



Alliance for learning

In a novel, yet simple, initiative, learning consultancy Trainer1 is helping 24 Scottish councils to develop highly cost-effective, public sector orientated e-learning materials.

An original approach to e-learning development by a consortium representing 24 Scottish councils is bringing a host of benefits – to the materials' developers, learners and even to taxpayers.

Council staff who are involved in developing learning materials within these organisations have formed a consortium to commission and develop e-learning materials that can be shared among the consortium's members. This not only produces greater cost-effectiveness for each e-learning programme for each council involved but also enables the spread of e-learning design and development expertise among consortium members.

The 20 e-learning modules were produced for £18,000 - financed by 15 councils and one NHS Trust, at just £1,125 per organisation. In addition, these materials are free from any further licensing or usage charges.

According to the group's co-chair, John Arthur, who is the Organisational Development Adviser with Fife Council's Policy & Organisational Development Service Training & Learning Services Team: "We currently have 24 of the 32 Scottish Councils in membership of the eLearning Alliance Scotland. They are also members of our Scottish Local Authorities' eLearning Network, which operates as a Special Interest Group of the Alliance.

"We started life as the CoSLA eLearning Network – brought together by CoSLA, to

encourage us to work collaboratively and to learn from each others' experiences."

Some two years ago CoSLA's priorities changed and it was unable to continue supporting and leading the network it had instigated. However, the network's members decided that their work together was too important to be allowed to wither.

"Consequently we are now a self-managing group, whose secretariat is provided by the eLearning Alliance," said John. "We aim to

Key points

- A consortium representing 24 Scottish councils is developing e-learning materials that is resulting in greater cost effectiveness in production
- Disseminating e-learning design and development expertise
- Major savings for taxpayers

prevent duplication of effort among ourselves in the field of e-learning and, to date, have developed one set of modules. We are working collaboratively to build others in topic areas that are common to many – or all – of the group's members."

In looking to develop the members' e-learning design and development skills, the group turned to Trainer1, one of the UK's leading learning consultancies. Trainer1 has supplied not only the Lectora authoring software that each group member uses in developing e-learning materials but also provides guidance on matters including instructional design and development techniques using that software.

Trainer1's Suzy Cooper explained: "Nine councils are currently developing learning materials using Lectora. Some people who are not using Lectora are contributing to the group through providing training design and subject matter expertise. One course that the group has built successfully in this way is 'An Introduction to Best Value'."

According to John: "In addition to Trainer1 supplying the authoring software and training on how to get maximum benefit from using it, Trainer1's Suzy Cooper has been an invaluable source of support where we have encountered difficulties that we could not solve ourselves.

"On the evidence of its involvement with this group, Trainer1 appears to be a highly professional organisation with people who are committed to improving e-learning for all of their clients," he added. "They are always approachable and, recently, Suzy Cooper tailored one of Trainer1's standard courses to meet our particular need for a two-day programme for delegates who are confident, advanced users of MS Office."

Commenting on the value of having a consortium of e-learning designers and developers among these Scottish councils, John said: "The main benefit to our councils is that, through the group, we obtain materials with a public sector perspective. Often, these materials are not commercially available. Moreover, we can obtain these materials at a cost that we feel helps us to maximise the value from our budgets.

"For example, the 20 Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act (FOISA) modules were produced at a cost of £18,000. This was financed by 15 councils and one NHS Trust – at a cost of just £1,125 per organisation. In addition, these materials are free from any further licensing or usage charges.

"We estimate that the FOISA modules have been made available to around 20 public sector organisations with approximately 60,000 staff including all NHS Trusts in Scotland," John revealed. "In addition we have shared modules that each has built separately – in areas of absence management, fair treatment at work and managing mental health. Our only truly collaborative piece of work to date has been 'An Introduction to Best Value', which involved Fife Council, North Lanarkshire Council, Renfrewshire Council and was led by the City of Edinburgh Council.

'The introduction to Best Value is still being piloted by four councils, but our initial feedback has been highly positive.'

"The FOISA modules were well received and continue to be well used – and we are in the process of updating these to take into account the changes to legislation and case law since the Act was introduced on 1st January 2005," he added. "The Introduction to Best Value is still being piloted by four councils, but our initial feedback has been highly positive."

However, it is not only the Councils, their staff – and, ultimately, the taxpayer – who benefits from the existence of this group. John explained that the benefits for the individuals involved in the group include mutual support, and skills development in being able to design and build e-learning modules.

"In addition, we have sought to gain some economies of scale in the purchasing of software licenses and training," he added. "For



example, we use Lectora in order to help us to work collaboratively and to exchange files. This makes life a lot easier for us all!

"The next stage in the group's development is to establish a community of practice supported by the Improvement Service," he continued. "We will have an area on the improvement services website that will allow us to upload and download files and folders and so help us to share more effectively and more quickly than when using CD-ROM and conventional mail!"

"The consortium now has two special interest groups: one for Local Authorities and one for the NHS," Trainer1's Suzy Cooper commented. "Obviously, authorities' focus on staff development needs changes in accordance with central government requirements. At present, the focus is on buying procedures. So the next course which the group is building collaboratively, with advice and guidance from Trainer1, is on procurement."

By Bryn Howells

In a nutshell

Initially, the councils wanted to collaborate in order to outsource the creation of a 20 module course on the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act (FOISA). Obviously, this course was applicable to staff at each of these councils and the idea was that the cost of developing the programme would be shared between the group members.

This collaboration proved to be so successful that the group continued to operate. They realised that each of their organisations needed information – and, thus, learning materials – on a number of common areas and issues. It was a short step to making the decision to build these learning materials themselves, collaboratively.

Consequently, they formed development sub-groups with leaders. And, mainly in the interests of avoiding duplication of effort, topic areas for the learning materials were divided out among the groups.

Contact:

*Neil Lasher, Trainer1, Unit 26 Kimberley Court,
Kimberley Road, London, NW6 7SL
Tel 020 7624 4844; Web www.trainer1.com*

*John Arthur, Organisational Development Adviser,
Fife Council, Policy & Organisational Development
Service, Training & Learning Services Team,
Carleton House, Balgonie Road, Markinch, KY7 6AQ.*