

Community Learning Reform

Support and Resources for Providers

Community Learning Partnerships Work in Birmingham Birmingham Community Learning Trust (CLT)

Introduction

This case study describes a collaborative approach between the Birmingham Adult Education Service, Further Education colleges and voluntary sector partners to planning community learning in Birmingham. It sets out the processes used and describes the achievements and considerable benefits this approach brings to learners and providers.

The activity

This case study concerns the way that the CLT provider partners - adult education and the FE colleges in Birmingham - are working together to align and optimise their funding and activity. The main FE and CL providers in Birmingham are:

1. Birmingham Adult Education Service (BAES);
2. Birmingham Metropolitan College;
3. Bournville College;
4. South and City College Birmingham;
5. Joseph Chamberlain College.

The other main partners for the pilot were:

3. the Best Network, a network of 3rd sector organisations working with the most disadvantaged to boost participation, skills and employment potential;
4. Birmingham Voluntary Service Council, a large voluntary sector support service;
5. the National Careers Service.

When the CLT was launched, BAES organised a conference to identify approaches and attitudes to community learning and how partners could work together. BAES was in the right place to lead this as the largest local recipient of CL funding and with a presence across the city. The work done at the conference provided a foundation for the CLT bid and this began the collaborative approach which has been sustained. Three partners came together to write the bid, which gave an immediate focus to joint discussions, rather than just being a 'talking shop,' as there were deadlines to meet. Building trust between the partners was vital and clarity about the reasons for working together in this way helped to build that trust.

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Adult education, which receives 85% of the Community Learning funding in the city, has been able to widen its curriculum offer through using its Community Learning funding to offer provision that leads directly to college accredited vocational courses. This has been achieved through using college premises at a cost neutral rate and employing college staff who are familiar with the venue, the specialist facilities and the vocational curriculum to deliver introductory Community Learning funded courses. Learners have not been made aware of the CLT, so for them it has been 'business as usual' with alignment of funding and activity taking place behind the scenes. Everyone wins from this arrangement. – the learners, the staff and the partners.

The differences this approach has made

Learners

The key difference for learners has been the smooth progression that CLT partners have facilitated from one provider to another through delivery on the same premises by two organisations. Birmingham Adult Education Service recruited learners onto the first step with Community Learning funded courses and progressed them (sometimes fast-tracked) into Adult Skills accredited courses run by the FE college.

The use of college premises with specialist facilities has enabled Community Learning funding to fund learning in a wider range of curriculum areas than adult education is able to offer. Specific examples have included construction crafts, hair and beauty and complementary therapies. This has given learners access to high quality learning environments with industry-standard equipment and specialist tutoring that Adult Education on its own could not provide.

Learners become familiar with the venue, facilities and staff and so are enabled to progress easily to the next stage, which is a college-run vocational, accredited course. They have the opportunity to 'have a go' at a subject before committing to a more substantial course at a higher level. The partnership improves learners' ability to stay the course, achievement and success on the accredited courses as learners have received relevant Information, Advice and Guidance and preparatory learning before embarking on a more substantial course.

Managers, staff and volunteers

Managers and staff have built their understanding of the 'CLT approach' as a useful shorthand for this way of working together. This is why they have chosen to retain 'CLT' as the name of the collaboration.

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Partners have developed understanding of one another's approaches to Community Learning and shared good practice, for example in the collection of data on the achievement of 'soft' outcomes. One of the next actions is to standardise some of the evaluation tools used with learners to capture the impact that Community Learning has made to their lives and prospects and to report jointly on the responses.

The organisation

The CLT has given focus to collaboration between providers and is leading to more efficient use of resources as they avoid overlapping programmes and plan strategically in priority areas of Birmingham. BAES have featured the college partnership in their main marketing publication and in turn has been featured in two colleges' marketing materials.

Partners have developed a joint understanding of the various purposes of Community Learning courses and started common categorisation of their community learning courses:

- **Non accredited learning** (e.g. Introductory courses) **designed to engage** those who are some distance from the labour market and who need a first step to progress onto vocational and /or Basic Skills courses funded through Adult Skills Budget;
- **Accredited course** (not fundable under Adult Skills Budget) but which is potentially economically valuable;
- **Non-accredited pre-employment learning;**
- **Non-accredited learning** undertaken primarily to support **personal development, health and well being**, including courses for adult learners with learning difficulties.

BAES has been able to recruit more men into adult education courses by widening the scope of the community learning offer using the college's specialist facilities and tutors. The college has gained through being able to recruit people with prior knowledge onto vocational courses, which should improve retention and achievement. The main benefit for college partners has been access to funding that attracts new learners into their venues and ready-made groups for progression.

The Pound Plus benefits include adult education courses which have had a cost saving through running on excellent sites at low cost. Recruitment through

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partner organisations has saved publicity and recruitment costs. BAES were able to offer an increased number of free courses with a new partner in one of the CLT areas, encouraging new people to take up learning. Working in the CLT has prepared partners to bid jointly for any new opportunities as they emerge.

Challenges and solutions

One challenge the CLT set themselves was to share Community Learning data between providers, and this has continued to be challenging. They are working towards a common format to enable them to get a full picture of Community Learning participation, provision and progression in Birmingham and are very close to being ready with this. In addition to Community Learning, ideally they would like to build a full picture that includes data on Adult Skills participation, provision and progression, but this has proved a daunting task so far.

The Pound Plus concept remained challenging in terms of reaching common understanding. The partners agreed a fee policy, whereby each provider provides free courses for the same purpose, introducing new learners, particularly in areas of deprivation. Costing the Pound Plus has been challenging as partners were not accustomed to working in this way. Furthermore there was no additional funding to support the CLT, so there was additional pressure on staff time and other resources that led to a “Pound Minus” factor that offset any gains achieved through Pound Plus. BAES appreciated the goodwill of every organisation involved in making the CLT successful.

Critical factors for success

The critical factors have been goodwill, the motivation to make the CLT succeed and working with the right people. These were senior managers in each organisation who had decision-making powers and were able to take the messages back to their own organisations to make it happen on the ground.

Although there has been no additional funding for the activity all the partners have been willing to attend the meetings to establish and maintain the CLT. Partners are motivated as everyone involved can clearly see the potential benefits of planning and working together, especially since the Skills Funding Agency relinquished this role and acquired a commissioning rather than a planning remit.

Gaining agreement from college principals at an early stage was helpful and this was achieved by the Head of Adult Learning contacting each principal to explain what the CLT was aiming to achieve and securing their “buy in” for this. They had

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to emphasise that the CLT is not trying to take over the decision making in each organisation, but rather to influence it for mutual benefit and the benefit of learners and communities at a time of shrinking resources.

The “golden moment”

There were 3 golden moments:

1. Adult Education Community Learning Funded learners were fast-tracked onto accredited college provision as their initial learning demonstrated so much potential. This demonstrates the true benefit to learners of joint working, as rather than keep learners waiting at the first stage, they were enabled to move more quickly towards their ultimate learning goal.
2. One FE provider phoned the adult education partner to discuss what their college’s community learning targets should be. This shows evidence of real collaboration and understanding of the CLT principles.
3. The CLT used the successful model developed with one college to plan and launch provision on the site of two other colleges.

Additional materials

The attached example of data sharing sets show patterns of participation in Community Learning by ward across the city. The partners used them to identify current participation across wards and to start planning for more activity in deprived wards where participation is lower.

Contacts for further information

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