

WILTSHIRE AND SWINDON LIFELONG LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

LEARNING ON THE MOVE

* These articles authored by Don Courtney.

As part of its three-year plan to make Wiltshire a learning region, the Wiltshire and Swindon Lifelong Learning Partnership has commissioned the design and production of two innovative Mobile Learning Units (MLU).

The MLU's have been designed to take learning opportunities out and about to rural communities and individuals who, for whatever reason, find themselves unable to travel to traditional centres of further education.

They will be operated individually by Salisbury College and by Wiltshire College. They are each equipped with thirteen PC work-stations linked by satellite communication to provide internet access. The units will be able to provide courses on IT plus a range of subjects and much of the course work to be made available will be arranged in response to specific local demand.

On April 18th 2002, just twenty seven months after the initial concept was first discussed, the two colleges are ready to make "Learning on the Move" a reality in Wiltshire.

Sir Jeremy Moore KCB, who was Commander Land Forces during the Falklands war is officiating at this ceremony to officially launch the two Mobile Learning Units. Significantly, in retirement, he has made full use of an outreach course provided by Wiltshire college.

The story behind the launch of these vehicles is one of vision, determination and teamwork. It is an exciting demonstration of what can be achieved in making further education readily available in rural areas.

We have extracted the following from the text of a series of articles, which have been running in the regional press throughout Wiltshire.

1. In the beginning.

The remit of the Lifelong Learning Partnership is to help people benefit from having knowledge - either in their career or in leisure interests.

In January 2000, Partnership director Norman Atkin called an extra-ordinary board meeting to explore various ideas and opportunities.

Following the maxim of 'Think Big' the result was the concept to build two Mobile Learning Units, at a combined cost of half a million pounds.

The concept of taking training and learning opportunities out to rural communities was not entirely new in Wiltshire. Salisbury College had been operating a borrowed MLU on a part time basis for the past three years. During that time they enrolled almost 400 people from outlying areas who gained a total of 285 qualifications.

Several months of planning and extensive consultation were to elapse before a detailed business plan could be prepared for submission to the TEC board. After the TEC had given approval the plans then had to be submitted to Central Government. At last, in March 2001 the green light was given and the project could proceed. But there was much to be done.

2. Consultation, Consultation, Consultation.

Further consultations were held with Parish and Town councils, organisations both inside education and outside, employers, local authorities, the voluntary sector, the Employment Service, Lifetime Careers, each gave their inputs as to the types of learning and training opportunities which might be provided by the units. All in all some seventy organisations contributed to this initial phase of project implementation.

3. Red-tape - but a hidden benefit.

New projects hardly ever proceed smoothly. The process of going out to tender for construction of the MLU's became prolonged when, under EU law, because the combined cost of the two units was in excess of half a million pounds the invitations to tender to build the units had to be published in the European Contract Journal. This delayed the review of tenders by three months but had an unexpected advantage in that it broadened both the range and quality of the bidders.

4. The devil is in the detail. HGV or non-HGV

The MLU tendering and project management process was delegated to John Gacca, an experienced and independent project manager. The wisdom of this delegation became ever more apparent as a huge checklist of essential considerations evolved. A major issue was All-up weight (AUW). If this exceeded 7.5 tonnes, the vehicle would need to be driven by someone having a Heavy Goods Vehicle licence. But such a person would then be an addition to the staffing costs and would spend a large portion of each day with nothing to do. At under 7.5 tonnes, the vehicle could be driven on an ordinary car licence (but special training would be given) thus enabling a tutor / driver to operate it.

5. Selecting an IT supplier - Not easy.

Once the team had agreed on the IT requirements the contract were put to open market tender. Twenty-six companies expressed interest in bidding with eight of these actually submitting bids. Analysing the bids was a complex exercise. The overall cost of the project had to be balanced against wide ranging criteria. Suppliers' quotations varied enormously in terms of cost, ability to meet the specification, technical approach, and on going support.

In the end, some 14 weeks after the tender process had started, the final choice was made. Detailed implementation planning could then commence.

6. How much does it weigh?

Weight remained a crucial issue in sorting out the detailed specification and fit for the MLUs. The trailer body had to be designed for lightness as well as the strength to provide several years of robust use. As an example of the many critical decisions faced by the project team, was whether the wheel chair access or extendable 'pod' of the unit should be hydraulically operated as it was not going to be possible for two such mechanisms to be included. (The wheelchair access won).

For the IT fit, the suppliers, had to re-design and re-develop much of the available equipment; sourcing special lightweight flat screens as well as the lightest possible satellite dish. Even the cable runs were carefully calculated to make sure there was no redundant weight and the company resorted to using industrial scales to weigh every single component to ensure they were within limits.

Three months after placing the contracts and after many meetings, problems and innovative solutions the vehicles were ready on March 11th to be handed over to the Lifelong Learning Partnership. Following an initial shake-down period during which the MLU's were used to provide limited course work and for promotional exposure the day of the official launch arrived.

7. On the Road

Once the two Mobile Learning Units (MLU) had been formally handed over by the manufacturers to the Lifelong Learning Partnership, Salisbury College was then able to take delivery. It immediately put the unit to work.

The quality of the installed equipment and the college's experience from operating a similar MLU over the past four years (borrowed from Dorset County Council) meant that the training team was able to combine a shake-down period for the new vehicle with actual tuition on location.

The village of Netheravon was chosen for the first location and the vehicle duly arrived in the village hall car park. Advance publicity and natural local curiosity resulted in a considerable number of people turning up to have a look. Villagers were immediately impressed with the learning environment which is light, bright and cheerful, as well the thirteen work stations each equipped with up-to-the-minute flat screen personal computers and satellite connection to the internet. It was all a long way removed from the traditional classroom of memory.

Such was the impact that very quickly some thirty-five adults, of all ages, had enrolled for the computer classes on offer.

As with any new system the first week or two were not without difficulties. The biggest problem was the time taken to extend the 'Pod'; which is the unit that slides out from the trailer to provide the full classroom area. Because of the weight-saving penalties, mentioned in the previous article, this had to be done manually and it proved initially to be more difficult in a village car park environment than it had on the flat floor of the factory. However with a little perseverance and fine-tuning this was overcome and the MLU proved itself to exceed everybody's expectations.

On April 18th the outcome of twenty-seven months of team work from conception, through funding and manufacture, culminated in a grand launch ceremony held at Wiltshire College, Lackham. Guest of honour was Sir Jeremy More, KCB, a Bratton resident who himself had benefited in retirement from an outreach course on the use of computers, and who achieved distinction as Commander Land Forces during the Falklands war. During his speech he paid tribute to the tremendous spirit of teamwork which had prevailed throughout the whole project and which had included Salisbury & Wiltshire Colleges; The Learning Skills Council; the Lifelong Learning Partnership; and Torton Bodies, the manufacturer of the units plus Tempus Computers who had installed the sophisticated computer hardware.

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