

**A Review of  
the North-West Women's Centres  
Learner Access & Engagement Programme**

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**Prepared for  
The Women's Centres  
Regional Partnership (WCRP)**

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## **1. Introduction: Background to the Review**

In 2010, a consortium of Women's Centres from the North West was successful in tendering for a contract to provide learner support services as part of the Learner Access and Engagement Pilot Programme being rolled out across Northern Ireland. That programme is due to end later in 2011.

The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) was interested in learning about the experience of the NW Consortium and the lessons to be drawn from it. To that end, the WCRP commissioned this review, detailing how the Learner Access & Engagement programme has operated to date in the North West Women's Centres and examining what learning can be provided to the other women's centres within the partnership. It is also intended to inform and support discussions with Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Further Education (FE) sector on future directions in community education.

## **2. Methodology**

A research brief was agreed with the WCRP's Education Sub-Group and a full methodology was then developed as a result. This included relevant questions and appropriate benchmarks and indicators. The survey methods encompassed primary research in the form of semi-structured interviews, focus groups with relevant stakeholders; desk research and the use of the internet to locate relevant statistics and documentation. Information was also provided by the three partners in the North West Women's Centres Consortium. All such interactions were governed by an appropriate ethical framework where consent for the interview was obtained and the context of the interview fully explained. Data obtained was stored in a secured area and is compliant with the data protection legislation.

### 3. Summary

This report offers DEL an insight into how programmes for a ‘hard to reach’ target group can be delivered successfully in a Women’s Centre setting. As the report illustrates, the success of the Women’s Centres in attracting participants to the DEL initiative, the Learner Access & Engagement Programme (LAEP) is due to the unique support mechanisms put in place such as access to childcare, 1:1 support, small class sizes, and a welcoming, safe and inclusive environment.

The report demonstrates that Women’s Centres and groups have had a successful role in engaging LAEP learners in the North West. It is the view of WCRP that community education delivered in a Women’s Centre setting can contribute significantly to meeting the targets set by DEL for the engagement of people from disadvantaged communities. This report provides concrete evidence that the model of training and education delivered in a women’s centre setting is both effective and productive. Success in engaging and retaining essential skills learners is a key area for future focus.

The report outlines a successful model and will be a key piece of research for the future strategic development of the community education sector as a vehicle to engage “hard to reach” learners:

- “from disadvantaged communities”
- “who have additional barriers to getting involved in learning”
- “essential skills learners”
- “the economically inactive”

The WCRP looks forward to meeting with the DEL policy team to discuss this report and future provision as we believe the findings contained herein are important and should be included in any future evaluation of LAEP and in future DEL planning.

Based on the report the Women’s Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) recommends:

- that flexibility is built in to LAEP contracts as regards the minimum number of participants required to be enrolled per class. Due to the unique structure of

delivering training in Women's Centres; it is not always practical to have imposed minimum class sizes. The success of the Women's Centres in attracting participants is partly due to their unique support structures and smaller class sizes. Where appropriate we would recommend that in future the LAEP provider and the FE College should agree a total number of enrolments over a number of classes. This way if one class is over subscribed then the surplus could be offset against another class.

- that entry requirements for access to LAEP or similar DEL programmes should be modified. For example: excluding Level 2 qualifications means that some people are unable to access LAEP even though the qualifications they hold may be out of date or are no longer beneficial in securing training for employment. This issue is very relevant when it comes to gaining access to up to date IT qualifications.
- that DEL continues to resource the delivery of LAEP or similar programmes in Women's Centres and supports community education in general. This is imperative if we are to increase the participation of women in the economy, given that women have higher rates of economic inactivity than men. Currently the male inactivity rate is around 23%, whilst the female rate is 37%.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is important that women are encouraged and supported to enrol in LAEP and/or similar DEL initiatives.
- that the women's community-based education model of delivery outlined in this report is supported and encouraged across Northern Ireland as an effective way to engage a greater number of "hard to reach" and essential skills learners and families.

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1 <http://www.delni.gov.uk/es/lmb2004-8.pdf>

## 4. The Learner Access & Engagement Pilot Programme

### 4.1 The Programme Design.

4.1.1 The Learner Access & Engagement Pilot Programme ('The LAEP Pilot') was introduced by the Department of Employment and Learning in 2008. It had a number of aims. Firstly it was intended "to enhance collaboration between the statutory further education sector and voluntary and community organisations".<sup>2</sup> It was also intended to provide opportunities for non-statutory organisations to deliver learner support through a contractual arrangement with an FE College.

4.1.2. The programme was facilitated by means of contracts for services issued by the FE colleges to service providers. It was intended that these contracts would be awarded after a competitive tendering process. The contracts were paid for by the colleges out of the budget allocated to them by DEL for the LAEP Pilot. The overall maximum budget for the LAEP Pilot across Northern Ireland was £9 million. This was to be expended over the period of three years, with each of the six FE colleges able to access up to 500K in each of those years.<sup>3</sup> Colleges were permitted to 'top slice' up to 13% of their expenditure on learner access and engagement contracts.

4.1.3. The LAEP Pilot was intended to deliver the following outcomes:<sup>4</sup>

(a) Increased adult enrolments in:

- employment related FE provision;
- FE Essential Skills provision;

(b) Increases in:

- adult participation in FE by adults in disadvantaged areas;
- numbers of adults achieving recognised qualifications or units of qualifications<sup>5</sup> at Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2;
- numbers of adults achieving Essential Skills;
- numbers of adults progressing from FE Entry Level/Level 1 to Level 2 provision or

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2 DEL Circular "Learner Access and Engagement" Circular Number: FE 08/08, 16th May 2008, at para 1.

3 LONGITUDINAL EVALUATION OF THE LEARNER ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT PILOT PROGRAMME INTERIM EVALUATION REPORT October 2010 (DEL) ('DEL Interim Evaluation'), at para 1.7

4 DEL Circular, note 1 above, at para 9

5 As listed on the National Data of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ) or the Prescribed list of Approved Non-Accredited Qualifications (PLAQ),

employment.

4.1.4. The LAEP Pilot runs for three years from September 2008 and operates across Northern Ireland. All six FE colleges are taking part.

## **4.2 Focus of the Programme**

4.2.1. The non-statutory partners identified through the competitive tendering process are there to offer “Learner Support Services”. These were to include:

- engaging 'hard to reach' adults who meet the eligibility criteria;
- signposting adult learners to appropriate guidance services;
- promoting relevant (i.e. employment related) FE courses;
- providing 'on course' support and assistance with study skills;
- providing practical and motivational support and encouragement;
- providing advice and information on College and other external support services;
- providing exit and progression information.<sup>6</sup>

4.2.2. These services are intended to be targeted at “adults who are not in work, who do not hold a qualification at Level 2 or above, and who may have barriers to learning.” Anyone who is already enrolled in an FE programme, or who has a qualification at level 2 or above or who does not wish to return to the labour market is specifically excluded from taking part in the LAEP Pilot. <sup>7</sup>

4.2.3. Barriers to learning are identified as including:

- caring responsibilities;
- disability;
- poor levels of literacy and numeracy;
- poor behaviour in, or attitude to, education and training; and
- other personal, emotional, or domestic circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

4.2.4. The pilot programme was intended to target the enrolling of over 30,000 learners,

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6 DEL Circular, note 1 above, at para 11.

7 DEL Circular, note 1 above, at paras 12-15

8 DEL Circular, note 1 above, at para 16.

with a goal of 3,195 enrollees in the first year (2008-9).<sup>9</sup>

### **4.3 The Tendering Process**

4.3.1. The contracts went out to tender at various dates in 2008 and whilst there was room for variation within each set of tenders there were specified minimum criteria for selection of organisations to supply LAEP contracts. Thus, those seeking to tender had to show a track record of successful engagement of people with low numeracy and literacy skills. They also had to meet specific criteria in the areas of competence and accountability. Provided those minimum criteria were set, colleges were free to develop their own criteria for selection in order to “meet local needs.”<sup>10</sup>

4.3.2. It has not been possible to gain sight of all of the tender documents issued in 2008 by the various FE colleges. However, it has been possible to compare some<sup>11</sup> and these show very minor variations in the way in which the criteria for selection are worded. The weighting given to the criteria is difficult to compare because of these variations, but there do not seem to be significant differences. What many of the tenders do appear to have in common is that they issued contracts for learning partnerships based on electoral wards;<sup>12</sup> with the result that more than one organisation was awarded a contract to provide services in each of the FE college areas.

### **4.4 Awards of Tender in 2008**

4.4.1 Belfast Metropolitan College awarded a contract to the Upper Springfield Development Company Ltd (a consortium comprising Ashton Community Trust, GEMS NI, Workforce Training Services, Impact Training, and Oasis Caring in Action.

4.4.2. Northern Regional College awarded contracts to the Workers Educational Association (WEA), and FIT NI.

4.4.3 North West Regional College awarded contracts to WEA, FIT NI, Churches Training Company, Dove House Community Trust and the Greater Shantallow Area Partnership.

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9 DEL Interim Evaluation, at para 1.3

10 DEL Interim Evaluation, at para 5

11 The tender documents compared were those issued by the NW Regional College in 2008 and in 2009 and those issued by the Belfast Metropolitan College in 2008.

12 It has also been possible to compare the call for tender information issued by two other colleges, the South West Regional College and the Southern Regional College. Full tender documents for these contracts were not however publicly available.

4.4.4. South Eastern Regional College awarded contracts to the Training for Women Network (TWN), a FIT NI led consortium consisting of FIT NI, RNIB, RNID, USEL, Extern and Gingerbread) and WEA.

4.4.5. Southern Regional College awarded contracts to WEA and a consortium, including Clanrye, RNIB, RNID, USEL, Extern and Gingerbread.

4.4.6. South West College awarded contracts to FIT NI, WEA, TWN and the STEP Training and Learning Consortium, which includes South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP), Willowbank, Coalisland Training Services and Customised Training Services.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4.5. Awards of Tender in 2010**

A number of contracts were discontinued during the first year of the programme and a new call for tenders was issued.<sup>14</sup> The Southern Regional College then awarded contracts to Craigavon Community Network, The WALD Centre South Armagh and Newry Carers. The North West Regional College awarded contracts to Roe Valley Community Education Forum, Strabane Community Project and The Women's Centre, Derry.

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13 WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS, NI Assembly, Friday 13 February 2009, at Col AQW 4599/09

14 DEL Interim Evaluation, Fig 1.3.

## **5. The Experience in the NW Women's Centres**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The Women's Centre, Derry (TWCD) has been delivering educational programmes in conjunction with the NW Regional College for over 20 years. Thus, there is a long-standing relationship, which has generally been a very positive one. However, funding was always difficult to obtain. The NW Regional College paid the tutor costs, but the majority of the funding to support the learners, as well as run the Centre, to pay staff wages and to heat and light the building, had to be found from other sources. So when the Centre heard about the Learner Access and Engagement Programme Pilot, it seemed like a good opportunity to achieve a stronger funding basis for the support activities they were carrying out. These activities were particularly suitable for 'hard to reach learners' and the Centre already had a long track record of supporting and attracting learners in this category.

### **5.2. The Tendering Experience**

5.2.1. TWCD was invited to a regional information seminar run by DEL in Strabane when it began to roll out the LAEP pilot. The presentation laid out very clearly what DEL wanted to do with the pilot – and in particular the constituency of learners they wanted to target. The 'fit' with the learner profile of TWCD was ideal. Furthermore, the services that the LAEP Pilot envisaged was also a very good fit with what TWCD was already providing to learners, but without finance to pay for it. The college ran a second information seminar and that spurred the Centre on to applying for the tender when it was issued in 2008.

5.2.2. The tendering process was a very new experience for TWCD – they were used to applying for grants, rather than bidding to provide services. Nonetheless, they submitted a tender, one of 31 organisations to do so.<sup>15</sup> They applied specifically for the contract to provide learner support services in the electoral ward in which the Centre is situated, believing (wrongly, as it turned out) that you could only apply to deliver services in your electoral area. They were not successful with the tender and consequently sought feedback as to the reasons. The Centre was told that the tender content was very good, but that their

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<sup>15</sup> Minutes of 7th Meeting, Finance & General Purposes Committee of the Governing Body of the North West Regional College, 17 Nov 2008, at para 7.7.

budget was not as competitive as other applications.

5.2.3. In 2010 the opportunity to apply again for a LAEP Pilot contract arose as some of the initial contracts awarded were withdrawn. So TWCD went ahead and applied again, but this time adopted a slightly different strategy. They applied as a consortium, (the North West Women’s Centres Consortium) bringing in the Waterside Women’s Centre (WWC) and the Strathfoyle Women’s Centre, (SWC) with The Women’s Centre Derry as the lead partner. This partnership made the application much stronger. This time TWCD applied for contracts that were not located specifically in its electoral area. This was for a number of reasons. Firstly the tender was for contracts in the areas in which the other two consortium partners were located. Secondly, TWCD itself attracts learners from all over the north-west, including the areas covered by the contracts. Finally, TWCD had by this stage learned that you did not have to be located in the area in which you were proposing to deliver services. As long as you could satisfy the tender criteria around track record and service delivery, you were eligible.

5.2.4. In preparing the new tender, TWCD looked at the pricing structure in light of the feedback received in relation to the unsuccessful tender in 2008. They became more adept at figuring out the pricing structure and realised that they needed to cost their bid per student per unit, rather than just per student. This requires a bit of technical knowledge and some background research was necessary, but in the end it made the bid more competitive.

5.2.5. The consortium was successful in its bid, and began working on the contract in Sept 2010.

### **5.3. Recruitment & Enrolment.**

5.3.1. A number of other LAEP providers had struggled to recruit enough people to undertake training, but the North West Women’s Centres LAEP Consortium (NWWC Consortium) did not. As one of those involved with the consortium explains:

“When you look at the women who use the women’s centres for educational purposes they almost all fit the LAEP pilot profile. The women’s centres are a natural port of call for them.”

In total there were 375 enrolments from Sept 2010 – March 2011 across the three centres that make up the NWWC Consortium. These figures compare favourably with the targets bid for in the tendering process and with the numbers recruited to the LAEP Pilot across Northern Ireland generally (see discussion below at para 6.2).<sup>16</sup>

5.3.2. Whilst there has been no difficulty in recruiting, there have been some issues in relation to enrolment, primarily associated with the definitions of what constitutes an enrolment and administrative arrangements. Determining what constitutes an enrolment is important, as the contract fees are structured around a series of stages, with a certain percentage of the contract cost being paid on enrolment, another percentage on completion (i.e. the student attends to the end of the course) and the balance paid on achievement of qualification.

5.3.3. When it came to managing the enrolment, there were two different models employed, for administrative reasons. In the model employed by most of the centres, LAEP students chose an appropriate course and then enrolled, alongside students who are not involved in the LAEP Pilot. Thus LEAP students are scattered throughout the educational provision. In the other model, the centre involved identified specific courses that would be filled only by LAEP students and then it recruited appropriate learners to those courses. In this model, courses and classes run which only have LAEP students enrolled in them.

#### **5.4. Course Range, Content & Structure**

5.4.1 There is a wide variation in the types of courses offered. They range from OCN Flower Arranging, Oil Painting, Jewellery Making and Digital Photography through to Photoshop, Paediatric First Aid, Conversational Spanish to Essential Skills Literacy and Numeracy and GCSE Maths and English.

5.4.2. Prior to the LAEP, some of the classes would not normally be assessed nor lead to a qualification – these were courses which had primarily been run as recreational (such as flower arranging or jewellery making). However, the LAEP Pilot requires that participants are enrolled on programmes that do lead to a qualification. This meant that some classes that had previously been recreational required conversion to assessed courses. This necessitated extra effort and work for all involved. There was some confusion as to the

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<sup>16</sup> The details of the tender bid are commercially sensitive and are not disclosed in this report.

course content and means of assessment in some cases and it was felt, where these problems arose, that there could have been greater guidance and clarity for the tutor from the FE partner.

5.4.3. There is extra administration across all three centres, although the extent of this varies. There have been ongoing teething problems with the administration. However, all three centres have members of staff who deal directly with the FE provider and the tutors to co-ordinate and address problems where they arise. One important piece of learning to emerge from this study has been the view that there should be greater support for and co-ordination of the tutors.

## **5.5. Learner Support**

5.5.1. Each of the Centres offers dedicated learner support for the LAEP Pilot programme and it takes a variety of forms. In two of the three centres, there are two specific members of staff who are tasked with supporting the implementation of the LAEP Pilot. In the third centre, the role is shared between the two members of staff who run the centre. In each of the centres all members of staff provide ancillary support. This means that there is always a member of staff on hand for people who just come through the door. All of the centres are local organisations where women feel comfortable going in ‘on spec’.

5.5.2. All of the centres have onsite childcare and this remains a significant element of the success of educational provision in women’s centres. For those women with small children it is often the difference between enrolling in a class and not doing so. Without onsite childcare, it is very unlikely that many of those ‘hard-to-reach’ learners would engage with educational programmes.

5.5.3. One of the centres involved in the Consortium offers a dedicated study support service, run by the Educational Services Support Organiser and the Learner Support Mentor. The latter has a specific role in relation to the pastoral care and attendance with the LAEP students. She will follow up a student who has missed a class and keeps an eye on learners’ progression in general. She also acts as a study skills co-ordinator and helps with portfolios.

5.5.4. Another of the centres offers a more informal study support service, which runs in an

holistic way through all of their provision. It provides an overarching menu of support from; helping with personal problems, providing help in getting portfolios together, signposting to further courses and job opportunities and following up with poor attendees.

5.5.5. The third centre has an Educational Co-Ordinator who works with the tutors and troubleshoots any issues as they arise. She follows up on people who have missed classes and would help with portfolios. The centre also has an onsite careers advice service, which includes help with interview skills, applying for jobs, writing CVs and help applying to university. They also provide life coaching & mentoring. This centre has a library.

5.5.6. In each of the centres the experience is slightly different. However, there are common threads across all three centres. Below are some comments from those involved in providing learner support that give a good picture of the experience across the three centres.

- “We often would have women coming in and saying, “Oh, I want to do a course, but I don’t know what.” So we would sit them down, maybe with a cup of tea and help them choose the right course for them.”
- “Each week I get asked for different sorts of help from different people. Some ask me for advice, some just want to use the computers, some want help with their portfolios.”
- “A lot of people really lacked confidence – they would say things like ‘Will I be able to do this’, or ‘Will I be able to cope?’ They’ll say, ‘Sure I’m stupid, I’m useless.’ They really need a lot of reassurance and support.”
- “Many of them struggle with IT so the questions are sometimes, ‘Could you show me how to get an email address?’ and about how to use the internet. You’ll find women who needed to research issues for portfolios, but have no idea how to use search engines or the web.”
- “Sometimes you’ll find they’ve been given an assignment but not shown the study tools. For example, people given CD-ROMs but couldn’t use them because they didn’t know how to access them.”

- “Part of the problem is that the things which stopped those women from staying in education all those years ago are stopping them coming back and staying this time. Without childcare, for example, lots of the young women wouldn’t be able to do the courses. And without a lot of confidence building and ongoing moral support a lot of the older ladies wouldn’t think that they could take on to do a qualification. “

## **5.6. Retention & Progression**

It is still early to draw firm conclusions about retention and progression rates for students on the LAEP pilot – it will be important to pull all of the figures together at the end of the academic year and look at what those rates are. Each of the centres currently collects and reports the data in different ways. The WCRP is currently developing an IT system to facilitate the collection and collation of this sort of information.

## **5.7. Partnership working**

All of those involved were clear that working as a consortium or partnership had really enhanced their work. It was clear that there was mutual support amongst the partners, underpinned by a pre-existing and long term relationship. The lead partner in terms of managing the consortium was TWCD but there was otherwise equality between the partners in terms of making decisions about the work. As one of those involved put it, “Three heads were better than one when you’re trying to solve a problem.” It also meant that whilst each of the centres had their own recruitment target, the numbers were shared across the consortium, so that under subscription in one centre could be taken up by the other two.

## **5.8. The Experience of the Learners**

5.8.1. All of those involved could identify a great deal of benefit to the learners, primarily the gaining of a qualification and the confidence that brings. One member of staff explained it this way, “The women doing the floral art have been taking classes like that for years and could all run their own florists, but never would have had the confidence. The qualification really helps.” Another pointed out that getting a qualification in jewellery making has prompted one woman to go off and investigate setting up her own business.

5.8.2. The experience of the learners themselves is also very positive. Below are some

representative comments from participants on the LAEP Pilot.

- “All the staff in there are lovely and the people in the class are great. There is a real atmosphere of support.”
- “No-one minds if don’t get it the first time – which is really different from school.”
- “I was going to sign up for a course at the tech, but when I tried to go in, it was really scary. I couldn’t find anywhere in the building – it was so big and I was totally freaked. There was so many people in the class, it was worse than school. I couldn’t believe how I felt – I didn’t expect it. Over here it is nowhere near as intimidating.”
- “There are parts of the things I am learning I have to keep repeating, but that’s just me. But the tutors don’t mind and will help you out. “
- “They are so pleasant in there and so nice, even the girls in the office, they help you out and will get you numbers and suggest places to try if you have a problem. It’s like a family. ”
- “You have the space to learn and that’s important. You never get the feeling that if you don’t succeed the first time you’re finished. It’s easy to come in here and learn, in your own time, at your own speed.”
- “I often talk about the experience in the women’s centre to people – I say it’s a great place. I have seen so many people in here progress from having zero confidence, then get their basic maths and English and they bloom and are completely different people. “
- “For people who are a bit isolated as well, it’s great. You meet people and you can make friends more easily, which really helps too. People will text you if you miss a class to see if you’re alright and check in to see if you are coming next week.”
- “When the class finished at Christmas, one wee lady said to us, I am really going to

miss you all, so we talked her into doing another class with us this year and she has really enjoyed it. And it was a class she would never have thought of taking on by herself.”

## 6. Commentary

### 6.1 The Tender Process And Documentation

6.1.1. It is clear that the tendering process was a learning one and in particular that the failure of the first tender was a useful learning experience. Importantly, those involved in the first tender asked for feedback about the flaws in that tender and then used that information to improve the tender the next time round.

6.1.2. What is also clear is that despite minor variations in the tender documents across NI, the core criteria in the tenders were all very similar. This is because a set of minimum criteria was laid down by DEL at the outset of the LAEP Pilot.<sup>17</sup> Variations of the terms of the tenders were permitted, within very narrow limits:

“Subject to organisations meeting minimum and any other specified criteria, Colleges may choose to award learner support contracts to:

- organisations offering generic support within defined geographical areas;
- organisations which focus on particular categories of ‘hard to reach’ learners; and
- organisations proposing collaborative arrangements.”<sup>18</sup>

### 6.2. Drafting Tenders.

Organisations seeking to be awarded a contract to deliver Learner Support Services had to provide evidence that the organisation was already successfully engaged with learners at community level. It was also necessary to show a record of successful engagement with adults with numeracy and literacy skills needs. For those women’s centres that were already running educational programmes, this was not difficult. But, as one of those involved in drafting the tender points out, “It’s really important when you are doing the tender to follow their criteria very carefully, use the language they’re using and really show how you meet

<sup>17</sup> DEL Circular, note 1, above, at Annex 1..

<sup>18</sup> Ibid at para 19.

the criteria in detail.” This kind of skill and eye for detail is key to successful tendering for services.

### 6.3. Budgeting.

Another key aspect is getting the proposed budget right and it took the second round of tendering before TWCD grasped that the funding structure was based on teaching units rather than individual students. Furthermore, the bid is a budget based on a 100% completion rate, but that completion rate is unlikely to be met in reality, so any bid must be cost effective in taking account of a likely attrition rate. Thus, one of the key lessons learned is the need to be competitive, but also to be realistic in costing the proposal. This is likely to be easier if you are a Women’s Centre that is already carrying out a lot of this work – the services and staff are already established. However, if you are not already delivering educational programmes to this sort of learner, then it may not be as cost effective. It is very important to look at the bottom line and make sure that it is going to be worthwhile for your organisation to do this. To determine this, you need to be clear about how to cost your tender and take advice about that, if necessary.

### 6.4. Recruitment & Enrolment

6.4.1 Whilst the NWWCC had no difficulty in recruiting learners for the programme, it is clear that other contractors did, as the LAEP Pilot significantly under-recruited in its first year across NI. The table below shows the numbers of **enrolments** in the LAEP Pilot at each centre in the NWWCC. It is important to note that one learner may be enrolled in more than one class, so the number of enrolments may be more than the actual numbers of students. Nonetheless, the figures are impressive.

| Centre | No of Enrolments |
|--------|------------------|
| TWCD   | 197              |
| WWC    | 137              |
| SWC    | 41               |
| Total  | 375              |

*Table 2: Enrolments in the NWWC Consortium LAEP Contract Sept 2010- August 2011*

6.4.2. It is worth comparing the total number of enrolments achieved by the NWWCC with the numbers enrolled in the LAEP Pilot in its first year. The programme was intended to deliver a target of 30,000 enrolments across its 3 year life span, with a Year 1 target of

3195. In fact, it only delivered a total of 984 enrolled learners in its first year.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand the NWWCC delivered 375 learner enrolments in its first contract year 2010/11. When compared to the NI total for the first year of LAEP this is a very impressive result.

LAEP pilot programme – 1<sup>st</sup> Year results.

| <i>College</i>                 | <i>Total Enrolled</i> | <i>Total not completed</i> | <i>Male not completed</i> | <i>Female not completed</i> |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Belfast Metropolitan College   | 449                   | 97                         | 24                        | 73                          |
| Northern Regional College      | 61                    | 19                         | 6                         | 13                          |
| North West Regional College    | 245                   | 39                         | 14                        | 25                          |
| South Eastern Regional College | 141                   | 8                          | 4                         | 4                           |
| Southern Regional College      | 45                    | 0                          | 0                         | 0                           |
| South West Regional College    | 112                   | 10                         | 4                         | 6                           |
| <b>TOTALS</b>                  | <b>1053</b>           | <b>173</b>                 | <b>52</b>                 | <b>121</b>                  |

Table3:: Enrolments & Completions, LAEP NI 2008-09

(Source: Assembly Written Answers, 9 Oct 2009)<sup>20</sup>

6.4.3. If the NI figures remained of a similar order in 2010 and 2011, then the enrolment figures achieved by the NWWCC are indeed significant, even taking into account the difference between “enrolments” and “those enrolled”. This information is not currently publicly available and it would be helpful to revisit this issue at the end of the project in late 2011.

6.4.4. Interestingly, there are a small number of men attending courses at one centre. This is primarily because the centre is the only community facility available in the area and there

<sup>19</sup> DEL Interim Evaluation, at para 1.3

<sup>20</sup> AQW 985/10

has been a tradition of some men taking courses in the centre at night. Some of those men enrolled on the LAEP through a young parent's programme in which they were taking part.

## **6.5 Course range, content & structure**

6.5.1 The range of courses available across all three centres is varied and provides a 'soft landing' for those who want to start with a less academic, more practical class. This is important because many of those returning to education after a long period are frequently very anxious about formal education structures and approaches. Gaining a qualification in a more practical subject first can really improve confidence and self-esteem. However, there are also those who want a qualification in a more academic subject and there are a good range of those types of classes available, as well as a variety of essential skills courses.

6.5.2. There have been some issues where some of the more practical courses have been previously run without the prospect of a qualification and the conversion of those to accredited classes has caused some teething problems. It would be helpful in the future for the type of accreditation, the content and length of the course and the means of assessment to be clearly agreed with the college and the tutor delivering the programme at the outset.

6.5.3. There have also been issues with the size of the classes. Whilst some women's centres can run larger classes, most are committed to smaller group study, as this is a model which works better for women, especially those who fit the LAEP pilot criteria. The small size of the groups makes the experience less intimidating and it also allows for more individual support. It is easier to track drop outs and to move to bring them back more quickly. However, the FE colleges running the courses have now set a lower limit on the numbers enrolled in a specific class, below which the course will not run. There have been difficulties in persuading the FE College on some occasions that the smaller size of the class was both necessary and valuable. In one particular case, the college would not teach IT classes with enrolments of less than 10. This proved difficult for the centre concerned as their small computer room only had 8 PCs. In the end they had to provide a couple of laptops and rearrange the room to accommodate them.

6.5.4. It would therefore be important at the outset of any contract to agree a minimum number of enrollees with the FE provider for each class. The learner support contracts are

intended to run classes in a community setting and the FE partners should factor the smaller sizes of rooms available into that equation.

## **6.6 Learner support**

6.6.1. The dedicated learner support in each centre is vital and it is particularly helpful where there is someone with a specific role in study skills support. It is clear that there is a real need for this support resource especially where you are dealing with a large number of students. Whilst a dedicated support role is very valuable, it is also clear that in all of the centres, every member of staff provides support for the LAEP Pilot contract, something borne out by the comments of the learners themselves.

6.6.2. A key task is in co-ordinating the tutors, especially where they are teaching LAEP students mixed in with others. One of the centres has chosen to run the programme with specific classes for LAEP students and it is certainly the case that it makes for easier administration. However, in the other two centres, the numbers of enrolments make it less feasible to operate this type of model. Nonetheless the two models offer a choice of options and a smaller consortium or group might prefer the dedicated course model.

6.6.3. A key issue that has emerged as the contract has been rolled out is the issue of quality assurance, in making sure that the delivery of the classes and of the learner access support systems are as good as they can be. All of those involved were aware that lessons were being learned and were keen to see those captured at the end of the year.

6.6.4. It would be very helpful to have a meeting of all of those involved at the end of the academic year to discuss the experience of the contract and to contribute to a discussion about lessons learned from that experience. This would also help with the contractual requirement to provide an end of year quality assurance report to the FE college and it would also assist in drawing out lessons for future contracts should the opportunity arise.

## **6.7 Retention & progression: barriers**

6.7.1. It is too soon to say anything authoritative about the retention and progression rate of those enrolled on the LAEP Pilot in the NWWCC. However, what is clear is a need to streamline monitoring systems across the three centres, so that information can be readily

drawn down and compared. The WCRP has already begun to work with the women's centres throughout NI to streamline information and data collection systems. The first phase an online prospectus is to be completed for summer 2011.

6.7.2. It is also important to ensure that the enrolment & monitoring systems in each centre are capturing the same information. It is also vital to ensure that they are all capturing the information necessary to inform a discussion about the extent to which the programme is targeting the LAEP 'barrier categories'. So, for example, the enrolment forms in all three centres ask about an applicant's child care needs, but do not track whether or not they have other caring responsibilities, something in which the LAEP Pilot is interested and which it will be important to know.

### **6.8 Partnership working**

It is clear that the three women's centres involved work well in partnership with each other, with a mutual respect and support amongst all three. Whilst TWCD is the lead partner and handles much of the administration, the other two centres are very clearly equal partners in the project. The nature of this positive working relationship and, the degree of shared history and mutual respect, is absolutely essential to the success of the contract. The relationship with the FE provider has been very good in the past and remains cordial and supportive.

### **6.9 Why Learner Access & Engagement Works in Women's Centres**

6.9.1. The success of the NWWCC in attracting such a high number of people into the LAEP Pilot where others have faced difficulties is largely due to the way in which women's centres 'do' education. It is deliberately a very different model to the one implemented in the more formal sector and to the experience undergone by the type of person targeted by the LAEP Pilot. As one of those involved in the consortium says:

“Women's centres offer an environment of support, a place where confidence building and self-esteem is part of the fabric and where there are programmes at your elbow to help you with that. The whole ethos and atmosphere of the centre is conducive to women learning in a supportive and non-threatening atmosphere.”

This ethos works so well because a lot of the people who come through the door of women's centres have such low levels of self-esteem they do not even have the courage to go into an FE college to do a course. As one member of staff says:

“They think, I'm no good I could never do that, whereas somewhere like a women's centre they feel much more comfortable. In a women's centre, they are encouraged to believe that they *can* do this and that they *are* worth something.”

6.9.2. Another key aspect of the model that works so well is the provision of onsite childcare, without which many of those who have enrolled on the LAEP would simply have not been able to participate.

6.9.3. This model of empowerment and support works well for women, but it could also work equally well for people in other categories of “the hard-to-reach-learner”. It is a model that has worked exceptionally well over the last thirty years in the women's sector. Remarkably, it is not a model that the mainstream educational system seems interested in either learning about or from. Perhaps it is time for the women's centres to promote the benefits of the feminist educational model developed over the years.<sup>21</sup>

6.9.4. Another key to the success of the programme in the NWWCC is the ebb and flow of the classes, which do not conform to formal patterns of 9-to-5 schedules or the established “after hours” evening classes but are instead organised around women's timetables, needs and habits. This is something women's centres have been doing for decades, so it comes naturally to them, but is completely antithetical to the normal pattern in educational institutions. As one member of staff says:

“Lots of the programmes are in the morning because although women may have a child in the crèche in the centre, the chances are they will also have a child at school. So they need to be free in the afternoon. The courses also follow the way women live their lives. So that is why you get a lot of classes which run for 2 hours a week over 30 weeks, rather than ten hours a week for 6 weeks.”

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21 WCRP Education Report (2008)

Organising education provision around people's lives and habits rather than requiring them to organise their lives around that provision is different, but for people with complicated lives and competing calls on their time – the 'hard-to-reach-learner' - it works. Again, this is a lesson 'mainstream' education could learn.

6.9.5. The other aspect of the provision in women's centres which works so well is the support for women learners at every step of the way. From the staff who have a specific role in study skills and pastoral care, to the women who answer the door and the phone and who make the tea and clean the classrooms; everyone understands that they are part of a support system for every woman who comes through the door. That is vital to reaching people with barriers to education and is one reason, along with the peer support which is so visible in classes, that this form of educational provision is succeeding so much better at accessing 'hard to reach' learners than other sorts of provision.

## **6. 10. Conclusion**

6.10.1. The programme has worked well for the three centres involved even though all of them have experienced varying degrees of challenge with the administration of the programme. All three of the centres were already supporting women who fit the profile of the LAEP Pilot target group, so what they have gained is more financial support to deliver a better resourced learner support service.

6.10.2. There are issues for the centres around the conditions of inclusion in the LAEP – particularly around prior qualifications. It makes sense to target the programme on those without any qualifications, but to be excluded from the LAEP because of (for example) a CSE in Shorthand and Typing you got when you were 16 and which was 30 years ago seems unduly harsh. There are also issues around re-skilling – a lot of people are trying to get back into the workforce with qualifications and skills that were relevant a decade or two ago, but not now. This is especially true of IT skills. All of this impacts adversely on women who are trying to return to work after time out of the employment market.

6.10.3. The original set of tendering criteria was reviewed by the Women's Support Network and their research paper highlighted the failing to include childcare and childcare costs as an example of the types of on-course support a learner provider should offer.<sup>22</sup> In

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22 ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE LEARNER ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMME: PROMOTING EQUALITY OF

particular it suggested that the absence of childcare and the failure to specifically include it in the list of barriers to education and employment in the LAEP Pilot would impact upon the capacity of women from disadvantaged areas. This is borne out by a number of studies.<sup>23</sup> Data from the first year of the programme seems to indicate that more women than men are enrolled in the programme and that there is a significantly higher proportion of women enrolled on the LAEP programme than would normally enrol on an FE course (see Table 1, below). However, early statistics indicate that a greater proportion of men from disadvantaged areas (52% of all men enrolled) were taking part in the LAEP Pilot than women from disadvantaged areas (44% of all women involved). So whilst the LAEP Pilot may be successful in targeting women learners, it is not having the same success in attracting women from disadvantaged areas as it is in attracting men. It will be worth comparing the end of year statistics from the NWWCC in this area to see if the availability of onsite childcare has had any impact on attracting women from disadvantaged areas to the programme.

| <b>Enrolments by Gender</b> | <b>Mainstream FE<br/>(2006/07 to 2008/09)</b> | <b>LAEP<br/>(2008/9)</b> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Male                        | 48%                                           | 26%                      |
| Female                      | 52%                                           | 74%                      |

*Table 1: Enrolments by Gender*

(Source: Interim Evaluation of LAEP Pilot, DEL, 2010,) <sup>24</sup>

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OPPORTUNITY ON GROUNDS OF GENDER, (WSN, 2009)

23 WOMEN LIVING IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES: BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION, HELEN McLAUGHLIN, (WCRP, 2009)

24 Early Indications Of The Success Of The LAE Programme, Figure 6.10:

## 7. Summary of Lessons Learned

**7.1. It is important to get the tendering process right** – it is crucial to follow the criteria listed and show precisely how you meet those criteria. It is also important to get the costings right - making sure you keep an eye on your bottom line, so that it is cost effective for you to run the programmes, as well as making sure that your pricing is cost effective. You should be aware that there may be some additional technical information about how to cost FE contracts..

**7.2. You can bid for contracts outside the electoral area** in which you operate, provided you can meet the tendering criteria which to date has meant that you need to show a track record of engaging successfully with learners in the area.

**7.3. Be aware of the tight limits on who qualifies for a LAEP place.** However, the profile of the majority of learners in a women's centre is a very good fit for a LAEP programme.

**7.4. If you are already offering educational provision in your centre, there is a good chance that you are already providing a number of the services required by LAEP.** Furthermore, it is probable that you will have little difficulty in recruiting learners to the programmes. However, if you do not currently offer educational opportunities, the LAEP may not be a good fit for your organisation.

**7.5. Consider working together with other women's centres in your area to submit a joint tender.** This will work better if you have a pre-existing good relationship with the other centres and it is a good idea for one of the centres to be the lead partner in the consortium.

**7.6. There are likely to be teething problems around enrolment and curriculum content and delivery,** not least because the FE sector runs educational provision in a different way to women's centres. However, if you can sort out those issues in advance by agreeing with the FE partner how the programmes will operate, that will help reduce those problems. It would be useful to try to have an initial working meeting with all those involved before the programme starts to run.

**7.7. It is important to ensure that there is a good mix of courses available to LAEP students.** Some will want to start off with a more practical, 'hands on' course, like flower arranging or art. Others will want to take on more academic subjects, while others will opt for essential skills in Maths and English, which are offered free of charge. It is important to offer a range of skills provision, as this mix will make it easier to recruit people to the programmes.

**7.8. You may need to add an accreditation element to some of your existing provision.** So, for example, if a flower arranging class has been run to date as a non accredited class, which people do for pleasure, it may be necessary to link it to a recognised qualification which your FE partner is accredited to deliver. You should be aware that this may require some adjustment to the content of the class and the tutor will need to follow the assessment regime required for the LAEP students.

**7.9. It is important to have at least one member of staff with a defined role in relation to the LAEP students,** even if you decide to confine recruitment of such students to a particular set of classes. It is essential ensure that someone takes responsibility for all of the contracted activities so that you can easily demonstrate how you are meeting those contractual commitments.

**7.10. It is important to set up data gathering systems that will allow you to monitor the recruitment, progression and qualification of students against the LAEP barrier categories of 'hard-to-reach-learners'** If working in a consortium, it is important to ensure that all the partners collect the same information in the same way.

**7.11. It is important to track individual learner's progress and follow up with any problems that arise.** It is also important to be able to work out what your attrition (or 'drop-out') rate is and what your progression rates are. Your data gathering systems should be fit for this purpose.

**7.12. There may be pressure from the FE partner to only run classes that are above a certain size.** However, it is important in these cases to firstly make your FE partner aware of the practical implications of this - you may not have a physical space which can take the numbers they want you to provide. Secondly, it is important to robustly articulate the

importance of the education model operated by women's centres - where people learn in small groups. In targeting 'hard-to-reach-learners' this model is very effective and trying to make it over into one that accommodates large classes might defeat the purpose of what you are trying to achieve. Rather than agree numbers per class, it is advisable to agree an average number of enrolments over a number of classes. This way if one class is over subscribed then this could be offset against another class.

**7.13. It is useful if the partners in the consortium meet regularly to review the implementation of the contract** and especially at the end of each year to look at quality assurance issues and lessons learned.

**7.14. The success to date of the experience in the NWWCC underpins the relevance and importance of the feminist model of community education,** which has led the way, albeit very quietly, in bringing 'hard to reach learners' back into education and thence on to the employment market. It is important when providing learner access support services that the necessity of that model in doing things in a certain way is robustly defended against the pressures that mainstream education can place on it.

## 8.0 Recommendations

### 8.1 Based on the report the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) recommends:

8.1.1 That flexibility is built in to LAEP contracts as regards the minimum number of participants required to be enrolled per class. Due to the unique structure of delivering training in Women's Centres; it is not always practical to have imposed minimum class sizes. The success of the Women's Centres in attracting participants is partly due to their unique support structures and smaller class sizes. Where appropriate we would recommend that in future the LAEP provider and the FE College should agree a total number of enrolments over a number of classes. This way if one class is over subscribed then the surplus could be offset against another class.

8.1.2 That entry requirements for access to LAEP or similar DEL programmes should be modified. For example, by excluding Level 2 qualifications, this means that some people are unable to access LAEP even though the qualifications held may be out of date or are no longer beneficial in securing training for employment. This issue is very relevant when it comes to gaining access to up to date IT qualifications.

8.1.3 That DEL continues to resource the delivery of LAEP or similar programmes in Women's Centres and supports community education in general. This is imperative if we are to increase the participation of women in the economy, given that women have higher rates of economic inactivity than men. Currently the male inactivity rate is around 23%, whilst the female rate is 37%.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is important that women are encouraged and supported to enrol in LAEP and/or similar DEL initiatives.

8.1.4 That the women's community-based education model of delivery outlined in this report is supported and encouraged across Northern Ireland as an effective way to engage a greater number of "hard to reach" and essential skills learners and families.

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25 <http://www.delni.gov.uk/es/lmb2004-8.pdf>

**8.2** This report offers DEL an insight into how programmes for a ‘hard to reach’ target group can be delivered successfully in a Women’s Centre setting. As the report illustrates, the success of the Women’s Centres in attracting participants to the DEL initiative, the Learner Access & Engagement Programme (LAEP) is due to the unique support mechanisms put in place such as access to childcare, 1:1 support, small class sizes, and a welcoming, safe and inclusive environment.

The report demonstrates that Women’s Centres and groups have had a successful role in engaging LAEP learners in the North West. It is the view of WCRP that community education delivered in a Women’s Centre setting can contribute significantly to meeting the targets set by DEL for the engagement of people from disadvantaged communities. This report provides concrete evidence that the model of training and education delivered in a women’s centre setting is both effective and productive. Success in engaging and retaining essential skills learners is a key area for future focus.

The report outlines a successful model and will be a key piece of research for the future strategic development of the community education sector as a vehicle to engage “hard to reach” learners:

- “from disadvantaged communities”
- “who have additional barriers to getting involved in learning”
- “essential skills learners”
- “the economically inactive”

The WCRP looks forward to meeting with the DEL policy team to discuss this report and future provision as we believe the findings contained herein are important and should be included in any future evaluation of LAEP and in future DEL planning.