

Summary of visit to Aberdeen City Council

About this summary document

Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) have prepared this document following a recent visit to Aberdeen City Council. It contains more detail than the report. We hope that the local authority and any agencies it commissions to support the delivery of Community Learning and Development (CLD) will find this document helpful in continuing to support recovery, renewal and improvement work.

About our visit

We made the commitment some time ago to revisit Aberdeen City Council following a previous inspection and our recent visit was arranged to fit in with individual circumstances.

All of the activities undertaken by HM Inspectors during the visit were discussed in advance with the CLD lead/s. Taking into account the COVID-19 pandemic, some activities may have been carried out remotely.

The visit included discussions to consider the progress made since the original inspection. HM Inspectors also explored the impact of the pandemic as well as the actions being taken to support recovery. HM Inspectors recognise that some priorities may have been paused or overtaken as services responded to the pandemic.

Current context – impact of COVID-19

CLD facilities are only now beginning to re-open. This is limiting the ability of the service and partners to operate fully. Some groups are still unable to meet due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, and others are restricted in terms of the group size.

Aberdeen City continues to face a range of ongoing challenges as a result of the pandemic. This includes an increasing number of people with mental health issues, including social isolation, fear of going out, and higher levels of stress and anxiety.

There is also a greater need for financial support for many families with a noticeable increase in families registered for free school meals. As a result of COVID-19 and awareness-raising the support available, many more people are aware of their entitlements to financial support. This is helping them to get the support they need.

Steps the establishment is taking in relation to COVID-19 recovery

CLD partners, responded quickly and effectively to support individuals and communities affected by COVID-19. Community development workers supported community groups to continue to operate and develop throughout the pandemic. They helped to provide digital devices and training on how to use them, enabling communication to be maintained through regular online conversations and meetings.

New groups were supported to open bank accounts when COVID-19 restrictions allowed. Community groups who were able to operate from their own premises responded well to meet community needs. For example, by distributing food, providing information and advice and allocating grant funding to families in need.

CLD, education, social work, and other partners are providing responsive and coordinated support to families throughout the pandemic. Hubs for vulnerable children were set up quickly and staffed by a range of partners who worked effectively together. Based on this successful approach, a new whole system, single entry point model for supporting families has developed. As a result, since October 2020 over 600 families are benefitting from support through this new approach. ‘Senior’ hubs, provided support for young people, staffed by youth and arts workers. These hubs helped to keep young people safe and support them, for example through the role modelling of positive behaviours.

‘Food and fun’ in the summer of 2020 and ‘summer of play’ initiatives in 2021 provided safe, nurturing hubs for children to play with their peers in a supportive family atmosphere. In addition, ‘camp geronimo’ provided a safe and enjoyable opportunity outdoors for families to meet and reconnect.

There is a variety of outdoor learning opportunities being provided by CLD and a range of partner organisations and community groups. These include ‘walk and talk’ and hill-walking groups, community gardens, creative outdoor activities and conservation work. The ‘keep growing Aberdeen’ project developed in response to COVID-19 to reach more vulnerable people, such as those shielding. This has developed from a small scale pilot to distributing over 400 growing packs this year to priority neighbourhoods. With considerable interest from schools recently, this project has potential to develop further.

The outdoor learning offer provides a range of benefits for the adults and families who participate. This includes improvements to their physical and mental health, reducing levels of stress, developing friendships and benefitting from social interaction. In addition they are gaining in confidence, developing new skills and a few are gaining recognised awards such as Saltire, John Muir and Adult Achievement Awards. A few of the outdoor learning providers are working closely and well together. Some are able to network and share ideas through the Adult Learning Providers Group. However, there is scope for more networking to develop further the collective outdoor learning offer.

CLD partners provided a swift and effective response to supporting adult learners at the start of the pandemic. Partners including Station House Media Unit, the Workers Educational Association and Healthy Minds offered a range of online activities and courses. Many learners struggled at the start, both with the technology and their ability to participate fully. However, the distribution of lap tops and other digital equipment helped learners engage, with some progressing to gaining qualifications. As providers move towards blended learning in the future, there is scope for the Adult Learning Network to oversee the ongoing development of digital learning and share emerging practice.

CLD staff working in partnership with Criminal Justice provided a quick and proportionate response during the first period of closure. A range of methods were used to support adults doing unpaid work as part of a community service order. This included cooking challenges and 'walk and talk' sessions. A few adults achieved certificates and others now participate in learning in their local community. A few learning groups were able to adapt to using digital devices. However, it remains a challenge for others.

Safeguarding

There were no issues re safeguarding identified in the original inspection. Child protection and safeguarding remain an important aspect of practice for CLD and the Child Protection policy was updated recently. Youth workers are aware of the issues regarding online safety and are encouraged to be vigilant when working with young people. Child protection and safeguarding training is mandatory for all staff and this is discussed regularly at staff meetings and in individual discussions. Annual updates are also in place. During the pandemic staff delivering food and other essential items were advised to be vigilant when dealing with potentially vulnerable families. All volunteers are Protecting Vulnerable Groups checked and given access to the same training as CLD workers. Leased community centres are also required to follow council guidance and procedures.

Strengthen governance for CLD

HM Inspectors identified strengths, progress and areas for further consideration during the visit.

Governance arrangements for CLD have improved considerably since the last inspection visit. Changes to the structure of CLD are having a positive impact on CLD staff and are leading to greater clarity of purpose. CLD staff, including those who moved to new posts, are motivated and positive about the direction of travel.

The refreshed Community Empowerment Group (CEG) has been operating in its current form for almost a year. The group now has clear responsibility and ownership for the governance of the CLD Plan. Members of the group are committed to aligning the CLD Plan with the Community Planning Partnership and Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP) priorities. They are making good progress with this and closer alignment has emerged with a clear focus on meeting needs. Community voice is a stronger feature in current plans.

The CLD Plan (2021-24) for Aberdeen is underpinned by strategic priorities for the city. Alignment with the LOIP is much clearer than in the past and has an increased focus on securing improvement. Partners recognise and support the priorities in the CLD plan.

Leadership of CLD is now stronger. Vision, values and aims are clearer and better understood by partners. CLD staff demonstrate a good understanding of the direction of travel as set out in the CLD Plan.

CLD staff now feel more involved in the development of priorities for CLD. As a result of changes in Development Manager roles, working practices have been changed and improved; for example home visiting arrangements for family learning and the delivery of English Speakers of Other Languages.

There is now greater alignment between priorities in the LOIP, the CLD Plan and locality plans, with a clear line of sight across all three plans. The use of online platforms was successful in engaging a wider range of partners and local people to set the direction of the CLD Plan. The Fairer Aberdeen Fund is better aligned to LOIP priorities and reporting mechanisms are clearer than in the past.

Arrangements for the operation of Partnership Forums is improving. New guidance has been issued recently and partners are now clearer about their role and purpose. Planning through the Partnerships Forums is better informed by data that is collated centrally within education and CLD. Barriers that existed before have been removed and there is a greater sense of collective ownership.

The universal offer from CLD and their partners is leading to bespoke responses. Families are receiving the support they need more quickly. Planning across partners is improving and CLD is viewed as a key partner in the continued support to vulnerable families. The revised deployment of CLD resources is having a positive impact in areas of Aberdeen where they did not traditionally offer a high level of service. For example, in Bridge of Don high levels of self-referral demonstrate the changing level of need across the city.

The Northfield Partnership Forum continues to enjoy a high level of commitment from partners. Their improvement plan focuses on responding to need and providing timely support. The sub group structure is beginning to help partners plan and allocate resources. In response to COVID-19, the Walk and Talk as part of the family learning response ensured that important relationships remained in place. A recent residential experience for local families was well received.

Responding to the challenges of the pandemic has helped to highlight the role of CLD and, as a result, the connections and collaboration between CLD services and partners is stronger and more effective

The Mastrick Youth Project is an example of strong and effective partnership working to address anti-social behaviour. Streetsport, run in partnership with Robert Gordon University, worked with Police Scotland, Tesco Summerhill, Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeen Football Club Community Trust to create a youth hub for young people to enjoy in the Mastrick area of the city. The sessions have allowed young people in the local community to gather in a safe and fun environment to take part in a range of activities from football to rock-climbing and smoothie making. As a result, there has been a 90% reduction in anti-social behaviour locally, saving time and resources spent on policing and repairing damage.

The recently established Adult Learning Providers Group (ALPG) has responsibility for the adult learning section of the CLD Plan. The benefits of more effective communication between partners are beginning to provide a better service for adult learners with partners being better able to respond and react quickly. For example, in meeting the needs of new scots including Afghan refugees.

The ALPG is at an early stage of implementing the CLD plan. The action plan is not yet fully developed but should be completed soon. Partners have their own individual systems and processes in place to monitor and evaluate their success. However, they recognise that they still need to consider and agree how to do this collectively and efficiently.

CLD staff should continue to support Partnership Forums across Aberdeen so they fully meet the needs of children and their families.

A robust framework is now in place to monitor the progress of the CLD plan. However, the CEG has identified is the challenge of involving key stakeholders in monitoring and evaluation. There is also further work to determine the exact role of the group in monitoring the progress of the CLD Plan.

Improve networking across CLD providers to help with the sharing of practice and peer support

HM Inspectors identified strengths, progress and areas for further consideration during the visit.

Networking amongst CLD staff is improving. CLD staff are sharing their skills and experience across professional disciplines. Collaboration has improved and staff across youth work, adult learning and family learning are working together more effectively As a result, practices have changed and developed.

All CLD staff are more confident in the use of digital platforms to deliver their work with learners and communities. Many have supported colleagues and shared expertise. Staff taking up temporary posts recognise the importance of developing new skills through gaining experience of other roles.

CLD practitioners in Aberdeen collaborate more regularly with colleagues at national level. There is increased engagement with local authorities in the Northern Alliance and more opportunities for joint working. In early 2021, CLD workers from Aberdeen participated in a

professional learning programme focussing on research. This helped widen their thinking and reflect on their practice. Although at an early stage, the Child Friendly City Group is looking out-with Scotland to help develop their practice.

What happens next?

Understandably, CLD in Aberdeen City has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These have had a significant impact on the work of CLD partners, who are implementing plans to support recovery. CLD partners have addressed the recommendations from the original inspection successfully. As a result, HM Inspectors will make no more visits to Aberdeen City in connection with the original inspection.