

## Belfast: a learning city making its mark

With the support of the then Lord Mayor Councillor David Alderdice, Lifelong Learning was identified as a key priority for the city in 1990s. Alderdice called together representatives of education and training organisations from across the city to debate the concept of Belfast as a Learning City. Belfast City Council itself, it should be noted, is not an education authority - school powers, for example, rest with the Education and Library Board

Belfast was one of the first to declare itself 'A Learning City' that *will foster creative Lifelong Learning that inspires and enables all to reach the best that is within them, for their benefit and that of the wider community.*

This declaration is not out of step with the output of many other city vision processes across the UK, but for Belfast it was a milestone. Peace and reconciliation, making the Good Friday Agreement work, creating new institutions of government: these typically have been the political focus in Northern Ireland, rather than the 'education, education, education' in Britain.

The WEA and the city council decided to mount a series of high profile events to give credibility to the development of a learning city strategy for the city. It was an achievement which reflects the impetus, political skills and vision of the Workers Educational Association (WEA) in Northern Ireland Already involved in working across the political divide, acting as both provider and community capacity builder, in 1997 the WEA approached Belfast City Council with the idea of forming a Learning City Forum.

### The Learning City Forum

The Learning City Forum was set up to lead the partnership. It was an inclusive body with more than 35 members including councillors, colleges and universities, voluntary and community sector organisations, government agencies, the Education and Library Board, trade unions and employers. The Forum agreed that the purpose of the Learning City must be to add

- Learning Change - expanding the shared use of education buildings; linking education establishments; and overcoming obsolete divisions eg between science and art
- A rounded and lifelong education - encouraging access to all with greater investment in both early childhood and adult returners
- Quality - valuing the education of all by raising the availability and standard of education in the city

### The following steps

The forum developed a programme of activity aimed at turning the learning city vision into reality under two main headings

- **Marketing and promotion**, to stimulate the demand for lifelong learning
- **Collaborative interventions by providers**, to connect individuals to learning most appropriate to their needs locally

### Marketing and promotion

#### Local Learning Ambassadors - role models

The aim of Local Learning Ambassadors was to provide neighbourhood support for potential, new or 'at risk' learners. Local people were recruited and trained local people to work with within their own communities to make the case that learning pays

The BBC has, through campaigns such as Webwise, shrewdly used local community figures to convince people of the benefits of returning to learn. Short courses already exist that can equip the 'Ambassadors' with the skills they need for this new role. It is an idea that was fully endorsed by the Forum and developed alongside the Gasworks Local Employment Initiative (GLEI). This project trains unemployed adults to act as peer referral points for others who are living in their community and actively seeking work. It offers advice and guidance on training and an information resource base on-line as a community resource. The Learning City Forum blended these developments and others, for maximum impact and gave them a real meaning for the population

#### 'Learning for Life' brochure

The production of a brochure in partnership with all the providers in the city provided potential learners with a comprehensive picture of the range of courses available throughout the city. This was complementary to the Forum's vision for improving access and awareness. The brochure, which would be largely logo-free, was delivered to every household in the city. The range of courses was displayed by classification, as for learning opposed to provider, so that the user can view in one section the range of courses available in their chosen subject.

## Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Signposts

Another scheme for widening access to information was to have Information and Guidance points at a variety of public locations (not traditionally associated with education), and a trained staff member on site able to provide signposting details. These facilities were linked to the *learnirect* learning centres and access points, but add value to existing initiatives by promoting a single brand for learning in the city.

### On-line information

The new Northern Ireland Learning Opportunities database was a valuable resource re-designed to provide information on-line. The Springvale Project - a Lifelong Learning project literally built across the 'peace line' - at BIFHE is a valuable enabler for this

### Learning Shop

A one stop shop for learning was essentially a shop front facility providing an information service on a range of learning opportunities throughout the city, and a focus for a range of initiatives including the Events Guide, the Ambassadors and the Learning Festival. A city centre location was essential, linked with a *learnirect* centre and linked to neighbourhood centers. The availability of the Ufl/ *learnirect* programmes, the 'People's Network' in the Libraries, and the New Opportunities Fund 'Community Access to Lifelong Learning', Belfast had a marvellous opportunity to take maximum advantage of the possibilities created by the new technologies. The Learning Shop, housing a Secretariat for the 'Belfast: provided a focal point for learning. It supported an IT learning strategy firmly aimed at people at risk of remaining excluded from learning, and created a Community Network for Learning in Belfast.

The development of a web site to promote Belfast as a learning city locally, nationally and internationally was the responsibility of Belfast City Council, linked to the Development Department and Economic Development Unit web site, with links to all Forum members' respective web sites.

### Events guide: a single brand for learning in the city

The level of interest and participation in the events listed in the events guide for Adult Learners' Week has encouraged the forum to repeat similar guides for other learning events/festivals throughout the year. Discussions were held with Lisburn Borough Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and Newtownabbey Borough Council about the production of a Greater Belfast events guide.

Regular newsheets and 'Learning City Updates' were produced to highlight successes and stimulate interest in particular learning opportunities. Key to this development were the role of Belfast's schools

### Learning Festival

A Learning Festival was held in May 2001 linked to Adult Learners' Week with the involvement of the forum and this provided a boost to the Week, increasing the range and number of events and drawing in new learners as a result.

### Community access to schools for Lifelong Learning: The Community Schools Initiative

Schools in Belfast, as elsewhere, were an under-used resource, an expensive investment used for 25% of the year. Yet, in some areas, schools were the only resource that the community could use. Achievement levels also vary greatly across the city. The forum designed a Community Schools Initiative that would provide:

- after hours and holiday activities for young people and children to raise achievement levels and encourage staying on at 16+
- facilities for adult and family learning
- facilities for local organisations

### Learning Houses

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive provided a network of Learning Houses to be used for community activities at a nominal rent. These houses were linked to the Community Schools Initiative and to an IT Learning Network serviced through the Learning Shop, thereby accessing the power of *learnirect* and the 'People's Network'.

## Vision

The 'Belfast: A Learning City' Forum had a clear role to play in driving forward collaborative ventures that maximised the potential of existing resources, using schools as a focal point. The Education & Library Board adopted the slogan *Towards A Learning City* as its vision, recognising that schools especially in the primary sector are uniquely placed to facilitate local opportunities for learning. Beginning in certain target wards, the Forum co-ordinated a series of strategic programmes of activity using the resources at hand, and also gave the initiative a common identity and badge, promoting a single brand for learning and ensuring that there was no confusion amongst the target audience. In this way the Forum added value to current educational activity for providers and communities.

The role of the Learning City Forum therefore has been to make an impact on Belfast not only through programmes of events and other initiatives, but also encourage partnership between the city's education and training providers and other interests. Its advantages have been in

- ¥ Broadening understanding and sharing in a 'crowded field'
- ¥ A vehicle to tackle duplication and replication
- ¥ Creating a powerful advocacy
- ¥ A complementary network supporting existing community structures
- ¥ Neutral as it is not lead by a statutory provider
- ¥ Adding status

The WEA, a relatively small voluntary organisation and the City Council, which does not itself deliver education and training, developed a high level of trust and commitment amongst the members of the Forum. Together, they established it as an inclusive and authoritative partnership which brought shape and direction to a neglected field.