

## **Save Southwark Adult Learning Campaign Submission to Scrutiny Committee 23 April 2012**

*This document should be read in the context of previous submissions to the Council and this scrutiny process. For your information, a copy of a deputation speech from 26 January 2011, when the first effects of the changes were felt, is added below as an appendix.*

### **HOW ADULT LEARNING CAME TO BE AT RISK**

Southwark policy on adult learning was radically changed after accepting the premise that in order to cover costs, and thereby supposedly safeguard adult learning provision, fees for Southwark's adult learning arts, leisure and fitness/wellbeing classes needed to be raised substantially. Putting aside for the moment the social hardship imposed by this change, a serious problem with the logic behind this premise is that higher fees would likely mean fewer learners, and, as the cost per learner (as opposed to cost per class) is typically small, net income would likely fall rather than rise - unless, of course, the result was a cut in the number of classes. As the fall in learner numbers would put classes at risk, a fall in classes would be likely, and substantial savings made, but at the cost of reducing adult learning provision, ie the obverse of the stated intention. Even if the real intention all along was to cut expenditure, whatever the cost adult learning, there is still a problem in the argument: a reduction in adult learning classes would not significantly decrease building running costs or admin and management costs, and so savings are severely limited. Are these savings worth the effective destruction of Southwark's adult learning arts, leisure and fitness/wellbeing classes?

### **OUR PROPOSAL**

An obvious alternative was, and still is, readily available. Keep the same price structure, but increase learner numbers per class by attracting back previous learners (instead of alienating them as is currently the case) and carrying out outreach marketing. Learners have already offered to help promote classes at festivals etc. As the cost of additional learners to an already running class is typically small, if this strategy was pursued effectively, income would increase with little inflation of cost, and classes could become net earners for Southwark - with the extra benefit of safeguarding and developing adult learning in the community. This is quite achievable. Adult learning provided by Southwark has been notoriously under-promoted in the past and there is scope for increasing adult learner numbers - if a sensible price structure can be agreed.

### **THE HARDEST HIT**

Southwark's current price strategy is an extreme measure with the poorest being hardest hit. Before the price changes, a learner entitled to concessionary rates would pay £46.40 for each 10-week three-hour class taken - that's £1.55 per hour. Full-fee learners would pay £110.00 per term, or £3.70 per hour. Now, after the imposition of unfair price changes, learners pay these fees for just one class for one term; after that, for terms two and three of the same course, or for any other class taken, the learner on concessions (and the full-fee learner) faces a 'repeat' fee of £165 per class taken, or £5.50 per hour. Some classes have reduced hours, but at the same hourly rate: for instance, a 20-hour course will cost £31 for the first term, rising to £110 for terms two

and three and for other classes taken. But this is still prohibitive and many of those dependent on concessions have been driven away from adult learning altogether. Those unable to travel to other providers, such as disabled or elderly learners, have had their classes effectively cut and their lives made qualitatively poorer. Those not entitled to concessions also face a price rise in terms 2 or 3 or for other classes taken. The ‘rationing’ of one subsidised course per learner per year

## **GROUNDLESS JUSTIFICATIONS**

Southwark’s officers have put forward a series of unsound reasons for the imposed fee hikes, all of them geared towards the idea that the service had no choice.

1. First it was claimed that the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) had insisted on these price changes. However, an SFA representative attending an earlier scrutiny meeting stated that this was not true.
2. It was then argued that economic necessity had forced the changes, but other adult education providers have **not** made such changes (more on this below).
3. It was then argued that Southwark had opted to provide ‘taster’ courses in order to encourage learners to take up places with other providers. If this was a serious intention then it would be expected that learners would be guided by tutors to other providers in the area and the success of this would be monitored and evaluated. This is not happening.

## **MORE MISSED OPPORTUNITES**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that tutors have been given no instruction or guidance by management to help learners move on to other providers or that any monitoring or evaluation has taken place. A quick glance at Southwark’s ‘partner providers’, though each valuable resources in their own right, suggests that this was never an achievable policy. In a way, this is a missed opportunity, because it is a very good idea to extend the provision of the type of course available at the Thomas Calton Centre to other parts of Southwark. One of the Centre’s great strengths is that it provides adult learning to a local community and helps bind that community together. But rather than make a serious attempt to increase adult learning opportunities in other parts of Southwark, a valued resource is in the process of being dismantled in Peckham.

## **OUR EVIDENCE**

We have submitted in previous statements to the committee and to council, as well as to management and to Veronica Ward, many examples of the destructive, unwanted, unfair and unnecessary effects of the new course rules and fee hikes. WE also gave evidence on the social, personal, health and environmental benefits of adult learning for pleasure and creative development – both in statistics and in individual statements. We refer you to these previous submissions. We have repeatedly asked for specific figures on enrolments and class closures in arts/crafts/dance/movement/history but management consistently conflated the figures with basic skills/vocational course numbers and so the figures are skewed. We therefore do not have access to the full figures on learner numbers and course closures but we have anecdotal evidence.

1. **In January 2012 learner numbers in arts and crafts were down approximately 66%.**
2. **In the Spring term 2012, one art class tutor who normally teaches two classes lost a whole class as only two learners had registered for that**

course. That tutor's other class had 4 learners and was told to close at half term, but two other learners joined, so it finished the term.

3. **One disabled student has been unable to afford the high prices and cannot return to her ceramics class. As her mobility is affected by her disability, she has been unable to sustain attendance at a course she registered on at City Lit.**
4. **Two students with physical and learning disabilities have been prevented from returning to an art class they had been attending for many years, because of the fees hike.**
5. **One student says: "I have not been back to classes In Southwark for almost one year. I do keep in touch with [a former fellow student] and I hear that the class continues, despite only 6 students. I just feel that the imposition of higher fees in order to continue a class makes no sense at all. The value of a class is also in the relationships that you build on as well as developing a skill. The higher fee to continue does NOT encourage continuing attendance."**
6. **Another student says: "I did one course there and would have loved to do lots more but as someone on benefits I could not at all afford the high fees that I'd have had to pay since the changes. Even worse was that a repeat learner - you pay even more than the normal non-concession price. Absolutely out of my price range. "**
7. **Another says: "Southwark adult learning service says it offers a fairer future for all, but people claiming benefits are not treated fairly due to the repeat learner fee not having a concession fee."**
8. **Another says: "I was a member of Thomas Calton for several years and put some effort into increasing attendance and providing materials for the class to encourage students. I was one of the oldest students in the class and believe that the arts have a unique place in promoting physical and psychological health. For while I attended council meetings where it was explained to me that Southwark supported several opportunities outside of Adult Education. The policy therefore was for students to attend for the shortest possible time and move on. I moved on. "I think that office staff do not understand the criteria for fee reduction. "In addition, to be questioned about ones finances in a public area i.e. reception is not private and confidential. "I am sorry for those who have been unable to move on and have to manage with the loss of relationships made and the social isolation."**

## **COMPARISONS WITH OTHER PROVIDERS**

An alternative to the high-price policy is viable, as is evident amongst other local-authority adult-learning providers. Lambeth does not restrict reduced fees to one course but applies them to all course taken. In fact, Lambeth is far more generous in its concessionary rates than Southwark was prior to the fee hikes. At Lambeth

College, those on mean-tested benefits pay a flat fee, typically about £30 per term - and those on low incomes pay a concessionary fee of about £35. Lewisham College also doesn't have any nonsense about 'repeat fees' though are not as generous as Lambeth. Those on concessions typically pay about £50 for a 10-week course. Compare this to Southwark who, as noted above, charge those on very low incomes £110 to £165 for comparable courses.

Southwark Adult Learning is unrealistically priced even in comparison to the 'high end' adult learning colleges. City Lit typically charges just over £80 concessionary fees for their arts and leisure courses, these are not limited to just one course, and usually provide materials. Some courses which use few materials are as little as £29 for a 12-week course. Nor does Morley College restrict the number of concessionary fees available to those on benefits and typically charges around £100 for an 11-week daytime course, with materials.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is a clear, viable alternative to Southwark's high price strategy. That is to set prices comparable to similar providers and make a concerted effort to promote and advertise classes and thereby raise learner numbers. At the moment, even the basics are not being done in Southwark. Each of the providers mentioned above has a dedicated, well-thought-out website where potential learners can find out about courses and access learning resources. Southwark has just a single page tucked away on its general website with a link to a one-term list of courses! Were Southwark to take promoting classes seriously there would be great scope for increasing learner numbers - and this is how classes can be made to cover costs.

At a time when unemployment is rising and fear is growing amongst a very deprived population in Southwark, Adult Learning could be offering a vital beacon of enrichment, empowerment and hope.

## **Appendix**

Deputation statement made to Council on 26 January 2012-04-17

### **Adult Learning in Southwark is, as we speak, fighting for survival.**

Let us make clear at the outset that we are not concerned with basic skills classes. We are not questioning Southwark's commitment to basic skills, or to provision of good facilities, given the current investment in improving the Thomas Calton Adult Learning Centre. So please don't emphasise the robust basic skills service in order to undermine the points we are raising. It's not relevant.

We are here to ask you now for urgent steps to be taken to **save** courses in arts, crafts, fashion & textiles, health and fitness, dance, local history, woodwork and upholstery.

The enormous rise in fees – of up to nearly 300% for those on benefits - and the introduction of a minimum 'new learner' rule have already had a devastating effect on these courses, just as we warned Veronica Ward they would, when we met her in November .

We don't have the full picture because the Adult Learning Centre won't divulge the full profile of course closures. However, through the experiences of the learners and tutors we are in contact with, we have learned that:

**Last term**, the following courses closed::

1. Keep fit
2. therapeutic art
3. Evening ceramics
4. drawing.

These closures resulted from classes needing 8 new learners to run, and due to fee rises being unaffordable for individuals and for a charity which funded the attendance of some special needs learners.

**This term** – and again these are only the ones we know about – the situation is this:

1. Many health and fitness classes, including several pilates classes, have closed.
2. Out of a total of 18 courses in fashion and textiles, ONLY ONE course, in soft furnishings, is running.
3. Two out of four wood carving courses have closed due to not having enough new learners,
4. The Therapeutic Art course has closed
5. Felt making has closed – there were NO enrolments.
6. Two out of four ceramics courses have closed.

. Tutors' and students' offers to help promote the service and bring in new learners, by putting up posters in local cafes and centres, and by holding stalls at events, have been turned down. There is an alarmingly strict grip on outreach and advertising. In fact, even before these draconian rules started,

courses were often only filled by tutors and students going out of their way to recruit.

People get to know about it mostly by word of mouth. The list of classes is usually provided late and is not always accurate. The enrolment procedure is chaotic.

The service is heading for annihilation, which is a tragic loss for Southwark, and for the people who rely on classes for skills, development, social contact, training and well-being

### **The changes have not been forced on Southwark by the Skills Funding Agency**

Southwark council have insisted that the enormous rise in fees for those on low incomes and the imposition of a rule to close all classes which do not attract eight new learners each term, has been forced on them by the Skills Funding Agency. This is simply not true.

It is true that the Skills Funding Agency provide funding only for learners for one course, but it is Southwark Council who has decided that a course should last only one term. And the eight new learners rule is a bureaucratic nightmare dreamt up by Southwark officers alone. It's obviously expendable because it was summarily reduced to four new learners at the end of last term.

Contrary to Southwark's claim, the Skills Funding Agency guidelines explicitly state that those eligible for concessionary fees should remain so for the whole academic year. Limiting reduced fees to one term is quite against the spirit of those guidelines. In effect, Southwark receives funding for a whole academic year per learner but pass on only one term of that to the learner.

Limiting a course to one term makes no sense for the vast majority of art, keep fit or leisure courses, where the benefit lies in continuity and development. You don't learn a skill, or keep fit, in one hit. These courses should last the whole academic year and the concessionary fees should apply to all three terms. Anything less is pure discrimination against those on benefits, and amounts to active social exclusion, utterly in conflict with any equal opportunities policy.

Those entitled to concessions returning for a second term at the Thomas Calton Centre, in art say, now have to pay a fee of £137 for a two and a half hour class, or £165 for three hours. (That's IF there are enough new learners to keep the class going) Southwark's closest comparator, Lambeth College and Greenwich Community College allow reduced fees for all three terms. At Lambeth, an art course costs about £30 per term for those entitled to concessions. Greenwich Community College charges those on means tested benefits £1 per hour – for the whole year. A comparable course at Morley College, a well set up and prestigious institution near Waterloo would cost

£100. City Lit, in central London, charges about £80. Neither Morley nor City Lit limit their concessionary fees to one term

Imposing unrealistically high fees and excluding people saves hardly any money at all, as an additional learner in a class incurs few, if any, additional costs. But, if the learner is deterred by high fees then the college foregoes that learner's fee payment. The net result is a loss of money.

Southwark's fees are clearly quite ludicrously high. Those on low incomes will go elsewhere, or more likely will have to drop out of learning all together. This is not only grossly unfair and damaging to adult learning, it is very bad economics.

### **The eight new learners rule**

The eight new learners rule is a nightmare of bureaucratic thinking. The way to safeguard adult learning is to attract new learners to classes. Rather than discuss with students and tutors a sensible way to do this an arbitrary rule has been imposed that requires each course to enrol eight completely new learners each term or be closed. This is simply madness.

It is not physically possible for those courses which attract a high number of learners to add eight to their number each term. The classrooms are not big enough! Those courses which are failing to attract new learners or retain existing learners need a sensible strategy for attracting new people not immediate closure.

This can all change. Not through the summary closure of classes, but by students, tutors and Southwark Council working together to celebrate and promote the excellent work which is done.

### **The way forward**

The students, staff and tutors at the Thomas Calton Centre and the other Southwark centres for Adult Learning want to work with Southwark Council to safeguard our classes against the coming budget cuts which we know will effect all adult education institutions.

But by imposing these ill thought out and damaging changes this current academic year Southwark Council are making enemies of the very people who should be their close allies. Even now despite the already alarming number of class closures it is not too late.

### **PLEASE:**

Allow the reduced fees to run over all three terms

Drop the ridiculous new learners rule and work with us to get back the people already lost this term.

Please put aside summary class closures and ludicrously high fees. With the fees back to sensible levels the learner's class reps from last term can meet

with Adult Learning management as matter or urgency to find ways of getting closed classes up and running again. And over the coming months we can find new ways to celebrate and promote Adult learning in Southwark.