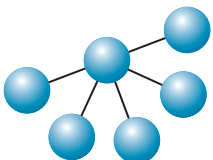


**Evaluation of
Learning Challenge Fund
Final Mini Evaluation Report**

Vale Learning Network



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Vale Learning Network

Background to the Vale Learning Network

- 1.1.1. The Vale Learning Network (VLN) is the name of the Vale of Glamorgan's Consortium for Education and Training, which before 2003 was known as the Vale Consortium for Education and Training (VCET). The VLN's mission is:

"to develop, promote and monitor a coherent, strategic, lifelong learning programme to satisfy the needs of the Vale".

- 1.1.2. With Vale of Glamorgan Council (VOGC) acting as the Lead Body, the VLN bid for £500,000 from the Learning Challenge Fund to develop the network. The VLN also bid for funding from ESF (Objective 3), to run four projects addressing gaps in provision that the VCET had previously identified. The VLN was successful in securing £400,000 from ESF to run these projects: Basic Skills for the Workplace; Extending Entitlement; Widening Participation; and Basic Skills for the Unemployed. LCF funding acted as match funding for the ESF monies.
- 1.1.3. These projects – the one LCF project and four ESF projects – are managed as one by the VLN Project Manager and his team. The VLN project began in July 2004 and is due to finish in February 2007.

Project objectives

- 1.1.4. The aims of the VLN project were to develop a co-ordinated and integrated network of community-based and other learning providers, and to plan, develop and implement co-ordinated learning provision where information, guidance and learning opportunities were easily available to all and, in particular, to those groups that have traditionally been unwilling or unable to access learning opportunities.
- 1.1.5. The project has a set of amalgamated objectives for the LCF and four ESF projects. The objectives that relate most clearly to the LCF funded strand are:
- to improve the quality and range of post-16 provision through the establishment of formal networking arrangements for all network providers where provision is planned, developed and implemented in partnership; and
 - to engage the full range of providers in the development of the learning network.

Project management structures

- 1.1.6. The VLN project has been managed as an integrated programme by a project team, based at Barry College. The full team was comprised of seven posts (including two part-time posts): Project Manager, Project Team Leader, Community Development Officer, Basic Skills Development Officers/Tutors, ICT Technician, and Administrator. Each of the four ESF projects has its own part-time project officer, with the exception of Basic Skills for the Workplace, which is managed by a full-time officer.

- 1.1.7. Vale of Glamorgan Council is the Lead Body and contract holder, as the VLN itself is not formally constituted and cannot bid for funding.
- 1.1.8. A sub-set of the VLN, known as the Project Management Group (PMG), was formed to oversee the project, and meets monthly.
- 1.1.9. The PMG reports to the VLN Steering Group, which reviews and ratifies decisions that the PMG makes. The Steering Group includes representatives from all the different sectors comprising learning provision in the Vale (e.g. FE, private training providers, voluntary sector, Jobcentre Plus, Adult and Community Learning, schools).

1.2. LCF Evaluation Methodology

- 1.2.1. Shared Intelligence was commissioned by ELWa – now the Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DELLS) - in 2003 to evaluate the Learning Challenge Fund on an ongoing basis. The evaluation programme included a mini evaluation of each of the LCF projects, as well as an assessment of the LCF's progress as a scheme.
- 1.2.2. The first stage of the LCF evaluation reviewed the development and process of setting up and administering the Learning Challenge Fund. Project mini evaluations, including the mini evaluation of the Vale Learning Network project, began in 2004.
- 1.2.3. It is important to highlight the difference between the VLN itself, the VLN project and the LCF-funded part of this. This mini-evaluation looks at the VLN project, focusing on the outcomes of LCF-funded activities – although these are, of course, closely linked with the other work carried out by the network team. We do not look at the success of the four ESF-funded projects, although these will be subject to evaluation by the VLN project team when complete.
- 1.2.4. This mini-evaluation is based on:
 - an initial project visit in June 2004, meeting with the Project Manager, original ELWa Contract Manager and representative from Vale of Glamorgan Council;
 - attendance at Vale Learning Network conference in March 2005;
 - meeting with new ELWa Contract Manager in June 2005;
 - interim telephone catch-up conversations with the Project Manager and ELWa Contract Manager during lifetime of the project;
 - semi-structured telephone interviews with eight Project Management Group members (including two key members who were interviewed twice during the course of the project); and
 - review of project data, including quarterly output reports and internal evaluation reports, on a regular basis.

2. PROJECT PROGRESS AND EFFECTIVENESS

2.1. Project activities

- 2.1.1. At the start of the project, a Project Plan was prepared, including a detailed schedule of outputs and milestones, relating to the full VLN project (including the ESF-funded projects). Because of the nature of the work funded by LCF, these outputs were not quantitative (e.g. beneficiary numbers) but related to network development.
- 2.1.2. A large proportion of the project team's work focused on building relationships with partners and facilitating joint working. This included convening meetings on particular issues (e.g. the establishment of advice and guidance arrangements between Careers Wales and network providers) and servicing sub-groups of the network, working to achieve partnership goals such as setting up referral and progression routes between providers, or aligning providers' strategic planning cycles.
- 2.1.3. The project team also carried out a number of distinct development projects using LCF funding, including the following:
- development of a VLN website (www.valelearning.net) for use by providers and learners;
 - running an annual conference for all VLN members to set priorities for the VLN and inform ELWa's Regional Statement of Needs and Priorities;
 - upgrading community learning facilities and identifying new locations for community learning;
 - carrying out an audit of community learning provision across the Vale, including staff training needs analysis of providers;
 - providing staff training through the Vale Training Consortium;
 - employing IT staff to deliver support to smaller providers in the Vale to ensure all can access the VLN's on-line resources; and
 - producing e-newsletters and bulletins for members.
- 2.1.4. Recently, the Vale was selected to participate in ELWa's Community Learning Pilot. Because it was in receipt of LCF funding, the VLN did not receive extra funding through the pilot. The aims of the pilot and of the LCF project are similar.

2.2. Project progress

Progress in delivering LCF outputs and milestones

- 2.2.1. As with several other LCF projects, the Vale Learning Network project suffered a slow start, caused by delays in contracting. The project submitted its bid to ELWa in October 2002 and received funding approval for a three year project in January 2003, but could not commence until July 2004 because of delays at ELWa. The delay meant that five re-datings of the project milestones had to be made, causing frustration amongst network and team members.

- 2.2.2. The delays in contracting also affected the ESF projects. The Vale Learning Network had bid for ESF funding from WEFO once LCF funding was agreed, and although ESF projects are normally funded for 2 years, the length of the projects was extended to three years to fit with the LCF project timetable. However, the end dates of the ESF projects could not be changed once the start of the LCF project slipped. As a result, the VLN had to spend all its ESF funding before the original deadline, or lose funding. It decided to go ahead with the ESF projects in full, but the timescale to deliver these shrank, meaning that more milestones and outputs had to be delivered in a shorter time.
- 2.2.3. Nevertheless, despite the slow start, the project has so far reached most of its LCF milestones, broadly as planned. Some rescheduling of the original project plan has taken place in order to take account of the delayed start of the project and the VLN has reached almost all of these revised milestones on or before schedule. Two consultees did, however, suggest that perhaps the VLN project had over-extended itself and was trying to achieve too much at once:

"the current project has a lot of different strands – we've made it more difficult than it needed to be, perhaps."

- 2.2.4. After contracting, the main barriers to progression in the project as a whole have been recruitment difficulties, and problems with one key staff member, managing the Basic Skills for the Unemployed project, who went on long term sick leave but could not be replaced until a resignation letter was received because there was no additional funding to bring in another member of staff. This led one Project Management Group member to suggest that in future, perhaps more funding should be released up front for recruitment.
- 2.2.5. Maintaining staff levels at the end of the project has also been difficult, with key members of the project team having already left. This is, of course, a common problem with projects with finite timescales and funding, as staff members are often minded to look for new jobs before the funding for their positions runs out.

Progress in delivering ESF outputs and milestones

- 2.2.6. The ESF-funded projects (match funded by LCF) have been audited by the Audit Commission. After a slow start in some cases, the four projects are currently running well, even though making up for earlier difficulties means that challenging targets remain. The Basic Skills for the Unemployed project faced the most serious early problems, with a key member of staff who had been on long-term sick leave later leaving post. These difficulties have now been overcome; a new permanent staff member began on the project just before Christmas 2005 and has since been able to increase referrals from Jobcentre Plus.
- 2.2.7. While these projects are not the main focus of this mini-evaluation, as they are funded by ESF not LCF, some points about their progress are worth noting. PMG members as well as the Project Manager have suggested that the targets set for some of these projects were initially too high and were concerned that not all final targets would be met – although at the time of writing, all projects were either on track to meet their main targets or action was being taken to increase outputs.

- 2.2.8. Some interesting learning has come out of this. For example, with the Basic Skills in the Workplace project, the project officer spent a lot of time on development work with companies in the Vale, but found it difficult to translate this into learner numbers, partly because many of the companies engaged were micro-businesses and could not, therefore, offer many learners. The project has since refocused to work with larger SMEs and is aiming for a 3:1 learner to business ratio. In future, if this type of work were funded by DELLS, it would be worth taking this point about size of businesses into consideration.
- 2.2.9. There are also some similarities in the difficulties faced in engaging employers, when compared with the work of other LCF projects. For example, Carmarthenshire Basic Skills Strategy also met difficulty engaging employers in basic skills training, despite, like the VLN, building good relationships with employers and garnering interest in training, even to the extent of getting employers to sign up to the Basic Skills Agency's Employer Pledge.
- 2.2.10. Another point raised by PMG members about the ESF projects was that, although the VLN team was funded to co-ordinate the projects, for the providers delivering them the administration around the projects took a lot of time, which perhaps had not been fully recognised at the start.

2.3. Effectiveness of project delivery

- 2.3.1. Consultation with Project Management Group members suggested that the network was being managed effectively and that partners were very satisfied with the work of the project team.
- 2.3.2. For example, consultees commented that the VLN was successful in reaching all sectors, and that this inclusiveness was a result of the project team's good work. As one PMG member, from a smaller organisation, commented, the network is not dominated by larger providers:

"In fact they bend over backwards to include us [smaller providers] and they value our contribution. They realise that we're working with people who are harder to reach – we're working in really deprived areas compared with other providers in the Vale."

- 2.3.3. The network has also been proactive in trying to draw in those who were not already members. As one consultee explained,

"I was concerned at a recent meeting to find out that there are some learning providers who still aren't involved, but the VLN is making attempts to bring them in now."

- 2.3.4. The VLN was also perceived to be open and transparent, and a key strength was that larger providers worked well with smaller providers.

"Everybody's represented, though I think the bigger providers are obviously going to be more involved, I think rightly so... [but] there doesn't seem to be any sort of elitism."

"Sometimes we can get pushed to the edges – working with

our target group - but within the network, we feel we have a voice."

- 2.3.5. The project team was also felt to be very accessible and friendly, making it easy for network members to contact them. The team was seen as a useful resource and central contact point. As one consultee commented,

"If you have a problem they will get back in touch with you within a day, and if they can't help they'll put you in touch with other providers who can."

3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

3.1. Outcomes and benefits

- 3.1.1. The evaluation explored outcomes and impact of the VLN project with members of the Project Management Group, who represented a range of different learning providers.
- 3.1.2. The interviews focused on the LCF-funded side of the project, looking at how development of the network had benefited individual providers, and at how this ultimately made a difference to learning provision in the Vale.

3.2. Outcomes for learning providers

- 3.2.1. The interviews with PMG members showed that they, and their organisations, experienced a wide range of benefits as a result of their membership of the network.
- 3.2.2. One of these was simply that their awareness of other providers and their work significantly increased through involvement with the VLN. The project team was also seen to be actively helping VLN members to network with one another. This was seen as a key strength, especially by providers in the voluntary sector who otherwise felt they would have been isolated from the wider 16+ learning community:

"We felt very isolated here before we became involved – we needed to find a way to network with other resources."

- 3.2.3. Leverage of further funding was also seen as a key benefit. The VLN cannot bid for funding itself, which is why VOGC became the lead body responsible for delivering the contract. However, some of the individual partners have been able to bid for funding for various projects and feel their membership of the VLN has helped to attract this:

"When we do grant applications as a charity, the fact that we're part of a prestigious network really helps. Also, when a partnership application is needed, that partnership is already there."

- 3.2.4. Some of the providers have benefited from specific strands of the VLN's work. For example, the ICT Technician has been giving community support to small providers, and this work has been supplemented with additional work by IT workers from some of the larger providers, such as Barry College.

3.3. Outcomes for learning provision in the Vale

- 3.3.1. PMG members were asked about how the VLN impacted on learning provision in the Vale, as distinct from its impact on individual providers. While we did not explore outcomes for individual learners (as these would be related to ESF-funded projects, rather than the LCF-funded development work), consultees recognised that the aim of developing the network was "ultimately, to benefit the learner". Many examples were given of the types of work undertaken to this end, and of the outcomes achieved so far.

- 3.3.2. The VLN's work has started to bring more coherence to provision in the Vale and started to put structures in place to allow provision to be planned strategically and collaboratively between providers. For example, as part of the Community Learning Pilot, the VLN prepared a Local Area Strategic Plan. The annual conferences also had a key role in facilitating a more strategic approach in the Vale, and were seen as one of the most successful elements of the project, in that they gave an opportunity to get providers together to talk about what was going on in the Vale and share ideas on what provision was needed. The VLN used these conferences to devise recommendations to ELWa and now DELLS on the Regional Statement of Needs and Priorities.
- 3.3.3. Another outcome from the VLN project has been the development of protocols and a system for commissioning provision where gaps have been identified. This has been done in a collaborative and open way, which the PMG sees as a real strength. Using the audit of provision carried out earlier in the project, and the local area strategic plan, the VLN produced a series of specifications for learning provision where gaps had been identified. These were then advertised on the VLN website and expressions of interest sought. Where more than one partner applied to deliver the project, they were encouraged to work out how they could collaborate to deliver it. For example, in one case three providers bid for a specific piece of work. One later withdrew, and the other two got together and agreed to share delivery, providing 3 courses each. They also agreed a timetable between them. The partners were private training providers, so although they knew each other's organisations they were not regular collaborators but more often in competition with one another.
- 3.3.4. PMG members also recognised that the VLN project has given opportunities for providers to try new types of provision and to run courses that they may not otherwise have been able to – and to learn from this. A key example was in fact in the use of ESF funding. As one consultee pointed out,

"There's not been a lot of ESF funding in the Vale before, and people have been nervous about using it, because of the requirements of this funding. So the VLN projects have been a learning experience in utilising external funding as opposed to just core funding. It's made us more confident about applying for this in future."

- 3.3.5. A key benefit of the VLN project, although more related to the ESF funding, has been that partners have been able to deliver new courses, or courses aimed at new groups, that otherwise would have been risky and potentially financially unviable. This has enabled providers to meet needs that they had previously identified but not been able to address – as well as giving a sound basis for continuing some of this provision in future. One major outcome from this was to widen participation, particularly because not all courses needed to be accredited so could be aimed at a wider range of groups. Consultees explained:

"We've been able to be experimental where we wouldn't have risked tutors' time on courses before because we weren't sure whether we'd get people interested. Before we couldn't run courses with fewer than 10 people, but VLN has allowed us to be flexible and try new things."

"There's a lot that we wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. We've been able to put something on and hope it will grow, instead of having to have a ready made group to make things financially viable."

"We've been able to put on ESOL classes, in areas where before we wouldn't have been able to put them on because of the risk. We knew about the need anecdotally but didn't have data to support it. We're hoping that these classes will be sustainable in future because we now know the numbers are there."

"An example would be some Welsh projects that we wanted to run in the workplace and a community location we hadn't used before."

"One group that's under funded is people with communication difficulties, because it's hard to get accreditation for them... VLN funding has helped with this."

3.3.6. The flexibility of project funding, as opposed to mainstream funding, in allowing partners to try out new forms of provision was a benefit of other LCF projects as well as the Vale Learning Network. For example, this theme came out very strongly in the evaluation of Carmarthenshire Basic Skills Strategy, which was also linked to the county's CCET and placed a strong emphasis on partnership working, although its main focus was in promoting basic skills.

3.3.7. The success of the network has also brought new opportunities to the Vale. As mentioned above, the Vale was selected as one of five areas to participate in the national Community Learning Pilot. Although the VLN did not receive additional funding for its involvement, PMG members felt that being part of the pilot raised the VLN's profile, giving it some national exposure and recognition. It was also useful in sharing good practice and helping the VLN to benchmark its work against that of other CCETs. Further, the VLN found that as a network, it was relatively well developed compared with the other pilots, and this was affirming and encouraging. Involvement in the pilot also gave an additional spur to concentrate on network development, rather than letting the ESF-funded projects take over – which could be a risk, given the pressure to deliver outputs for these projects.

3.3.8. Not only has this approach resulted in new provision being commissioned, to fill gaps, but it has also helped to foster a culture of collaboration, rather than competition, between providers. As one PMG member commented:

"Different providers wanted a share of the cake and we worked out a way so that everyone got something without one provider taking the lot. Instead of all bidding against each other we're working with each other – we're looking at what students want instead of our own interests! But we're also protecting each other – making sure that providers aren't left out in the cold."

3.3.9. Another PMG member reflected this view, and noted that the regular network meetings helped to cement these relationships as well:

"All the tensions around ownership of classes and students has all dissipated...we're connecting to each other constantly and don't feel threatened any more."

3.3.10. More recently, the VLN carried out some work aiming to encourage providers to start aligning their planning cycles. This was taken forward by sub-groups of the VLN, primarily through the Quality Group. As an innovative piece of work, this is explored in some detail below.

3.3.11. The first step in the process was to get the largest providers, who are Estyn-inspected, to share their organisational self-assessment reports (SARs). This is seen as an important step in moving forward with partnership working, given that providers have traditionally been in competition with each other and would have previously avoided sharing business critical information such as that in the SARs. The VLN has used these reports to prepare a 'Vale Self-Assessment Report', bringing together the findings in the individual SARs to give a good picture of strengths and weaknesses in provision. It is intended that smaller partners, who will become subject to Estyn inspection themselves when the new Local Area Inspection takes place, will later be assisted to draft and share their own SARs. If each of the five largest providers works closely with five smaller partners, virtually all adult learning provision will be covered in one of the SARs and part of the Vale SAR. A Quality Development Plan to deal with issues in need of development identified in the SAR has also been written and takes effect from September 2006 – this will help to achieve certain LCF milestones.

3.3.12. While the process of sharing 'warts and all' self-assessment reports could be seen as risky, providers recognised that it was helpful not only for the 'greater good' of learning provision in the Vale, but also for their own organisations as they could share ideas and good practice. As one PMG member put it,

"it makes sense for providers to share good practice and ideas from elsewhere – the culture that's around now is more demanding and it makes sense for us to learn from each other. I don't mind pinching ideas!"

3.3.13. This work ultimately aims to align organisations' planning cycles, so that providers can refer to one another and 'self help' while they are writing their strategic and organisational plans. The intention is that providers can discuss gaps and duplication in provision when writing their planning documents, and where a gap is identified they can agree how it will be filled. PMG members who were interviewed as part of the evaluation all felt that this would be beneficial for their organisations and for learning provision in the Vale:

" We are thinking about what we do in terms of joint planning, and by the end of the pilot we should have a joint planning system that says in January we will do this, and in February we will do this..."

3.3.14. Providers have, therefore, bought into the concept of aligning their strategic planning. Nevertheless, this is not yet a reality in the Vale and more work would need to be undertaken before the end of the project if the joint planning cycle was to be fully established and embedded. For example, a documented process

for planning in partnership would be needed. This element may be difficult to take forward without the ongoing support of the project team.

3.4. Added value of LCF funding

- 3.4.1. An important issue for the evaluation was to explore the additional benefit for the Vale Learning Network from receiving LCF funding. The added value of funding for network development could be questioned for two main reasons – first, the network existed prior to the LCF funding; and second, the VLN also received ESF project funding, yet the LCF monies amounted to more than the combined value of the ESF projects. The evaluation therefore placed considerable emphasis on finding out what qualitative difference was made by the additional funding.
- 3.4.2. A key point about additionality of LCF is that the ESF monies could not have been sourced without match funding, which the LCF provided. In this sense therefore, the LCF was a main enabling factor in getting the ESF projects off the ground.
- 3.4.3. LCF funding also complemented the ESF projects in a way that was beneficial for the network. WEFO regulations meant that if a person's post was funded by ESF, all their time had to be spent on that project. This was not the case with LCF, where time could be spent more flexibly. Without the LCF funding, the VLN would not have been able to use staff time to carry out network development activities.
- 3.4.4. PMG members consulted for the evaluation also felt that, although the network had existed prior to the LCF funding, and its structure was still similar, it had nevertheless changed. Most of the consultees pointed out that, with funding on the table, there became a greater purpose and impetus behind partnership working. Comments included the following:

"It's become more confident and people can see we do have weight now, because we have funding."

"It's much easier to collaborate if there's some funding on the table – for example, if you're talking about joint training, it's much easier to do this if there's some funding available."

- 3.4.5. The VLN's activities, particularly the emphasis on networking, the sub-groups, and the annual conferences, have helped to improve relationships between providers and establish a culture of joint working: as one provider put it, "it's made everyone realise the benefit of partnership working." Another explained that the VLN had made a difference on joint working at a number of levels:

"The relationships were there before, but the VLN has helped everyone to work together better. Every relationship is better – and we're working with some organisations that we didn't know about before, like voluntary organisations and training providers."

- 3.4.6. A key to the VLN's success in facilitating partnership working seems to be that the project team has been able to administer the various meetings, for example sub-group meetings, meaning that partners are more likely to attend on a regular basis. Consultation with PMG members showed that partners were very

committed to the network, and, in contrast with many other partnerships (across all sectors, not just within the learning arena), that representation from senior staff was strong. This may not have been possible if there was a greater burden of administration on partners. As one consultee put it,

"The VLN has had success in bringing partners together to share good practice through the sub-groups – there are a lot of sub-groups and they're very inclusive because of the leadership style – it doesn't feel burdensome as if you're going to have to do minutes, etc, all the admin is done on your behalf."

3.4.7. Partners also pointed out that the types of work the network carried out was different to that it had managed prior to receiving LCF funding. Before the VLN project started, the network members would meet and do some joint working, for example around marketing Adult Learners' Week and similar projects. However, once the VLN received LCF funding, its work diversified and extended, to include the wide variety of activities mentioned earlier in this report. A key difference is that, beforehand, the network did not carry out strategic planning. This has now become a core part of its work. The VLN team has also found that project funding effectively subsidises core funding, which on its own would be inadequate to fund the extensive community developmental work that a widening participation agenda requires.

3.4.8. Another point about added value of the network is that its work could stand providers in good stead for future statutory requirements, notably the new inspection regime. Estyn is now carrying out Local Area Inspections, as well as inspecting mainstream providers as individual organisations. Several PMG members noted that the new regime was a real impetus for partnership working and that it was a big asset having a strong network in place and funding to develop it. A typical comment was as follows:

"It will pay dividends in the long term, particularly when we come to be Estyn inspected. We'll have the relationships in place, we'll have the mapping, we have providers delivering to all people whatever stage they're at – college, community education, WEA in deprived areas, basic skills underpinning it all, training providers for the workplace..."

3.4.9. There were, though, some qualifying points made by PMG members about the added value of the VLN project. Mainly, these referred to the ESF-funded projects, and were made by partners who were also delivering these projects. These consultees made two main points. The first was that the projects themselves generated a lot of administration - "I am working on the project between meetings – course proposals, monitoring" – that was not fully compensated for in project funding.

3.4.10. Two consultees also raised a concern that some of the activities on the ESF side would have "a negative effect on other provision". This could happen if the ESF projects took providers' attention away from their core work, because of the pressure to deliver outputs. It could also be the case if the ESF projects targeted a group already provided for through the mainstream. Although these providers did not think the problem was widespread, they suspected it was happening in some instances.

- 3.4.11. One PMG member was concerned that the high targets could mean that the project was running the risk of 'widening, but not deepening' participation, by running mainly taster courses. However, although taster courses were a prominent feature of the Widening Participation project, the VLN has also funded accredited courses, and long-term and in-depth work with specific groups. For example, the network has entered into partnership with the Partnership for Young Parents to help fund their extensive and, in Wales, unique provision for the lifetime of the project. The VLN is funding crèche provision and the wages of a student mentor to the value of £35,000.

4. CONTRIBUTION TO LCF OBJECTIVES

4.1. Aims of the Learning Challenge Fund

4.1.1. This section looks at the extent to which the Vale Learning Network project fitted with, and contributed to, the aims and objectives of the Learning Challenge Fund. In summary, the key objectives and success criteria for the LCF, are as follows:

- innovation and new approaches in learning provision;
- a strategic approach at national, regional and local levels;
- collaboration between learning providers leading to improved learning networks;
- improving access and widening participation;
- delivering more and high-quality learning outcomes from existing resources; and
- effective mainstreaming of successful projects.

Innovation

4.1.2. Innovation was not central to the VLN's approach, but there were nevertheless some good examples of innovation within the VLN's work – both in terms of introducing new things to the Vale of Glamorgan, and in terms of trying out new approaches with wider significance. (It should be noted, too, that while facilitating innovation was a key tenet behind the Learning Challenge Fund, it was not a criterion for project funding.)

4.1.2. As mentioned above, the ESF project funding gave providers the opportunity to deliver new courses, in new locations, targeted at new groups. These included, for example, Welsh in the Workplace, ESOL courses, and entry level provision for people with learning disabilities. These projects, therefore, allowed Vale providers to pilot new types of learning.

4.1.3. Further, the partnership development work carried out by the VLN project has had some innovative elements. Involvement in the Community Learning Pilot allowed some PMG members to see that the work they were doing was in fact different to some of the work being carried out in other parts of Wales. This included the early work on a joint planning cycle, discussed above. Another example was that one of the VLN sub-groups had spent some time discussing how to align pay within the different sectors. The logic behind this was that, with the network commissioning provision, it didn't make sense that they would pay tutors more if they were working for one provider than for another. The network does not have a solution for this issue yet – but as several PMG members pointed out, the fact that they were even discussing pay was quite radical, as it is such a sensitive issue. It is hoped that progress can be made on this in coming months:

"We have discussed aligning pay and concessions, and fees. We decided to take an audit of provision first, to find out how rates of pay etc vary, and we will then look at actions to be taken from this."

Collaboration and a strategic approach

- 4.1.4. As mentioned above, the key objectives of the ELWa-funded strand of the VLN project were to develop the provider network and ensure closer joint working, planning and delivery of provision. This fits closely with the LCF's objectives to promote a strategic approach at national, regional and local levels and to encourage collaboration between learning providers leading to improved learning networks.
- 4.1.5. From the interviews with PMG members, it was clear that the VLN had indeed facilitated collaboration between learning providers, and that this had enabled the Vale to pursue a more strategic approach in planning and delivering provision. For example, the VLN had carried out an audit of provision, and then commissioned new provision to fill some of the gaps that the audit found. The collaborative approach to commissioning – whereby all providers were invited to tender, and if more than one suitable provider expressed interest then provision was shared out – seems to have been very successful so far.
- 4.1.6. Another example of increased collaboration making a more strategic approach possible is the VLN's work in trying to establish a joint planning cycle. Although this work is not yet complete, some positive steps forward have been made. Further, several PMG members noted that regular meetings and joint working had helped providers to start trusting each other more.

Improving access and widening participation

- 4.1.7. The learner projects that the VLN is delivering also fit well with the LCF objectives around widening participation and delivering more and high quality learning outcomes – though it should be noted that, as previously mentioned, these projects are funded through ESF Objective 3 rather than LCF.

Delivering more and high-quality learning outcomes

- 4.1.8. The ESF projects were the main way through which the VLN delivered more learning outcomes. As stated at the start of this document, these projects are not the focus of this mini-evaluation. Nevertheless, there were ways in which the network development funded by LCF contributed to delivering 'higher quality learning'. Consultees also mentioned the work of the Quality Group, in raising awareness of quality issues within the network, as a way of raising quality of provision within the network.
- 4.1.9. Delivery of 'more learning' was not unproblematic, though. As mentioned in the section on 'added value', above, two consultees raised concerns that the demands of the ESF projects, and the pressure to meet output targets, sometimes meant that providers' attention was distracted from delivering mainstream provision. This should not be taken to mean that the VLN projects were not additional, but that there may be some element of 'displacement'. This is an area that the VLN's internal evaluation could usefully explore.

4.2. Sustainability and mainstreaming

- 4.2.1. The VLN project runs until the end of February 2007, but the network plans to finish the bulk of delivery by the end of 2006, using the remaining months to tie

up loose ends. The VLN is therefore already thinking about how its work will be sustained. Positively, all PMG members consulted felt that it was important that the network, and its cycle of meetings, should be maintained.

- 4.2.2. In terms of the progress made in getting partners to work together more strategically, it is hoped that this can be largely sustained without additional funding. Working relationships pre-dated the VLN, but have been cemented through the project. The Estyn inspection regime will also provide an impetus for continued partnership working. In terms of the working relationships built, most consultees from the Project Management Group were positive that they would be maintained after project funding expired:

"It all looks as if it is very positive, no indication that we would go back to competitive ways."

"The benefit for me is that we've had time on the PMG to develop relationships so that we all know each other really well now."

"Providers agreed the current structure, so there's no reason why this shouldn't continue. We wouldn't have put so much work into it if we didn't think it would work."

- 4.2.3. Further, the network's progress in developing protocols for joint working, and the collaborative ways of working that have been set up, lay the groundwork for continued partnership working in future.
- 4.2.4. Nevertheless, having funding to distribute has no doubt strengthened the partnership and given the network a stronger focus, which might be hard to maintain without funding. The network has also benefited from having a dedicated project team and resources to co-ordinate processes and carry out research. Some consultees were concerned that without the central team, the network would not be so effective.

"I would like to think that this will continue into the future – but it will need an independent broker. It's the independence that's important – the fact that it's not led by the College, or the Council, etc – it needs a facilitator."

- 4.2.5. The VLN had hoped that the national planning and funding system as proposed by ELWa would be fully operational by the time the projects were due to end. This could have been advantageous in that the large number of new learners who projects have identified may then have been eligible for core funding. As this now looks unlikely to happen, other non-core funding is being actively sought.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND LEARNING POINTS

5.1. Conclusions

- 5.1.1. Consultees for the mini-evaluation, who have represented a range of sectors (e.g. further education, voluntary and community sector), have all been very positive about the operation and outcomes of the Vale Learning Network project.
- 5.1.2. The VLN project has met almost all milestones on or before schedule. As the project was not yet complete at the time of writing, there is still time to meet all targets. Partners contributing to the evaluation have felt strongly that the development work facilitated by LCF has strengthened the network, and complemented the ESF-funded projects that the network is also carrying out. There are several examples of innovation and good practice in the work that the VLN is carrying out, and its involvement in the Community Learning Pilot allows this to be shared more widely within Wales.
- 5.1.3. The LCF funded VLN project has led to some hard outcomes – such as the production of a website and audit of provision – and many softer outcomes, including better relationships between learning providers. Consultees gave examples of how these had now started to translate into benefits for learning in the Vale more widely – allowing the VLN to commission new provision to fill gaps, for example.
- 5.1.4. In terms of additionality, it is clear from the partner interviews that the work of the project team was additional and would not have taken place without LCF funding. Although a network existed prior to the VLN project, the nature of the network and volume of work it was able to undertake radically changed when funding was secured. Partners also noted that relationships between providers had developed and strengthened, with the funding giving the network more weight and bringing a new incentive to work collaboratively. The network has also helped to improve quality of provision through collaborative working and ensure a more effective use of resources by reducing duplication and gap filling - both important aspects of additionality.
- 5.1.5. Even if the network does not receive additional funding in future, it is likely that work it has set in train will keep running. PMG members believed that working relationships with other partners were now strong enough to be maintained without so much support from a central team (and the examples they gave of collaborative work helped to reinforce this contention). Nevertheless, the VLN may find that without funding to distribute, it has less weight with providers; further, not all of the partnership initiatives (e.g. the joint planning cycle) are fully established at present, and there may be some aspects of the VLN's work that are not able to be maintained without the support of a dedicated project team.

5.2. Learning points

- 5.2.1. There are several learning points to arise from the mini-evaluation. A first point is that the mini-evaluation brought forward clear evidence that networking and collaboration between providers in the Vale is real and has resulted in valuable outcomes, for organisations and for provision more widely. While not all final aims have so far been achieved (as the project is not yet finished), there is good progress towards them. Sharing the ideas and experiences of the VLN with other

CCETs or similar networks would, therefore, be useful. For example, some of the areas that the VLN has explored - such as standardising pay across sectors - are quite radical and could have broader significance.

5.2.2. The VLN experience also highlights - as do several of the other LCF projects - the importance of making funding available that is not as rigid as mainstream funding, in terms of how it can be used and at whom it can be targeted. The VLN benefited from being able to try new forms of provision, including unaccredited provision, aimed at small groups, which have since grown and may therefore be able to be sustained with mainstream funding.

5.2.3. VLN members have suggested that if area wide funding for Adult and Community Learning was provided by DELLS instead of provider specific funding, this could further improve local provision and encourage continued collaboration. The VLN has already established high levels of collaborative planning, and produced a SAR, Quality Development Plan, strategic plan and joint planning cycle, suggesting that it would be in a good position to distribute local funding in accordance with these plans.

5.2.4. In terms of the way the project was managed and progressed, some other points emerged:

- The project team, like other individuals and teams managing LCF projects, found that reporting levels were excessive. For projects lasting as long as the VLN, monthly reporting was a heavy burden. It was, however, exacerbated by the fact that the project received funding from two sources. WEFO's monitoring requirements were also stringent; the Project Manager found that, to satisfy both funders, the team had to produce 11 reports each quarter. This is clearly not the best use of funded staff's time. The LCF monitoring system was designed by Shared Intelligence with ELWa, so this provides good learning for us as well. In terms of a recommendation to DELLS, it should be considered that in future, quarterly reports be sufficient to monitor projects lasting more than one year. These could always be supplemented with verbal updates with Contract Managers in order to manage any problems that come up in the interim period.
- Another point about projects funded from more than one source is that, if there is a delay in securing funding from one of these sources, the whole project can be at risk. The VLN experienced serious difficulties in awaiting its contract from ELWa, and was concerned that it might not be able to deliver its full ESF projects as a result.
- An operational lesson that has emerged from the project so far is around the responsibility on the lead partner. The Vale of Glamorgan Council's Lifelong Learning Department, as the largest partner, took on the responsibility for contracting with ELWa and also acts as an employer to the team. Although local authorities are regularly in receipt of grant and project funding, the department felt that the contracting process in particular took up more resource (including in the legal, finance and HR departments) than would normally be expected and placed a large burden on the council as the lead partner. It was suggested that this would certainly preclude most other organisations, with less capacity, from acting in this role. DELLS might find it useful to consider the implications of this for future projects.

- Another issue that the original project bid did not account for was the possibility of a key staff member being absent for a long time through sickness. This risk is inherent in all such projects and ways to mitigate it could have usefully been considered at the application stage. For example, one consultee suggested that some budget could in future be ringfenced to cover additional staff time in the event of such an absence and clawed back if not used.
- Finally, some of those consulted for the evaluation felt that the VLN project was perhaps too ambitious – either in its targets, or in the number of strands it attempted to manage concurrently. While the project has generally been successful in meeting its milestones and may be able to meet its ESF output targets too, this is a point that DELLS, and those bidding for funding, could usefully bear in mind in future. This also highlights the importance of spending adequate time on planning, and target setting, at the application stage of the project.