

Meeting community needs: notes on capacity-building

Introduction

These are notes from round tables at a NIACE seminar – *Meeting community needs: community learning providers and the voluntary sector: working together to meet the needs of disadvantaged groups*. The event, which was held on 14 January 2014, aimed to encourage dialogue between community learning providers and voluntary sector organisations, in order to understand and address key issues in meeting the needs of very disadvantaged learners, and to share current effective practice. The notes reflect the range of comments made on round tables and do not necessarily represent the views of NIACE or any other agency.

Notes from round tables on capacity-building

Do voluntary and community organisations add anything genuinely distinctive to Community Learning? If so, what?

- Reach communities we want to reach, but issue where organisations fails after invested lots of capacity building
- Issue re quality
 - Finder's fee – organisation get paid by learner
 - Where gaps – Local Authority covers as direct delivery
- Talking to organisations – what can each bring to the table to make learning happen? Now happens within pound plus framework (college)
- Local authority - commission out where risk is lower – more experimental
- How to offer small grants? – No framework from SFA. Barrier within council - counts as subcontracting? How will Ofsted see it?
- Staff come from refugee background – knowledge and advice based on experience – trust, language skills etc. (refugee organisation)
- Offer reach into communities that providers can't do on own – starting with addressing needs that aren't principally learning needs – solution-focussed to meet needs
- Needs honest appraisal re. what they can offer to community learning e.g. risk of mission drift

- ESF – LEPS – social inclusion
- Sometimes down to political agendas - councillors wanting to keep certain VCOs going

Is the drive to commission more Community Learning delivery through voluntary community organisations achievable given the requirements of the OFSTED (48-hour notice inspections, Matrix IAG standard, etc.)?

- Tension - short term capacity building needs vs. long term organisation strategy – need for outputs
- Do the frameworks we have enable innovation and creativity needed to reach communities vs. need for accountability and procurement rules etc?
- Learners take long time to engage and progress but funding doesn't allow it to take that long e.g. moving learner towards being able to speak
- Issue re. Ofsted recognising learners' needs – they need to listen to the context.
- Issue of trust – some community groups not coming from position of trust.
- Ratcheting up of Ofsted expectations – means haven't taken on new organisation for 5 years. So now it's about working together. (Local authority provider)
- But what about financial resources for organisations? Unwritten element of ESF community grant – to develop capacity of voluntary and community organisations.
- 2 out of 38 organisations transform from grant model to subcontracting model therefore would prefer to work with 2 or 3 organisations intensively (VCS consortium)

- 4 step process:

ESF community grant → community learning → ESF → ASB

No Ofsted requirement Ofsted full claim

Attrition at each level

- Some organisations bow out once they have awareness of what's involved.
- Reducing amount of funding for capacity building element → identify most likely organisations to go forward but losing others at the other end → decreased diversity of providers
- Tension – as more contracted and less support → risk for inspection → failure → contract given to e.g. A4E (Bristol)
- Reduced resources (staff) to be able to call on from other LA teams for community development capacity building
- VCOs not got capacity to join up with other people

- Organisations need income → effects £+ agenda, e.g. if main income is from room hire – can't offer as £+
- Organisations need some hand holding to start with
- CL providers – approaches to support VCOs
 - Adapt paperwork to meet needs of homeless charities e.g. individual tracking rather than classroom tracking
 - Small amount of contracted organisations
 - Spend time with subcontracted providers to look at how can marry systems together – but had to justify to management
 - Evidence – includes video performance, etc not just paper based. To work with most vulnerable - need to go beyond Ofsted requirements
 - Grouping together activities with VCOs, rather than 1-1 work
 - Community learning forum– for anyone interested in delivering AL – generate ideas, and connections.
 - Database - kept informed re. funding and priorities
 - Building up providers to be confident and apply in their own right - act as referee
 - Enabler of informal learning and self-organised learning. Mission statement includes building capacity
 - Creating culture where learning is part and parcel of what people do
 - Need to think about language of learning – not about sitting in classroom - it's whatever people need to move forward
- Twin challenge for VCO – new business model + upscaling quickly at same time – huge leap.
- Interpretation issue for VCO staff re. eg. City Council language
- Stop-start when funding changes and different skills sets needed
- Need to maintain spine in organisation to take through
- Organisation cultural change
- Passion and enthusiasm v bureaucracy
- Don't we need consortia everywhere? Not one size fits all. Why didn't similar consortia flourish elsewhere? What can be done to help sustain that capacity building activity?
 - Several consortia didn't survive. Humber Learning Consortium has grown slowly and gradually – cut teeth in other areas before ASB (HLC).
- Trustee buy-in is key. Need better quality and awareness of people on trustee boards.

- Same in many areas, including school governors
- Skills need for whole charity landscape
- Need to be able to ask right questions
- Boards need to recruit not just through personal networks. Need strategy – identify skills – recruit
- Trustee training rarely surfaces as need but may be hidden – not mentioned in audits.
- Some Community Learning providers would be well placed to deliver trustee training