

# **ADULT LEARNING: CRISIS? WHAT CRISIS?**

**submission to Education Committee**

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**from SAVE SOUTHWARK ADULT LEARNING**

Beatrix Barnes, Jane Booth, Vincent Brown, Nicola Field,  
Dorothy Love and Paul Shrubshall  
**southwarksaveadultlearning@gmail.com**

In Autumn 2010, Southwark Adult Learning introduced a 'repeat fee' for arts and leisure courses. This represented an up to 255% increase for anyone wanting to study for more than one term. In addition, tutors were instructed that only classes with eight new – or 'unique' learners - *each term* could go ahead.

This spelled the end of 'lifelong learning' and heralded an effective shutdown of arts & leisure adult education for the borough's poor.

This sparked protests at Thomas Calton Centre from students who were about to be shut out by the new fee and 'unique learner' rule. Responding, last year, Southwark council ordered an investigation by a Scrutiny Panel.

The wheels turned slowly and management have done their best to put a gloss on dwindling enrolments and class closures resulting from the 'repeat fee'.

But students have kept up the campaign and conducted research into the effects of the 'repeat fee' and 'unique learner' rule, using the council's own figures, the Ofsted report, and testimony and evidence from students. Tutors have not been able to contribute information, under threat of disciplinary action.

No other adult learning provider that we have found has applied the measures.

Now, councillors have the power to end the notorious, discriminatory 'repeat fee' and unworkable 'unique learner' rule.

Read on for the full story.

<b>MANAGEMENT MYTH</b>	<b>REALITY CHECK</b>
'Fees have been frozen'	The repeat fee represents an increase of over 250% for those entitled to concessions and an increase of over 50% for others
'Class closures have not increased'	Arts and leisure course closures increased from under 5 per term in 2009 to 76 in 2011. Class cancellations have rocketed from 6.6% to 63.9%
'Any increase in closures simply reflect a greater number of courses on offer'	The number of arts and leisure courses has increased – but only because 10-week courses have been cut into multiples of 2,3,4, and 5-week courses
Southwark Adult Learning has been deemed “outstanding” and “excellent value for money” by Ofsted	Ofsted did not reflect on arts & leisure class closures or on the ‘repeat fee’ level
Each class must attract 8 new – or ‘unique’ in the jargon – learners each term	This target has proved totally unworkable and has been adapted, lapsed and waived in various ways for various courses

### **Arts and Leisure Classes Collapsing**

At the end of 2010 a new fee structure was introduced for Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL, or arts & leisure) in Southwark’s Adult learning service.

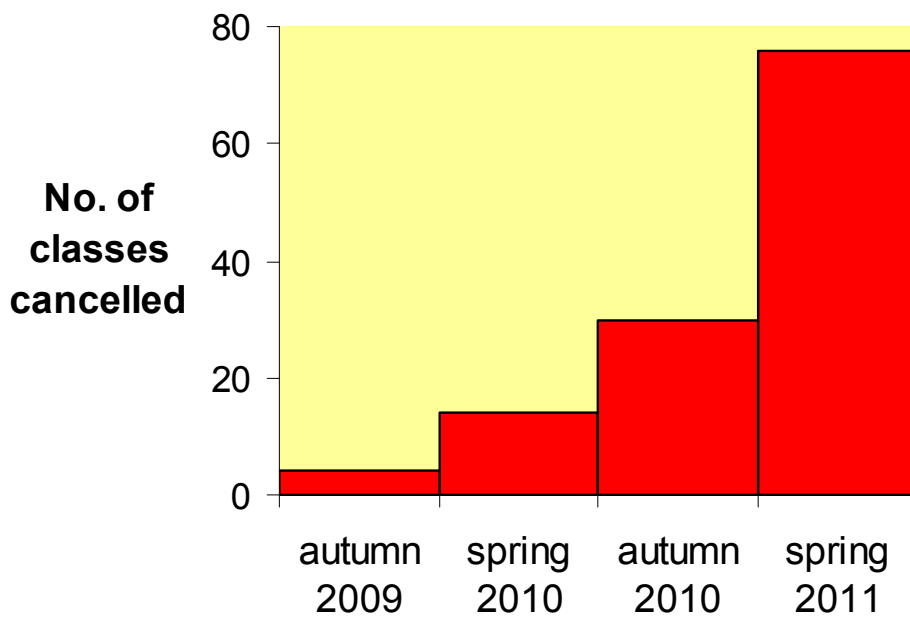
Each learner would now be entitled to attend just one class for one term, paying the standard or concessionary fee. To progress in the same class into the next term, or to take any other class, everyone would have to pay the ‘repeat fee’.

For a typical three-hour class taken over 10 weeks this would mean:

1. Learners paying the standard fee of £108 have to find £165.
2. Those entitled to a concessionary fee of £46.50 also have to pay the ‘repeat fee’: £165. A staggering and quite unaffordable increase for those on low incomes.

A campaign of learners and staff was formed to oppose this policy. The campaign argued that these new fees were not only damaging and unfair to learners, particularly for those on low incomes, but that learners would be driven away and classes would face wholesale closures. Regrettably, this warning has proved correct and PCDL, or arts & leisure, has seen a precipitous collapse in classes.

The graphs below are based on latest available figures from Southwark Council (11/6/2012). These figures show an alarming increase in class closures, rising to 76 cancellations in spring 2011.

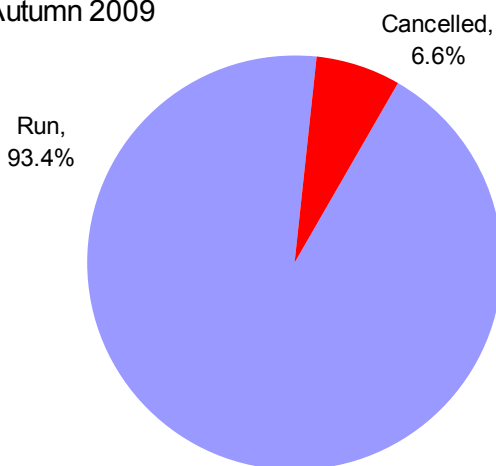


**Seventy six arts and leisure classes cancelled in spring 2011 compared to just four in autumn 2009**

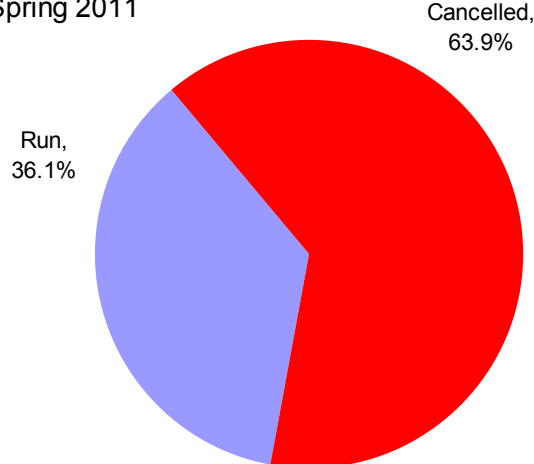
This sharp collapse in classes is seen even more clearly in the figures for the percentage of planned classes actually run. In autumn 2009, 93.4% of planned classes were

delivered, by the spring of 2011 this had plunged to just 36.1%. Almost two thirds of all arts and leisure classes were cancelled in spring 2011 compared to less than 7% in autumn 2009.

Autumn 2009



Spring 2011



**Classes run fell from 93.4% of those planned in autumn 2009 to just 36.1% in spring 2011**

### **Why has this happened?**

Before the repeat fee was introduced, classes were not ‘un-economic’, but there was a need to increase student numbers. Southwark’s own figures showed that with 12 learners classes would cover running costs and with 14 or more would make a profit. What was needed was better marketing. It was a standing joke that hardly anyone in the borough even knew it had a PCDL, or arts & leisure adult learning service! Many warned that introducing an exorbitant ‘repeat fee’ would be counter-productive and so it has proved.

## **What about similar providers? What are they doing?**

Neighbouring local authorities have not followed Southwark's lead.

In Lambeth, all arts and leisure (two-hour, 11-week) classes charge £75 per term (£30 concessions). There is no 'repeat fee'. All further classes taken are charged at the standard or concessionary rate.

Nor is there a 'repeat fee' in Lewisham. All classes are charged at the standard rate, typically £80 (£40 concession). For a similar (two-hour, 10-week) class in Southwark the fee compares well, typically £71 (£31 concession). But, after just one term of one class, **all** learners face a 'repeat fee' of £110.

There is no justification for asking the most hard pressed in Southwark to pay £110 per term compared to £30 in Lambeth and £40 in Lewisham.

## **Why is Southwark's policy so wrong?**

Southwark has needlessly driven many away from adult learning, including the poorest and most vulnerable. Moreover, the 'repeat fee' is so high many who pay the standard rate cannot afford to continue and class closures result.

The community spirit built up in classes running over several terms, with a core group of returners and new people each term, has been destroyed.

Community learning has been proved to be highly effective in promoting physical and mental well-being, social inclusion and community cohesion. Many learners develop skills and talents over time and many of Southwark's learners have moved on to professional practice in arts, crafts, dance and movement.

This melting pot of growth and happiness has taken a mortal kick.

## **What needs to be done**

Southwark's standard and concessionary fees compare well to other local authority providers. These fees should apply to all classes taken and the 'repeat fee' abolished. This would bring Southwark back into line with Lambeth and Lewisham and would allow learner numbers to begin to improve again. This would not only be fairer to learners, particularly those on low incomes, but would allow class numbers to increase to levels where running costs are not only met, but a surplus generated and classes safeguarded.

## **Objections you may have heard**

**But the number of learners has not fallen?** It is true that the total number of 'unique learners' has not fallen, but this figure includes those on the free basic skills classes as well as fee paying students. This skews the picture. More to the point, the unique learner figure does not distinguish between the case where a learner is content with the new fee structure and carries on with their class, and the case where a learner takes one class for one term at the standard/concessionary rate, but is unable to afford the repeat fee and leaves. In each case, the student would count as one 'unique learner'. Even if it were the case that all learners had been driven away by the 'repeat fee' after taking just one class for one term the total number of unique learners would not be affected and could even increase! The number of unique learners is thus a meaningless statistic in the context of discussing repeat fees and no other data on learner numbers has been provided by the council.

**But haven't the number of classes delivered increased?** Actually, the number of arts and leisure classes delivered has fallen from 57 in autumn 2009 to just 43 in spring 2011, but even this hides the

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extent of the collapse. Learners are still entitled to one standard or concessionary fee so classes won't collapse completely. The **real** reason why the number of classes reported to be delivered has not fallen by a much greater extent, however, is that many new 'short' classes have been introduced as even the more well-off students find they can't afford the repeat fees for a 10-week class. Thus, one 10-week class becomes two five-week classes – thus artificially inflating the total number of classes delivered.

**But didn't Southwark adult learning receive a good Ofsted report?** Southwark classes are fantastic, which is one of the reasons why the campaign has received so much support. And the standard and concessionary fees are good value. It is the 'repeat fee' that is so unfair and is driving learners away. Few can afford to pay the repeat fee and Ofsted would not have come across many in classes. Rather, Ofsted would have come across learners paying the standard or concessionary fee who, because of the 'repeat fee', were worried that they would not be able to afford to continue their classes into the next term. And this is precisely what is highlighted by Ofsted in their report (p6):

*What learners would like to see improved:*

- **opportunities to attend longer courses**
- **opportunities to continue studying their course from term to term**

The only way to comply with the Ofsted recommendations is to abolish the 'repeat fee' and to charge all classes taken at the standard and concessionary rate.

**But Southwark's adult learners say they are satisfied with the service provided?** There is a clear and unambiguous call from learners to abolish the repeat fee. At the daytime workshop held by Southwark Council on 16 January 2012 for current students (Supplemental Agenda for scrutiny sub-committee March 7, p 25) learners commented:

*If repeat you have to pay more, it's too expensive for some*

*Courses cannot be continued by students for another term without excessive fee.*

*And this leads to class closures: A class cancelled due to too few people – get more people.*

The need to abolish the repeat was again emphasised at the evening workshop for current and former learners held on June 18 (report to July scrutiny sub-committee forthcoming):

*The fee structure means I can only do one course for one term which debars me from developing and being part of a learning community;*

*I cannot afford the repeat learner fee. After attending various courses in Southwark for 25 years I now no longer attend one because of cost;*

*If I could take on more courses such as carpentry and still afford it on jobseekers, and if I felt this was a place I could progress in – basically remove the repeat fees, as I can't afford it but really want a new career;*

*I want to get access to more woodworking/ creative/ arts courses – be able to build and develop my skills. At the moment this centre is not available to me because of repeat fee structure.*

### **The way forward is clear: abolish the repeat fee**

The message from class closure figures, from the Ofsted report and from the learner consultation is abundantly clear and unambiguous: if learners are to be able to continue attending classes and if classes are to be safeguarded from closure then the repeat fee must be abolished.