to be used strategically during the planning of work.

16. There are no widely accepted definitions of inputs although there is broad agreement around the types of data collected. The following types of data are collected by a substantial number of the organisations surveyed:

- Funding;
- Staff time (full time/part time);
- Equipment;
- Premises/buildings;
- External trainers;
- Learning materials;
- Volunteer time;
- In-kind support (N.B. only voluntary organisations reported collecting information on in-kind support).

Baseline information

17. All the organisations surveyed reported collecting some **baseline** information on those participating (both as individuals and as part of a group) in their activity. For the purposes of this report baseline information is viewed as an aspect of **output** information, as it relates to the characteristics of those who are taking up the opportunities provided by organisations. However it was often viewed as a distinctive facet by those surveyed and so has been included here separately.

18. The majority of this information could be classed as administrative in nature and is similar across local authorities and voluntary organisations. In relation to community capacity building (CCB) work recording of individual information was still a significant feature, though less than in other areas. Collection of baseline information on groups was also a significant feature in CCB.

19. Baseline information is normally collected through registration and attendance forms by those running the opportunity. The information is normally held locally, either in paper files or collated into electronic media, and in general is not used in any systematic way (i.e. routinely at an organisational level) to plan or evaluate work.

20. Many systems collected at least some information relevant to equalities considerations. Almost universally this included age and gender, though there was also significant systematic collection in relation to ethnicity and disability. Very few collected information in relation to religion or sexual orientation.

21. Many also collected elements of other socio-demographic information. Most frequently this was participant addresses but employment status and income level were also reported. Where these latter items were recorded, this tended to be related to the focus of the organisation. For example a course targeted at those not in employment, education or training (NEET) would unsurprisingly be much more likely to collect information on age and employment status, while more general learning courses would tend not to.

22. There are no widely accepted definitions of baseline information although there is broad agreement around the types of data collected. The following types of data were collected by a significant proportion of organisations surveyed (where there were significant sector all differences, these are noted below – but see note in paragraph 18 in relation to individual information in CCB):

Item	Sector
Participant Name;	All
Participant Address;	All
Gender;	All
Age;	All
Joining Date;	All
Leaving Date;	All
Disability;	More likely in adult learning
Ethnicity;	More likely in adult learning
Parent/ Guardian	Most likely in youth work
Employment	Most likely in some adult learning and employment-focussed projects
Qualifications on entry	Most likely in adult learning

Where baseline information was collected on groups (mainly in relation to CCB), this tended to include:

- Group size;
- Group meeting place;
- Purpose of group;
- Geography (community) covered by the group;
- Theme (community of interest) covered by the group;
- Date of formation; and,
- End date.

Output information

23. Most organisations collected some information on the **outputs** of their work. In the main this focussed on attendance/participation and in most cases it related back to the baseline information collected.

24. Amongst the voluntary organisations most noted that they recorded information on publicity and publications as a key output. This was not the case amongst the local authorities, where a minority (around 20%) recorded information on other resources produced including publications. Voluntary organisations also reported project-specific reports as a key output. This relates to reporting back to funding bodies.

25. Output information is used for planning, monitoring and evaluation of work. There was no clear pattern around the storage of the information. It could be captured through either electronic or paper media, and could either be held locally and centrally.

26. There are no widely accepted definitions of outputs although there is broad overlap around the types of data collected:

- Attendance pattern of individuals;
- Attendee numbers;

- Number of events/courses;
- Number and details of groups;
- Group or individual learning plans (most prevalent in adult learning);
- Publicity produced; and,
- Project reports.

Outcome information

27. Again most organisations report using outcomes to gauge the impact of their work. Although a large majority (over 70 per cent), this is not as great a proportion as those that reported collecting information on inputs and outputs.

28. Generally this type of information is more often collected and used at the practitioner level to carry out individual level evaluations. Though instances were found across all sectors, it is not widely used at an organisational level for planning, monitoring or evaluation of work plans.

29. The information is generally held alongside the individual learner or group files at a operational level, either in electronic media and on paper as appropriate.

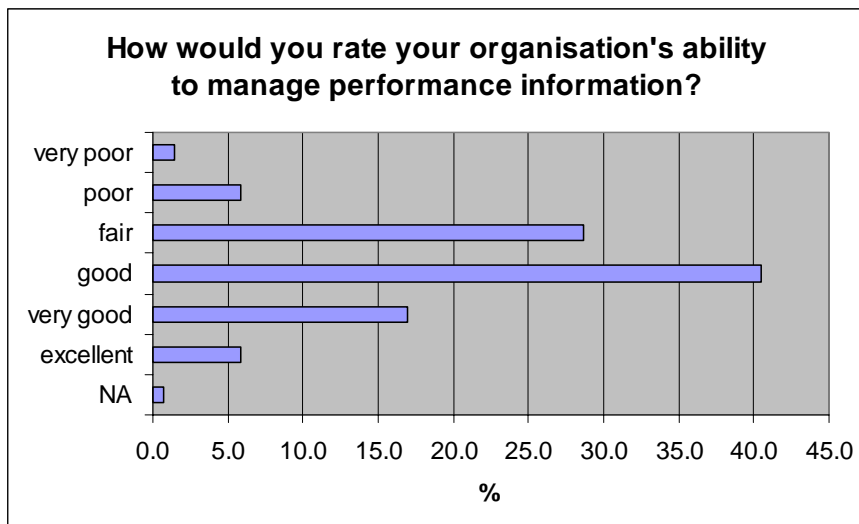
30. Some organisations identified that in order to fully understand the long term impact of their work it would be necessary to track learners over a period of time. Although several organisations reported attempting to do this, it is rarely done systematically and has proved to be very difficult. Maintaining contact with learners after they have moved outside an organisation is particularly challenging. Where tracking has been carried out it has provided valuable information but it was noted that the cost of implementing a long term follow-up may not be justifiable based on the data produced.

31. There is no consistent set of outcomes in use across the country. In general outcomes are collected at a practice/operational level and organisational level outcome frameworks are infrequently used. *LEAP* and *How Good Is Our CLD?* were mentioned as being used as sources of outcome indicators (i.e. tools to assist in the process).

32. There is some evidence of unease around the collection of quantitative information to describe the activity and outcomes of the sector. Quantitative information is seen as being more suited to systematic collection of data at organisational level, while qualitative information is more associated with local collections. Similarly, qualitative information is seen as giving a richer picture of the activity and is more in-line with local assessments of outcomes. Some organisations (particularly in the voluntary sector) reported a perception that qualitative data is not valued as highly by funders when work is being assessed.

Capacity to manage information

33. The chart below shows how the organisations taking part rated their capacity to manage the types of information discussed in the survey.



34. 'Good' was the most common rating (over 40%). At the extremes 7.5% rated themselves as poor or very poor and 23% rated themselves as very good or excellent. On the whole voluntary organisations rated themselves slightly higher than the local authorities, with the largest number (45%) rating themselves as 'good' compared to most local authorities (43%) rating themselves as fair.

35. The state of development of systems is extremely varied. Some organisation have developed or have purchased electronic systems, others use robust paper based systems, while many organisations appear to be at a stage of transition between the two. Even where organisations were increasingly using electronic systems, it was sometimes felt that there would need to be an element of paper storage. This was particularly the case in the many organisations that feel they have not been able to invest to the extent they would like in ICT infrastructure.

36. Some concern was expressed around the impact of data protection legislation on widespread collection and storage of data. Concern was also expressed around ensuring that data collection systems are quality assured for use with people with communication difficulties, specifically the deaf or hard of hearing, the blind and those for whom English is not their first language [was this in relation to staff, participants or both?] Both.

37. Particular issues identified as impacting on the current state of development that should be considered when looking at how to best develop systems in the future are;

- **Stakeholder needs** – Who are the stakeholders who require information and what do they need? Both internal (e.g. staff, chief executives, boards) and external stakeholders (e.g. funders, inspectors, communities, service users) should be considered.
- **Staff needs** - It is essential to consider the needs of staff when considering systems developments. Ad-hoc systems develop to meet staff needs. When new systems are developed they must continue to meet the needs of the staff who are asked to use them or they will revert back to the old ad-hoc systems.
- **Capacity to develop systems** – Organisations can find the capacity to develop systems either internally or externally. Particularly in smaller organisations good systems have often been developed where a member of staff has a particular interest or background in system development and IT. Relevant experience is very important when designing and specifying systems to be purchased externally to avoid systems quickly becoming obsolete. When a system has been developed based on the skills of a particular person it is important that the skills are passed on to others.

38. Tying these three points together is a tension caused by the value attached to producing information, compared to the value given to providing a service. Both staff and stakeholders can view data collection and management as additional administration, rather than a fundamental part of the work of the organisation. As such they do not attach the same priority to this as to their contact time with individuals and groups.

39. The sharing of knowledge and experience between organisations appears to be limited and occurs on an ad-hoc basis. Respondents across the surveys noted that opportunities to share knowledge would be welcomed.

40. Attitudes towards the development of better performance information are generally positive. Increased use of IT is accepted as being of benefit in simplifying how data is collected and stored, although the development of IT systems has been hampered by the lack of resources and the lack of appropriate skills and experience. Where IT systems have been developed the work is often done in isolation. There are currently a number of organisations working on the development of systems.

41. Lack of training in the use of data and data systems was widely acknowledged as being a barrier to the development of performance information.

Use of data

42. The main uses of data reported through the survey are reporting back to funders or other partners and internal evaluation of work. In many cases, particularly around the baseline data, information is gathered for purely administrative purposes. That is to say that the information is collected as part of the administrative processes (e.g. course bookings, insurance) of the organisation rather than being collected specifically for statistical purposes.

43. Evaluation of activity is carried out both with the participants and with colleagues, with peer groups as well as within management structures. Planning was also seen as being an important use for the data collected particularly around allocation of resources, though this was less frequently reported overall.

44. A primary focus of data collection in voluntary organisations is on providing evaluation and reporting to funders and updates to boards. Although also mentioned as a motivation in local authorities the clearer focus of reporting is within the authority to managers and staff and, in some cases, to CLD partnerships.

45. The provision of information to funders causes significant problems for voluntary bodies due to the range of different information required by different funding bodies. The variation in the data requirements of funders are seen as being both time-consuming and a barrier to developing a single in-house system. It was acknowledged that any system would need to retain the flexibility to meet the varying needs of multiple funders.

46. Lack of flexibility in systems was also noted as a barrier in local authorities. The lack of ability to produce flexible cross-tabulated results was seen as hampering the usefulness of statistics within the planning, monitoring and evaluation cycle.

47. It was reported that in a significant number of cases information is collected and not used or is not used to any great degree. Support around how to analyse and interpret data was reported to be potentially helpful.

Conclusions

48. Information on the inputs, outputs and outcomes, along with baseline participant information, is widely collected across the voluntary and local authority sectors. There is however no consistent approach to, first what is collected, secondly how it is collected and finally how it is used.

49. Although there is no evidence of agreement around specific definitions there is a broad convergence between organisations around the types of quantitative information – particularly in relation to inputs and outputs – that they collect. From this starting point it should be possible to develop a best practice model which can be applied across the entire field.

50. The picture in relation to outcomes is more complex. Most organisations reported that they collected information in relation to them (though less often than on inputs or outputs) but in the clear majority of cases this was not in the context of an organisational framework of outcomes (rather outcomes were set and information recorded at practice level).

51. Management information systems have developed independently driven by the needs of stakeholders. The resulting systems are often inflexible and although fit for the specific purpose for which they have been developed make it difficult to exploit the wider benefits of the data being collected.

52. Organisations are at a wide range of stages of development of their systems depending on the unique challenges of their local conditions. There is however broad agreement over the importance of collecting and using information around their performance although this is often relatively unfocussed. Data collection is generally seen as a 'good thing', although it is often perceived as an additional burden beyond the core activity of engagement with learners and groups.

53. Although the majority of organisations rate their ability to manage performance information highly, they appear to be receptive to a more comprehensive approach to collection of data and are particularly keen on accessing additional support to increase their capacity to collect and use performance information.

54. Access to consultancy support and training around the collection and use of data within their local context have both been suggested as helpful developments. The lack of knowledge around ICT, both in terms of the use of technology and around specifying the business needs for an IT-based system, was flagged as an additional area where support would be welcomed.

55. The development of increased national support for the collection of management information was in general welcomed and in some instances this extended to support for the development of a generic national system. However alongside this respondents emphasised the need to develop systems suited to their unique infrastructure, processes and priorities. It should also be noted that many organisations have already made considerable investment in data systems.

Next steps

56. The following points are being taken forward from this survey:

- A best practice model, focussing on quantitative information around inputs and outputs (including baseline data) will be developed and included in the National Framework for Performance Information in CLD. This will set out the data that could be collected, how it should be gathered and how it should be interpreted. It will be developed as a 'menu' of options that organisations may wish to use rather than as a prescriptive national data model but including a relatively small core of items that could be gathered to provide national data.
- A framework of the outcomes of CLD practice is currently the subject of a consultation process. This will also be included in the National Framework. It will provide a tool to assist organisations in identifying and recording the outcomes of their work, and over time could develop greater consistency nationally in this area.
- The National Framework will also include plans for a programme of support developed specifically for CLD practitioners and managers
- Communication and consultation with the field will be maintained to develop the positive attitude towards the collection and use of performance data within CLD. Effort will be made to facilitate communications between organisations, particularly those at similar stages of development.



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