

## **WEA Scotland's Response to COVID: Reflections and Lessons from Lockdown**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this reflective account is to collate and consolidate WEA Scotland's response to COVID 19. This account is an opportunity to share practice and learning with colleagues across Scotland. Through this collective knowledge and experience across WEA Scotland, we aim to inform and enhance our future practice.

The past nine months have been extraordinary. The response to this crisis by WEA Scotland has also been extraordinary. Staff tutors members volunteers and external stakeholders have all made a significant contribution to maintain continuity of learning and support for learners. The learners themselves have shown great resilience, a willingness to change and have provided excellent feedback in shaping their learning experience in the "new normal".

### **Organisation Transformation**

#### **A Virtual Organisation**

By necessity, WEA Scotland moved quickly from an office-based organisation delivering face-to-face learning to a virtual organisation with staff working at home and learning delivered remotely by-

- Quickly providing the means to work from home; laptops, internet phones etc.
- Immediate implementation of a working from home allowance
- Quick HR response to wellbeing while working at home during a crisis in the form of digital social interaction with colleagues, quizzes and family activities as well as regular briefings and wellbeing short courses
- Regular operational / management meetings
- Provision of CPD to support the use on online learning; Zoom and CANVAS

#### **Delivery of Education through Online learning platforms**

At the time of lockdown, WEA Scotland had the means of delivering an alternative mode of learning through CANVAS, a high quality Virtual Learning Environment and multiple Zoom accounts for virtual classroom delivery. The major differentiator however, was the willingness of education staff and tutors to embrace the CPD on offer and rise to the challenge of working with new delivery methods and platforms.

### **Application of Change: WEA Scotland Case Studies**

#### **Support for learners and innovation in learning: Reach Out**

In the Reach Out Project, WEA Scotland works with those going through the criminal justice system, those with substance misuse issues, those with mental health problems and those with learning difficulties. It was apparent at the beginning of lockdown that the majority of Reach Out Learners would not be able to engage via CANVAS or ZOOM for various reasons. Some learners had no digital access, others did not understand the platforms and some learners wanted to use platforms with which they were more familiar and confident.

We knew already, through previous chats, that a large population, within Reach Out, had access to and were using social media platforms and could also use You Tube. Following discussions with learners, WEA Scotland set up a private Face Book page and those students that use the platform invited to engage. The page has had a good level of engagement since March and we are now into our 3<sup>rd</sup> term of online activities. Learners join the FB page then enrol for various classes according to their interest. This includes formal learning but also provides a means of informal engagement through the sharing of music, gaming and movies. Some of this activity runs with minimal input from staff members, which gives the learners an opportunity and space to talk to each other and meet new friends with common interests.

The videos we create are a mixture of 'going live' on the page, uploading wee vids to the page and/or uploading the bigger videos with educational content to our You Tube channel. The tutor also uploads instructional videos to help people get used to whatever devices they are using. Below there are links to both the You Tube channel and, specifically, one of the instructional videos.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6w179XRQyU>

Above is the third in a series of videos uploaded to the You Tube channel on 'get to know your device'.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcrDIKQikCZVBkMTE1M1SYA>

The above takes you to the You Tube channel and gives you access to all the Reach Out videos.

This mode of delivery also facilitates on line learning for outdoor groups such as the John Muir Award. Staff members make films of outdoor activities they would typically undertake with learners and then make the film available to learners. The learners in turn watch and then copy the activities on the film in a safe outdoor location that they use as their 'exercise space'. They then upload pictures of their activities or keep a journal of the activities undertaken.

Now that learners are more familiar and confident with digital learning, they are embracing the technology more willingly. They will continue to use social media and the videos but are now participating in other activities via ZOOM and we envisage a continuing growth in digital learning which was beyond our wildest expectations at the start of lockdown

### **Adaptation of content and teaching approaches: Employability Ayrshire**

After many years of delivering Employability Programmes in Health and Social Care courses face to face, the challenge in lockdown was to continue provision and virtually deliver a meaningful learning experience. One of the biggest advantages of face-to-face delivery is the interaction, camaraderie and teamwork that occurs between the students, built up through peer support working. The challenge was to replicate this interaction through virtual learning.

The course still takes the same format as before with the two weeks evenly split between gaining knowledge of the care industry and general employability skills. We

were also able to continue to deliver all the core elements of the programme, including working towards and achieving accredited care qualifications, having local care employers speak directly to the learners and conduct realistic mock job interviews to help boost learner confidence.

Despite the initial apprehension of moving to virtual learning and that the staff and learners could not meet face to face, the learners grasped the new concept and adapted well to online delivery. The technology available still allowed for group teamwork via the breakout rooms and the students completed the qualification assessments at home.

The great news is that in the first couple of weeks since the course ended we have one student who has started a new job and another who is waiting on a start date following a successful interview. Many of the others have completed job applications for other suitable vacancies. In North Ayrshire 8 of the 22 Syrian New Scots on our employability project have secured employment during lockdown. The other 14 are attending college.

### **Adaptation of Initial Language Assessments: ESOL AMIF Project**

Many of our lower level ESOL learners already struggle with isolation so when the pandemic hit we were keen to ensure that learners could continue to access class through on line provision. We have worked hard to provide support to learners who had little to no experience with IT to enable them to access Zoom and Canvas.

Despite some trepidation from learners who were unsure of how to use these applications, and the obvious language barriers, we encouraged our learners to join the world of online learning. We have received a lot of positive feedback and it is clear to see the learners enjoy seeing and interacting with their classmates and teachers at the live sessions. Having access to Canvas allows them to reinforce learning from the live sessions at a time that is convenient to them.

Our Initial Language Assessments have also been successfully running online since early June. Our materials and approach have been adapted for online learning. The Scottish Refugee Council refer all new refugees to the WEA for their initial English language assessment. We then make an initial introductory phone call to arrange an appointment to conduct the assessment. At this stage, we can assess their level of IT understanding and their level of digital access. On conclusion of this on line assessment, the learners then join one of our 'Survival ESOL' classes.

WEA Scotland continues to be responsive to individuals and partner's needs. New content is constantly being added and new courses offered in response to the challenges of the pandemic.

### **Employability Support for Vulnerable Learners: Falkirk Job Clubs**

The Falkirk Job Clubs provide employability support [and arguably life support] for some of the region's most vulnerable learners. Despite the challenges of lockdown, the service has continued initially through text and telephone support. The early challenges of limited digital access has in part been resolved by securing laptops from the Connecting Scotland Fund.

All active learners in the Job Clubs are currently contributing to a research project about the impact of the pandemic from their own perspective. The response to this has been amazing. This project has generated a body of work that is enlightening, poignant and powerful. It is a mixed bag of hope, despair, resilience and concern for the future. There is some strong opinions about the impact on the most vulnerable people in our communities and questions about how society should respond. Learners have fed back that the process has been cathartic, educational, fun and given them a purpose

Some learners have used their writing to achieve an SQA qualification and one or two learners have written poetry about their experience. Furthermore, learners have independently engaged with one another through email and zoom, maintaining contact, reducing isolation and increasing skills.

### **The Pandemic Players**

17.3 million People in the UK are lacking the essential digital skills for today's workplace: A WEA Tutor Keira McLean developed and delivered Pandemic Players: Zoom for Fun, a course introducing people to the technical skills and creative ideas needed to stay connected during the pandemic.



## **Financial First Aid for ESOL**

With the pandemic placing greater financial pressures on people than ever before, the WEA in North East Scotland has been running a series of two-hour Financial First Aid workshops using Zoom.

Financial first aid skills help learners to respond to money problems more effectively, developing the understanding needed to identify the issues, know their rights and decide what action to take. However, the workshops also help learners to reflect on the social context of financial emergencies, acknowledging the slow and ongoing 'emergency' of poverty in our communities, and to think about how groups can respond.

Individuals and groups of staff and volunteers from frontline agencies across Aberdeenshire have taken up the opportunity to join the first tranche of workshops, with further sessions and an extended course on Financial Citizenship planned for early 2021 using Zoom.

## **Significant Change in Accredited Learning: The Personal Assistants Network**

Prior to lockdown, the Personal Assistants Network main form of engagement was through networking and support events. During lockdown, WEA Scotland offered the members of the Personal Assistants Network CPD opportunities, with the option of 6 different care topics that covered Health & Safety, Communicating Effectively, Safeguarding of Vulnerable Adults, Safe Administration of Medicine, Infection Control and Food Hygiene.

This has proved to be a great success and to date PAs across Scotland have gained almost 150 new accredited qualifications.

## **Securing Digital Devices and Impact for Learners in WEA Highland**

Devices for the learners were sourced from a combination of two external funds that we applied for. The first was via the Libertie Project. We used this fund to secure devices for the most digitally and socially isolated learners who had no access to any digital devices whatsoever (their phones were also insufficient). The second round of funding came from the Scottish Refugee Council. We secured £2,500 which we used to purchase a further nine devices for learners without access to laptops.

Fairly early on into lockdown and the further Covid restrictions, we became aware that our learners' digital skills were significantly lacking and that supporting them to transition to online learning without first teaching them the necessary skills was going to be hugely challenging. After securing the devices, it presented the opportunity to start teaching skills such as typing, using the internet, sending emails and much more.

Alongside our core ESOL classes that we now deliver online at pre-beginner, beginner and intermediate level, we also developed a digital skills class. This class takes learners from very basic digital skills such as logging in and out, naming parts of the computer, through to online shopping and internet safety. These skills are

going to be vital for our learners moving forward when they begin searching for work and applying for jobs online.

The impact of the devices on learner engagement has been significant. After receiving devices, we are now seeing learners logging regular time in their Canvas courses where previously they struggled to do so through their phones. Learners have been able to engage with online social sessions, make friends with new volunteers who they can communicate with outside of class and gradually build confidence in the basic computer skills they so sorely needed. Some learners have been able to foster links with other community groups locally and branch out socially.

As a result of the transition to online learning and learners receiving appropriate devices, they will come out of lockdown and this period significantly upskilled and empowered. Prior to this year, a number of learners were very suspicious of technology and very reluctant to engage with it on any level. However, we now regularly have learners telling us how much they are enjoying learning online and how it is enabling them to work at home in their free time. Learners have begun to take real agency over their learning. The devices and digital classes have not just opened doors to learning, but also to remaining connected with their communities and a future gateway to employment.

### **Extending Reach: The Women in the Highlands Project**

The Women in the Highlands Project connects with women across the Highlands providing them with training and development opportunities to share ideas develop their potential and engage with their communities and society. Since the spring of 2020, the WITH Project has successfully continued its delivery with women via Zoom live meetings and the Canvas e-learning environment. WITH presented seven 8-week on-line course meetings on specific topics of interest including improving digital skills, mindfulness, a book group, a community project group and courses for personal growth through the medium of art and writing, all in line with the wider project aims.

Since transferring to on-line engagement, the project has reached a wider geographical area than ever before, with women 'attending' from remote villages and islands who are now unconstrained by travel distances. Attending an online meeting removes the limitations of childcare or other caring responsibilities as well, meaning many more women can participate. Since March 2020, we have had 62 new attendees involved in the Project, whilst continuing to connect with over 200 women from previous engagement.

The first Independent women's group developed out of the Women's Book Group meetings, where women gained the confidence to continue the group after the project sessions ended. This represents the achievement of a Project Outcome.

We continue to present a higher level of engagement through online meetings in topics that women confirm are of relevance to their needs and interests. Women report that this engagement has been a vital form of connection and support throughout this difficult period. They describe it as 'a lifeline' where women have a dedicated time each week for themselves, promoting resilience and well-being.

## **Maintaining and Growing Partnerships: Scottish Union Learning**

WEA continue to grow and develop our partnership with Scottish Union Learning (SUL). In addition to a wide range and variety of courses being organised and delivered online in the 'Lowlands and Uplands' area, we are seeing a welcome increase in interest and successful delivery of online workplace learning with SUL and unions in the Highlands and Islands. This includes courses developed and delivered Cross-Union (involving participants from several unions) and with UNISON with whom we have a national partnership agreement.

Courses successfully delivered online by ZOOM recently include Working from Home at Your Best; Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) Workshops; Managing Conflict at Work courses; and a Making Fairer Workplaces workshop. Participants have joined us from across the Highlands and Islands, including the Western Isles and Orkney, and have been keen to take advantage of the ease of participating online on these courses.

Our 'Working from Home at Your Best' course combines mental health and wellbeing awareness with more practical tools and techniques to stay physically and emotionally well during this challenging time. Our SSSC Workshops, developed with UNISON, provide health and social care workers with essential information about the requirements and their responsibilities regarding SSSC registration. Areas covered include: Codes of Practice; Health and Social Care Standards; Registration and qualification; Social media guidance and post-registration training requirements

Other courses which are due to be delivered with SUL In the Highlands and Islands over the next few months include Creative Wellbeing for Teachers (EIS), Employability Skills for Young Workers (UNITE), Hidden Disabilities at Work (Cross Union), and Working from home at your best (RMT).

## **Managing Rural Isolation and Poverty: North East Fife Book Group**

Our North East Fife Online Book Group recently completed a successful second 'Lockdown term'. The group participants are all 50+ and avid readers. Despite some apprehension around the use of online platforms (Zoom) the course has quickly become a welcome part of the week for the participating members, very few of whom knew each other prior to the sessions starting in June 2020.

The weekly meetings have proven to be a welcome break, embraced by all, from the stresses and strains of everyday life at this time. Members of the group are from across the NE Fife area and the online delivery and accessibility has been particularly useful for this group in this area of Fife. As the largest area of Fife by some margin, the NE by its nature and geography necessitates learners must often travel longer distances to attend this type of community adult learning opportunity. Zoom, removes the potential cost (financial and time) of travelling to and from the venue so helps address this challenge of fuel poverty.

## Conclusions

The above case studies highlight WEA Scotland as an adaptable flexible organisation with significant change capability

WEA Scotland will continue to provide further CPD for all staff and tutors to continue to develop our digital resources, capacities and capabilities

With lockdown likely to be, a recurring reality for some time, WEA Scotland will continue to enhance the volume and quality of its digital offer to enable continuity of provision for existing partners and learners. This enhanced digital offer also provides a new learning opportunity to prospective partners and funders who may be unable to access provision from their current provider.

Staff and tutors are and will remain the key differentiator in maintaining services to learners. Their capacity and willingness to change demonstrates that their learners really are at the heart of everything they do

We have adopted working practices that have and will future proof our offer. Blended learning is here to stay as part of an enhanced more flexible offer to learners. We will not go back to the way we did things before