

DRAFT

**Bedfordshire Adult Skills and
Community Learning (ASCL)
Service**

Needs Assessment

14/11/12

Version 6

1. Background to the Needs Assessment

The Bedfordshire Adult Skills and Community Learning Service (ASCL) is contracted through the Skills Funding Agency to deliver Adult Learning across Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire. In the 2011/12 academic year 4,603 learners were engaged in 7,155 learning activities through the following funding streams:

- Adult Safeguarded learning which included personal and community development learning (PCDL), Family Language Literacy and Numeracy (FLLN) and Wider Family Learning (WFL)
- Employer Responsive
- Learner Responsive
- Formal First Steps
- Next Steps for Information Advice and Guidance

The ASCL service is expecting to receive funding from the above streams in 2012/13 totalling approximately £2.1M. It is also expected that a similar number of learners will be engaged. 53% of learners are from Central Bedfordshire, 35% from Bedford Borough and 12% from neighbouring authorities.

In addition to the above funding streams, ASCL delivers full cost recovery courses supporting Learning for Leisure and Pleasure.

The ASCL service is a shared service with Bedford Borough. Central Bedfordshire Council is the lead body and is leading a comprehensive review of the service. This review will set the strategic direction and priorities for the service and ensure the achievement of a financially sustainable model for the future.

This review is important and necessary for a number of reasons, primarily:

- ASCL involves relatively flexible funding which can be used responsively to help achieve wider Council objectives; in a context of increasing economic austerity, it is therefore wise for the Council to review the extent to which this opportunity is being maximised
- The Council has not, up till now, sought to influence the strategic direction of the ASCL Service, and has not set strategic priorities for the Service. The Service has therefore done its best to respond to as many adult learning needs as it could, which may have caused it to be spread too thinly
- External and internal financial factors place pressure on the Service's budget; it is unfortunately not financially viable beyond the current academic year, so there is a need for a review to establish whether the Council wants to continue to offer ASCL to Bedfordshire communities, and if so, how best to do this in a financially sustainable way

2. The Needs Assessment

The needs assessment seeks to provide the basis for the Council to set the strategic priorities for the Service, and also to derive detailed targets for the Service. There are always going to be a large number of competing demands for adult and community learning opportunities from amongst the diverse types of learners in the Bedfordshire community; these will include needs for learning amongst disadvantaged groups, employers, community groups, people who want learning for

leisure who can afford to pay towards their learning, people who need learning in order to increase their employability but who cannot afford to pay. In a context of a diminishing funding base, it is all the more important for the Council to take a long hard look at the range of priorities and to use this to set the strategy for the Service. In particular the needs assessment seeks to assist in the process of deciding where and how to target the subsidy of adult learning.

In order for this process to be as comprehensive and fair as possible, the needs assessment is based on several kinds of evidence about what the learning needs of Bedfordshire communities are. These include:

- Demographic information about the area: characteristics of different wards, balance of population by age, gender, employment status and other variables
- Information about employers and what they want from ASCL in order to get the right skills in the workforce
- Information from and about the third sector, because they are often very closely embedded in local communities and are an invaluable source of information about what learning is needed
- Feedback from learners and from potential learners
- Work which the Councils have already done to identify what the needs of the community are and how the Councils will respond. This includes Council strategies on skills, economic development, health, children, Central Bedfordshire Council's Medium Term Plan "Delivering your Priorities" and the wider range of Council strategies which seek to improve the wellbeing and prosperity of the population in Bedfordshire
- Account also has to be taken of what central Government priorities are and the likely impact of them on the ASCL service

Bringing this together forms the basis for setting the future direction of adult learning in Bedfordshire. Critically, the needs assessment aims to provide the basis for an ASCL Service Specification, by:

- Providing a community profile that is as current as possible, for targeting purposes
- Providing the basis of some analysis of the data in thematic and geographical contexts
- Using feedback from local stakeholders and learners to inform decision-making
- Providing the basis for setting of strategy and targets for the ASCL Service to best serve the learning needs of people in Bedfordshire

3. National Policy & Funding Priorities

National policy and funding triggers are currently complex and sometimes conflicting, so it is all the more important for the Council to have clarity about how these affect the context and funding for ASCL.

General policy directions affecting ASCL nationally are:

- Public service reforms:
promoting an ethos of public service
freeing professionals from top-down control and bureaucracy
giving **informed** choice to the user
encouraging competition between suppliers
payment by results wherever appropriate
publishing available information wherever possible
accountability to people, not to the government machine
- Big Society
Mobilising the enthusiasm of local volunteers
Local communities defining local needs
Community self-help
- Localism
Simplification, “cutting red tape”

This affects **ASCL providers** in a number of possible ways, all of which need to be thought about in the assessment:

- Adult Skills and Community Learning is primarily a policy responsibility of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), so the key focus is on how the FE sector/providers can contribute to the **growth agenda**
- Public funding for this work is administered by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), so the priority is on developing **economically useful skills**
- Strong emphasis on employability, on progression into mainstream skills programmes, on **upskilling the existing workforce**
- Growing emphasis on targeted work with the **unemployed (eg via “skills conditionality” – a DWP issue) and with disadvantaged groups (the “social mobility” agenda)**
- Increasing emphasis on need to respond to **employer demand**

BUT

- At the same time, adult learning contributes to personal and community well-being, enhances community cohesion, addresses local priorities, underpins or contributes to other public services (DCLG, DCMS, DoH interests)
- And parts of the provision have clear and in cases direct links to education concerns (DfE), eg via family learning, parenting, addressing the needs of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs)

In terms of specific **Government strategy for Further Education** (of which ASCL is part), the BIS FE Reform Plan “New Challenges, New Chances” (December 2011)

makes the following priorities quite clear:

- Learners at the heart of the system ('learner journey' is crucial)
- Better quality careers advice
- A progressive curriculum
- Ensuring the quality and relevance of vocational qualifications
- Strengthening the quality of teaching and learning
- Freeing up governors to lead
- Greater funding simplification and provider freedoms
- New efficiencies and shared investment, including FE Loans
- More transparency (informed choice) and accountability
- FE as a global brand/export product

In terms of what is happening to **funding for FE and for ASCL** in particular, the situation can be summarised as:

- 2012/13 is the second year of planned BIS budget reductions, with deeper cuts to come in 2013/14
- Next CSR now brought forward to Autumn 2013, and Treasury (since Spring 2012) requiring spending Departments to hold back 5% reserves
- The expectation is that things will get worse before they get better
- The policy of "shared responsibility" for paying for provision is already in place – as seen by changes in adult entitlement, planned introduction of FE Loans, etc
- Concern that some areas of public expenditure will be de-prioritised, and pressure on all aspects of public expenditure to demonstrate a return on investment

Specific trends for the **Adult Skills Budget** are:

- Growth in investment in Apprenticeships, especially 19-24 year-olds
- Top-slice to pilot "employer ownership", with SFA directly funding employers to make/secure required skills provision
- Loss of direct public subsidy for those aged 24 and over for Level 3+ programmes
- SFA "funding simplification" being modelled in advance of 2013/14 – in theory cost-neutral, but will impact differentially on providers depending on their mix and balance of provision

- Particular uncertainties over English and Maths (formerly “Skills for Life”) funding, and ESOL arrangements/eligibilities
- Transfer of Formal First Steps funding to a more closely-monitored, formula-funded regime
- Changes expected to adult learner support funds, and to additional learning support

Implications for **ASCL budgets and strategy**:

- £210m national “safeguarded” budget secure for 2012/13, but is considered very vulnerable to next round of CSR challenges by Treasury, and there is a possibility of future national redistribution
- Providers given freedom to vire sub-allocations between different strands of activity (PCDL, wider family learning, FLLN, NLDC), but required to sustain a broad and balanced offer and to maintain or increase learner volumes
- New policy direction:
 - to better target use of public funding, while maintaining a universal offer
 - to measure and report on the impact of adult learning
 - to give local accountability
 - to find innovative ways of funding provision
 - to create models of partnership working
- Community Learning Trust pilots in 2012/13; may be rolled out from August 2013, subject to evaluation
- Community Learning Innovation Fund
- Minister is known to be in favour of Community Learning Champions schemes

The new **Common Inspection Framework** is also contributing to the change and uncertainty for ASCL:

- Recent “ACL” inspection results set Grade 2 as sub-sectoral benchmark (but Grade 1 is very rare)
- While worsening college inspection grades are focusing all support on poor providers
- Shortage of the “sparkle factor” – no adult learning provider deemed to be outstanding in respect of teaching and learning
- Revised approach to inspection, and new Common Inspection Framework, from September 2012:
 - greater focus on teaching, learning and assessment
 - short-notice inspection (48 hours)
 - Grade 3 = “requires improvement”, more rapid re-inspection ... and more rigorous intervention for those that fail to improve
 - more attention to be paid to the learners’ end-to-end experience

- Adult learning providers still attracting notices to improve because of failure to meet minimum levels of performance
- OFSTED is as yet unclear about how to inspect new-style Community Learning

There are important issues for the **ASCL workforce** which again need to be brought to bear in Council strategy:

- Review of formal regulations requiring initial teacher training, annual registration with IfL, continuing professional development – BIS advised to de-regulate, puts a *new onus on individual providers to set and apply minimum professional standards*
- Future supply of teaching staff expected to be badly hit by changes in HE funding, and introduction of FE loans
- Concerns over lack of flexibility in the initial training that is offered (eg under-developed approach to recognition of prior learning)
- Some mis-match of staff skills with current/future curriculum priorities (eg enterprise education, work with adult unemployed)
- Changes in community learning may further emphasise skills gaps
- CPD not necessarily well managed, and is perceived to be overly focused on meeting organisational administrative needs
- Trend towards reducing reliance on permanent/factional staff ... with consequent negative impact on staff morale, and maybe on quality of provision
- Some evidence that workforce equality and diversity issues are receiving less priority than is expected under prevailing legislation
- Expanding “management span” in services where reviews have reduced senior staffing structures
- Lack of clarity in how to promote FE as a positive career option

All these imperatives mean at the very least that the Council needs to set a **development agenda for the Service** which includes:

- Comprehensive financial modelling to establish a standard baseline and methodology for costing and pricing of courses and classes
- Clarity about what the service is designed to do – set the vision, underpinned by a clear statement of values, and structure all future decisions around that. This is likely to require extensive needs assessment, local market analysis and consultation before it is agreed
- Secure (and where necessary develop) robust leadership, including a “service champion” to link with the local authority at the most senior levels, and to promote the service to external agencies

- Pay close attention to how future service outputs, outcomes and impacts will be monitored, and how key messages on service performance will be disseminated – to the accountable body, to funders, to stakeholders and to service users
- Develop a realistic assessment of forward income, including from new ventures (some of which may fail)
- Undertake a zero-based budgeting exercise, which includes a contingency fund and some "venture capital", and which allows for retention of generated surpluses
- At that stage, consider what business model(s) might be adopted to secure the level and nature of service required – including whether, how and with whom the service might partner to achieve its objectives
- Plan and implement a staffing structure to deliver this model

4. The Overall Central Bedfordshire demographics

Covering 716 square kilometres, Central Bedfordshire currently has a population of approximately 254,400. Between 2010 and 2021, the total population of Central Bedfordshire is set to increase by just over 14.5%. The biggest proportionate increase in population will be in the number of people aged 65 and over. This is expected to increase by 41.4% between 2010 and 2021.

The area is home to over 11,000 businesses and 134,300 economically active people. The majority of local businesses are small – 97.4% employ fewer than 50 people – and the area has high levels of self-employment, but the area does have some very large, successful employers such as Cranfield University, Amazon and Lockheed Martin.

According to the 2011 Census, females slightly outnumber males. Approximately a quarter of the population are under twenty years of age, and almost 16% are aged over 65. The highest numbers of individuals are within the 40-45 and 45-50 age ranges.

An estimated 13.3% of people in Central Bedfordshire were from ethnic minority communities in 2009. The largest of these groups are White Other (not British or Irish, 3.5%); Indian (1.9%); and Black African (1.3%). There is also some variation by age group: younger age groups have a higher proportion of people from ethnic minority groups, compared with the older age groups.

The pre-2009 wards with the highest proportions of people from BME groups were Parkside (7.3%), Tithe Farm (5.2%) and Cranfield (7.1%).

Central Bedfordshire is classified as predominantly rural. The two largest towns, Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard, are located in the south of Central Bedfordshire, whilst a number of smaller towns including Biggleswade, Sandy and Flitwick, are to be found in the north.

Overall levels of deprivation within Central Bedfordshire are low. However, three lower super output areas (SOAs) are in the most deprived 10-20% in England and a further six are in the most deprived 20-30%. These areas are mainly within the south of Central Bedfordshire.

Levels of unemployment are below the national and regional averages. In October 2012, 2.4% of the resident population in Central Bedfordshire were claiming Job Seekers Allowance combined to 3% in the east and 3.8% in Great Britain. However, in some wards, the JSA claimant count is significantly higher (nearer 6% in parts of Houghton Regis and Dunstable).

Young people in Central Bedfordshire (aged 16-24) have also been affected in terms of increased unemployment. The figure now stands at 18.3%, which is below comparator areas and the national average of 21.3%.

The labour market in Central Bedfordshire is relatively strong compared to the national picture. Employment and economic activity rates have fallen since the 2008 recession and currently stand at 76.4% and 80.3% of the working age population respectively, but remain above comparator areas. At the same time, the percentage of people working part time has seen a notable increase, with the male rate having more than doubled to 10.3%.

Just over half of all Central Bedfordshire residents commute out of the area to work. Hertfordshire, Luton, London and Bedford are the most common destinations.

The top five industries of employment for people who work in Central Bedfordshire are education, retail, manufacturing, health, and public administration and defence.

At 59.4% in 2011, the percentage of students achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including maths and English is slightly above the national average.

Individuals in Central Bedfordshire are more likely to have higher level qualifications.

Residents in Central Bedfordshire are generally in good health, with fewer people than nationally reporting long term illness and life expectancy longer than in England overall.

Central Bedfordshire has a number of strengths, particularly in relation to skills. These include the quality and range of skills providers; a labour force with diverse skills; a prevalence of higher level qualifications; and a history of partnership working. However, the area also faces a number of challenges, particularly around the varied nature of Central Bedfordshire as an area and the absence of an agreed sense of place or a focal town; the disparities in skills and deprivation that exist between areas; competition from other geographical areas; inconsistencies in achievement across schools; persistent skills gaps and limited workforce planning by some businesses.¹

The November 2011 Family Poverty Needs Assessment highlights that in 2009, 13.1% of children in Central Bedfordshire were living in poverty. Whilst all wards contain some children in poverty, there are particular parts of Central Bedfordshire where levels of poverty are significantly higher, namely:

- Houghton Regis 28.0%
- Northfields 25.2%
- Dunstable Downs 20.2%
- Sandy 18.6%
- Leighton Linlade Central 18.5%

¹ From Developing an All Age Skills Strategy: Consultation to support the development of an All Age Skills Strategy for Central Bedfordshire. A Report July 2011. Public Perspectives Ltd

5. The Overall Bedford Borough Demographics

Bedford Borough's population rose from 148,100 in 2001 to 160,800 in 2010, an increase of 8.6%. Growth was concentrated in older age groups, including a 26% rise in the number of people aged 80+. Younger age groups increased by much smaller amounts, with the 0-19 population rising by less than 4% since 2001.

Much of Bedford Borough is situated in one of the growth areas of the former Milton Keynes and South Midlands (MKSM) Strategy² and approximately 10,500 new homes are planned for 2010-2021. As a result, the Borough's population is expected to grow significantly to 173,000–178,500 by 2021, depending on the future level of net in-migration.

The number of older people is forecast to grow at a much higher rate than the total population between 2010 and 2021, with those aged 65+ and 80+ both rising by approximately 30%. This will represent a significant ageing of the Borough's population.

The number of births in Bedford Borough rose significantly in 2008-2010 compared to earlier years, with much of the increase attributable to mothers born outside the UK. If this trend continues it will result in an early rise in Early Years and younger school age populations.

There are major differences between the demographic profiles of the Borough's urban and rural areas. The population of Bedford and Kempston towns is much younger on average, with only 45% of the population aged 40+ compared to 55% in rural areas.

Bedford Borough has an ethnically diverse population. In 2001, 19.2% of the population was from minority ethnic groups (BME), compared to 13% nationally, and there has been a substantial increase since 2001 due to significant international in-migration. The BME population is largely concentrated in the urban area of Bedford and Kempston with particularly large BME communities in Queens Park (57.8% in 2001) and Cauldwell (43.6%) wards.

The Borough has received a large number of new migrants since 2001, particularly from the countries which joined the European Union in 2004 and 2007, including significant numbers from Poland and Lithuania.

Bedford Borough has a similar average life expectancy to England, both at birth and at age 65, but is slightly below regional averages. The most deprived areas of the Borough experience significantly lower life expectancy, with a difference of up to 9 years in life expectancy at birth between the most deprived and least deprived wards.

Though Bedford Borough is midway among local authorities on national Deprivation rankings, four areas³ in Bedford town (parts of Castle, Cauldwell and Harpur wards) are among the 10% most deprived areas in England, and a further 7 are among the 10-20% most deprived nationally.

² Though the Regional Spatial Strategy (the East of England Plan and the Milton Keynes and South Midlands sub Regional Strategy) was revoked by Government in July 2010, the dwelling numbers planned for in the Council's Core Strategy and Rural Issues Plan were based upon the RSS, and continue in effect.

³ Deprivation is measured using the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) geography. These average 1,500 residents and there are 102 LSOAs in Bedford Borough.

Income deprivation and Education, Skills and Training deprivation are particular concerns in Bedford Borough. Eight areas fall within the 10% most deprived on Income deprivation, and a further 8 within the 20% most deprived.

20% of children in the Borough are raised in income deprived households, rising to more than 50% in parts of Castle, Goldington and Kingsbrook wards.

Almost 16% of pensioners in the Borough are income deprived, with twice that level in Castle, Cauldwell, Harpur and Queens Park wards.

Rural areas are generally affluent, but there are pockets of deprivation such as the Shortstown area of Eastcotts ward. Two-thirds of rural residents live in areas which are among the 20% most deprived nationally in their access to essential services such as a GP, primary school, post office or supermarket.

Worklessness is an overall measure that combines people who are unemployed and seeking work with those who are economically inactive and not looking for a job, whether that is by choice (e.g. raising a family or in full-time education), or due to barriers to work or unwillingness to work. There is a strong relationship between an area's level of worklessness and deprivation.

Total worklessness in the Borough is estimated at 21,800 or more than 21% of the working age population. Of these 6,200 want a job and 15,600 do not.

Claimant Count unemployment, which measures Jobseeker's Allowance recipients, rose significantly in late 2008 and in 2009. It declined in 2010, but had risen to 4,314 or 4.1% of the working age (16-64) population in March 2012. This exceeds both the national (4.0%) and regional (3.3%) averages. Bedford and Kempston towns have a much higher rate (5.3%) than the rural area (2.1%).

11,000 people were claiming out of work benefits in May 2011. At 10.6% of the working age population this exceeds the regional average (9.4%) but is less than England (11.8%). In the most deprived parts of Bedford Town, out of work benefits claimants exceed 25% of the working age population.

Of particular concern is the estimated 10,000 people of working age who live in households in which no adult is in paid work. This is also estimated to affect 7,200 children living in workless households.

6. Feedback from Learners, Non Learners and Businesses

The below summarises the views of existing learners, businesses and potential learners. This information comes from:

1. Focus groups with existing ASCL learners and non ASCL users and telephone interviews with businesses in June 2012 as part of the ASCL service review
2. Focus groups with different groups in summer 2011 to inform the development of the Central Bedfordshire All Age Skills Strategy
3. 2012 Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Business Surveys

ASCL Focus Groups

The key findings from the focus groups in 2012 were that:

- There are low levels of awareness amongst non-learners and businesses about the ASCL service, although there is interest in the ASCL service which presents an opportunity
- Learners and businesses have high levels of satisfaction for the learning and support they receive and want to continue learning and working with the ASCL service
- Most learners and non-learners think that the ASCL service is mainly there for recreational/informal learning and they do not see it as a major provider of vocational learning and helping people in to work

The key issues arising from the above are that:

- There is scope to improve marketing and business development to residents and businesses
- Develop relationships with the Job Centre and local colleges to encourage signposting to the ASCL service
- Focus on developing a greater vocational offer and as part of this promote the qualifications that learners will achieve and how these will help them in the workplace
- Review arrangements for supporting learners in to employment or further learning at the end of their courses
- Review the administrative arrangements when learners first engage with the service and around enrolment
- Focus on developing and promoting local and community based learning
- Further price rises should be considered carefully and reflect the nature of the course and the situation of the learner

From a business perspective the key messages were that:

- Skills are important, but in the current economic climate it is not a major issue for most businesses
- There were limited examples of skills shortages or gaps
- Central Bedfordshire is considered a good place to access a skilled workforce and develop skills, although there is scope to raise awareness of some of the opportunities that are available
- There is evidence of commitment to workforce development and planning for the future
- There is a demand for coordinated engagement with businesses and businesses will only engage if they can clearly see a commercial benefit to their business

- The current economic climate makes it difficult to see the skills agenda as a priority, but there is an openness to participate in new opportunities if they are relevant to the business
- Businesses that support apprenticeships are very positive about the importance of apprenticeships, the potential to recruit more apprentices and the calibre of the apprentices they employ. For these businesses, apprenticeships are essential to the growth and success of the business
- Commercial property agents do not consider Central Bedfordshire to be an area which has a lack of skills and an area in which the skills agenda will be a barrier to attracting inward investment
- Recruitment agencies do not have problems filling vacancies in the current economic climate, although there are some skills shortages and some vacancies where getting the right person with the required job and work skills is a challenge

Central Bedfordshire All Age Skills Strategy

Through the development of the Central Bedfordshire All Age Skills Strategy a number of focus groups were held with people out of work, those aged 50yrs+, adults with low skills, parents, adults with learning disabilities, physically disabled adults and BME groups. The general skills issues emerging from these groups were that:

- The concept of skills development is understood and considered important
- Skills development is not always associated with receiving a qualification which poses a potential barrier to encouraging people to take up qualification based skills development
- There are aspirations but a lack of optimism that these aspirations can be met, with little experience of being rewarded for developing their skills
- There is awareness of skills development opportunities and experience of workplace development, but scope to improve the quality of provision
- There is a lack of core skills and job finding skills for some of those that are out of work, have low skills or are on low incomes
- There is some demand for practical and financial support to develop skills and progress in work
- There needs to be improved employment prospects at the end of skills development to make it worthwhile
- Some participants raised concerns about the effectiveness of Job Centre Plus
- Some older people felt they had skills which were not being utilised by their employers and felt their age was a barrier to career progression and investment in skills development
- For parents on low income, childcare responsibilities and benefit issues meant that the incentive to develop their skills and progress their careers was limited
- For people with learning disabilities, the support they received to develop their skills and find suitable employment was considered positive – but demand seemed to outstrip the available resources

2012 Central Bedfordshire Business Survey

The specific issues emerging through the 2012 Central Bedfordshire Business Survey were that:

- One in every six businesses reported hard to fill vacancies in the past 12 months, representing an increase on previous years, with larger businesses more likely to have hard to fill vacancies

- Sales and marketing occupations, followed by construction and building trades were the hardest to fill vacancies
- Lack of skills, qualifications, experience and attitude were the main reasons for hard to fill vacancies
- Almost one in five businesses expected to have hard to fill vacancies in the next 12 months, representing an increase on previous years, with larger businesses more likely to expect to have hard to fill vacancies
- Construction and building trades is the area where there are expected to be the hardest to fill vacancies
- Almost half of businesses reported finding it difficult to obtain key skills when recruiting new staff, representing an increase on previous years
- About a third of businesses reported skills gaps in their existing workforce, with larger businesses more likely to have skills gaps
- About half of businesses provided their staff with off the job or on the job training in the past 12 months, which represents an upward trend over time, with larger businesses more likely to provide training
- A lack of identified need was the main reason for not providing training
- About half of businesses either have an apprentice or would consider having an apprentice, which is an improvement on previous years, with larger businesses more likely to have or consider having an apprentice
- About four in every ten businesses either offer or would consider offering work experience placements, with larger businesses more likely to do so
- About a third of businesses have links with local schools, with larger businesses more likely to do so

2012 Bedford Borough Business Survey

The preliminary findings from the 2012 Bedford Business survey show that:

- The number of businesses reporting hard to fill vacancies has remained pretty constant (7% in 2012, compared to 6% in 2011). 9% of the businesses surveyed expected to have hard to fill vacancies in the coming twelve months.
- A third of businesses had funded or arranged off-the-job training or development for staff (33% in 2012, 30% in 2011)
- On-the-job, informal training and development stayed much the same as last year at 40% (42% in 2011).
- Some 30% of Bedford businesses reported skills gaps amongst their existing staff, up from 25% in 2011
- 25% of Bedford businesses considered they had skills for growth needs (26% in 2011).
- 5% of Bedford businesses had employees on the Government Apprenticeship Programme (same as 2011).
- 20% would consider taking on an apprentice compared with 22% in 2011
- 13% offered unpaid work experience (compared with 19% in 2011) and 26% would consider offering such (compared with 28% in 2011)

7. Other Providers operating in Central Bedfordshire

In 2009/10 approximately 215 providers delivered SFA funded programmes in Central Bedfordshire to learners aged 16+ years, which equates to over 20,600 enrolments.

There were just over 15 providers delivering with more than 100 enrolments in 09/10 this includes the larger FE Colleges such as Central Bedfordshire College, Barnfield College, North Herts College, Milton Keynes college and Cambridge Regional

College. But also a number of private training providers such as Bedford Training Group and CiTB construction skills.

8. Big Society and Community/ Civic Engagement

The Big Society remains a key part of Government social policy, and it is recognised by BIS that ASCL has an important role to play in this development.

The Council could consider ways in which this agenda could work together with other agendas to help promote the Big Society vision in ways appropriate for people and communities in Bedfordshire, whilst also helping the ASCL Service meet its targets.

Self-organised groups are an important component of the Big Society vision, and ASCL providers are ideally placed to support learners in developing skills to run their own groups. The Council could consider setting a strategic priority to develop the Big Society and Community Engagement aspects of the ASCL curriculum, including developing civic engagement through training volunteers, community allotment courses, community learning champions, self-organised group facilitator training, school governor training, community leadership etc.

9. Voluntary & Community Sector in Bedfordshire and engagement

In the 2011/12 academic year the ASCL service began commissioning activity across a number of Skills Funding Agency funding streams. This resulted in 34 voluntary and community sector organisations being involved in the delivery of adult learning worth £250,378. Some of the organisations the service are working with are Mind, Autism Bedfordshire, Bedfordshire FA, Voluntary Community Action, Evolve Your Future, Family Groups, YMCA.

For the 12/13 academic year the Council has increased the level of funding being commissioned or delivered through partners to £450,000. This has resulted in 21 voluntary and community sector organisations working with ASCL to deliver effective Adult Learning.

The ASCL service is committed to working with the voluntary and community sector as an effective way of engaging harder to reach learners in local community based settings.

According to VCA's March 2012 report "Social What? Defining and Mapping the Characteristics of Social Enterprise in Central Bedfordshire" there are around 3,000 records of voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations operating within all or part of Bedfordshire. 166 organisations were identified as operating, emerging or potential social enterprises and of these, 55 organisations identified at least one or more of the following support needs:

- 18 Business plan development (33%)
- 3 Company registrations (5%)
- 6 Constitutions and governing documents (11%)
- 9 Financial management (16%)
- 9 Full Cost Recovery (16%)
- 30 Marketing and promotion (55%)
- 25 Partnership/Collaborative working (45%)
- 9 Public sector contracting and procurement (16%)
- 14 Quality Assurances (25%)
- 4 Social enterprise activity and trading (7%)

At Central Bedfordshire Council there are a number of initiatives aimed at helping the voluntary and community sector.

CB2 - Central Bedfordshire Capacity Building Project

The aim of the 18 month project is to support organisations to be more entrepreneurial, enabling them to respond to changes in core funding and to capitalise on proposals set out in the Localism Bill and Open Public Service White Paper. In particular, the project aims to support organisations to be able to deliver public sector services effectively. It is essential that organisations are supported to be able to deliver the services required, in an effective way, and in accordance with local authority expectations.

Through the CB2 project, Social Enterprise East of England (SEEE) will work intensively with ten organisations, providing support from an accredited business advisor, Micro coaching from trained and experienced social entrepreneurs, host visits to learn from similar organisations and, where there is sufficient demand, workshops on particular subjects.

Support through the Business Investment & Marketing Team

The Business Investment and Marketing Team signpost social enterprises and potential social entrepreneurs to a range of generic business support, including Business TimeBank and the ESF Building Enterprising Communities project, as well as to organisations specific to social enterprise such as BedSEN. They also encourage networking amongst organisations that support enterprise through the Pathways to Enterprise group.

Support through the Service Modernisation Team

The Team are aiming to encourage the establishment of small local microenterprises that could potentially deliver social care and support services on behalf of the local authority through a number of events. The microenterprise event aimed to raise awareness of microenterprise and to signpost those who are interested to mainstream business support.

10. Information, Advice & Guidance (IAG) in ASCL

An integrated approach to the delivery of IAG is, we believe, at the heart of developing the ASCL service. The ASCL service is Matrix accredited. Whilst there has been a lot of good work to date in embedding IAG into our curriculum offer we recognise that there is more we can do and that this will take time.

11. Fees

One of the key challenges facing the ASCL service is the need to ensure that Government funding is focused on the most disadvantaged, while ensuring that the offer is a universal one. Maximising fee income for those who can afford to pay is seen as a way of better of members of society supporting or subsidising those least able to pay.

In 2012/13 all fees are being held at the 2011/12 rates. Following a review of fees it is clear that current fee levels are at the higher end when compared to neighbouring Local Authority provision and local providers. Customer focus groups undertaken in summer 12 have also indicated that they consider fees to be at the top end of scale.

National changes to benefit entitlement has already impacted on the number of learners being able to join courses for free or at reduced rate. For some customers it appears that course fees "have gone up".

For the ASCL service income from fees has reduced over the last three years.

12. Key emerging themes for Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough

Through the work on the strategic influences on ASCL both nationally and locally and through customer, resident and business feedback a number of emerging themes can be identified. These are summarised below:

- **The importance of skills to the most deprived areas, with improving skills levels and getting people into work being the key drivers for regenerating these communities**

As highlighted in Central Bedfordshire's Local Economic Assessment, Family Poverty Needs Assessment and the Joint Strategic Needs Analysis, parts of Dunstable, Houghton Regis, Leighton Buzzard, Sandy and Flitwick, are ranked within the 10% most deprived lower super output areas nationally in relation to education, skills and training. In these same areas, unemployment tends to be higher, child poverty more prevalent and health problems more pronounced.

Similarly, the Bedford Borough Economic Development Plan identifies hotspot areas of unemployment, deprivation and inequality. Parts of the Castle, Cauldwell and Harpur wards are amongst the 10% most deprived super output areas in England. A further seven super output areas are amongst the most 10-20% deprived nationally.

Addressing education, skills and training in these areas could have a significant impact on individuals, in terms of improving their chances of securing new or better employment which in turn influences their standard of living. By concentrating efforts on individuals in a particular geographical area, the overall impact on the area and its regeneration could be substantial.

- **Provision should focus upon the development of skills for employment, with clarity for learners on how provision links to employment opportunities**

A common theme within the Central Bedfordshire Sustainable Community Strategy and the Council's Medium Term Plan is around maximising employment opportunities and ensuring individuals have the skills required to secure employment. This is further reflected in Central Bedfordshire's Economic Development Plan and All Age Skills Strategy, both of which emphasise the importance of local training provision that meets the skills needs of employers.

The importance of skills and employment are also highlighted in Bedford Borough's Sustainable Community Plan under the Thriving theme and in the Council's Corporate Plan.

Similarly, both the 2012 Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Business Surveys highlighted increasing numbers of businesses with hard to fill vacancies, skills shortages and skills gaps. This suggests a real need to work with individuals to ensure they have the skills required by employers.

The focus groups facilitated by Public Perspectives highlighted that both learners and non-learners are unclear how the provision offered by ASCL relates to employment opportunities, or how it can enhance their chances of securing employment. As such, consideration should be given to how to improve this awareness, both amongst those who may be looking to undertake training to improve their employment prospects and

amongst current learners with respect to progression (see further bullet points below):

'You need to get something out of the course . . . it has to be recognised by employers . . . for me it's got to help you get a job . . . from this it isn't clear whether that's the case . . . I feel like they don't market themselves as well as they should . . . they should be stressing how their courses have helped people to get a job . . . how many qualifications they've achieved.' Non-learner, Group 3 (Male, 35-54, White British)

With a focus upon learning for employment, it would be pertinent to embed employability skills within every course. This includes formal first steps to learning. Additionally, most of the learners who participated in the focus groups were keen to receive additional support to help them find employment:

'Ultimately surely this is what it's all about [to get you in to employment], brushing up on your skills and having a qualification is only half the battle.' Learner, Group 2 (Male, White British, Skills for Life learner)

Similarly, the focus groups held as part of the development of the Central Bedfordshire All Age Skills Strategy identified a similar attitude, with the learning needed to be seen as relevant to, and leading to, employment opportunities:

'I'm not against going back to college or getting a qualification . . . but there's got to be a benefit for me doing it . . . I'm not going to do it just for fun or because my employers says I should . . .' Female, Low skilled group

- **improvements need to be made to progression routes, including progression to other training, learning and employment**

One of ASCL's strengths, highlighted in the 2011 Ofsted report, is their ability to engage with a range of communities, including those in areas of disadvantage. The importance of this first engagement in learning should not be underestimated, but consideration needs to be given to how learners are supported on to the next stage of the journey, be it onto the next level of ASCL provision, or training offered by a college or other provider.

The Versa Review of the service highlighted that 83% of ASCL's delivery is focused on provision up to level 1. Moving learners on to level 2 and beyond should be a priority, particularly with a focus on skills for employment, as employers are increasingly seeking higher level skills, and given the relationship between skills levels, employment opportunities and poverty.

None of the learners who participated in the focus groups could provide examples of ASCL providing them with support to go on to further learning:

'I think they should do more marketing to current learners . . . I've never received information when I enrol about other courses and I've never received a call to see how things have gone and if I'd like to go on other courses . . . I think that's a shame . . . they have all our details . . . they should take advantage of that.' Learner, Group 1 (Male, Non-White British)

The importance of progression routes is further recognised in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills "New Challenges, New Chances: Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan". This is based around a number of core elements, of

which, a 'ladder of opportunity' from community learning and basic skills, to apprenticeships and further vocational education, is one.

- **Effective Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is crucial and more should be provided as an integral part of all provision**

Linked to both of the above points is the importance of information, advice and guidance. IAG could support awareness of progression pathways and other training and support opportunities.

87% of learners who took part in the focus groups said that on enrolment they received appropriate information, advice and guidance on the learning opportunities available. Such IAG should be provided at the end of and at suitable points during, the course. Similarly, the focus groups identified concerns over the careers advice that was provided, with few individuals accessing this and those that did, considering this to be ineffective.

The consultation undertaken as part of the development of Central Bedfordshire Council's All Age Skills Strategy further emphasised the importance of IAG to ensure learners are aware of the skills and learning opportunities available and the employment pathways available.

- **The focus on particular age groups should be enhanced, specifically those aged 19-24 and those over 50+yrs**

One of the priorities identified in the Central Bedfordshire Economic Development Plan is around addressing youth unemployment. Similarly, the Local Economic Assessment has highlighted youth unemployment, given its high level compared to historic rates. In Bedford Borough, 18-24 year olds have also been identified as a priority group in relation to unemployment.

Research has also shown that those over 50 are more likely to experience long term unemployment.

As such, an argument can be made to target some provision at these particular age groups.

- **The training needs of businesses need to be recognised, addressed and tailored**

The importance of creating employment opportunities and maintaining an employment rate higher than the national average, are emphasised in Central Bedfordshire Council's Sustainable Community Strategy and the Council's Medium Term Plan. It is acknowledged, particularly in the former document, that supporting businesses to train their workforce has a role to play. Similarly, the second priority in the Central Bedfordshire All Age Skills Strategy is about developing the current and future workforce. The importance of supporting businesses and developing a "quality and competitive workforce" are further included within the priorities of Bedford Borough's Economic Development Plan.

The in-depth interviews with businesses carried out by Public Perspectives showed that businesses who have used ASCL have been extremely impressed by their services:

'I would recommend them because I think they're spot on in what they do . . . I'm happy with them and so is the company . . . we are not interested in working with other providers because I have not seen anything better than what we already have.' Business working with the ASCL service

There is however, a lack of awareness of the service amongst businesses, and this is something that needs to be addressed if ASCL wish to increase the range and number of businesses they are involved with:

'I wasn't aware of them at all and I certainly didn't know they did this sort of thing . . .' Business not working with the ASCL service

- **Recognise the impact that learning can have on social wellbeing and where appropriate use as a gateway to economic wellbeing**

Health and wellbeing and independent living are recognised in their own strategies as well as being recurrent themes in strategies such as the Sustainable Community Strategies for both Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire Council's Medium Term Plan and Bedford Borough's Corporate Plan.

The focus groups further emphasised the social benefits that arise from participation in learning:

'The course has been excellent for me . . . it's the socialising and sharing things with people that have similar interests . . . My family lives 200 miles away from me . . . taking part in these classes has almost created another family for me.' Learner, Group 1 (Female, White British)

'I can't tell you how important it is for us . . . it gets you out of the house, gives you a sense of satisfaction and the socialising is important.' Learner, Group 1 (Female, White British)

In some circumstances, engaging with learners through more social activities may encourage an appetite for learning, which where appropriate, could be channelled towards learning for employment and economic reasons. Again, clear progression pathways, IAG and support with progressing into further learning or employment would be important.

Support for community learning is outlined in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills "New Challenges, New Chances: Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan". The Plan outlines a number of objectives relating to community learning, including increased confidence; improved/maintained health and/or social well-being and cites one of the purposes of funding this to be to "maximise the impact of community learning on the social and economic well-being of individuals, families and communities".

13. Looking to the future

The below are the draft service priorities for the 13/14 academic year:

- To focus adult skills provision on those geographical areas with the highest levels of deprivation, tailoring delivery to meet the needs of individuals in

those communities through bite size periods of learning, that build confidence and an appetite for further learning

- All provision should focus on developing work skills with better support for learners to secure employment
- Delivery of work clubs to support unemployed adults into work
- Improve progression routes into next level training and into work
- Further embed Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) into the curriculum offer
- Provide particular support to those aged 19-24yrs and those over 50+yrs to find work and progress in employment
- Support workforce development through provision of flexible, needs led provision that meets locally identified business needs
- Recognise the impact that learning can have on social wellbeing and where appropriate use as a gateway to economic wellbeing

There are implications here for the provision of Learning for Leisure and Pleasure type activities. Any new strategy would need to involve careful transition planning with other local partners if the Council were to reduce its curriculum offer in this area.