Implementing the Community Learning reforms

This paper summarises findings from a survey conducted in Autumn 2014 and designed to provide a sector-led, bottom-up analysis of providers' self-assessed capacity in terms of implementing and embedding Community Learning reforms. In summary this new agenda, first published in *New Challenges, New Chances* and in force for all providers since 2013/14, is couched around three headline objectives:

- that Community Learning activity is targeted on people who are disadvantaged and are least likely to participate in education and training;
- that a localised, partnership approach is taken to design and delivery; and
- that value for money is maximised, including levering in additional resource from beyond the SFA funding allocation (so-called "pound plus").

The Community Learning Implementation Survey was undertaken to take stock of progress in responding to the reform agenda to date, to help identify aspects of effective practice, and to point to areas where providers funded for Community Learning delivery might need additional support. In undertaking the survey, HOLEX worked with other sector membership bodies - LEAFEA, AoC, and TSNLA - to facilitate provider engagement in the exercise and to ensure cross-sector input.
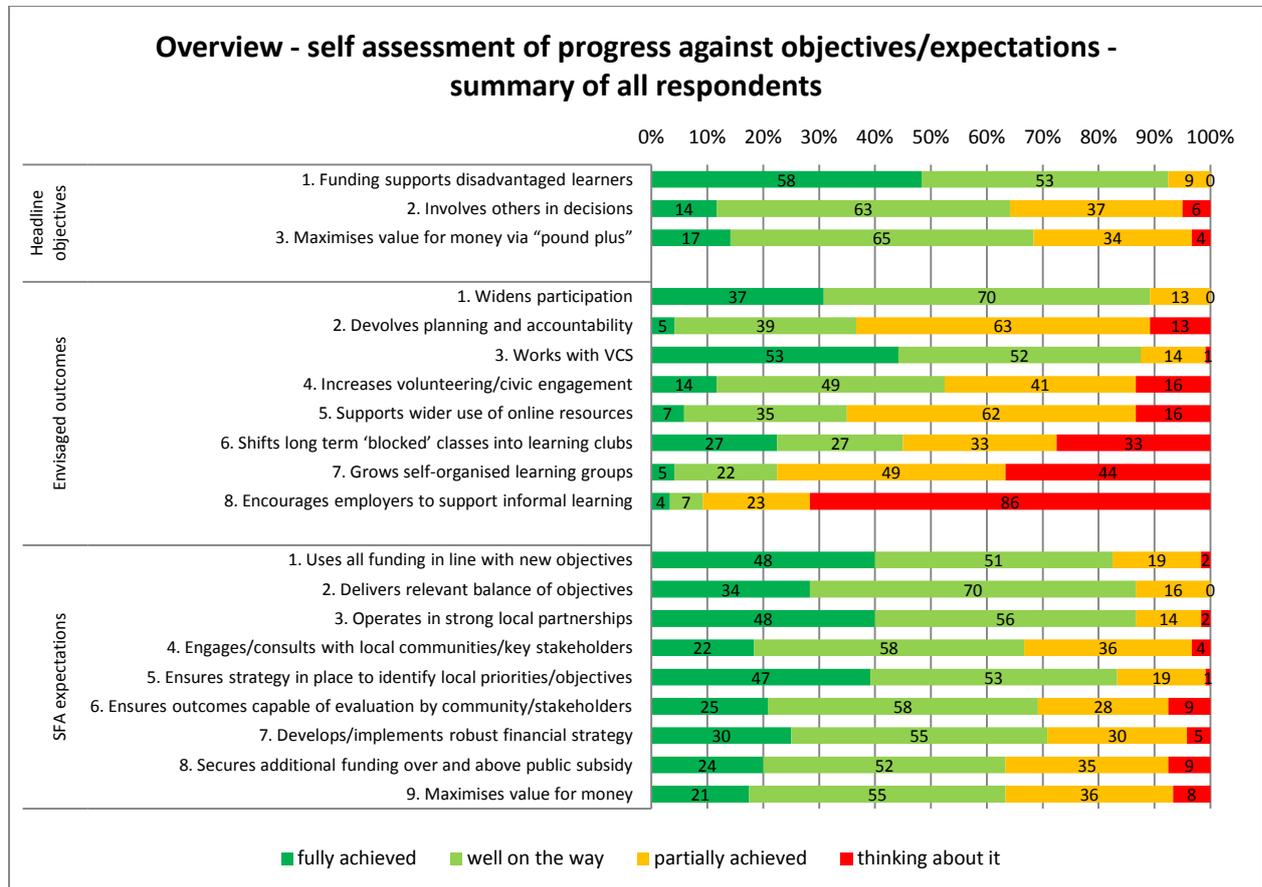
Methodology and response rate

The survey targeted all 318 providers in receipt of a direct Community Learning funding allocation, and secured a 38% response rate. Data gathered included type of provider, region of operation and size of funding allocation. Information on areas of effective practice self-identified by providers was sought to illustrate principles arising from the reforms. Of the responses received, 75 came from Local Authority maintained services, 32 from colleges (including four from Sixth Form Colleges) and 13 from providers we have classified as "Other", including third sector agencies, specialist designated institutions, higher education institutions and a former Community Learning Trust Pilot. Findings have been analysed to identify differences by type of provider organisation.

15 providers responding to the survey have a Community Learning funding allocation of less than £100,000, and have been subject to sub-analysis. Responses indicated no significant variation in reported performance by region. As a consequence, minimal analysis based on regional distribution has been undertaken.
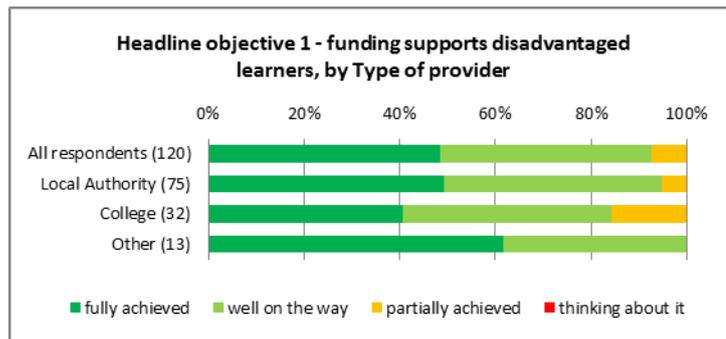
Overview findings

Responses show generally positive progress, though with some areas where more work is required. In general terms, Local Authority services report a somewhat higher level of progress in implementing the reform agenda than other provider types.

Overview - self assessment of progress against objectives/expectations - summary of all respondents
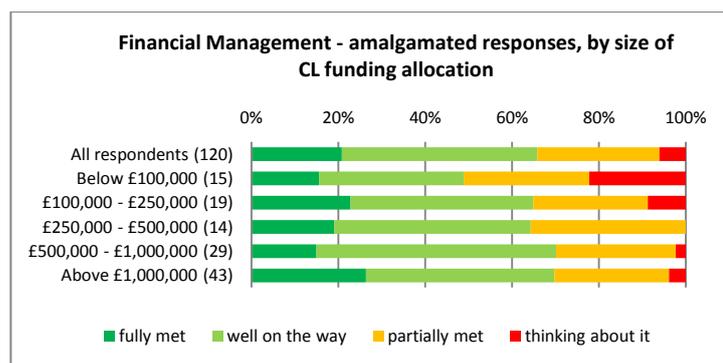

Just over 60% of all respondents report positively on achievement of all headline objectives and against all SFA expectations. Least progress is being made in respect of engaging employers in the provision of informal learning, with only one in ten providers giving a positive response to this prompt. Providers are also in some cases yet to make good progress in shifting "blocked" classes (45% positive response) and, specifically, promoting and facilitating self-organised learning groups (22% positive response). Promoting greater use of on-line resources is also reported as problematic, with just over one in three providers reporting positive progress.

In more detail:

- 93% of respondents consider themselves to be either 'fully achieving' or 'well on the way' to targeting their activity on disadvantage

Headline objective 1 - funding supports disadvantaged learners, by Type of provider

Legend: fully achieved, well on the way, partially achieved, thinking about it

- some 54% of all providers report that at least two-thirds of their funding allocation is spent on targeted work (ie that focused on specific groups); only 14% of providers are yet to focus more than a third of their available budget on specific provision for prioritised groups

- overall, Community Learning providers consider they are well prepared to widen participation through adopting a partnership approach, including working with the voluntary sector: 9 out of every 10 providers report themselves satisfied that they are meeting these expectations

- nearly two thirds of providers report positively on engaging others in planning Community Learning provision, though resident involvement is less developed

- 68% of all respondents consider themselves to be either 'fully achieving' or 'well on the way' to maximising value for money for the taxpayer by increasing income generation and using it to extend provision for people who can't afford to pay (known as 'pound plus'). Just under two in every three providers report securing additional funding to augment the SFA funding allocation from the public purse

Financial Management - amalgamated responses, by size of CL funding allocation

Legend: fully met, well on the way, partially met, thinking about it

- just over 80% of respondents to the survey report using their funding allocation in line with the Community Learning reform objectives to a full or significant extent. Delivering a balance of the objectives set out in *New Challenges, New Chances*, and meeting local priorities achieved a similarly positive response

- half of all providers report positively on an increase in civic engagement, and 38% confirm work is well underway to devolve decision-making. These findings are taken to imply that the reform agenda is as yet still

predominantly being driven by a professional response.

Low-funded providers are most confident of their ways of working to plan and deliver the reform objectives, and fairly confident that their client groups are meeting the expected profile. Nonetheless, around half of this group feel that there is room for improvement in the extent of their collaborative activity, and innovative thinking. The areas where they identified particular weakness are the extent to which their learning offer aligned with what was expected, and financial management of their allocation. Not all of these low-funded providers are small, which suggests some potential marginalisation of Community Learning activity.

Analysis gives some indication that providers involved in the Community Learning Trust Pilots are more positive about the progress made towards meeting reform objectives and funding expectations, but this is not as pronounced as might have been expected. We attribute this to widespread dissemination of evaluation reports on the pilots, and promotion of found practice via the Community Learning Reform website: other providers have been able to learn from the work of the pilots, and are by and large "up to speed" in their implementation of the reform agenda.

Areas of effective practice, and barriers to implementation

The survey presented prompts (derived from published evaluation of the Community Learning Trust Pilots) on what has been identified as effective practice. Here again, reported progress is by and large positive, with 70% of providers reporting satisfactory progress against all identified effective practice characteristics and one in four assessing themselves as good in all areas. Development is needed in:
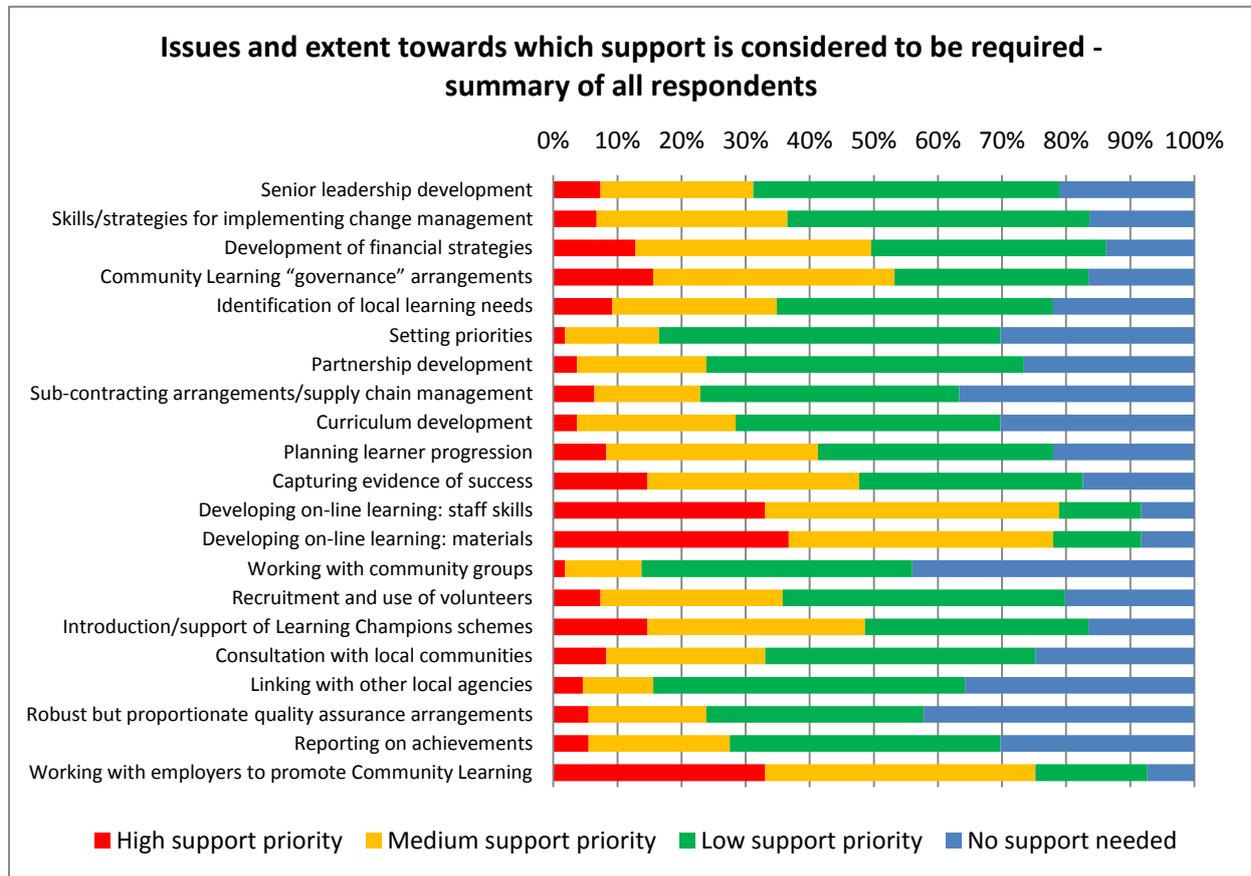
- developing protocols through which partnership working is being governed
- effective co-ordination and "joined-up" working
- succession planning, which suggests a potential over-reliance on key individuals
- securing early buy-in from key local stakeholders
- effective promotion, including branding.

Survey respondents were additionally invited to report on the extent to which their implementation of the Community Learning reforms was being hampered by various hypothetical barriers. Responses highlight four key areas:

- the reluctance of local residents to take on responsibility to help to manage local Community Learning activity – a particular concern for larger/better funded providers
- introducing new fee strategies: a third of respondents consider that they face significant difficulty, and have made little or no progress
- diversion of generated income to support non-Community Learning activity: identified as a hard problem by a third of providers, echoing recent work on Pound Plus published by RCU
- problems faced in developing digital approaches to the delivery of Community Learning – both a lack of staff skills and a lack of the technical infrastructure.

Support and development needs

When asked to identify support and development needs, respondents to the survey specifically highlight the development of staff skills to enable greater use of on-line learning, and a need for relevant materials and technical infrastructure; and working with employers to promote informal learning in the Community Learning context.

Issues and extent towards which support is considered to be required - summary of all respondents

	High support priority	Medium support priority	Low support priority	No support needed
	■	■	■	■

Categories (top to bottom):
- Senior leadership development
- Skills/strategies for implementing change management
- Development of financial strategies
- Community Learning "governance" arrangements
- Identification of local learning needs
- Setting priorities
- Partnership development
- Sub-contracting arrangements/supply chain management
- Curriculum development
- Planning learner progression
- Capturing evidence of success
- Developing on-line learning: staff skills
- Developing on-line learning: materials
- Working with community groups
- Recruitment and use of volunteers
- Introduction/support of Learning Champions schemes
- Consultation with local communities
- Linking with other local agencies
- Robust but proportionate quality assurance arrangements
- Reporting on achievements
- Working with employers to promote Community Learning

Providers express a clear preference for training, support and development to be delivered via regionally based, practical workshops; through the sharing of materials from other providers; and via peer support arrangements. There is clear rejection of residential conferences, national events and accredited training programmes.

The report concludes that providers are making good progress across most elements of the new policy aims for Community Learning, and that the sector has responded positively to the reform agenda. Findings have been shared with BIS, with the Education and Training Foundation and with NIACE, and should be useful in informing both future policy development and sector support initiatives.