

CLIF Impact Project

Community Learning and Socially Vulnerable Groups Offenders and ex-offenders

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This briefing paper accompanies the CLIF Impact Report on Community Learning and Socially Vulnerable Groups, available at <http://shop.niace.org.uk/clif-impact-vulnerable-groups>.

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1. Introduction

The Community Learning Innovation Fund (CLIF) provided grant funding from the Skills Funding Agency for 96 community projects across England to run from September 2012 to July 2013. One of the primary objectives of CLIF was to generate robust evidence on the impact of community learning, in order to help strengthen the case at both national and local levels for sustainable and diverse funding for the sector in challenging economic times. NIACE was commissioned to manage the fund and as part of that role it supported projects to collect, analyse and report evidence on the difference their work made for learners, families, localities and delivery partners.

A series of six thematic reports demonstrating the contribution of community learning to key policy areas as evidenced by CLIF have been produced. One of these thematic reports focuses on socially vulnerable groups; in particular, older people; homeless and vulnerably housed people; people with learning difficulties and disabilities; and offenders and ex-offenders. This briefing paper provides additional information regarding the impacts of community learning on **offenders and ex-offenders**.

For detail about the evidence on which this briefing draws please see the main thematic report on socially vulnerable groups, available at <http://shop.niace.org.uk/clif-impact-vulnerable-groups>.

2. Key messages

2.1 Key messages for practitioners

- Socially vulnerable individuals face multiple barriers in relation to confidence and self-esteem, health, poverty, social inclusion, ability to live independently and many other areas. Learning and skills can transform the ability of individuals to manage the challenges they face and to aspire to a better future for themselves. But this will only happen if learning programmes are designed and delivered in a way that is **tailored and responsive** to the needs of learners and seen by them as **relevant and useful** to their real life requirements. A purely utilitarian focus on vocational skills and immediate employment outcomes will rarely achieve this.
- The most valuable outcomes for socially vulnerable groups, and those that will transform their lives and support them to progress in ways relevant to their personal circumstances, are those which permit them to **act independently** and **make their own choices**, coupled with the ability to benefit from enhanced social interaction.

- **Offenders and ex-offenders** can be successfully motivated to participate in learning despite obstacles such as chaotic lifestyles and mental health issues. Learning almost always leads to an increase in self-esteem, confidence and autonomy. This can manifest itself in increased involvement in community life; the strengthening of fragile family bonds; greater responsibility for personal lifestyle; tangible steps towards a positive daily routine; and the ability of learners to set and achieve realistic goals for themselves.

2.2 Key messages for planners

- Working in **partnership** is the key to delivering excellent outcomes for all learners, but especially for the most vulnerable. Imaginative and creative partnerships involving agencies with a range of expertise and contacts with vulnerable people in all parts of the community bring about the best outcomes for learners where they work together to identify shared priorities for vulnerable groups and ways in which these can be addressed.
- Community learning partnerships should work in **collaboration with third sector organisations** which are in close contact with socially vulnerable groups. With each agency playing to its strengths even small injections of funding will be seen to make a real difference to the lives of the most disadvantaged.
- Other key partners are likely to include:
 - adult learning providers from both public and private sectors
 - Skills Funding Agency
 - Jobcentre Plus
 - social care services
 - health and well-being boards
 - community safety partnerships
 - offender learning planning groups
 - homeless organisations
 - residential social landlords.

2.3 Key messages for policy makers and funders

The Skills Funding Agency, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Justice should align budgets in order to ensure the delivery of a programme of **offender learning** in the community which meets their shared objectives. In addition, there would be considerable benefit in providing training for community learning champions in order to assist them to effectively engage offenders and ex-offenders in learning and to support them to achieve and progress.

3. Policy overview: Offenders and ex-offenders

Although offenders are a varied group, many prisoners have experienced a lifetime of social exclusion and a significant proportion of crime is committed by offenders who have multiple problems. Over half of newly sentenced prisoners report using an illegal drug during the four week period before custody, and a similar proportion have had problems with alcohol misuse which may have required treatment. Many offenders report having a mental illness or depression as a long-standing illness, and similar numbers need help with emotional or mental health problems.

The need for good learning opportunities is illustrated by the estimate that 48 per cent of all prisoners are at, or below, the level required to function in everyday life in reading, 65 per cent in numeracy and 82 per cent in writing. Nearly half of those in prisons have no qualifications.¹ The vast majority of prisoners do not have paid employment to go to on release and a significant number have never had a paid job. Evidence shows that prison education and vocational interventions produce a net benefit to the public sector ranging from £2,000 to £28,000 per offender (or from £10,500 to £97,000 per offender when victim costs are included).²

A high priority in government policy is to reduce re-offending, estimated to cost £7 billion per year. Raising educational and skills levels has a positive impact on employability, a key factor in reducing re-offending. However, *Outside Chances: Offender Learning in the Community* cautions against an overemphasis on employment outcomes.³ It argues that those offenders who conclude that employment is not an option for them may discount the possibility of educational participation and hence may not gain from the other benefits that this learning has to offer: personal fulfilment; a sense of achievement; increased self-esteem – a precondition for social inclusion; support for children's learning; and even compliance with community orders. The Ministry of Justice also recognises that, as with other learners, offenders should have access to a wider offer of informal learning that brings with it other benefits, such as improved health, including mental health.⁴

4. The evidence from CLIF: Offenders and ex-offenders

4.1 Outcomes for learners

Six projects focused either exclusively or substantially on work with offenders and ex-offenders and two of these worked specifically with people recovering from

¹ *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile*, Prison Reform Trust, December 2011

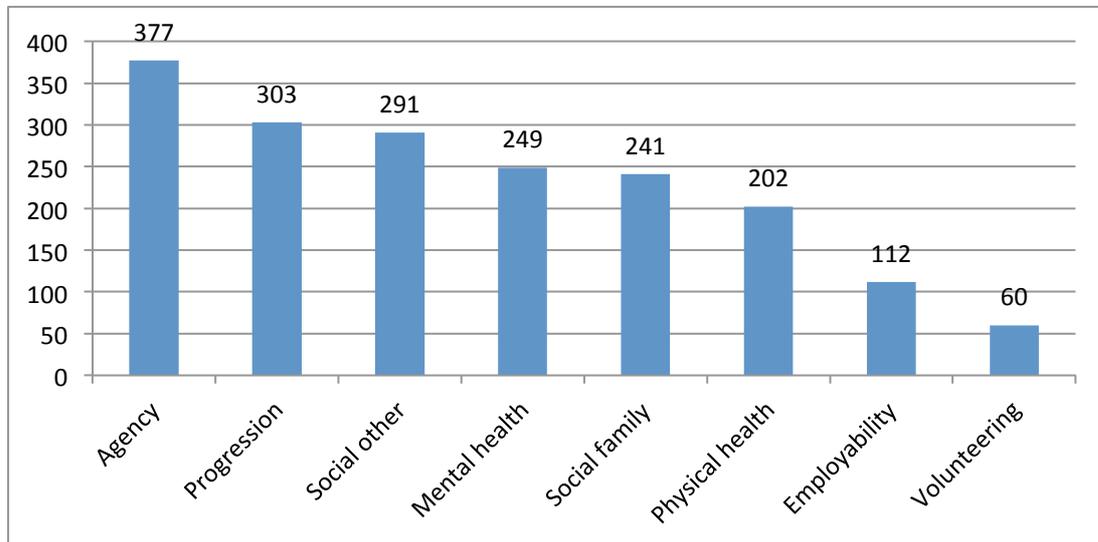
² *Lifelong Learning and Crime: An Analysis of the Cost-effectiveness of In-prison Educational and Vocational Interventions*, IFLL Public Value Paper 2, NIACE, 2009

³ *Outside Chances: Offender Learning in the Community*, City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development in conjunction with De Montfort University, January 2011

⁴ *Making Prisons Work: skills for rehabilitation – Review of Offender Learning*, Ministry of Justice, May 2011

substance abuse. The outcomes they attributed to CLIF involvement are summarised in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Number of offenders/ex-offenders experiencing outcomes under each domain



4.1.1 Greater personal agency

Anti-social behaviour and lifestyle have been identified as major factors contributing to re-offending. All the projects reported strengthened personal agency in a number of respects particularly relevant to combating anti-social tendencies. Key outcomes included:

- increased self-esteem, confidence and autonomy
- increased sense of purpose
- greater feelings of being valued and of belonging
- increased personal responsibility for lifestyle.

Activities which contributed to these outcomes included:

- providing support to other ex-offenders
- increased involvement in community life
- strengthening fragile family bonds
- taking responsibility for personal finances
- taking tangible steps to establish a positive daily routine and manage a self-harming lifestyle.

They manifested themselves in learners who:

- communicated more effectively both individually and in groups

- displayed greater confidence in their own abilities
- felt more able to voice opinions and make decisions for themselves
- became more involved in activities designed to benefit both the body and the mind
- set themselves goals in relation to lifestyle, learning and employment.

Learner X, like most of the participants, was unused to making choices in her life (or thought she had made bad ones). She constantly asked for instructions from 'the expert' but was gently encouraged to make up her own mind having been given some basic information about materials etc. She took a risk on a 'mad' idea and it worked! This mixture of learning from others and then selecting/putting ideas into practice as an independent creative person really built up her confidence. Networks

TM's life has completely changed. His confidence and self-belief have improved 100 per cent and he no longer depends on drugs to face his day. His hygiene and appearance have completely improved and he is much happier. TM is still looking for more suitable accommodation but with support he has managed to remain abstinent despite his vulnerable living circumstances. He accesses online recovery daily and attends a local job club – he is not fearful of employment and is actively enthusiastic about further training and gaining work. Recovery Rises – from drugs to digital inclusion

4.1.2 Progression to further learning

All the projects provided evidence that they successfully motivated a difficult to engage client group, who often lack confidence to attend regularly, despite obstacles such as chaotic lifestyles and mental health issues. In several instances this was their first experience of post-compulsory education. The projects provide evidence of learners having developed increased motivation and confidence to learn new skills and engage in further learning, and of feeling more positive about themselves as a result.

Some have already joined further learning programmes, including:

- accredited training for volunteers
- counselling qualifications
- fitness instructor training.

One project reports that learners previously far from the labour market say they have renewed hope and belief that learning will enable them to obtain employment at some time in the future.

As a result of the courses GG is volunteering with SHARP and Childline, speaking in schools with Choose Life and undertaking Health and Social Care BTEC and

Counselling Skills Level 2 qualifications. Back from the Brink

After successfully passing interviews and training I became a Peer Advisor for St Giles working towards a Level 3 Certificate in Advice and Guidance. The prospect of gaining this gave me a different outlook on life because it opened doors to getting a job and leaving crime and prison behind me. Peer Advisor

4.1.3 Improved social relationships

Positive social relationships are known to reduce the risk of re-offending. CLIF projects demonstrated how community learning can provide the right environment to nurture these relationships. All the projects reported existing relationships being strengthened as a result of increased trust and shared understanding accompanied by a deepened knowledge of how learners could help themselves and each other. In addition:

- Learners reported being more comfortable with other people, feeling part of a community for the first time and how the group dynamics raised their confidence.
- Some could cite examples of how this new confidence had empowered them to break free of earlier negative relationships.

Several projects reported the development of new and positive relationships with people from different backgrounds. Two examples of this are:

- the bonds developed between families and friends of ex-offenders working towards a common goal of supporting the achievement of a crime-free lifestyle;
- online links between those seeking to escape from substance abuse and other online recovery communities which enabled them to share experiences of the recovery process and the implications and complexities of addiction.

Four projects reported improved family relationships and strengthened bonds between family members. Factors contributing to these outcomes included:

- the development of IT skills during the project and hence an increased ability to communicate via email and social media as well as to help family members with IT issues;
- the creation of digital stories which enabled prisoners to maintain contact with families living at a distance, even overseas in some cases;
- successfully combating addiction, in one case making use of online recovery options the learner had researched themselves, at the same time as finding new interests which could act as a bridge to heal broken relationships.

The films made a difference to the community of prisoners in the prison too. It was almost as if they really listened to each other for the first time. It was an important part of the process that the films were seen by the wider prison community. Some prisoners were really keen for their families to see their hopes and dreams verbalised. Stretch Story Box

I can't believe how things have changed, when my wife seen all the stuff I'd done on the magazine and everything she knew how hard I was trying and things have got much better and I'm just made up to be seeing my lad again. Recovery Rises

4.1.4 Improved mental and physical health

Many offenders need help with mental health problems. All CLIF projects reported an improvement in mental well-being and a decrease in anxiety and stress. Contributory factors included:

- increased confidence and enthusiasm for life as a result of gaining a new skill
- developing effective strategies to manage anxiety
- being more assertive and generally forming a more positive view of themselves
- undertaking creative activities that helped them learn more about themselves and appreciate personal strengths
- increased understanding of digital technologies and the ways in which they can offer access to online support for recovery from addiction
- increased confidence in personal financial capability and a deeper understanding of the impacts of welfare reform and how these might be managed.

Put this into practice every day... learnt that it's important to get 'out of my head', interact and don't isolate; spend as much time around recovery as possible. RB, Back from the Brink

The two projects targeting those in recovery from substance misuse both report improvements in physical health as a result of a recorded reduction in substance intake. One project reported evidence of improved diets and greater knowledge of healthy eating as well as general healthcare which had been of benefit both to the learners and their families. Eighty per cent of learners on this project are now undertaking regular physical exercise and have taken up new physical activities such as boxing and running.

I feel extremely thin and unfit, I hate that I can't breathe properly, and even walking a few yards sometimes makes me feel crippled. I want to breathe properly, I know I need to stop smoking but I am terrified of it. I have no motivation to do anything that

is good for me. I am excited to learn about health and fitness and hope I can achieve something even just walking. JA, Back from the Brink

4.1.5 Improved employment prospects

Only a limited number of CLIF projects set out to improve the employment prospects of this group of learners, choosing instead to focus on overcoming other barriers to engagement in a crime-free lifestyle. However, three projects reported that learners had developed new employability and entrepreneurial skills, mainly in communications, professional workplace behaviour including the need for anger management, and the use of IT. Learners on these projects were also reported to have increased their motivation and confidence to seek employment or self-employment, including via online searches. Fifteen learners on one project have already succeeded in gaining employment.

4.1.6 Other outcomes for learners

The duration of CLIF projects was too short for it to be possible to make any definitive claims about any sustainable contribution to reducing reoffending. However, at least one project reports that 135 learners have reduced their involvement with the criminal justice system and have developed the resilience to desist from further offending. A second project reports that 34 households are on a sounder financial footing as a result of a better understanding of budgeting and improved money management skills.

4.2 Outcomes for volunteers

Those projects which involved volunteers report outcomes for them which include:

- enhanced self-esteem through increased interaction with the community accompanied by the opportunity to give something back to society;
- new skills which have increased their own employment prospects.

One project encouraged participants to become volunteers in order to support future beneficiaries. This has given a considerable boost to the self-esteem of the individuals involved who are no longer disenfranchised from work and community activity as a result of their previous addiction. They are now actively researching voluntary placement opportunities, fundraising, and supporting other service users.

Another project is assisting existing and new volunteers to undertake an accredited mentoring course which will lead to professional volunteer status alongside guaranteed voluntary placements.

4.3 Outcomes for lead and partner organisations

All projects reported significant outcomes for lead and partner organisations. These included:

- more extensive and effective partnership working, including with some partners new to the criminal justice system;
- enhanced staff skills, including a greater understanding of the client group;
- increased ability to meet organisational objectives;
- improved ways of working and hence improving the service to clients as well as increasing the scope and confidence of the lead organisation.

5. Case studies

5.1 Case Study: Back from the Brink

SS is female, aged 38 and works part time. She left school with no qualifications and started drinking aged 13. It became clear that she was an alcoholic in her 20s when her partner died. SS has never held down a job, and alcoholism was a key factor which led to her children being taken into care.

SS entered supported housing and treatment a year ago, and then enrolled on a *Back from the Brink* health and nutrition course. As a result SS describes experiencing a better sense of well-being, has a much healthier lifestyle and has found new interests. She described tutors as being very helpful, easy to work with and knowledgeable. What she enjoyed most about the sessions was being part of a positive group of people, learning new skills and having something to focus on.

As a result of the course SS has now been sober for one year, is about to have her children move back in with her and is employed part time in The Brink as a kitchen assistant. She describes *Back from the Brink* as “Inspiring! Amazing! Brilliant!”

5.2 Case Study: Peer Advisor

I arrived at HMP Highdown addicted to hard drugs with little outlook on life. I was placed on the rehabilitation wing to detoxify and make my health become stable. Around three months into my sentence I was informed that there was a St Giles Peer Advisor course running for six months, it sounded just what I needed to replace the void left behind when leaving my chaotic lifestyle. I have previously been a Skills and Employment Advisor some years before and saw the opportunity to gain the qualifications needed for this role. After successfully passing interviews and training I became a Peer Advisor for St Giles working towards a Level 3 Certificate in Advice and Guidance. The prospect of gaining this gave me a different outlook on

life because it opened doors to getting a job and leaving crime and prison behind me.

Throughout my time as a Peer Advisor I learnt a lot of new things about law, discrimination, equality, housing and benefit applications. I also gained self-confidence and motivation to change my life around. After passing my Level 3 qualification I was released from Brixton, but instead of worrying and stressing about not being able to get a job I now had the knowledge and know how to make a difference in not only my life, but also in others' lives. Towards the end of my sentence my release plan became that I would volunteer for St Giles Trust and however long it took would volunteer full time on the projects until they offered me paid employment.

Working in the office and out in the community is so rewarding. I love doing what I do because I know I'm helping someone take the next step to recovery from homelessness, drug addiction, alcoholism or domestic violence and prison. I have now been in full -ime employment with St Giles Trust for 11 months and in that time have achieved so much including winning a personal achievement award.

The additional training I have received through the CLIF project has been a great tool both for me and my client group. The motivational workshops instilled confidence in my work and helped to encourage others to progress with their lives. The housing solution workshops are so useful for supporting the clients.