

CLIF Impact Project

Community Learning and Socially Vulnerable Groups

People with learning difficulties and disabilities

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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 impacts of community learning on **people with learning difficulties and disabilities**.

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.

- Learning can make a real difference to the lives of **people with learning difficulties and disabilities** by boosting their confidence and self-esteem and increasing their capacity to act independently and make their own choices.

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

The Skills Funding Agency (using both its Adult Skills and Community Learning budgets), the DWP and local authority adult social care services should align budgets, and require contributions from learners where appropriate, to ensure that a coherent programme of learning opportunities for **people with learning difficulties and disabilities** (including those aged over 25) is available and accessible in each local area. Key design elements should include developing confidence and self-esteem, achieving independence, and maintaining community safety and cohesion.

3. Policy overview: People with learning difficulties and disabilities

Adults with learning difficulties and disabilities are one of the most under-represented groups in the labour market; only ten per cent have a job whereas 65 per cent want to work. Low levels of skills and qualifications, and labour market discrimination,

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underpin this challenge. People may have high support needs or challenging behaviour which means they are unable to take advantage of mainstream opportunities to gain the skills and confidence needed to improve their situation in life. As a result, people with a learning disability are more likely to:

- live in poverty
- face bullying or be the target of hate crime
- experience low self-esteem and poor mental health
- rely on public services
- be excluded from local decision-making processes.

Key policy changes that will have an impact on this group include the reform of the welfare system, the drive for personalisation in adult social care and new powers through the Localism Bill. Changes brought about by the Care and Support Bill, coupled with cuts to social care brought about as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review, mean that many people with learning disabilities fear that they may not get the essential support that they need in order to live independently.

Research identifies people with learning disabilities as needing improved learning and support for adult life in the community and recommends 'co-production' of solutions by education and care agencies, families and learners to help them build confidence and self-esteem, achieve independence and participate safely in their communities.¹ The Children and Families Bill, currently out for consultation, focuses on people up to the age of 25 with Special Educational Needs or a disability. The proposed joint Education, Health and Care Plan that will be put in place from birth aims to ensure that services work together and develop a coherent plan to support the individual to lead a fulfilling life. Learning could be an important dimension of this.

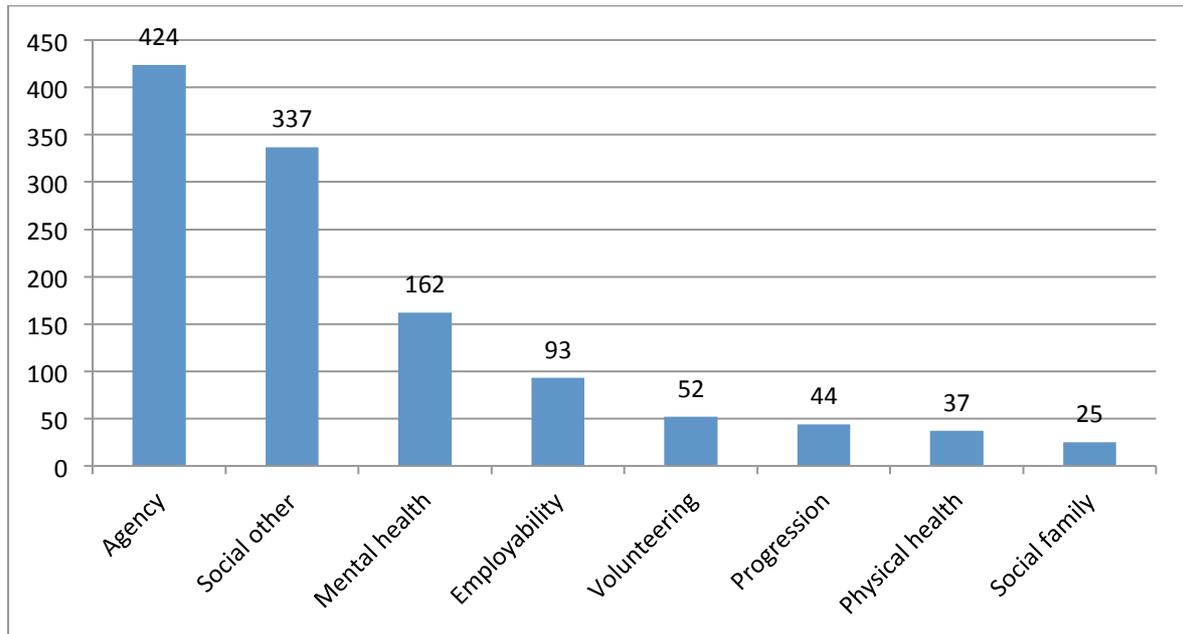
4. The evidence from CLIF: People with learning difficulties and disabilities

4.1 Outcomes for learners

Five projects focused exclusively on adults with learning difficulties and disabilities, one on adults with physical disabilities and one further one on both of these groups. The outcomes they attributed to CLIF involvement are summarised in Figure 1 below.

¹ *The Road Ahead*, Norah Fry, 2004
SEND Green Paper, HM Government, 2011
Valuing People Now, Department of Health, 2010

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



4.1.1 Greater personal agency

Measures to increase autonomy and independence are particularly important for this target group. Key outcomes reported by CLIF projects include:

- increased confidence, self-esteem and autonomy
- increased ability to carry out day-to-day tasks independently
- decreased at risk behaviour
- decreased social isolation.

These outcomes were demonstrated in a range of ways including by:

- creating artwork and organising an exhibition
- setting up a social enterprise
- co-developing an inclusive online community learning environment
- overcoming fear of bullying and harassment
- taking control of money and making financial choices
- speaking in public in order to influence local services
- travelling independently
- not presenting challenging behaviour.

Examples of some of the above are demonstrated by the following:

I have learned to talk about my ideas and I will continue to try to speak up no matter how nervous I am. Also, I have learned that the effort I have made throughout this project has meant something special to me, not only through my artistic abilities but my confidence. Independence through Art

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119 learners showed a decrease in at risk behaviours such as walking alone at night, keeping mobile phones on show, not telling anyone about bullying behaviour.

Disability and Bullying Awareness Roadshow: Respect Safety Voice Project

I made a presentation to the Kent Partnership Board about work we are doing in Tonbridge. I got a round of applause and people said 'well done'. I used to get really nervous about speaking to lots of people. I can manage it now because I have been to lots of groups. Getting on Board: Strengthening Communities and Local Democracy

All projects reported decreased social isolation as a result of taking part in group activities and two could point to evidence of increased access to community facilities. One project focused on financial capability and learners were able to take increased personal responsibility for their lifestyle as a result of developing skills in relation to budgeting, saving and paying bills. One learner says:

The training made me feel better. It made me more confident and able to take control. I feel a lot more independent and can do a lot more things that I want to do with my money. I feel like I've shown people what I can do and I didn't feel confident enough to do this before. Money Matters

4.1.2 Improved social relationships

CLIF projects reported numerous improvements to social relationships as a result of working in groups which undertook activities and visits together. Developing a wider circle of contacts, with which learners could share experiences and feelings, was also instrumental in this respect. These resulted in:

- improved existing relationships
- increased support via new positive relationships.

One project could demonstrate increased contact with more diverse groups by bringing adults with learning difficulties together with young people by whom they had previously felt threatened and humiliated. Other examples follow:

I thought 'Oh my God, I didn't expect to do this not... meet ordinary people'. It's again because I didn't know how I was going to respond to that. But I've responded really well to the students and all that. And I've got a friend now who I continue writing to, M, and she's been the best help for me because I thought I can be friends with her 'cause I still continue writing to her and all that and tell her, you know, about today – I can tell her about today and how I developed as a person. ICICLE

I used to find it really annoying when John talked about football all the time, but now I know he can't help it because of his disability it doesn't bother me so much, I like

him more now. Disability and Bullying Awareness Roadshow: Respect Safety Voice Project

Increased confidence levels, ability to work as a team, listening to others and taking turns were all evident. It was noticeable that in all courses a real sense of community emerged with learners helping and supporting each other. In fact, a number of learners who met on the programme have stayed in touch and a few have joined up on the basis of shared hobbies. Getting on Board: Strengthening Communities and Local Democracy

Other projects reported improved family relationships as a result of:

- family members participating in project activity and supporting learners to achieve their goals
- increased confidence and a wider range of conversation topics on the part of learners.

Having family members come to the exhibition was clearly important to MM. His sister reported that every Wednesday evening he would talk at length about the group and what he was working on. When asked if she had noticed a change in MM over the course she stated how she had never seen him so enthusiastic and ready to talk. Independence Through Art

4.1.3 Improved mental and physical health

With regard to mental health the evidence indicated:

- reduced anxiety and stress
- improved mental well-being.

Each project achieved these outcomes in different ways. Some examples of these include:

- greater understanding of the impact of welfare reform and feeling better informed and more empowered to deal with this
- creating and exhibiting artworks made learners feel good about themselves
- increased confidence in dealing with bullying and harassment.

One learner who was afraid to travel after being mugged regained his confidence to go out into the community again. Using his story as a case study for other learners to understand resilience skills, reduced anxiety and improved confidence and that they could also manage challenging situations. Disability and Bullying Awareness Roadshow: Respect Safety Voice Project

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One project was able to demonstrate increased physical activity by virtue of rehearsals and performances of dance although other projects experienced unintended beneficial outcomes in relation to physical health.

I will be doing a weight loss management course at the leisure centre and met the health trainer at the Gateway. I am going to do some more work with him. Getting on Board: Strengthening Communities and Local Democracy

4.1.4 Improved employment prospects

Only a limited number of CLIF projects sought to achieve employment outcomes for learners in this target group although there were some successes in this respect. Two projects helped people develop job-related skills including in IT, communications and self-advocacy. As a result of one project, seven individuals have established their own social enterprise. The difference this made to one learner is described below.

L has a lifelong interest in animals, particularly horses and dogs and has expressed interest in having a dog walking business from the age of 19. L has been walking dogs as a volunteer for some time. Taking part in the project has meant L has a clear idea of what her life will look like following the end of college. She and her support workers now have the knowledge to take forward L's dog walking business. Local Enterprise All People

4.1.5 Progression to further learning

Projects report that experience on the CLIF projects has motivated participants to continue to learn new skills including:

- visual and creative arts
- IT
- literacy and numeracy.

I have learned a lot of things about art and how to make things like sculptures and drawing a self portrait... The role I was given at the exhibition was marketing and to design the leaflet. I also liked drawing in my sketchbook. I felt happy about the exhibition, about my sculpture. The design for the flyer was excellent. In the future I want to do more artwork and drawings. Independence through Art

Just because someone is physically disabled doesn't mean they can't achieve. People in wheelchairs can go to uni! Living Life and Taking Part

Sixty four per cent said that they would go on to undertake a further adult education course. Almost half of these said that they would like to undertake a course to develop their reading and writing and/or be better with numbers. This was a high

priority for many learners who recognised previous barriers in education had held them back. Getting on Board: Strengthening Communities and Local Democracy

4.2 Outcomes for volunteers

All the projects working with this target group used volunteers and were able to report positive benefits for them including increased interaction with the community.

In two of the cases where the volunteers were previously unfamiliar with the target group they increased their understanding of, and skills in working with, this group. This was particularly evident amongst a group of young volunteers on one project who increased their awareness of the effect that even good-natured teasing can have on vulnerable adults. In another project the following comment was made by one volunteer:

Asked to name one thing that she would take from this experience one student volunteer replied "That I'd consider now going down the career path of working with adults with learning difficulties once I finish university". ICICLE project

In the four projects where some if not all of the volunteers were drawn from the principal target group the opportunity to give something back to the community considerably raised their self-esteem and made them keen to continue with voluntary activity. Their work included:

- advising on the accessibility of money advice services
- co-developing and delivering financial capability training
- contributing to changing community services across health, police, social housing, social care and local politics
- undertaking a range of public activities to raise awareness of the issues facing their peer group.

I have always wanted to work with the Police and never found a way to do this. After the course finished I applied to Kent Police to be part of the West Kent Independent Advisory Group. I had an interview and I have been accepted. It's great news for me and I will work with lots of people. Getting on Board: Strengthening Communities and Local Democracy

I am a member of the Sevenoaks District Council Access Group. I told them about the course and asked them to make their notes easier for people to read. They are making their notes easier by writing the letters bigger and trying to use fewer words people find hard. Getting on Board: Strengthening Communities and Local Democracy

4.3 Outcomes for lead and partner organisations

All projects reported significant outcomes for lead and partner organisations. The most important outcome for all projects was the increase in positive publicity generated by CLIF funding and the opportunity this gave to raise awareness amongst employers, schools, local community members, carers, public services, local councillors and MPs, of the needs of the target group and the social barriers they face. This has led to a number of significant and concrete changes including:

- offers of supported employment
- improved behaviour on the part of young people
- greater financial independence for people with learning difficulties
- willingness of service providers to take account of the views of this client group.

Other positive outcomes reported for organisations include:

- increased and more effective partnership working
- improved services to clients as a result of an increased staff understanding of their needs
- improved ability to identify and measure the impact of their work
- the development of new and effective tools, including IT-based ones.

5. Case studies

5.1 Case study: Money Matters

I was invited to take part in the Money Matters course through the Local Authority. I was very worried about starting the course because money terrifies me! I avoided dealing with money because I found it too scary, all of the responsibilities that go with it. When I saw the invitation for the course I decided that I wanted to face my fear of money and try to overcome it. I learnt a lot about banking, different accounts and keeping my details safe. Since the course I have opened up another Post Office account, I use one account to deal with all of my bills and the other for my everyday spending money. I learnt about this from the course and thought this would make it easier for me to deal with bills. I still find banks a bit too intimidating and feel comfortable at the Post Office because they know how to help me. I also learnt more about bills; what's a priority and what isn't so important. Before the course, when my bills came I used to panic and feel overwhelmed with it all. Now I know more about what's a priority I have changed the way I deal with them. Now I focus on my rent and other bills I know are important and don't panic over other bills that aren't so important.

The course helped me to deal with meeting new people and working in groups. I was very anxious about this before starting the course, but meeting people regularly helped. I feel like my confidence is growing and the course helped to build it up. I was also part of the consumer focus group and learnt about my consumer rights from this. Shops seem less intimidating because I know I have rights. I feel more independent. Through the focus group I built up the confidence to do some online shopping, I ordered some food shopping from ASDA. Before the course my Mam used to do my food shopping for me and if she thought something shouldn't be on my list she would tell me it was out of stock. I would never have ordered anything online because I was too worried about people being able to get hold of my details. Now I have a lot more choice and control over my shopping and I feel like "it's really easy, I love it". I only stick to using shops that I know, big names, online and know to look for the padlock on the web address so that it's secure and I can keep my details safe. My ultimate goal is to get a job and I feel like the course has helped with this by building up my confidence in different ways. I'm glad I did it!

5.2 Case study: Getting on Board: Strengthening Communities and Local Democracy

I found the course immensely rewarding and fun in the process, a whole round fantastic experience. I have found it informative and extremely useful. I have learnt absolutely loads about communities, politics and Government, that I did not know previously. I have met a whole load of people whom I have become very good friends with. Throughout the whole course I encountered a very diverse set of people, who are all wonderful and have amazing qualities. It has taught me a whole lot more about how to support others with disabilities, about myself and my capabilities. It has also given me a voice finally, and the confidence to be able to talk publicly to local councillors and politicians and others in general about the things close to my heart. And it has boosted my confidence in general. The whole experience has been amazing, and I think this whole course is just so worthwhile for anyone and I would certainly encourage anyone to go on it if they got the chance.