

WECA ADULT EDUCATION:

COVID-19: PROTECTING LEARNER CONTINUITY & PROVIDER STABILITY

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an extraordinary challenge to the delivery of adult education across the West of England. During these difficult times it is critical to maintain a semblance of normality and continuity wherever this is possible, and to ensure that as soon as the crisis abates, we are in a position to continue our collective endeavour to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth. To this end, the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) wishes to reassure our providers that we will take all reasonable steps to ensure continuity of learning where this is possible, and to protect the stability of our provider base.

MEASURES

In response to the current challenges WECA can confirm the following:

- 1. PAYMENTS:** WECA will continue to pay providers in line with their current payment profile (as set out in your Grant Funding Agreement) for the remainder of the academic year unless the provider asks us in writing to do otherwise. Some providers have already verbally indicated to us that would like payments to be frozen. If this remains the case, please can you confirm this in writing asap.
- 2. IN-YEAR RECONCILIATION:** WECA will not seek to recover any funding as a result of the Mid-Year Review process that was completed in February 2020 and the further review process scheduled to take place in April / May will not proceed.
- 3. END-OF-YEAR RECONCILIATION:** We are not yet in a position to fully confirm our intentions regarding any potential end-of-year reconciliation of funding as this will be dependant on a number of different factors. However we are able to confirm that we do not wish any provider to be financially penalised or destabilised as a result of COVID-19 and therefore have no plans to recover funds due to under-performance that may occur as a result of the pandemic (on the condition that providers comply with the expectations set out below).

Our position regarding end-of-year reconciliation may however be shaped by wider government interventions and support that may be accessed by providers in response to the pandemic. Whilst wishing to protect the stability of providers we remain obliged to protect the public purse and therefore must avoid the risk of double-funding arising from our decisions concerning end-of-year reconciliation.

We will continue to monitor the situation and will confirm our precise approach to end-of-year reconciliation later in the year once the actual impact on delivery and the wider context is clearer. In the meantime, we ask providers to notify us if they either apply for, or secure, other forms of government support that relates to COVID-19.

- 4. ALLOCATIONS FOR 2020:** We remain confident that we will be in a position to confirm indicative allocations for 2020 on 10th April as was originally planned. We also expect to be in a position to continue the implementation of our 2020/21 Planning and Allocations process broadly as planned (though we will

continue to monitor the situation and are willing to consider any reasonable adjustment that providers may request).

If the current disruption continues into the 2020/21 academic year, we will maintain the approach set out above until it is deemed reasonable for normal operations to resume.

EXPECTATIONS

The measures set out above are intended to protect the stability of providers during the current crisis and ensure that they are in a position to recommence normal delivery as soon as it is reasonable to do so. In exchange for these extraordinary measures we expect providers to commit to the following:

- 1. PROTECT LEARNERS:** Although we are confident that this will be the case, we ask providers to make best efforts to ensure that learners are supported to continue their learning during the current disruption. This includes both supporting the retention and completion of existing learners and the recruitment of new learners where it is possible to do so (not least as this may be a highly effective means through which to support vulnerable and disadvantaged residents during the necessary isolation). We set out a number of potential measures that we are currently considering to assist in this endeavour below.
- 2. PROTECT STAFF:** We intend to protect the income of all providers irrespective of the current situation in order to ensure that a stable and secure network of providers is intact and able to continue delivery once normality resumes. Given this we expect providers to take all reasonable steps to ensure that their staff (including agency staff) continue to be paid throughout the crisis and avoid lay-offs. For a provider who is exclusively funded by WECA this should normally be entirely possible given the protections that we have outlined though we appreciate that providers funded from a number of sources may face different challenges. However, if you are considering any staffing changes that are likely to impact on current or future WECA delivery please discuss this with us in advance.
- 3. PROTECT SUBCONTRACTORS:** Subcontractors are a vital component of the West of England Adult Education system and therefore the measures set out above are intended to support both directly funded providers and their subcontractors equally. As WECA is committing to continue to pay our providers in line with their agreed profile our clear expectation is that WECA funded providers ensure that their subcontractors continue to be paid as normal.
- 4. KEEP US INFORMED:** As the situation appears to be changing rapidly it is important that we maintain effective communication to ensure that we fully understand what is happening and are therefore in a position to respond effectively. All providers should already have performance monitoring meetings scheduled. We propose to proceed with these meetings (via TEAMS) but predominantly focus on how you are responding to COVID-19. We also ask providers to complete and submit the new Monthly Claim Report and associated risk-register. This may prove to be particularly important if current challenges make it more difficult to rely on the Individualised Learner Record.

To avoid the risk of double-funding it is particularly important that you inform us of any applications or grants of funding from central government or other relevant organisations that may impact on your WECA adult education delivery.

POTENTIAL FLEXIBILITIES AND MITIGATIONS

There are a range of options available to providers to maintain continuity of learning and support in the current circumstances, many of which are perfectly permissible within the current funding rules and others which may require a degree of flexibility as far as interpretation is concerned. We encourage providers to make good use of the following flexibilities and mitigations, and to share any others that may be of use.

1. **LEARNER SUPPORT:** We anticipate that in order to maintain continuity of learning some residents may require a greater degree of support than may normally have been the case. In contrast to ESFA, WECA has not ring-fenced the proportion of the adult education budget allocation that providers are required to utilise within any specific funding line. Providers are therefore at liberty to utilise a greater proportion of their allocation on learner support if this is justified within the current circumstances. We believe that a substantial level of beneficial support may be supported within the standard funding rules. If any further measures of significant benefit could be realised if a broader interpretation of current rules was agreed please discuss this with us.
2. **COMMUNITY LEARNING:** The WECA objectives for Community Learning (currently aligned with the ESFA objectives for Community Learning include) some potential forms of utilisation that relate to community cohesion rather than the delivery of learning. Some of these defined objectives may also facilitate an extremely helpful response to the current crisis, such as:
 - Develop stronger communities, with more self-sufficient, connected and pro- active citizens, leading to:
 - increased volunteering, civic engagement and social integration
 - reduced costs on welfare, health and anti-social behaviour
 - increased online learning and self-organised learning
 - the lives of our most troubled families being turned around
 - Commission, deliver and support learning in ways that contribute directly to these objectives, including:
 - bringing together people from backgrounds, cultures and income groups, including people who can/cannot afford to pay
 - using effective local partnerships to bring together key providers and relevant local agencies and services
 - devolving planning and accountability to neighbourhood/parish level, with local people involved in decisions about the learning offer
 - involving volunteers and Voluntary and Community Sector groups, shifting long term, 'blocked' classes into learning clubs, growing self-organised learning groups, and encouraging employers to support informal learning in the workplace
 - supporting the wide use of online information and learning resources minimising overheads, bureaucracy & administration

WECA encourages all providers to consider how they may potentially make good use of Community Learning funding to support residents. We are willing to consider creative solutions and to offer reasonable flexibility within the existing funding rules to facilitate this.

As is the case for Learner Support, your WECA allocation is not ring-fenced and therefore you are at liberty to utilise a greater proportion of your allocation to support Community Learning in the current circumstances.

However, providers must discuss and agree any proposals with us in advance of setting up delivery. In the first instance please contact us via: adulthoodeducation@westofengland-ca.gov.uk

- 3. BLENDED LEARNING AND DISTANCE LEARNING:** We anticipate that in order to maintain continuity of provision many providers will need to make increased use of blended learning and distance learning. WECA has a number of highly experienced distance learning providers within our delivery network who are likely to be well placed to offer advice or may be in a position to deliver through sub-contract on your behalf. If you are in a position to offer support in relation to distance learning (including the capacity to deliver through subcontract) or are seeking advice or delivery partners, please let us know and we will put the relevant organisations in touch with each other.

The potential flexibilities and mitigations detailed above represent a starting point and as our providers are the delivery experts there may well be other measures worthy of consideration. If you have any recommendations, please discuss them with us. Equally, if you are in a position to offer any advice or support to other WECA adult education providers please let us know and we will circulate the message. As is the case across wider society, in order to manage effectively within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic the West of England Education and Skills System will need to operate in a collaborative and mutually supportive manner.

We thank you all for your continued efforts during these exceptional times. If you have any questions or require any further support please contact us via:

adulthoodeducation@westofengland-ca.gov.uk.