



## **PASCAL EcCoWell Community Recovery Program**

### **City of Wolverhampton October Report**

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*This report is from the Wolverhampton City Learning Region in the West Midlands of England which addresses the theme: Building further community learning strategies for health and well-being, with an initial focus on mental health. The Wolverhampton report is also of particular interest in illustrating good public/private partnership collaboration, and the ways in which the Wolverhampton City Learning Region and the Wolverhampton Community Partners collaborate.*

### **Context**

Wolverhampton is in the West Midlands region in the UK. The City of Wolverhampton has a population of almost 260,000. The city is diverse, one third of the city's population is from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups and there are over 88 languages spoken. Before the Covid19 pandemic, Wolverhampton faced significant challenges linked to inequality, income levels, skills and health and well-being. Due to the effects of Covid19, these challenges are growing, with large numbers of residents in low skilled roles being made redundant, increasing number of benefits claimants, digital poverty including barriers to engagement and employment opportunities. In addition to this, are the health and well-being consequences of enforced isolation (health, education, psychological) and rapid rates of infection, causing a second national lockdown.

Wolverhampton is a member city of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities and is developing a learning city through the Wolverhampton City Learning Region initiative. It builds on the tradition of lifelong learning across the city. The Wolverhampton City Learning Region (WCLR) initiative is a partnership between the lead core partners: City of Wolverhampton Council, University of Wolverhampton, City of Wolverhampton College, Adult Education Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton Learning Platform and Wolverhampton Learning Communities, and a range of key organisations across Wolverhampton and surrounding areas. Whilst the intention is to put learning at the heart of the WCLR, the key intention of the initiative is not simply to position or prioritise learning per se but to focus on the means by which learning creates transformation to achieve economic and social development and growth. Wolverhampton has developed community learning strategies for

health and well-being including a focus on mental health through Wolverhampton Learning Communities.

## Wolverhampton Learning Communities

Aligned with the Wolverhampton City Learning Region initiative, Wolverhampton Learning Communities is a grassroots-led initiative established by Wolverhampton Learning Platform Community Interest Company (CIC) and the City of Wolverhampton Council in conjunction with other key voluntary and community sector (VCS) partners and education training providers, who work together to improve the city’s response to supporting local residents and those who are socially excluded. This provides an integrated package of learning, skills and well-being activities that are tailored to the needs of the communities within the City of Wolverhampton. Wolverhampton Learning Communities is a partnership between City of Wolverhampton Council, voluntary and community providers, WEA – Adult Learning within Reach, City of Wolverhampton College, Adult Education Wolverhampton and the University of Wolverhampton.

The Wolverhampton Learning Communities Offer is made up of five strands as follows:



The specific aim of the Wolverhampton Learning Communities Partnership is to improve the city's response to supporting people who live in the local communities to engage with learning in the community and access employment and skills services in order to facilitate their integration, skills development and capacity to make a personal contribution to flourishing communities and economic growth in Wolverhampton. The partnership is a network of voluntary and community sector learning providers working collaboratively with the City of Wolverhampton Council and key training, support and health providers to deliver learning, skills and employability services in community venues and neighbourhoods across the City of Wolverhampton. The Partnership was established to find solutions and ensure adequate resourcing to support residents, particularly those who are furthest away from the labour market, to access learning, skills and employability services. In 2019 Wolverhampton Learning Communities won the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) Innovation Award. This was a great recognition of the partnership work which has demonstrated that by working collaboratively it has been possible to ensure partners are sharing best practice and providing

complementary services to provide local residents with a clear pathway to access all levels of quality learning in their local community.

The partnership offers a wide range of city-wide support to develop skills, access employment, training, and further and adult education progression opportunities, and tailored advice to ensure that barriers to support, learning and services are removed for Wolverhampton residents. Their activities are normally conducted at community venues across the city, but partners have had to readjust their engagement and delivery methods to meet the needs of residents during the outbreak of coronavirus and are working to ensure community well-being during this challenging time and providing support for almost 1,000 residents on a weekly basis.

The Learning Communities Strategy Board has recently been established to build on the success of the partnership and focus on further opportunities for partnership working and strengthening connections into communities in these challenging times.

### **Mental Health and Well-being**

The major strand of work for health and well-being targeted support includes the Mind@Work programme which has continued to be a powerful tool during the pandemic. Mental health conditions are one of the prevalent reasons for residents in Wolverhampton being dependent on health-related benefits and significantly disadvantages individuals in their attempts to gain or stay in employment. The Mind@Work programme has been developed through Wolverhampton Learning Communities to provide training, skills development, confidence building and employability skills to individuals who have experienced mental health issues as a barrier to employment. It has been running successfully since 2015 with three programmes per year (one each term) and usually supports 10 - 12 residents on each programme. The programme includes: well-being workshops & mental health assessment; 1-2-1 coaching & mentoring support; learning coping strategies; learning relaxation & meditation techniques in relation to work; and, employability skills development and sector awareness.

The Mind@Work programme was developed as a direct response to the needs identified by the city's Skills Team when co-ordinating community programmes to support unemployed people into work. A number of residents were identified through programme delivery as experiencing depression and anxiety as key barriers to finding work. As a result, a project was developed to support unemployed residents with anxiety or depression or other mental health impairments to get them ready for work. Detailed data was collected on the local population of people with mental health impairments and the trainers used had specific skills to assist this client group and provide a service responsive to it.

Factors such as unemployment, personal debt and cuts to welfare payments are known to increase the risk of mental disorders. Mental health is so broad and affects individuals in different ways. Consequently, the city's Skills Team piloted this scheme to scope the reaction and differences in the type of support required for those with mental health impairments and how this can differ from those who are experiencing other health-related problems. The Mind@Work programme offers bespoke customised training and support to individuals in

moving closer to the job market. The programme also provides appropriate sign posting to additional provision during the programme and on completion of the programme.

The delivery of the Mind@Work programme and support for it includes a number of Wolverhampton Learning Communities partners including:

- **Workers Education Association** who focused on coping/relaxation strategies and other employability skills.
- **Wolverhampton Healthy Minds** who carried out a mental health assessment with all the residents and provided well-being workshops at intervals throughout the programme.
- **Department for Work and Pensions** who promoted the programme as an opportunity and organised for residents attending to receive transport expenses.
- **Skills Service** who provide on-going coaching & mentoring support when requested by residents.



Residents participating in the Mind@Work programme found the coaching and mentoring support available throughout the whole programme very useful as it helped them overcome any barriers experienced during the course and helped them to complete the programme successfully.

Overall the partner organisations felt that the programme was very well co-ordinated and delivered. This ensured that the majority of the residents completed the programme and gained positive outcomes.

A thorough recruitment process ensured that all the places on the programme were filled and the fact that it was promoted by the Department for Work and Pensions as an opportunity was very useful. Referrals are received from other city partners including the NHS and Healthy Minds.

Participants completed Confidence Measure & Feedback Forms with all respondents stating that, as a result of the programme, they felt more confident. In particular, they felt that they gained new skills and qualifications to improve their chances of finding work. Following the programme residents expressed increased confidence levels, a clearer understanding of services and how to access them. Participants have been able to progress onto voluntary work, further learning and / or further skills development programmes.

The programme now runs every term and is considered to be a positive progression for residents who have been long term carers for family members, are economically inactive or are moving from one form of benefit (Employment and Support Allowance) to one which focuses providing support for people into work (Jobs Seekers Allowance). The programme has been particularly successful in attracting participants as it is based in a comfortable community setting which is the first stepping stone to their next step.

## Covid-19 response

Given the success of the programme, the Mind@Work programme has been adapted during the pandemic to continue to be delivered face-to-face using smaller cohorts (7 instead of 10-12), shorter sessions and social distancing restrictions. The content of the sessions has remained the same.

Learning Communities have other health and well-being related programmes which have been adapted during the pandemic. Two examples of programmes currently being delivered by partners include:

- Empowering Women: a blended learning programme for women only. This is being delivered by Aspiring Futures, a community organisation that supports women who may be experiencing barriers related to domestic violence, low or no confidence etc.
- Health@Work: a programme focused on residents who have a disability and delivered by Access to Business, a community organisation that specialises in supporting local residents onto positive pathways.

In addition, a city-wide cross-sectoral approach focused on community recovery has been established. *Relighting Our City: City of Wolverhampton Council Recovery Commitment* has been developed in partnership with more than 2,500 local people including residents, young people, the voluntary and community sector, council partners, employees, councillors and businesses. The 5 point plan identifies the key priority areas for the city:

- supporting people who need us most
- creating more opportunities for young people
- supporting our vital local businesses
- generating more jobs and learning opportunities
- stimulating vibrant high streets and communities.

As a result of this engagement, these will now be used as a framework for the Council and its partners to focus on recovery, enable the city to address key challenges and build on new opportunities.

Through the strengths of the Learning Communities partnership and its community learning strategies for health and well-being, Wolverhampton has been able to maintain a focus on support for residents during the pandemic. The success of its flagship programme and the model of community provision has meant that learning providers could make small changes to the programme to ensure that it continued to be available to residents locally. Through the broader partnerships with key agencies such as the Department for Work and Pensions, the City of Wolverhampton Council, especially the Public Health team, and NHS, the programme can continue to attract the residents who need it most during this challenging time. Their early work on evaluating and refining it mean that it was sufficiently agile to cope with the new challenges of the pandemic.

Ensuring sustainability of the programme is crucial going forward to enable it to continue to be responsive to the need of local residents who are experiencing ongoing and growing disadvantage resulting from/causing new mental health issues for people who are seeking to gain or stay in employment.