

Learning Network North Training Network
“The Way Ahead”
Summary Report
May 2010



scottish social services
learning network
north

Introduction

One of the principal aims of the Learning Network North is to bring together organisations and individuals from the statutory, voluntary and independent sectors in the area and find ways of working together to improve knowledge, skills and competencies of the workforce. It also aims to facilitate effective communication of policy, knowledge, information and good practice.

In an effort to further and promote these aims, the LNN sought to investigate the proposal to develop a training network in the North. Such a concept had been raised on numerous occasions by network members interested in joint working and mutual support on training and development issues. Individuals had expressed feeling isolated both professionally and often geographically when it came to development and training issues. Whilst there were areas where joint training initiatives were evident, it seemed that this was not the case throughout the area and that there was value in investigating this further.

The LNN undertook a consultation exercise between February and May 2010. A consultant was engaged to do the work. The results of these discussions make up the basis of this report.

Scope

The consultation included social service organisations in the statutory, voluntary and independent organisations. It also involved participation from training and learning providers across the North area, including assessment and verification centres, practice teachers and university / college staff, as well as partners from the NHS and independent trainers/consultants. Contact was made using a variety of methods, including newsletter article, telephone consultation, written responses, on-line questionnaire and a series of three locality based seminars.

Objectives

To identify the interest in such a development and consult with interested parties

To consider what such a network might offer and present options to individuals and groups whilst considering the advantages and disadvantages of the identified options

To engage with individuals and organisations across the area, listen to their views and report back to the LNN with recommendations

To identify what groups and networks already exist locally and nationally and the function of these

To evaluate how the learning network north could offer support

To consider how improvements in learning and development can provide better outcomes for people who use services and their carers

Desired Outcomes

To have a multi agency training/ learning and development network with active members

To hold regular meetings/events to improve training across the sector

To have a virtual forum to increase involvement and provide an alternative form of support to individuals and organisations

Methodology

At the outset of this consultation, an independent consultant was engaged by the LNN to gather views, facilitate discussion and present the findings to stakeholders.

In the first instance, an article was circulated in the LNN Bulletin inviting interested parties to get in touch. This was followed up by a letter which went to all those on the LNN database; the letter alerted people to the forthcoming questionnaire and encouraged people to get in touch with their views on a North Training Network. Some did this by e-mail or telephone.

It was decided that opinions be sought through the on-line Survey Monkey tool. This provides a useful way of gaining and analysing information on-line. The link to the survey went to all the North Learning Network's existing stakeholders and was attached to their monthly e-bulletin and also the weekly e-bulletin of Aberdeen Council for Voluntary Organisations.

In addition to this, the survey results were supplemented by telephone interviews with representatives from organisations who were unable to attend the series of workshops which took place in April in Aberdeen, Inverness and Elgin.

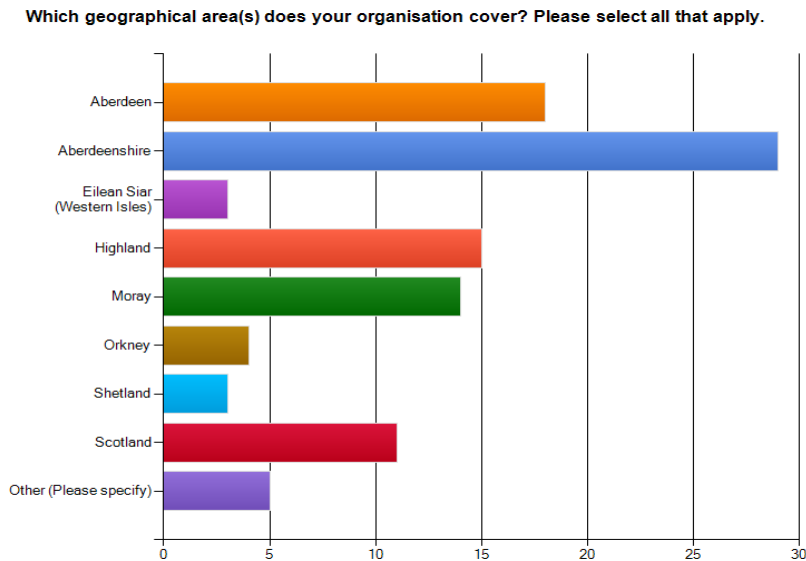
The workshops were well attended across the region, 20 in Aberdeen, 12 in Inverness and 14 in Elgin. A number of people were unable to attend but did express interest in being involved in such a network and have been added to the database of contacts. Unfortunately, the date in Inverness clashed with a conference otherwise it seems the interest in Highland in particular would have been greater.

The workshops involved a presentation of the survey results, and then in small groups participants discussed their training/development involvement and what such a network might look like, and if they were interested in being involved. Lastly, they considered potential pitfalls.

Survey Results

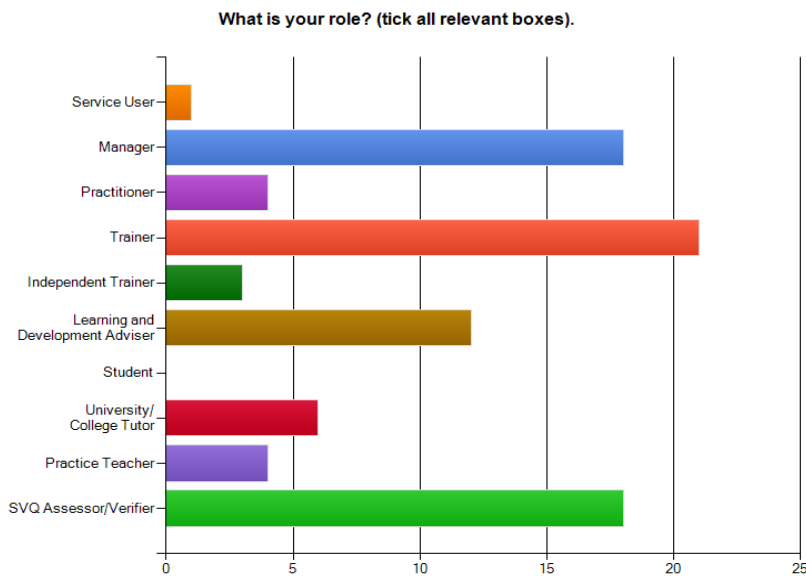
There were 53 responses to the on-line survey during the month of February 2010 when the survey was open.

Figure 1; Area covered by organisations



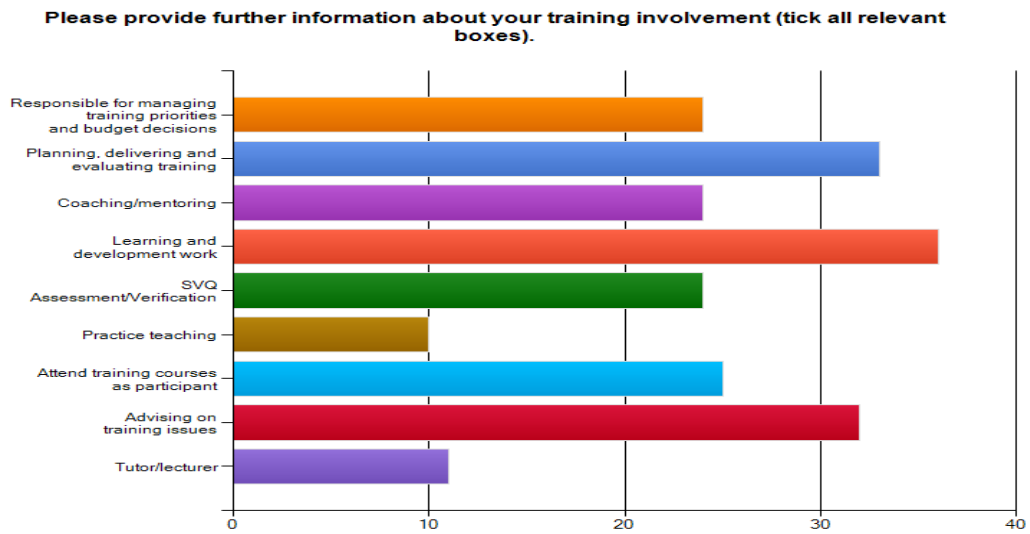
54% of those who responded were based in Aberdeenshire. Aberdeen, Moray and Highland practitioners made up a credible sample of respondents and 20.8% were employed by Scotland wide organisations. Representatives from Eilean Star, Orkney and Shetland Isles all responded favourably to the survey.

Figure 2 ; Who responded to the survey



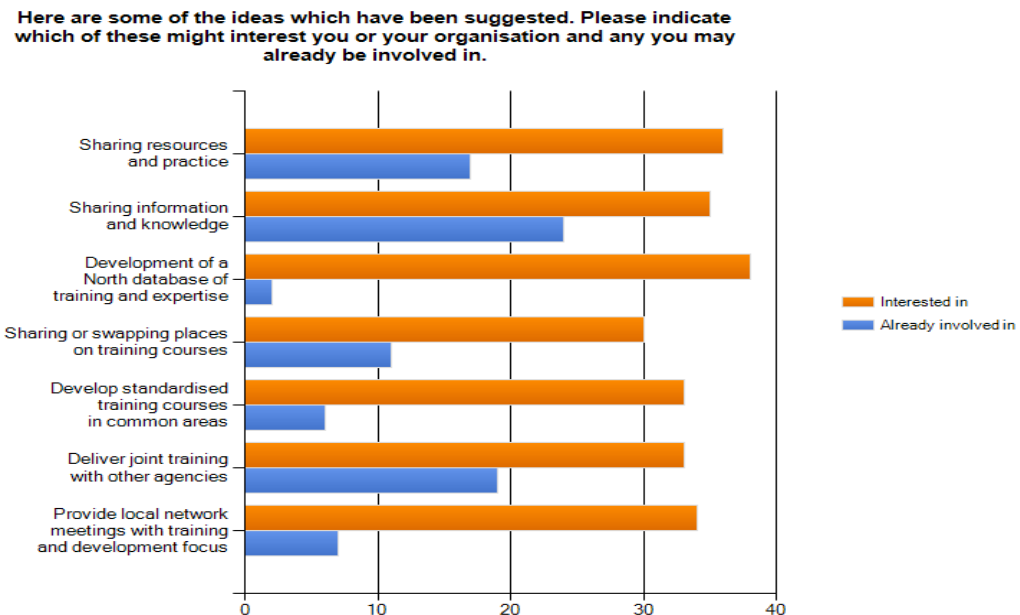
The people who responded to the survey were in the main, as expected in a training/ learning and development role, with only 8% being practitioners and only 1 response from a service user. The survey also asked for information on the main client groups which they were involved in on a regular basis. The responses were fairly evenly spread throughout all groups, with a slightly greater response from those working within learning disability.

Figure 3; What type of training and learning/development work do people do?



70% of the individuals who responded are involved in a range of learning and development work. 64% were responsible for the planning, delivery and evaluation of training and 47% responsible for training decisions and budget priorities. A similar percentage was involved in mentoring or coaching and in the SVQ process. Only 19% were involved in practice teaching and 21% tutors or lecturers.

Figure 4; Respondents were asked to consider some ideas for a training network which had been suggested as areas of mutual benefit.



As can be seen by the bar chart, there was considerable interest in all the options presented. In the three workshops, these themes were explored in greater detail as it was important we looked at the pros and cons of each.

Summary of suggestions and comments

Sharing resources and practice and sharing information and knowledge

The majority of participants expressed an interest in the sharing of resources, practice and knowledge; about a third said they were already doing this and that it worked very successfully. Individuals said they would welcome the opportunity to learn from each others mistakes and share difficulties relating to common themes. Ideas about innovative methods of working with groups and individuals were also muted and explored even in these initial road shows. Training styles and methods of evaluating input also areas of potential interest for many.

There was strength of feeling that whilst practice teachers and college and university lecturers often have fairly well established support groups, trainers and learning and development advisers often work in isolation from others and that peer support in their area of expertise is often limited. Discussion with colleagues can often be about practice areas rather than the actual business of training and development. This is of course essential but not always conducive to professional development or indeed to the business of improving service delivery in training.

Certain topics arose as being potential subjects to focus on; SSSC Induction, the continuous learning framework, other aspects of the Changing Lives agenda, PLQ, CPD, risk management, core training, “soft” skills such as mentoring and coaching, leadership and management skills and a whole host of other topics. There was no shortage of possible common themes which could be explored.

In Inverness, people expressed an interest in exchanging with others their knowledge of the SVQ framework and of the Home Care Practice Licence, it was noted that organisations operate different systems and that much time is spent setting up courses, producing knowledge input sessions and in preparing materials and courses for staff. As the knowledge base for SVQs is likely to be the same for all staff, then sharing would be a sensible use of resources.

The presence of colleagues from health, social work and the voluntary and independent organisations allowed for a useful exchange. Individuals from the independent sector talked about how it can be difficult to know who to approach for training input, and how useful it would be to have local links specifically for training. It is worth pointing out that health partners came along with reservations that they would have been able to contribute to the sessions or indeed take anything away, on the contrary their presence was of real value to the sessions and their input welcome.

During the road show, people were already beginning to share ideas, websites and contacts. Indeed two participants in one group managed to access free training for their staff groups during the course of the discussion through colleagues from health!

One common theme running through the consultation is that trainers spent much time in the development of materials and that it seems likely that other professionals in the North are also doing the same and “reinventing the wheel”. Whilst, it was pointed out that there is an element of competitiveness arising from the commissioning process, participants felt that a network might go some way to overcoming this barrier to information sharing. Some organisations pointed out that they are actively discouraged from sharing training knowledge and everyone agreed whilst this was understandable it

was also a sad indictment of the tendering process. There was however a real air of positivity around this subject with individuals expressing a desire to work together and break through this potential difficulty.

Another likely benefit highlighted was in exchanging information about what represented quality training and best value. It was noted that whilst a course might be expensive and a website, impressive, it does not mean that it represents best value for the organisation.

Sharing or swapping places on training courses

In principle, the majority of participants were enthusiastic about the notion of sharing and joint training. Most managers and trainers are only too aware of the frustration of running training courses which are not at capacity, of people cancelling at the last minute, or indeed simply not turning up. Often courses have to be cancelled as there are insufficient participants to make it cost effective or worth running. Whilst the idea of resolving some of these problems by the sharing of training is a good one, the logistics of setting up a system to accommodate a wide range of topics, areas and indeed client groups could be a challenge too costly to consider. That said, it does work in some areas and this could be replicated to the benefit of organisations.

Precedents exist in some areas where joint training with colleagues from health or the police has become the norm. Sectors in Aberdeenshire Council and in The Moray Council deliver joint training and invite colleagues from the voluntary organisations to access this training, free of charge. This has the added value of a networking experience and adds to consistency of practice for service users. Concerns were expressed that training which voluntary and independent organisations had previously accessed at no cost, would be charged for in the changing economic climate. All the more reason people said to look at ways of saving money from already reduced training budgets.

The idea of swapping places appeared to be a sensible one but again might be a difficult one to organise across the area. That said; if local training networks can be formed, then there may be opportunities to explore this on a smaller scale.

Core training was identified which participants felt could also be a focus for discussion; consent and confidentiality, first aid, safer people handling, person-centred planning, challenging behaviour, personal care. Some statutory topics such as child/adult protection training are already delivered jointly and offer a positive model of delivery.

In rural areas, organisations talked about the difficulty in accessing and affording training. They were enthusiastic about the possibility of building local training links which would enable them to share costs and perhaps invite trainers or speakers to shared events. They also talked about the isolation they experienced and another idea was that small focus groups could be formed to provide the opportunity to discuss particular areas of training and development. The possibility of an online secure portal was also of interest to many.

Develop standardised training courses in common areas

The benefits of this idea were supported by 91% of the survey respondents and by the majority of the group participants. It was agreed that in principle this would be of

tremendous benefit to service users and carers, if introduced in specific areas of training. The possibility of everyone working to the same competency would provide a consistent approach and further the aim of joint working.

“A Pan Grampian approach to specific pieces of training could be developed. Evaluation and monitoring of this could show trends and therefore, allow services to predict staff training needs”, the comment was made in reference to what a training network could offer.

It would “encourage professionalism for the whole workforce in Health and Social Care and promote a common standard to all providers” were the comments from one on line respondent. This would be particularly relevant in the area of domiciliary care where a person might have several service providers visiting them. It can be confusing and not best practice if everyone works differently. However, there are many variables which might make this difficult to achieve.

Firstly, agency policies and procedures vary between organisations. There would also have to be agreement about costs and resources. Some of the group participants pointed out that all their training is controlled by their head offices, which may be Glasgow or Edinburgh based. It could therefore be difficult to achieve a consensus about what constitutes required training and indeed who should deliver it. That said, there are very good national courses which have been developed; once again in the field of child and adult support and protection, perhaps these themes could be progressed into other areas. Discussion could be progressed in local network arenas in the first instance.

One national training manager, who couldn't attend asked “if it might be possible to look at core induction standards across all four network areas?” An interesting point, but goes some way to demonstrate how difficult it is for national organisations to control training centrally when standards differ across the country. He was very enthusiastic about the possibility of a Training Network and the implications for his staff.

Development of a North database of training and expertise

Whilst it was unanimously agreed that this would be a welcome resource, it was also recognised that it might be the most difficult to achieve because of the need for regular moderation, input and upkeep of information. It was noted that it would have to be kept up to date, be comprehensive and was likely to be resource intensive. Keeping the information “live” could prove difficult and would have considerable resource implications for the LNN to manage.

Provide local or regional network meetings with training and development focus

There was real interest in such a development. Indeed the workshops demonstrated the value in bringing people together whose main business was training and development. The crucial factor in such a development would be in ensuring groups were focused and that those attending benefited from attendance. The majority of participants, preferred the idea of local area meetings rather than regional, and this was to be expected given the geography of the North.

Whilst some professionals commented that virtual communities were helpful and may offer alternatives to travelling to face to face meetings, others stated that there was something valuable in actually sitting round the table with like-minded others.

Speakers could be invited to attend from social work organisations such as the SSSC or the Care Commission as the initial meetings suggested that would be useful in helping organisations prepare and budget for training.

One suggestion was that webcams or Skype could also be used to enable staff in island and rural areas to link into discussions. These methods have been successful throughout the area in a range of activity and could well go some way to addressing the problem of isolation which learning and development staff experience.

Aberdeen Council for Voluntary Organisations had run a network for a number of years, and a number of participants made comments about how that had worked. Some spoke very highly of it and that it had provided much support at that time. Others said it had run its course, and that they felt any network requires someone or a group to organise, facilitate and take the lead and keep it on course. It was agreed that in these busy times, individuals rarely have the time to take on more activities which such a role would demand. The overwhelming feeling was that without coordination, any network would “wither on the vine”.

A number of participants expressed a hope that the LNN take on the role of coordinating a Training Network, as the driving force behind supporting the workforce in learning and development.

Online Secure portal

There was considerable interest in the development of this through the network if it was possible for them to host it. The benefits expressed for members were that it would ensure less travel and that there would be no danger of people being disillusioned if meetings were under-attended. The positives for the Network would be that the portal once up and running would require no maintenance; it would be live and current and would offer an opportunity to move to virtual communities of practice.

Some concerns which participants raised was that portals are only as active as the people who use them, and it was agreed that this would perhaps be something which could be publicised and set up. If it is found to be a useful resource and has an active exchange of information then it is likely that the community will grow and with it, its perceived value.

It may be possible through the portal to provide members to links to the SSKS (Social Services Knowledge Scotland) website and to IRISS (Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services) and the evidence informed practice portal which should be up and running soon. These should all provide support for trainers in their role.

Newsletter

Participants welcomed the idea of a newsletter specifically on training, learning and development, the LNN e-bulletin does include training events, but it was agreed that a regular training newsletter would be somewhere to post training opportunities, communicate developments and share ideas. Again, the issue of upkeep of this was discussed as something which would take administrative time.

Conclusions

On the basis of the information received and the emerging discussions, a number of themes have emerged which reflect the preferences of the majority.

It is crucial that these ideas are achievable, manageable and affordable. As the Learning Network North is committed in its vision to support workforce learning and development, there is a clear role for the Network in coordinating and supporting the establishment of a Training Network in the North. This is particularly the case at a time when training budgets have been reduced across the board, and it is inevitable there is worse to come.

Whilst people were very keen on the concept of a shared database of training knowledge and expertise, it seems that this would be unlikely to be a realistic possibility at this time. In order for such a system to be useful, it would need to be comprehensive, current and regularly updated. The costs of setting up, maintaining and populating such a system would be prohibitive.

However, there are a number of ways in which a Training Network could grow and develop and whereby members could receive communication, interact and /or network. These options would be less resource intensive and the concepts are flexible enough to be changed if participants felt their needs were not being met.

Recommendations

1 The introduction of local area meetings coordinated and facilitated by the LNN, (at least until groups become established and feel able to self organise). People expressed preferences that meetings be focused on particular training and development themes depending on the wishes of participants and what is currently of interest to group members. That way people could pick and choose which meeting they attended depending on the relevance of subject matter. In order to promote and build on the networking opportunities, it would be sensible not to leave too long a gap between meetings, every three months being a recommended ideal. Webcams, video conferencing or podcasts could ensure that everyone from this dispersed geographical area has the opportunity to be involved.

It is likely that smaller self managing focus groups may well emerge from these sessions and that these would also provide members with a support network.

2 The development of an online secure portal would be a cost-effective method of providing a hub for communication and learning in relation to training and development. Individuals and groups will be able to share information, training ideas and exchange thoughts on line. This could supplement the local area meetings and feed ideas for the focus groups. Yvonne is exploring this option.

3 The possibility of an e-newsletter via the LNN would be another development which would ensure communication about main training and development issues are circulated between partners. Obviously there are resource implications here and some thought would have to be given about what essential information should be included in this.

Footnote

In the course of this evidence gathering exercise, it has become evident that there is a real enthusiasm for trainers and staff working in learning and development to commit to the establishment of a North Training Network. There are lots of positive ideas and even in the road shows, networking was taking place. Individuals were exchanging ideas, telephone numbers, agreeing to send information to others and advising each other on positive training providers and sources of information.

One final comment would be about the importance of ensuring the evaluation of a Training Network is ongoing. If stakeholders don't feel whatever is put in place is meeting their needs then the potential benefits are limited.

Lastly, a few statements from the days, highlights the potential value in the network (a full list of comments available on request)

"Excellent session, I didn't think this was for me but I have come away with loads of good ideas and am thinking about my own role differently"

"I found this session most informative, I think it has given me a different perspective on others' jobs and the challenges they face, I think I would like to get more involved".

A member of the Independent sector said "we are isolated from other organisations yet keen to build bridges and work together".

Thank you to everyone who took part in this consultation, and for taking the time to provide your thoughts and suggestions, it was very much appreciated!

**Consultation work and report
Carolle Smith BAAPSS, CQSW**