

CLIF Impact Project

Community Learning and Socially Vulnerable Groups

Older people

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niace
promoting adult learning

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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; offenders and ex-offenders. This briefing paper provides additional information regarding the impacts of community learning on **older people**.

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.
- Social relationships are particularly relevant to well-being in later life. For **older people**, learning can have a significant impact in reducing social isolation and bringing about greater engagement in community life. This in

turn can lead to an increased ability to maintain an independent lifestyle coupled with increased resilience to cope with everyday situations.

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 of these. 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 message for policy makers and funders

Learning for **older people** is often given a low priority as not being of economic benefit to the nation. We would argue that the opposite is true. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that learning for older people can reduce the need for other, often more costly, services by extending working life, maintaining health and well-being, and offering opportunities to prevent isolation. The Skills Funding Agency, local authority health and well-being boards, social care services and community safety partnerships should work together to identify ways in which their respective funding streams can be aligned in order to achieve shared priorities for older people.

3. Policy overview: Older people

England will see a 51 per cent rise in those aged 65+ and a 101 per cent increase in those aged 85+ from 2010 to 2030. Longer lives represent progress but, as well as opportunities, the changes involved create major challenges for individuals,

employers, our welfare services, and the Government. A recent report from the House of Lords Select Committee on Public Service and Demographic Change warns that the Government and our society are woefully unprepared for ageing and suggests that, in order to make a success of the demographic shifts, major changes are needed in our attitudes to ageing.¹ We know that accessing learning can be difficult as people age, but there is much that learning can contribute to meeting the challenges and opportunities associated with ageing.

A range of specific issues relate to the anticipated retirement in coming years of millions of people from paid work. Lord Wei of Shoreditch has recently proposed some rethinking of retirement to enable people to better manage this transition.² Changes linked to retirement include, for example, a reduction in income, new caring responsibilities, and the loss of some social networks, often alongside health issues and bereavement. For adults in these circumstances, learning that develops financial and health capabilities and helps to balance caring responsibilities is likely to be important.

Following retirement there is a greater demand for more informal community learning and self-organised groups can have an important part to play. Evidence has shown that learning is key to maintaining health and well-being in later life.³ There is a tendency for policy makers to assume that the 80-plus group is the exclusive domain of the frail elderly, although many in this category remain active and involved in community life. However, isolation and loneliness are often key issues and here learning can play an important role.⁴ There are examples of effective learning initiatives in parts of the care sector,⁵ but the picture is patchy and provision largely unfunded with considerable reliance on the efforts of volunteers.

4. The evidence from CLIF: Older people

4.1 Outcomes for learners

Twelve projects focused either exclusively or substantially on older learners. The outcomes they attributed to CLIF involvement are summarised in Figure 1 below.

¹ *Ready for Ageing*, House of Lords Select Committee on Public Service and Demographic Change, March 2013

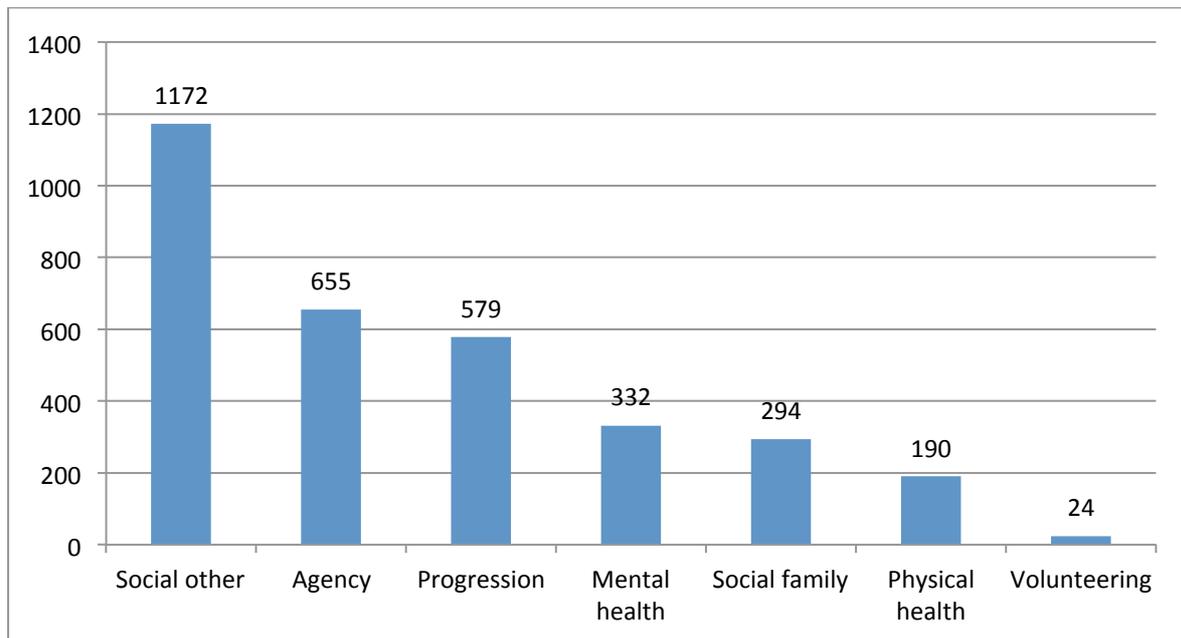
² *Next Steps: Life Transitions and Retirement in the 21st Century*, Lord Wei and Dr. Alison Hulme, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, July 2013

³ *Participation in learning and wellbeing among older adults*, International Journal of Lifelong Education, 30:3, 403-420, Jenkins A, 2011

⁴ Figures from the Campaign to End Loneliness suggested 800,000 older people were chronically lonely in England. More at www.campaigntoendloneliness.org

⁵ *Learning for older people in care settings*, Aldridge, F. and Jones, E., NIACE on www.niace.org.uk, 2013

Figure 1: Number of older learners experiencing outcomes under each domain



4.1.1 Improved social relationships

Social relationships are particularly relevant to wellbeing in later life. As CLIF projects showed, community learning can make a significant impact on the social networks of older adults. For example:

- Six projects reported increased positive relationships, more opportunities to meet new people and greater confidence to develop new relationships and cope in social situations as a result of participating in group activities, sharing experiences and skills, continuing social intercourse outside formal sessions, becoming more involved in community life and engaging in new activities.
- Three projects reported increased contact with – and understanding of – more diverse groups.
- Two projects reported a strengthening of existing relationships via shared activities such as singing and reminiscence.

The kinds of learning opportunities offered by these projects were explicitly social in their focus. They included:

- forming a choir
- visiting cultural venues
- reminiscence
- walking
- dance.

Almost all learners for whom data was collected by these projects reported an improvement in their socialising and social networks and a significant decrease in feelings of social isolation. Typical quotes include:

It is an opportunity to mix with like-minded people, where you can support and develop together. Silver Creative Arts Learning Programme

The young people really came into their own as they are more savvy with the IT side of things and the older people have the knowledge about their families. It was a really good cross generational activity as we teamed up one young person to one elderly person. Generally speaking these two age groups don't mix as well as they should so it's nice to have positive things to share. Back to the Future

In addition, projects reported improved social relationships within families as a result of learning new skills together and passing on skills between generations. Other family members attending project sessions in care homes provided a new mutual interest for all family members.

It is something they can do as a couple. Both of them love art (Nancy paints and writes poetry) so they absolutely love the sessions (their words not mine). They both feel they have learnt things. A unique experience for them as Peter does not live here but his wife does. I should think there are not many couples in the project. It gives them something to talk about as well as when the family visit and most importantly it helps to involve Peter with the home. Out of the Frame Loan Boxes

4.1.2 Greater personal agency

Taking part in learning and building new social networks strengthened learners' personal agency in a range of ways. Key outcomes reported by projects included:

- increased self-esteem
- a renewed sense of purpose
- increased capacity to cope with everyday situations
- greater engagement with external agencies and services, including providers of advice on debt, money management and legal issues
- greater confidence in using digital technology
- confidence to take up volunteering.

Among the learning activities which contributed to these outcomes were:

- rehearsing for and participating in a choral performance at the Royal Festival Hall
- engagement in community activities including putting on art and cultural exhibitions
- practical activities involving horses

- digital technology, creative arts, practical crafts and physical activity.

One project stated:

For many on the project, there is a feeling of being disconnected and disempowered not only by their own life experiences but also by their relationships with local agencies, where they often feel passive recipients. Playing a greater role has increased participants sense of personal agency with an opportunity to 'be part of the community' and with this new engagement, a voice and influence. Connected and Learning Glossopdale

4.1.3 Improved mental and physical health

Projects reported a range of health benefits for learners. With regard to mental health, the evidence indicated:

- improved emotional and mental well-being as a result of combating isolation by engaging in group activities such as cooking, yoga, gardening, walking, singing, art appreciation and reminiscence;
- increased involvement in positive activities such as social interaction, community work, discussion groups, creative arts and developing IT skills.

One project specifically researched links and relations of causality between increased physical activity and positive effects on mental health and systematically monitored this on a regular basis. Another reported that patients referred by a local NHS trust joined the project in order to aid their physical rehabilitation but reported that it had also helped their mental health.

In total, 75 participants stated that the courses of activity (cooking, walking, yoga, gardening) had led to a positive effect on their mental wellbeing, understood holistically as including mind, body and physical and social environment. Ageing Artfully

In relation to physical health, projects reported:

- increased physical activity
- markedly improved physical skills and condition
- a general improvement in physical well-being and a desire to continue to maintain increased levels of physical activity.

This was as a result of engaging in activities such as yoga, dancing, walking, gardening, practical activities involving horses and creative arts.

Thirty seven participants who stated explicitly that they had specific problems (arthritis, back problems, limited mobility) said that they felt the benefits of the sessions both on the days of the activity and throughout the cycle. Ageing Artfully

4.1.4 Progression into further learning

Projects reported that participation in CLIF projects gave learners the confidence to continue with and broaden their learning experiences. For example:

- Five projects report that participants either intend to or already have progressed to further structured learning, some in areas directly related to the CLIF project and others in entirely new areas.
- In one case project participants are now delivering training themselves and several are undertaking teacher training courses.
- Five projects report that learners say that their experience on the project has increased their motivation and confidence to develop new skills via both formal and informal means, as well as the desire to continue to be offered new challenges.

Learners say that they now see learning as something positive, fun and engaging that they will do again in the future.

When you look at the stories when I first started you would think they were written by someone else; I'm better than that now, I feel that I could do better...I want to get published. Silver Creative Arts Learning Programme

4.2 Outcomes for volunteers

Those projects which involved volunteers were able to report significant outcomes for them. These included:

- increased interaction with the community through their volunteering work
- developing new skills which often enhanced employment prospects or led to further formal learning
- increased self-esteem through giving something back to the community.

Some of the volunteers were supporting older people for instance by:

- acting as digital champions
- assisting in practical activities involving horses
- providing support in care homes.

In other cases the volunteers were themselves older people involved in:

- community outreach
- timebanking
- community action
- working in museums.

In one case where the volunteers were fully involved in project delivery this resulted in their developing the confidence to work together towards the establishment of a community interest company.

4.3 Outcomes for communities

Projects reported a number of positive outcomes for the wider community which included:

- strengthened links between different community groups involved in project activity
- new community groups and activities
- enhanced community facilities including a community garden and a volunteer centre
- renewed sense of pride in local facilities as a result of engagement in the creative arts.

4.4 Outcomes for lead and partner organisations

Projects reported significant outcomes for the lead organisation and also for their partners. These included:

- more extensive and effective partnership working both within large organisations such as local authorities and with external partners able to play a role in both signposting and delivery;
- raised profile and increased positive publicity leading in some cases to an increased uptake of services;
- reduced costs as a result of sharing services with partners;
- improved staff skills including in relation to teaching and learning; supporting volunteers; evaluation and monitoring; and working with older learners.

Examples were given of how CLIF projects had resulted in improved ways of working and hence an enhanced service to clients. These included:

- a more imaginative approach to digital inclusion
- better relationships with families of beneficiaries
- improved monitoring and evaluation
- embedded volunteer support.

5. Case studies

5.1 Case study: Silver Creative Arts

It gives me more strength on both legs, even in a straight standing position.

Our learner had previously been involved in a car accident which had “smashed her leg”, taken several months to heal and never fully returned to its former strength. Suffering from chronic leg pain she had gone to her doctor who suggested that Ballet Pilates may help her develop strength through weight bearing exercises which could help relieve the pain and ensure her posture would not diminish as a result of the leg injury.

Two of her friends already attended so she was encouraged to try it out. She started attending Ballet Pilates on a regular basis, engaging in learning ballet routines and pilates exercises. The result has been that the leg pain she was previously experiencing on a daily basis has gradually eased, which she puts down to Ballet Pilates. There is also noticeable improvement in her muscle tone, coordination and joint mobility and she has more awareness of her body than previously. She has continued to participate in the session and is now working on higher level exercises than at the start of the programme. The result is that she is now able to live a more comfortable and pain-free daily life and also feels she could take on more physical activity to keep her active.

5.2 Case study: Out of the Frame Loan Boxes

This learner is a female resident in a care home in Norwich. She is aged over 75 and has some disabilities, including partial deafness. She has no family to visit her. She finished formal education, did a degree in Sociology, then ran clubs and trained for the Church in Religious Knowledge at Cambridge, followed by studying for the Lambeth degree. She was ordained 19 years ago.

Originally she was resistant to the Out of the Frame Loan Boxes project but she feels it has widened her knowledge on various paintings and their background. Despite her initial lack of interest, this learner now attends group sessions regularly and tells other residents about the workshops. In addition, she has borrowed some of the written material from the “Family & Home” box for her own study. At a number of loan box workshops she has often made insightful comments and raised some really interesting and new perspectives on the art objects. “...the group setting is part of the fun”. She told us that she is now more interested in museums and galleries, art and art history, not just the Wallace Collection; she feels more confident in expressing her opinion, especially on the paintings which she really likes.

The boxes have also prompted memories. When asked about this, she replied: “Yes, it’s about a relationship to past life... often more vivid than the present.” She used to go to galleries and museums but not now. She feels that it has been wonderful to see the Wallace Collection artworks brought to her in the boxes and she has learnt a lot. Her deafness makes talks/events difficult for her; however, she said that when the loan boxes are discussed in a small group with the presenters close up, this

helps because she can then lip read. Visits out are rare, so for her the loan box project: “enables us to go to places without going.” This lady would like to visit the Wallace Collection, but expressed a concern about her electric wheelchair, namely that it would create an access problem at the Wallace Collection. However, she has been assured that this is not the case as the Collection receives visits from many wheelchair users.