



# **Community Learning Innovation Fund Final Report: Executive Summary**

A report by NIACE for the Skills Funding Agency

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**NIACE**

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**Working for more and different adult learners**

NIACE (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, England and Wales). A company limited by guarantee registered no. 2603322 and registered charity no. 1002775,



## FOREWORD

Community learning brings together adults, often of different ages and backgrounds, to pursue an interest, address a need, acquire new skills, become healthier or learn how to support their children. Our work at NIACE has shown us over and over again the ways in which community learning can make a tangible and lasting difference to the lives of individuals, families and communities. Equally, our experience in managing funds promoting community learning such as the Transformation Fund and the Adult and Community Learning Fund has convinced us that even a very small project or intervention can have a huge impact where it matters most.

We were delighted, therefore, when in May 2012 the Skills Funding Agency launched the £4m Community Learning Innovation Fund to support projects which aimed to develop and offer creative learning opportunities that would transform people's lives by giving them increased self-confidence and a better quality of life as well as by building stronger families and communities. We were equally delighted when the Agency appointed NIACE to take responsibility for the management of the Fund. This has been a great responsibility for the organisation but one which has been enormously rewarding for us. Not only have we been able to support organisations to think creatively about how they respond to the needs of local people in a sustained way, we have also had the opportunity to collect evidence about how this form of learning can have a transformational impact.

One year on and the Fund has supported 96 projects across England, large and small, and with a wide array of inspirations, methods and objectives. The projects engaged well over 15,000 learners, including many of those most disadvantaged and least likely to participate in learning. One of NIACE's key aims was to help projects to produce robust evidence of the impact of community learning and the contribution it can make to different social policy agendas. This report summarises the achievements of the projects and the lessons learned about what does and doesn't work in community learning. It also contains a range of case studies which demonstrate the very wide variety of projects supported by the Fund. Later in the year NIACE will publish a series of six thematic reports examining in more detail what the evidence tells us about the difference that projects have made in relation to: health; families; digital inclusion; employability; volunteering; and socially vulnerable groups.

Carol Taylor OBE, Director of Research and Development

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Introduction**

This report was commissioned from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) by the Skills Funding Agency (the Agency). It sets out the key achievements of the 97 projects funded through the Community Learning Innovation Fund (CLIF) in 2012-13, the difference they have made to the lives of individuals, families and communities, and the lessons learned about what does and doesn't work in community learning. NIACE was commissioned to manage the Fund on behalf of the Agency.

NIACE is an independent charity which promotes adult learning across England and Wales. Through its research, development, publications, events, outreach and advocacy activity, NIACE works to improve the quality and breadth of opportunities available for all adults so they can benefit from learning throughout their lives.

### **The Community Learning Innovation Fund**

The £4m Fund was launched by the Agency in May 2012 as part of the government's Community Learning Reform programme. The purpose of the Fund was to support new and creative learning opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged people, in line with the objectives set out in *New Challenges, New Chances, Further Education and Skills Reform Plan: Building a World Class System* (BIS, December 2011). In particular it was intended to support projects that would widen participation and transform destinies, particularly for the most disadvantaged; promote social renewal and develop stronger communities; maximise the benefit and impact of community learning on social and economic well-being; include effective strategies for sustainability; and align with the work of emerging Community Learning Trusts.

### **Project and participant profiles**

Ninety seven projects were awarded CLIF funding, out of a total of 2,214 applications. The majority of projects were led by third sector organisations with the only other sectors having anything more than minimal representation being local authority adult learning services and museums, galleries and arts organisations. CLIF projects reported that over their lifetime they had engaged a total of 15,943 distinct learners. Projects engaged a higher proportion of men, disabled learners and members of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups than is often the case in community learning more generally. Fifty per cent of learners were not in paid work and 34 per cent not taking part in any education or training at the start of their CLIF project. The projects engaged adults from very diverse backgrounds that included residents of deprived localities and adults who were marginalised, excluded or struggling in life because of one or more circumstances such as poor mental or physical health, disability, vulnerable housing, a history of offending or being

offended against, substance or alcohol misuse, poverty and age. CLIF projects offered a total of 1,443 learning programmes. The curriculum was wide-ranging although there was a considerable focus on both personal and community development. The projects succeeded in leveraging in a total of 55,800 volunteer hours.

### **CLIF themes**

Each CLIF project was required to focus on one of four key themes. Ten of the projects made a significant contribution to helping the most troubled families turn their lives around under the Learning for Families theme. Forty four projects made significant or interesting contributions to Learning for Community. These included greater community cohesion; strengthened community relations; increased community activity; and improved community services. Thirteen projects made considerable contributions to the Learning for Digital Inclusion theme. They focused on increasing the digital inclusion of older people and other digitally excluded groups as well as achieving an improvement in digital skills more generally. Forty projects made significant or interesting contributions to Learning for Social and Economic Well-being. These included increasing employability skills; improving health and well-being; enhancing family and other social relations; and improving financial capability. The figures for each theme indicated above differ slightly from those identified in the original applications (Table 2.2) as in some cases it became apparent during the course of delivery that a different theme was more appropriate than the one indicated in the application.

### **Cross-cutting themes**

All CLIF projects were asked to reflect upon how they had contributed to a number of cross-cutting areas by developing approaches which might be shared and extended in order to help improve the broader learning infrastructure. Seventy two projects made significant or interesting contributions to involving and being accountable to their local communities. They did this by ensuring that projects were developed in response to community needs; learners, volunteers and other stakeholders were involved in shaping the project; and mechanisms for obtaining and responding to feedback from learners, volunteers and other stakeholders were fully embedded. Seventy three projects provided valuable insights into effective approaches to teaching and learning. There were as many innovative and effective approaches as there were successful projects. However, there were some common factors which included the value of an informal, learner led approach, tailored to individual needs and the crucial contribution that volunteers made to the delivery of many projects. Sixty eight projects were able to describe effective approaches they had used in order to provide the information, advice and guidance that learners needed in order to progress in ways relevant to their personal circumstances. Finally, seventy one projects were able to provide useful insights into how their project partnerships had operated, how roles and responsibilities were determined and what channels of

communication were put in place. It is clear that in some cases the partnership was fundamental to the success of the project and without it the project would have foundered. The partnership structures were important but so too was the commitment shown by individuals from each of the partner organisations.

## **Innovation**

CLIF projects adopted approaches to curriculum design, engagement strategies and partnership working that were innovative not only for their own organisations but, in many cases, for the sector as a whole. Around half of the projects undertook work that is likely to be genuinely new for most adult learning providers and has much to offer in terms of good and interesting practice likely to be transferable to other contexts. A second group of projects carried out work which, although not significantly innovative for the sector at large, represented new areas of work for the organisations involved and hence considerably extended both their knowledge and their experience. There were 42 projects in this category.

## **Impact**

One of the primary objectives of CLIF was generate robust evidence on the impact of community learning, in order to help strengthen the evidence base at both national and local levels of the importance of sustainable and diverse funding for the sector in challenging economic times. As part of its fund management, NIACE supported projects to apply a consistent framework to collect, analyse and report evidence on what they considered to be the most important differences that their work made for learners, volunteers, families, localities and delivery partners. In addition 31 projects opted to take part in an additional exercise to collect quantitative evidence from a sample of learners at the beginning and end of their episode of learning to capture 'distance travelled'. Around a third of projects adopted approaches to impact measurement that reached a very high standard of rigour and produced consistently robust evidence.

Outcomes were reported for learners in the following categories: physical health; mental health; family relationships; other social relationships; employability; progression; volunteering and agency (capacity to act independently and make personal choices). All projects collected evidence on outcomes for learners. Agency was the domain under which projects most frequently cited outcomes for learners. Other outcomes for learners which were commonly reported related to progression to further learning, other social relationships, employability and mental health. Some projects also collected evidence on outcomes for volunteers and families. In most such cases a relatively narrow range of outcomes were reported and these mainly related directly to volunteering and family relationships respectively.

Over a fifth of projects (21) identified physical health outcomes for their learners that they attributed to CLIF involvement. The most commonly cited outcomes related to

learners' ability to manage their physical health, their levels of physical activity and their diet. Almost half of projects (41) identified outcomes for their learners under the mental health domain. The single most commonly reported mental health outcome for learners was improved mental well-being, followed by reduced anxiety and stress and an increased involvement in positive activities. Just under a fifth of projects (16) evidenced family relationship outcomes for learners and those most commonly reported were improved family relationships and strengthened bonds between family members. Almost half of projects (44) cited outcomes for learners relating to social relationships. Projects reported that learners were most likely to have experienced increased interaction with more diverse groups and to feel more supported through increased positive relationships. Almost a quarter of projects (21) identified outcomes for their learners under the volunteering domain. Increased interaction with their community, and to a lesser extent gaining skills for work and increased self-esteem, were the most frequently cited outcomes of volunteering within a community learning context. Almost half of projects (42) captured outcomes for learners under the employability domain. The majority of these found that their learners had gained new job-related skills (38) and / or increased their motivation and confidence to seek employment (26). Thirteen projects found that learners had gained employment as a result of participating in their learning provision. Over half of projects (52) captured outcomes for their learners under the progression domain. Learners were most commonly reported to have increased their motivation and confidence to learn new skills or moved on to further education, training, volunteering and / or employment as a result of participating in a CLIF project. Agency was the most commonly cited domain under which projects reported outcomes for learners in their final evaluation. Analysis of the number of learners for whom projects reported agency outcomes shows that increased confidence and self-esteem were more frequently cited than any other individual outcomes in any of the domains. Other outcomes frequently reported for learners under the agency domain included increased involvement in community life and improved communication skills.

In total, 23 projects reported specific outcomes for local communities as a result of CLIF, over half of which pointed to improved links between community groups. Fifty-four projects identified outcomes for delivery partners. The most frequently reported organisational outcome by some margin was improved partnership working (34 projects), while over a third of projects evidencing outcomes in this category reported increased positive publicity and the acquisition of new skills by staff.

The findings suggest that CLIF projects produced considerable immediate benefits for learners, volunteers, families, local communities and delivery partners. We have not attempted to calculate exactly the extent to which the changes reported can be attributed directly to CLIF, or what might have happened anyway, but there does appear to be a strong correlation between CLIF involvement and the experience of positive change across a range of wider social domains. The overlap and synergies

between these domains mean that the whole impact is likely to be considerably more significant than the sum of the parts.

### **Legacy and sustainability**

The Fund was not designed to support short-term interventions. It aimed to support the development and piloting of creative learning provision and the identification of ways in which successful elements of this could be sustained in the future. All projects were strongly encouraged to build in evaluation and sustainability strategies from the outset. Almost all the CLIF projects achieved some lasting legacy from their work. These included more highly skilled staff; a more diverse learner and volunteer base; effective partnerships; an increased ability to identify and measure the impact of their work; as well as a wide range of learning materials and products. Almost all projects also achieved or hope to achieve some degree of sustainability for at least a part of their work. The approaches adopted were many and varied. They included embedding within the core provision of the lead or a partner organisation; securing external funding from public or other sources; establishing social enterprises; setting up self-organised groups and generating fee income or other commercial activities. Some projects have succeeded in sustaining all aspects of their approved CLIF programme. However, more often than not they have deemed it appropriate to sustain only certain elements of the project. This may be because of funding constraints, because certain elements of the CLIF project were purely developmental or simply because certain elements were considered more successful than others and hence more worthy of sustaining.

In the opinion of those NIACE staff working most closely with the projects, a substantial majority of the CLIF projects are worth sustaining in whole or in part. There are exceptions to this judgement, but they are few in number. Reasons why the projects are judged so worthwhile are that many of the projects meet a real need; other projects have developed really effective ways of engaging and supporting those who have most to benefit from learning; the majority of projects have achieved significant outcomes for learners; most of the successful projects offered good value for money and some were outstanding in this respect; and the majority of successful projects, or at least elements of them, are readily transferable to other contexts and settings.

### **Links with Community Learning Trusts**

The CLIF Prospectus made it clear that CLIF and the Community Learning Trust (CLT) pilot programme were distinct but complementary initiatives both forming part of the Government's Community Learning Reform programme. It was anticipated that CLIF projects would add to the learning and evidence base from the CLT pilots. CLIF projects were required to take account of the expected roll-out of CLTs within their sustainability strategy. Twenty five CLIF projects were operating in or near to 11 of the 15 CLT pilot areas. In three of these cases the CLIF project and the CLT

were in fact led by the same organisation and the CLIF project was explicitly designed to support the CLT work programme. There were no CLIF projects close to any of the remaining four CLT pilots. NIACE staff worked hard to broker links between the CLT pilots and CLIF projects working in the same geographic area. In most instances these links were made and have proved fruitful for both parties. The small number of instances where no viable link has been made have been due to a lack of enthusiasm on the part of one or other of the parties involved.

### **What worked and what didn't**

Factors which led to success included adopting a learner-centred approach throughout; projects grounded in community needs and interests; clear vision underpinned by comprehensive planning; flexibility and responsiveness to changing needs; committed and effective project managers; appropriately skilled and experienced project staff; effective use of volunteers; appropriate and tailored approaches to engagement, teaching, learning and support; and the establishment and development of fruitful partnerships. NIACE Project Reviewers (who supported and monitored projects on an individual basis) deem 43 of the projects to have been excellent and a further 26 to have been good. Of the remainder all except five are regarded as satisfactory.

Only three projects failed to meet all or the majority of their objectives. However, others met a range of challenges along the way. In most cases these were dealt with successfully. There are, nevertheless, two or three further examples where it was not possible to overcome these difficulties and the overall project performance was affected. Some of the issues that a number of projects found it difficult to deal with include: flawed project design; weak project management; inadequate consultation with learners and communities; ineffective partnerships; organisational difficulties; and ineffective approaches to the measurement of impact.

### **Lessons the projects learned**

The most important lessons that CLIF projects learned were that:

- Community learning has the power to change lives on the ground and to help marginalised people make changes to their own lives and the services they receive. Community learning projects really can bring about transformational change for people who would not otherwise get the chance to move forward with their lives.
- Successful project delivery and clear evidence of impact can considerably raise the profile of the organisations involved which in turn will enable them to lever in additional funding and other support so that they will be able to sustain the work in the future.

On a more practical level CLIF projects offered useful insights for those seeking to successfully deliver similar projects in the future in relation to: project design and set

up; management and staffing; learner engagement; project delivery; and working with volunteers.





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