

Peer volunteering and learning in communities: volunteering in local Community Learning partnership plans



The National Voice for
Lifelong Learning

1. Overview

This paper was prepared by NIACE for the National Advisory Group on Peer Volunteering and Learning in Communities. It provides a snapshot of the place and role of volunteering in the plans for Community Learning that are being developed by publicly-funded providers and their partners at local level. Research was carried out with five evolving partnerships to explore how volunteers and volunteering fit into their proposals. The findings provide an indication of the sector's current focus and priorities. A summary of the activity taking place in each area is presented in section two below.

Evidence collected through the research suggests that:

- Volunteering is integral to the work of Community Learning partnerships. It has become a mainstream activity within Community Learning.
- The role that volunteering plays in Community Learning is multi-dimensional. It contributes in the following ways:
 - *Funding.* The resources invested in Community Learning via the time and skills of volunteers represents a significant, and in some cases substantial, element of Pound Plus.
 - *Planning.* Volunteers in specific roles are instrumental in acting as a link between providers and local communities. They advise providers on local learning needs and priorities, and support engagement by communicating the value and benefits of learning to their peers.
 - *Delivery.* Volunteer-led groups are part of the patchwork of Community Learning opportunities in a local area, often benefitting from “light touch” support from established providers.
 - *Progression.* Volunteering provides an important progression route for learners on Community Learning programmes, particularly excluded adults from priority groups for whom it provides a vital opportunity to develop new skills
- Developing and delivering training and support for volunteers is a key part of Community Learning partnerships' engagement with volunteering. Often, the

focus is on supporting learners to develop a core of generic volunteering skills that are recognized and transferable across organisations in the partnership.

- Community Learning partnerships are encouraging closer collaboration at local level between local organisations that have interests in learning and volunteering. This includes the pooling of expertise and resources, Some innovative provision is being developed as a result. Local CVS's are playing a key role in developing the links between voluntary and community organizations and mainstream-funded Community Learning providers.

2. Local activity

2.1 *Learn Barnsley!* Community Learning Trust

The partnership is led by Barnsley Adult and Family Learning Service and includes Northern College, Barnsley College, Dearne Valley College, WEA, the Local Authority, JCP, Voluntary Action Barnsley and the National Careers Service. The role of volunteers is being developed through a number of joint initiatives.

- The **Community Involvement Programme** provides training to enable local residents to develop the knowledge and skills to become active in their communities, support others to get involved, and influence local planning and decision-making. The initiative represents a pilot for a new way of working in which partners jointly plan, fund and deliver activity. All the core partners are contributing in some way:
- Voluntary Action Barnsley leads the cross-partnership **Community Learning Champions** programme. CLCs play a key role in promoting community learning in the borough.

2.2 **Cambridgeshire Community Learning and Skills Partnership (CLASP)**

CLASP is led by the Adult Learning and Skills Service, and involves a wide range of local organisations that have a stake in adult learning and skills including FE colleges, village colleges and academies, housing associations, community groups, district councils, Jobcentre Plus, Public Health, libraries and Cambridgeshire County Council Community Development. The partnership's focus on volunteering includes the following strands:

- **Learner Advisory Panels** are being established in each of the four Partnership districts, and they will inform the setting of priorities for funding through the Cambridgeshire Adult Learning Fund. It is anticipated that in time the Panels will contribute to setting the overall priorities for the CLASP. A Third Sector organisation has been commissioned to develop and facilitate the Panels, and the Cambridgeshire on-line community forum *Shape Your Place* (<http://shapeyourplace.org>) is being used to engage local residents.

- **Progression to volunteering** has been identified as a significant outcome for learners from priority groups taking part in Community Learning. Having realised that this is the case, the Adult Learning Service is both seeking to build wider links with organisations that can offer volunteering opportunities and to improve the support that it gives to learners to access these.

2.3 Luton and Bedfordshire Community Learning Trust

Volunteering was central to the Luton and Bedfordshire CLT pilot, and a short case study of that activity was included in the CL reform briefing paper. Since the end of the pilot, the Trust has agreed a new strategic plan and identified a number of areas where volunteering will make a contribution to its work.

- **Financial strategy** Building on the momentum gained during the pilot phase, supporting volunteers and volunteering remains a key element of the Trust's financial strategy. The time volunteers who are trained and supported through the Trust contribute to the work of partners will be critical for increasing the resources for CL activity in the borough ("Pound Plus"). The Trust collects data on the volume of volunteering activity, to support its "Pound Plus" calculations.
- **Community Learning Fund for Luton** The CLF has been established to distribute CL funding directly to third sector organisations that will deliver innovative learning to engage key groups and address local priorities. It includes a strand which offers very small grants (up to £2,000) to enable formally constituted clubs, groups and societies to provide "leisure learning" opportunities in their local communities. A rolling application process has been put in place for the small grants element of the Fund, with decisions made monthly.

2.4 Oxfordshire Learning Network (OLN)

The OLN membership consists of over 90 organisations from across the county who have an interest in adult community learning. This includes the six learning providers in direct receipt of Community Learning (CL) allocations, voluntary and community organisation and public sector bodies such as museums, libraries and galleries. Volunteering has been identified as a priority for the partnership, and is being developed in a range of ways. For example:

- Volunteers are being trained and supported to play a greater role in the **delivery of learning**, and this will be a key element of the "Pound Plus" generated through the OLN.
- **The Adult Learning Service and Library Service** have formed a partnership to develop a curriculum and training for volunteers who will be involved in staffing public libraries that were previously earmarked for closure. The ALS provides generic volunteering training, while the Library Service focuses on developing library-specific skills.

- **Building Dementia Friendly Communities** is a project which exemplifies the OLN's new approach to using CL funding to respond directly to local need. A partnership between the ALS, the Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council and the Guidepost Trust delivers dementia awareness training and support for volunteers across the county in urban and rural areas.
- **Workplace Learning Advocates**, which were already established in some businesses in the county, has been taken on as a CL project by the ALS who are now disseminating the approach through SME networks.

2.5 Wirral Adult Community Learning Partnership (WACLP)

WACLP brings together Wirral Metropolitan College and Wirral Lifelong Learning Service - the two providers in receipt of Community Learning funding from the Skills Funding Agency - with a wide range of local partners from the public and voluntary sector. These include Public Health, the library service, U3A, social landlords, Children's Centres, Work Programme providers, the Probation Service, WEA, Voluntary Action Wirral and Wirral Council for Voluntary Services.

Volunteering is integrated into the work of the partnership in the following ways:

- Among its strategic priorities, WACLP has committed to **encourage volunteers** in adult learning, and to support established classes to become self-sustaining, volunteer-led learning groups.
- **Progression into volunteering** and civic engagement will be measured as one of the ways of identifying how far WACLP is achieving its high-level outcome to develop stronger communities.
- Its **Literacy Buddies** programme, through which volunteers provide additional support for literacy learners to practise reading and build their confidence as readers, is being replicated with ESOL learners. **ESOL Buddies** are bilingual EAL volunteers based in schools with high levels of community languages. Buddies are offered accredited peer mentor training as part of their role.
- Volunteers have been helping to support the **learner voice** element of development work.