**EAAL 2020: England Development Project**

**Review of approaches to community learning in local planning for the devolved / delegated Adult Education Budget**

**Interim report**

**Introduction**

This interim report summarises the findings of research to date into approaches to community learning in local planning for the devolved / delegated Adult Education Budget (AEB) in England. It draws on evidence from the seven Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) to which AEB funding has so far been devolved[[1]](#footnote-1) and the Greater London Authority.

The research aims to shed light on the following research question:

*To what extent will community learning be better off under devolution?*

Devolution of AEB began in the 2019/20 academic year so is at a relatively early stage. This is an opportune time, therefore, to investigate what initial indications suggest about the risks and opportunities which skills devolution presents for community learning.

**Approach**

The research consists of two strands.

1. Desk review of the following current documents / materials for Greater London and each devolved Mayoral Combined Authority area:

* Local Industrial Strategy
* Regional Strategic Skills Plan (exact title varies)
* Websites, papers and communications in the public domain relating to devolved AEB funding, planning and delivery.

The review was undertaken using the following themes:

1. The role and contribution of skills devolution in the delivery of local strategic priorities.
2. Local approaches to community learning.
3. Evaluation of AEB outcomes and impact.
4. Stakeholder engagement via the EAAL England Impact Forum, to obtain feedback on the emerging findings from the desk review and develop the analysis in light of members’ knowledge, experiences and insights. Initial findings were presented at the first Impact Forum and interested members were invited to join a working group to explore the evidence in more depth. Two online workshops were held with working group members from devolution and non-devolution areas.

This report includes key findings from the desk review and workshops, arranged under each of the three themes, together with a summary of the desk review evidence for each devolution area (annex).

**Summary of key findings**

1. **The role and contribution of skills devolution to the delivery of local strategic priorities**

* The way in which the role and contribution of skills devolution is articulated can only be understood within the policy context defined by the national and local industrial strategies (LIS). The stated aim of the UK’s Industrial Strategy is “to boost productivity by backing businesses to create good jobs and increase the earning power of people throughout the UK with investment in skills, industries and infrastructure.” Local strategies, and devolution, are intended to strengthen the capacity of local areas to deliver increased productivity and economic growth by tailoring interventions to local needs and circumstances.
* Providers’ experience confirms that Community Learning (CL) has to fit into a narrative of economic growth and assisting productivity. Across MCAs there is a consistent expectation that what will be funded will contribute to the economic agenda. Skills are presented as sitting across the industrial and civic domains, but CL sits closer to the civic end of the spectrum. This makes it fundamentally challenging to get the message of the value of CL across to MCAs which are primarily interested in industrial impacts.
* A number of strategic themes emerge strongly and consistently across local areas in defining the role and contribution of skills:
* meeting the current and future skills needs of businesses, including understanding and addressing local skills shortages and skills gaps;
* strengthening provision and pathways in technical education;
* promoting inclusive growth;
* enabling upskilling for people in low wage, low skill occupations (some devolved areas are extending the AEB Low Pay pilot and in some cases raising the support threshold to the National / London Living Wage);
* enabling reskilling for people in roles at risk of redundancy / obsolescence;
* developing entry and progression pathways for learning and work;
* developing high level skills;
* developing digital skills;
* improving basic skills (English, Maths, ESOL);
* strengthening Careers Information Advice and Guidance;
* developing flexible delivery models.
* The devolution of AEB means that the funding receives considerable attention. Each local area has dedicated web pages which explain the role and purpose of AEB and how the funding will be used as well as providing links to supporting materials and information. In some cases, details of funding allocations are published. Broadly, AEB is described as a means of developing targeted and tailored local responses which will contribute towards delivering strategic skills priorities, with a focus on the ways in which funding and commissioning will strengthen entry and progression pathways for the most disadvantaged, e.g. unemployed adults, adults in low paid work and adults in priority communities. Funding is prioritised for learning that is aligned to skills shortage occupations and priority growth sectors. There is a strong focus on using AEB for workforce reskilling and upskilling and to provide a platform for progression to higher level skills (L3+) which are more likely to impact on productivity.
* Alignment, integration and similar terms abound in the local strategic plans. Much is made of the intention to develop and implement whole system approaches. Some specific models are presented, e.g. GM Unified Public Services Model. Within this context, a range of (overlapping) “sub-systems” are identified in which skills are an integral element.
* Employment and skills system: skills provision is aligned with and subservient to labour market needs. The role of AEB is to provide foundation skills, entry and progression opportunities that will support progression in learning and employment. Local areas state their intention to align and link AEB with both other skills programmes (Traineeships, Apprenticeships, higher technical education, other HE – the term “skills ecosystem” is occasionally used) and employment support programmes. AEB is also targeted on skills shortage and priority occupations and sectors.
* Business support system: skills are central to workforce planning and development to drive innovation and growth; support for business growth and better skills utilisation will create better jobs and strengthen demand for higher level skills. (This could be interesting to unpick further as there is a chicken and egg element. How far should the aim be to increase the supply of higher skilled individuals in advance of the ability of employers to utilise those skills?)
* Skills, employment and health system: this is less consistently articulated across local areas but is a priority for some where health inequalities have been shown to have a major impact on levels of economic inactivity, notably Manchester, Liverpool and TV. GM proposes integrated work, skills and health interventions and alignment of AEB with funding for work and health programmes. Of course, this approach also needs to be understood in terms of the productivity / growth agenda – poor health / mental health is a brake on UK productivity.
* Skills, work and transport system: again, this is less prominent but several local areas (London, TV and West of England) state their intention to develop an integrated strategic approach which enables transport related barriers to learning and work to be addressed.

However, in reality, siloed funding works against integration.

* The working group explored alternative starting points for thinking about the purpose of skills to those put forward in the strategy documents of devolved areas. For example, a proposition that the aim of LAs/MCAs is for residents to thrive in life has the potential to drive the bringing together of a “network of wellbeing” into which AEB fits. LAs / MCAs have to have a network that extends beyond skills if they want skills to flourish. This calls for an expansive definition of skills. A skills strategy delivery needs to be effectively integrated with other strategies for e.g. health, transport, housing, etc. Key is convincing the networks around individual services that they need the networks of other services too. Each can benefit from one another’s connections and insights.

1. **Local approaches to community learning**

* Community learning as a distinct strand of AEB receives little attention in strategy documents and communications. The local *AEB Funding Rules* are the only place where it is addressed by all areas. It is clear from these that, in common with the wider devolved AEB, CL is expected to support progression to further learning or employment. The national CL objectives which were first set out in *New Challenges New Chances* (2011) have broadly been adopted in these documents and it is stated that community learning which is to be funded through AEB must contribute to these. This approach is in line with the stated intentions of local areas to maintain continuity during these early stages of devolution, but it may be expected that such consistency will diminish over time.
* The narrowing of the concept of ‘skills’ within policymaking, and dependency within devolved areas on local decision makers who have limited understanding of adult community learning presents a significant risk to the funding for this type of provision. A recent *Handbook[[2]](#footnote-2)* produced by England’s Local Government Association (LGA) aims to raise awareness and open civic leaders’ / councillors’ eyes to possibilities of Adult Education Budget for community-based work. It includes useful definitions and an outcomes framework.
* Devolution presents an opportunity to pull together a coherent plan and strengthen local coordination and collaboration for Adult Education, but it is not clear how robustly this is being done in local areas. The structure / composition of the provider base and “who is in and who is out” is hugely variable across MCAs. There are some indications that devolution may be leading to greater splitting / segmentation of the provider base in terms of what each type of provider (ACL, colleges, ITPs) should be delivering. The rationale for this kind of planning approach is unclear, but it may be an attempt to simplify the landscape.

1. **Evaluation of AEB**

* What will be measured is influenced by the perceived role of AEB and national reporting requirements. Overwhelmingly, the current focus is on AEB’s role in supporting progression to further learning (at a higher level) and entry or progression in employment (including self-employment), and these are the outcomes that providers are asked to capture and report.
* None of the devolved areas has yet produced an evaluation strategy for AEB. Indications of what measures will be used to assess the effectiveness of provision suggest a limited approach in some areas. Several areas state that developing a local approach is a work in progress and its is expected that data collection requirements will change. With a few exceptions, strategy documents and other communications say little about the possible or anticipated wider social outcomes of learning. Liverpool and London are notable exceptions.
* The brigading of AEB in service of the growth and productivity agenda has become highly politicised in some regions. As a devolved budget, it is one of the ways in which an MCA can demonstrate its impact on key measures of success around moving people into jobs or preparing them for work. This is likely to become increasingly the case post-Covid, with growing unemployment and the need to restart the economy. AEB is now being talked about in some MCAs as an investment plan, with the identification at strategic level of elements where growth is desired. CL is barely mentioned in this context and demonstrating to MCAs how CL delivers value and impact is a huge challenge for the sector.
* A six-part outcomes framework has been developed by ACL providers in London and is presented in the LGA *Handbook.* There is a strong sense from the sector that a broad national framework is needed which can be adopted and adapted across devolved areas, and interest in undertaking a national outcomes pilot with associated metrics. LGA model is felt to be sufficiently generic and open to have the potential to be used across MCAs.
* While it is evident that policymakers currently have little appetite for participation as the main measure for adult education, stakeholders stress that it remains key to demonstrating impact.
* Post Covid, the positive health and wellbeing impacts of CL need to be emphasised. The narrative should be that *we can only have an economic recovery if the citizens of local area are able to be more productive and engaged in widest sense.* This could be a starting point for opening the discussion about the value of CL with local policymakers.

1. **Conclusions and implications to date**

Following discussions with the project subgroups, it was felt we needed a model for analysis:

* **Purpose**—linking broadly to our analysis of the strategic context for skills and the positioning of community learning within it
* **Approaches**—how community learning is funded and listened to as an approach to the delivery of local skills (and other) needs
* **Evaluation**—how strategies are evaluated, how skills (and other outcomes) are measured, and within that community learning

The model should be regarded as a cycle whereby the evaluation of the effectiveness will inform future planning. It will allow policymakers to better understand and revise the purpose of the AEB in future.

Under each of the three sections of the cycle we have devised, with the help of the subgroups, the type of questions that could be asked about local skills strategies. This would be a useful resource for local communities and their representatives who wish to hold regional planners to account.

**Purpose**

* What narrative(s) do(es) skills and AEB planning fit into?
* What strategies is the AEB seen to align to: skills, social inclusion / social cohesion, health equality etc?
* If it aligns to a wider strategy, what is the role of AEB within that strategy?
* What definitions are used for skills, Adult Education, community learning, basic skills etc?
* What other accepted concepts are used: progression, achievement, attainment, provision, provider, prime contractor, sub-contractor?

**Approaches**

* What is the operational model that drives the local approach? (Market-driven? Collaborative? Mixture of both?)
* How is the local provider base defined? Is there prime/sub-contractor model? What is the role of smaller organisations and those for whom learning is not their key purpose?
* Are there opportunities to co-fund across siloes (for example, health / wellbeing)?
* To what extent does the delivery of national entitlements ‘skew’ or destabilise provision?

**Evaluation**

* Is there an evaluation strategy in the public domain? If so, how does it relate to the strategy?
* To what extent are outcome measures being used alongside outputs such as qualifications?
* Are local metrics and measures being designed or are they buying into a national system?
* How do the measures relate to local data on need and demand?
* How will evaluation influence future planning and what are the democratic mechanisms for this?

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| **Areas for exploration at the Impact Forum?**   * **What other questions should we be asking?** * **How should these questions be best presented?** |

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1. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Liverpool, Greater Manchester, North of Tyne, Tees Valley, West of England and West Midlands. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.local.gov.uk/learning-life-role-adult-community-education-developing-thriving-local-communities-handbook> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)