

Community Learning Reform Partnerships in Action: examples from five local areas

1. Background and context

This report presents the findings of a short project undertaken by NIACE between March and May 2014, to investigate how Community Learning (CL) reform was being implemented locally in the first year of full, national policy roll-out. It provides a snapshot of the ways in which partnerships for the funding, planning and delivery of community learning are developing in five local areas. A short case study of each area is included, together with a summary which draws out the key findings. It is important to stress that the report is descriptive rather than evaluative. The project's aim was not assess the strengths, weaknesses or merits of different approaches, but rather to capture a number of different examples from the sector in order to support practice development.

NIACE is the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, the national voice for lifelong learning. We are an internationally respected development organisation and think-tank, working on issues central to the economic renewal of the UK, particularly in the political economy, education and learning, public policy and regeneration fields. As one of the country's foremost authorities on community learning, we play a leading role in supporting policy development and implementation in this area. Since 2013 we have developed and delivered the Community Learning Reform Support Programme for the Skills Funding Agency and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The Support Programme aims to assist providers to develop local practice so that it reflects the new national policy for Community Learning.

The project covered in this report was carried out as a joint piece of work for the Community Learning Reform Support Programme and the National Advisory Group on Learning and Volunteering, which is also co-ordinated by NIACE. It originated in a request from the latter to NIACE, to provide some information about the role of volunteers and volunteering in the new CL partnerships. NIACE recognised that having conversations with providers about their approaches to volunteering would offer an opportunity to explore a wider range of topics. Expanding the project's remit in this way was seen as a useful means of finding out, albeit on a modest scale, how policy implementation was taking shape, particularly in the absence of other mechanisms for capturing such information. The case studies cover the following key areas: partnership development and operation; planning; local accountability; financial strategy; and innovation and achievements.

2. Headline findings

Evidence collected through the research suggests that:

- The policy requirement that publicly funded CL providers work in partnership to develop approaches to the funding, planning and delivery of community learning

has provided a boost to local partnership working. Existing partnerships have been strengthened and extended, new partnerships have been developed, and partnerships that had lapsed or become dormant have been reinvigorated. The development of stronger partnerships between CL budget holders in an area is a particularly striking development. A strong degree of trust has been built between partners, for example in willingness to share and align information around fees and funding, and in the development of collaborative provision.

- For CL providers, the national policy objectives set out in *New Challenges, New Chances* have offered a useful framework for articulating the purpose, value and outcomes of community learning to partners and stakeholders. The objectives have provided a language through which CL providers have been able to make common cause with a wide range of local service providers across the public, private and voluntary and community sectors.
- The contribution that CL makes to the delivery of wider local strategic priorities is becoming more recognised and better understood. This is particularly true with regard to the role of learning in the health and wellbeing agenda, where both strategic and operational connections and collaborations are being developed. CL providers are making strong links with Public Health and with third sector organisations that can reach and engage learners with physical and mental health difficulties, and some innovative provision is being developed as a result.
- Engagement with the LEP agenda remains patchy. Some partnerships are developing effective links, while others are struggling to make progress in this area.
- Providers have been prompted to try new approaches and to take risks in order to make their provision more responsive to local need, to encourage innovation and to widen the provider base. This is particularly evident in the steps that some providers are taking to try to devolve a greater share in the delivery of learning to small, local third sector organisations, groups and partnerships by distributing funding directly to them.
- Providers are at diverse starting points in terms of the development of a fees strategy. However, it is apparent that the need to maintain a universal offer while targeting public funding at the most excluded learners is prompting innovation in curriculum development to address both of these elements.

3. Case studies of local practice

3.1 Community Learning Reform in Barnsley

How the partnership operates

The Community Learning Trust (CLT) for Barnsley is being developed as part of the work of *Learn Barnsley!*, the strategic partnership which oversees the development and implementation of adult learning in the borough. Established in 2012, *Learn Barnsley!*'s members include Barnsley Adult and Family Learning Service, Northern College, Barnsley College, Dearne Valley College, WEA, the Local Authority, JCP, Voluntary Action Barnsley and the National Careers Service. Under its *Executive Group Development Plan 2012-15*, the partnership has committed to establishing a CLT:

“To ensure that community learning is appropriate and relevant for Barnsley, as well as supporting national policy developments outlined in *New Challenges, New Chances*.”

The Adult and Family Learning Service leads the CLT development work. It convenes a steering group of core members (the Business Meeting), which is responsible for setting priorities and developing a strategy and action plan. A number of thematic sub-groups with their own terms of reference have also been established which focus on priority areas for the CLT, for example mental health and digital inclusion. The sub-groups draw in a wider range of partners who have specialist knowledge and experience and links to target learners. For instance, Berneslai Homes, which manages social housing on behalf of the local authority, leads the sub-group on digital skills.

Planning community learning

A full plan for the CLT has not yet been agreed. However, the partnership has begun to develop and test new approaches to working together to plan and deliver community learning and incremental progress is being made.

A key piece of work initiated by the CLT to enable collective planning has been the mapping of current *Learn Barnsley!* CLT actions against the national objectives for community learning set out in *New Challenges, New Chances*. This work captures activities being undertaken by individual partners, by CLT sub-groups, and by groups that are linked to the partnership through *Learn Barnsley!* such as the Work and Skills Operational Group and the Customer Journey Group. The next stage of this piece of work will be to identify the outcomes that are being delivered against each of the *NC,NC* objectives.

The mapping has helped to identify where there are gaps in provision. For example, the need to address the lack of coherence in learning opportunities for people with enduring mental ill-health has emerged as a priority for the partnership. A number of actions have been initiated to take this work forward. First, the thematic sub-group has agreed an action plan with SMART objectives. Secondly, the CLT has begun to develop closer links with Public Health. Public Health representatives have indicated that they would like to work with the CLT, although they do not currently have capacity to join the steering group so the relationship.

Partners have also begun to plan, resource and deliver joint provision. The Community Involvement Programme is the “pilot” for working in this way. Launched in March 2014 and due to begin in June, the course will provide 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. All the core partners are contributing in some way:

- staff from Northern College and the Adult Learning Service are leading the initiative and will be responsible for delivery;
- Barnsley MBC has contributed officer time to ensure that the course aligns with wider developments on area governance and community involvement;
- Northern College is providing a venue
- Dearne Valley College, WEA and the NCS are supporting delivery.

Jointly developing and resourcing provision in this way and on this scale is not something that had happened before the CLT was established. Previously, the work would have been resourced solely by the Adult Learning Service.

Local accountability

The work of *Learn Barnsley!*, and through it that of the CLT, is aligned to local authority strategic priorities.

In order to enable the CLT to consult more effectively with local communities, it is intended that the community activists trained through the new Community Involvement Programme will link with the borough’s 21 Ward Alliances, each of which includes Elected Members and six community representatives.

The partnership is currently exploring how to use commissioning as part of its approach to developing learning opportunities to meet local needs. In particular, it is seeking to increase the role of voluntary and community organisations which are in direct contact with target learners. The presence of Voluntary Action Barnsley (VAB) on the CLT steering group is helping with this, and VAB co-ordinates the CLT’s Community Learning Champions (CLC) programme.

Barnsley Council interfaces with both the Leeds City Region LEP and the Sheffield LEP. To date, however, the CLT has not identified any opportunities to introduce community learning onto the local LEP agenda.

Financial strategy

Partners currently take two main approaches to income generation:

- Both the Adult and Family Learning Service and Northern College have established fee policies in place. The income which the Service generates (around £100K per annum) is reinvested in targeted work, where unmet need is identified.

- Funding from external sources has been secured through successful bids, as in the case of Berneslai Homes which gained funding for a sheltered housing digital inclusion project.

At this stage, the CLT does not propose to ask partners to use a common template to capture “Pound Plus” data.

Innovation and achievements

Learn Barnsley! CLT is bringing about significant change in the way that community learning is planned, funded and delivered in the borough. Learning providers and key partners are collaborating in new ways and to a far greater extent than was previously the case, as both the mapping work and the Community Involvement Programme demonstrate. There is a greater focus on working together to develop collective responses to addressing local priorities, and on involving local communities in shaping learning opportunities.

3.2 Community Learning Reform in Bedfordshire and Luton

How the partnership operates

The Bedfordshire and Luton Community Learning Trust is a partnership of six local providers in receipt of Community Learning allocations from the Skills Funding Agency.¹ It has evolved from Learning-For-All Bedfordshire and the Luton Trust, two of the fifteen participants in the national Community Learning Trust pilot initiative (2012-13). Although initially conceived as distinct entities, the two pilots were integrated during the pilot period. They established a joint steering group, began joint strategic planning and in July 2013, towards the end of the pilot phase, agreed to take forward the work through a single Community Learning Trust. A significant development since the end of the pilot has been the entry of Bedfordshire Adult Skills and Learning Service as a partner in the Trust. As a result, the deployment of all Agency funding for Community Learning within the geographical area of Bedfordshire and Luton is being planned within a single, coherent structure.

Responsibility for the strategic and operational direction of the Trust rests with the Stakeholder Group, which is made up of representatives from the six lead partners, the Voluntary and Community Sector, Department for Work and Pensions and Skills Funding Agency. The Group’s role is to:

- ensure delivery of the strategic plan;
- ensure that delivery of provision is in line with the strategic aims of the Trust;
- develop and monitor and annual operating plan;
- commission and monitor community provision;

¹ The partners are: Bedford College, Barnfield College, Central Bedfordshire College, The Learning Partnership Bedfordshire and Luton, Luton Adult Learning and Bedfordshire Adult Skills and Community Learning.

- develop community engagement activities;
- develop a financial strategy.

Two thematic sub-groups have also been established to lead development work in priority areas where special attention needs to be given to complex practical or technical issues that will require a high level of cooperation to make the Trust effective and ensure that it can demonstrate impact. The Commissioning and Community Consultation group oversees the processes for involving local communities in determining the learning offer, and commissioning provision from organisations outside the partnership to meet need. The Quality, Data, Strategy and Performance group collects, analyses, interprets and reports data from delivery partners, to ensure that they are complying with the Trusts objectives, and to develop performance indicators. The work within these two sub groups is still being developed.

Planning community learning

Building on the joint planning begun during the pilots, Trust partners have agreed a *Strategic Plan 2013-16*. This articulates the high-level aims of the Trust and the objectives which will support these, based on the national objectives for publicly funded Community Learning set out in *New Challenges, New Chances*. It also outlines the proposed partnership arrangements and financial strategy. The Trust's four strategic aims are to:

1. Organise, plan and create a cohesive community learning offer for Luton and Bedfordshire.
2. Widen participation in community learning.
3. Improve social cohesion.
4. Support progression and self-reliance.

An important step towards integrated planning is the development, led by Luton Adult Learning, of a planning framework for use across the partnership. The framework is designed to capture the contribution that all provision - both directly delivered and sub-contracted – which is funded through partners' Community Learning budgets makes to achieving the Trust's strategic aims. For each Community Learning course that they provide, partners record the course name, geographical delivery area, amount of funding allocated, and anticipated learner numbers. The course is then mapped against the individual objectives set out in the strategic plan, and areas of alignment are recorded. This process is in the early stages of development, with an initial version of the framework being trialled. However, partners clearly recognise the potential of the approach to generate critical intelligence about what is being provided, where, to whom and at what cost. Data collected through the framework will help the Trust to identify where public funding could be used differently and more effectively, for example to address gaps and to

eliminate duplication and unhelpful competition. The possibility that partners might, in future, align their fee structures is under consultation.

It is planned to use the RCU mapping tool to support this overall process.;

Local accountability

A primary aim of the Trust has been to ensure that all Community Learning provision is developed in direct response to expressed local need. To meet that end, two categories of provision have been identified:

- *Demand led provision* (community responsive). This has been developed in response to the findings of a wide ranging programme of community engagement and consultation activities, which includes the use of on-line methods and “piggy-backing” on activities led by local authorities and other stakeholders.
- *Priority led provision* (priority responsive) This contributes to local strategic priorities, by aligning curriculum planning to cross-sector strategic priorities set out in local plans including local authority strategic plans, the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for Health and Luton and Bedfordshire Sustainable Communities Strategies.

In addition, a new mechanism for refocusing funding on community-led provision has been created through the Community Learning Fund for Luton. This funding was allocated from The Learning Partnership Bedfordshire and Luton and Luton Adult Learning. Launched in December 2012, the fund invited proposals from the voluntary and community sector and other not-for-profit organisations for projects that would deliver innovative community learning which engaged excluded adults and addressed local priorities. The Fund included a strand aimed specifically at promoting digital inclusion among older adults. From September 2013 another strand offered 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.

Initial take-up of the main Community Learning Fund offered via Luton Adult Learning was low. Partners attribute this to the proliferation of programmes in Luton that offer small amounts of funding to community groups (for example, the council’s *Your Say, Your Way* fund, Luton Airport Fund and Big Lottery). Some of these have very few strings attached and light reporting requirements, making them arguably more attractive and accessible than the CLF. However, the fundamental challenge that partners identify is a lack of a single body which takes an overview of such funding, resulting in little or no coherence, or “joined-upness”, across initiatives. As a result, the potential benefits and synergies that could be gained from the more planned deployment of resources flowing into the area are not yet being realised. A

possible, partial, solution has been generated within the partnership, as the local support organisation representing the CVS (Voluntaryworks) is a member of the Stakeholder Group and has been commissioned by Luton Borough Council to provide up-to-date information on all voluntary and community organisations in the area. As part of its mapping activity, it has proposed collecting data on where organisations access their funding. This will provide an overview of the local funding landscape for community groups, and enable the Trust to market the CLF more effectively in future.

The Stakeholder Group is also considering ways in which the Trusts' accountability to its "end user" constituencies of learners and communities on the one hand and local strategic planners on the other could be strengthened by securing their representation on the Group. The voices of learners themselves, and of the voluntary and community sector as representatives of communities and potential learners, rather than as delivery partners, are felt to be gaps that need to be addressed. Similarly, involving representatives from other departments within the three local authorities, particularly Economic Development, who can help to integrate the Trust's work more closely to wider strategy developments, would be beneficial.

Financial strategy

The Trust is starting to develop its overall strategy for Pound Plus. To this end, baseline data is being collected through the Quality, Data, Strategy and Performance sub-group which will provide a clearer picture of the current position and enable the development of Pound Plus indicators and targets for growth across the partnership. It is anticipated that the further development of volunteering will make a substantial contribution to Pound Plus in Luton. Among college partners, consideration is being given to how the Pound Plus value of some elements of wider college services (e.g. careers service) that are accessed by Community Learning funded learners can be calculated. There is also potential to increase efficiencies that are being realised by the partnership, with the extension of shared services.

A shared fee strategy has been discussed across the partnership for Community Learning. In the short term this is on hold as the governance within individual organisations makes this difficult. Individual fee policies are shared within the partnership.

Innovation and achievements

Publicly funded Community Learning provision in Luton and Bedfordshire has undergone radical transformation in the past two years. It has become entirely responsive, with all decisions on what provision is offered being determined by the needs of learners, communities and other local stakeholders. The creation of the Community Learning Fund extends this principle by providing a mechanism for grass roots organisations to play a direct role in both the planning and delivery of community learning.

All the partner organisations have experienced changes in key personnel during this formative period. However, this does not appear to have undermined or destabilised the partnership, with all partners continuing to attend meeting and contribute to the development and implementation of the Trust's plans. Partners regard it as a reflection of the trust and shared commitment which have been secured through the steady development of the Trust approach since the pilot period.

3.3 Community Learning Reform in Cambridgeshire

How the partnership operates

Community learning reform in Cambridgeshire builds on the Adult Learning Service's established approach, in which responsibility for operational planning and delivery sits with district teams. Thus four district-based Community Learning and Skills Partnerships (CLAS Partnerships) have been established across the county, covering City and South Cambs, East Cambs, Fenland and Huntingdonshire. Each Partnership is led by the Adult Learning and Skills Service District Manager, and made up of a wide range of local organisations that have a stake in adult learning and skills. Core members include FE colleges, village colleges and academies, housing associations, community groups, district councils, Jobcentre Plus, Public Health, libraries (which have a strong history of community engagement) and Cambridgeshire County Council Community Development. Alongside these are diverse voluntary and community organisations which have direct contact with adults in priority groups. Their role is primarily to engage new learners and support the development of innovative provision to address local priorities.

These district Partnerships report into the Learning and Skills Board, which is chaired by the Head of the Adult Learning and Skills Service. Other Board members include the Skills Funding Agency, Jobcentre Plus, Chambers of Commerce, Cambridgeshire County Council Economic Development, FE Colleges and the Local Enterprise Partnership.

The Service is the sole recipient of Community Learning funding in all areas other than Cambridge, where small allocations are also held by Cambridge Regional College and Hills Road College.

Planning community learning

The district Partnerships work within an agreed strategic framework which defines their common, overarching vision and aims. The aims are derived from the national objectives for Community Learning set out in *New Challenges, New Chances* and cover the three broad areas of funding, social renewal and impact. Each Partnership is responsible for agreeing its own priorities in terms of geography, learners' needs (including target groups) and subject areas, and for developing and implementing an action plan which interprets and applies the framework in their district context. The

action plans include priorities, objectives, activities, impact measures and progress tracking.

Across the Partnerships, there is a high level of consistency in the activities that are being undertaken to collect intelligence to inform the planning and development of community learning. For instance:

- On-going mapping is taking place of all the funding from various sources that supports community learning. Local directories are being produced for key subject areas including ESOL, English, Maths and Digital by Default.
- Annual local needs analyses are being carried out, drawing on data from a range of sources including local residents and employers.

Partners are using data on funding, current provision and local need to identify gaps and duplication, and underpin collaborative curriculum planning.

A key feature of Cambridgeshire's approach to Community Learning reform is its focus on embedding impact measurement into the development of adult learning provision across the districts. A wider outcomes approach has been adopted, based on the NIACE *Wider Outcomes Planning and Capture Tool*. Piloted in Fenland, the model is now being introduced in the other areas with the aspiration that ultimately all organisations in district Partnerships will apply it to relevant provision. The experience of implementing the approach in Fenland has ensured that roll-out is undertaken in a way that secures buy-in from partners. This includes providing full training and giving partners opportunities to input ideas to determine how the model works in their district. In addition, all projects funded through the Community Learning Trust Fund (see below) are required to use the wider outcomes tool to plan and capture the impact of their work. Feedback from voluntary sector partners who have worked with the tool to date has been positive. Implementation of the approach will be reviewed by the Adult Learning and Skills Service, and the views of partners sought on ways in which it could be improved.

Local accountability

The work of the Community Learning and Skills Partnerships is aligned with local strategic priorities. This means not only that relevant agencies and organisations contribute to the development and implementation of CLAS Partnership action plans, but critically, that community learning is embedded into other initiatives. For example, community learning has been written into the plans of the Cambridgeshire Health and Wellbeing Board in recognition of the role that it plays in securing better health outcomes for very excluded priority groups such as Travellers. It is anticipated that evidence generated by the Partnerships through their use of the wider outcomes tool will demonstrate how community learning contributes to a range of agendas and help to make the case for integrating it into other local plans.

The focus on aligning provision with local priorities and engaging target groups is reflected in curriculum development. Sub-contractors are required to allocate ten per cent of their funding to developing curricula for targeted provision, and next year that proportion will rise to 15 per cent. This is resulting in a re-orientation of the curriculum in some areas (for example in linking exercise classes explicitly to Public Health priorities) and the development of entirely new provision in others (such as the delivery of learning in care settings).

A number of mechanisms are being developed to strengthen the responsiveness of community learning to the needs of local communities.

- The Cambridgeshire Adult Learning Fund (CALF) opened in May 2014 and will provide grants of between £1,000 and £25,000 from the CL budget, through a competitive bidding process, to projects that will attract and successfully engage with priority groups of learners in targeted communities, as defined in the plans of each of the CLAS Partnerships (www.calf.org.uk). Funding will be allocated by a Panel that includes the chair of each Partnerships, Head of Service and (via an e-Panel) members of the Partnerships. Although not targeted exclusively at voluntary and community organisations, CALF encourages applications from partnership projects and builds on earlier funds which had a specific focus on building the capacity of the VCS to deliver learning.
- 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 CALF. Further in the future, it is anticipated that the Panels will contribute to setting the overall priorities for the CLAS Partnerships. 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.

The Partnerships are seeking to engage more effectively with employers, as this is seen as crucial to ensuring that community learning supports economic growth in the county. There are key initiatives in some districts with which links are being made, such as the Alconbury Enterprise Zone in Huntingdonshire, Wisbech 2020 in Fenland and local Business in the Community (BITC) projects.

Good links have been developed between community learning and the Greater Cambridge Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership. Cambridgeshire Adult Learning and Skills Service's Head of Service sits on the LEP Skills Board. The work of the LEP Prize Challenge Fund, which will make up to £1 million available to Third Sector organisations to develop innovative approaches to support excluded adults into work, aligns with the priorities of the CLAS Partnerships.

Financial strategy

The Partnership's financial strategy is under development. It will be informed by work on Pound Plus currently being undertaken for BIS by LEA FEA, Hoxex, RCU and NIACE, which aims to develop a tool to support providers who wish to use it to capture Pound Plus data in a consistent and systematic way.

The Partnership is building on the approach to fees that it has been developing in recent years. The universal offer curriculum is being revised and extended in order to attract new, fee-paying learners. To make this happen, a greater share of resources has been allocated to partners who can develop new provision. Funds raised in this way are used to wholly or partly subsidise access for priority learners who are less able to pay.

Innovation and achievements

The CLAS Partnerships have achieved a high degree of commitment from partners across all four districts to work together on the planning and funding of community learning. A number of mechanisms have been effectively deployed by the Adult Learning and Skills Service to secure this buy-in. The framework of national objectives for CL set out in *New Challenges, New Chances* has helped to articulate the value and purpose of community learning, while the focus on capturing evidence of wider outcomes to demonstrate impact has shown how it contributes to local strategic priorities. The relationship that is developing with Public Health, based on recognition of the way that learning can support the achievement of health outcomes, indicates a potential way of working with other strategic partners.

There is a clear orientation towards devolving decision-making about what learning is delivered to the Partnerships and the wider local community. This is evident in both the expanded fund to encourage new delivery partners (CALF), and the establishment of the Learner Panels. These initiatives signal the direction in which the Service wishes to take community learning in the future, with a greater emphasis on responsiveness and shared responsibility.

3.4 Community Learning Reform in Oxfordshire

How the partnership operates

Oxfordshire Learning Network (OLN) has developed on the foundations of the county's former PCDL Partnership. After funding for the PCDL Partnership ceased, its members continued to seek opportunities to work together, and some external funding for joint projects was secured. However, apart from a well-attended annual conference and AGM, the OLN was largely dormant for several years. The Community Learning Reform programme provided the stimulus to re-galvanise the network and a new focus for joint working. At the 2013 conference, it was agreed that the OLN would become the Community Learning Trust for Oxfordshire, and its terms of reference were amended to state explicitly that it is working to deliver the

national objectives for Community Learning set out in *New Challenges, New Chances*.

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,² voluntary and community organisation and public sector bodies such as museums, libraries and galleries. Its work is led by a steering group composed of the six directly funded CL providers, four elected representatives from the wider OLN membership (who were elected using Oxfordshire County Council's e-consultation portal) and the Skills Funding Agency. Oxfordshire Skills and Learning Service (OSLS) is the lead partner within the OLN and holds £2.1m of the £2.2m in CL funding that is allocated to Oxfordshire.

Planning community learning

A key aim behind the establishment of the OLN steering group was to provide a robust mechanism for the collaborative planning of Community Learning. In January 2014, the six directly funded CL providers agreed a joint strategy. This was developed over a series of four meetings, each of which was attended by at least two representatives of the partner organisations, and which looked critically at how CL funding was being used across the piece within the county. The strategy includes an overview of the national and local policy contexts, and a summary of the current use of CL funding by each of the providers in Oxfordshire. It then sets out a vision for the future which is orientated around three strategic objectives: partnership, participation and pound plus. An operational group has been set up which will oversee implementation of the strategy "on the ground".

The steering group identified the need to undertake spatial mapping of current CL provision as a priority, in order to provide partners with intelligence on areas of the county where there are gaps and duplication. This is a vital first step to coherent shared planning of provision, and the work is now underway.

Local accountability

The OLN has a strategic commitment to planning community learning "together and in consultation with" the voluntary and community sector and local residents. As a way of moving towards a community-led approach, Oxfordshire Skills and Learning Service allocated a small pot of CL funding to the establishment of a funding scheme into which VCS members of the OLN can bid on a competitive basis to deliver innovative community learning which reflects the needs of the OLN's agreed priority groups. Bids are assessed by a funding panel sub-group of the OLN Steering Group.

² These are: Oxfordshire Skills and Learning Service, Oxfordshire County Council; City of Oxford College; Banbury and Bicester College; Abingdon and Witney College; the Henley College; and Workers Educational Association.

The number of applications in the first funding round was low, which has been attributed to the fact that this was the first real opportunity offered to many OLN member organisations to access mainstream Skills Funding Agency funding, where bureaucracy and inspection requirements in particular can act as a barrier and disincentive to participation. It is proposed to continue the initiative as a six monthly funding round, thereby encouraging potential new subcontracted providers to recognise the value of developing their provision so that it meets Ofsted and SFA standards and requirements. For the first cohort of successful applicants, the Oxfordshire Skills and Learning Service has put in place a tailored programme of training and support. This is intended to build the capacity of promising organisations to become regular sub-contract holders in the future, in line with national policy to promote the greater involvement of the VCS in the delivery of CL. Around 200 new learners are expected to be engaged as a result of the first round of funding activity. OSLS aspires to increase this to 500 in 2014-15.

In addition, Oxfordshire Learning and Skills Service has strengthened its focus on community outreach. Two new dedicated outreach workers carry out on-going consultation with local residents and community groups to identify and respond to their learning needs through development of a wide range of outreach learning activities delivered in partnership with community organisations. Around a third of all community learning provision is now developed in this way, and it is a priority for provision funded directly through the Skills Funding Agency. One example of this new responsive approach is a Building Dementia Friendly Communities partnership project with the Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council and the Guidepost Trust to deliver dementia awareness training and support across the county in urban and rural areas. Other examples include partnerships with VCS organisations working with adults who are homeless or are recovering from mental health problems or substance misuse. Provision has also been developed in partnership with children's centres, the Oxfordshire Carers Association and local housing associations.

Oxfordshire Skills and Learning Service is committed to aligning community learning with wider local strategic priorities. For instance, it is in the process of developing a new relationship with Public Health. Steps are also being made towards realising its strategic ambition to build relationships with the Oxfordshire Skills Board and Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, in order to integrate community learning into local plans for social inclusion and economic development. OSLS contributed to the LEP consultation process during the development of its European Structural Investment Fund strategy and as a result can identify the clear contribution that they made to strengthening recognition within the final strategy document of the vital role played by community led provision in moving excluded adults closer to the labour market.

Financial strategy

Pound Plus is a key strategic priority for the OLN and it has identified three main sources from which it aims to generate Pound Plus contributions:

- fee income from learners who are able to pay;
- financial and in-kind contributions from community partners;
- greater involvement of volunteers in the delivery of learning.

Steps are already being taken to also involve the private sector in community learning through development of a Family Learning project in partnership with Miele which is based in the county.

The partnership aims to build Pound Plus calculations into all CL provision, both direct delivery and sub-contracted. In order to move towards this position, several approaches are being tested by the six directly funded providers. For examples, OSLS is piloting a Pound Plus framework within its Family Learning provision and all its sub-contracted providers have been asked to complete a Pound Plus framework showing all the projected costs and income associated with their activities. Initial work to collate and analyse this information is underway, and is producing a clearer picture of what different partners and stakeholders contribute to the development and delivery of provision.

Innovation and achievements

The OLN has secured a high level of commitment from its key partners, with the establishment of a strong steering group which is driving forward strategic and operational planning. The partnership's structure and processes provide a mechanism for building the capacity of all providers, however small, to understand and engage with the CL reform programme.

The network's wide and diverse membership has the potential to open up opportunities for the development of innovative community learning interventions, as the emerging work on building dementia friendly communities demonstrates. The funding scheme for VCS members reflects a determination to develop new approaches to delivery which balance innovation with appropriate mechanisms for managing the associated risks.

3.5 Community Learning Reform in Wirral

How the partnership operates

Wirral Adult Community Learning Partnership (WACLIP) 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. Its origins can be traced to the days of the

borough's PCDL Partnership. A solid foundation of trust has been established over the years, including through joint projects funded from external sources. In 2012, the Partnership applied to become a Community Learning Trust pilot, and although unsuccessful, continued to work in ways that reflected the CLT approach.

The College and Lifelong Learning Service are the core of WACLP. Levels of involvement vary among other members, and for small voluntary organisations with very limited staff resources, participation can be a challenge. The Partnership aims to work in ways that are as open and flexible as possible, to lessen barriers to engagement.

Planning community learning

WACLP has agreed a strategic plan for 2013-14. This sets out how its work will contribute to the delivering the national policy objectives for community learning articulated in *New Challenges, New Chances*, and to local strategic priorities. It also defines target groups, progression indicators and performance measures, and outlines a financial strategy.

Historically, partners planned their provision independently and generally kept one another informed about what they were doing. In some cases, they consciously competed. Now, they are planning together. Joint mapping work has been undertaken, which has enabled gaps to be identified and addressed in a joined up way. For example, a pocket of exclusion and unmet need was found in a relatively affluent area. A co-ordinated response was made involving partners including the Lifelong Learning Service, National Careers Service, Citizens' Advice and the local housing association. This approach has also made it clear where things are working well, and partners no longer seek to compete with one another's successful activities.

Marketing and promotion have become more joined up between the College and the Lifelong Learning Service. Together with the greater breadth and variety of organisations involved in WACLP, this appears to be attracting learners from more diverse backgrounds than previously participated in mainstream community learning, including adults with complex needs.

Local accountability

Intelligence to inform the development of provision and ensure that it meets the needs of the local community is gathered from a range of sources. Partners that are in direct contact with target groups of adults, including Jobcentre Plus, social housing providers and other voluntary and community organisations share information about their clients' needs and interests, as well as acting as a source of signposting and referral.

An important relationship has been developed between WACLP and Public Health, which illustrates how the Partnership's work is evolving make CL responsive to wider

strategic agendas. Key priorities for Public Health in Wirral are reducing social isolation and improving mental wellbeing. The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment identified high levels of need among groups with which WACLP was already in touch. The Partnership was able to secure Public Health funding to develop innovative provision in art and textiles. An approach has been adopted which aims to establish sustainable, learner-led groups. Funding is used to provide tutors for an initial period to support learning and confidence building, before groups become independent with support from other sources such as the CVS. Discussions are ongoing to determine what other kinds of learning activities Public Health could fund.

WACLP is connected to a number of networks which ensure that its work aligns with local and regional priorities. It links to the Wirral Economic Development and Skills Partnership, and through this partnership shares the priorities of the Liverpool City Region Employment and Skills Board. Through the Adult Learning Managers' Network for Merseyside and Cheshire, the partnership has also begun to develop a link with the Liverpool City Region Local Enterprise Partnership. On the one hand, this relationship provides the partnership with access to key local intelligence, such as up-to-date labour market information, to inform planning. On the other, it provides a potential route through which the partnership can influence the LEP agenda from the bottom up.

In addition, WACLP is exploring how it can integrate community learning into the new wider framework for community responsiveness and accountability that are being developed by Wirral Borough Council. Led by the Equalities and Neighbourhoods Scheme, it is seeking to deploy an Asset Based Community Development approach to engage, build and mobilise local area teams to develop and implement local plans in each of the borough's four parliamentary constituency areas.

Financial strategy

WACLP's financial strategy addresses its proposed approach to income generation (Pound Plus). In 2013-14, for the first time, partners agreed to adopt a consistent approach to fees. The strategy sets out the agreed fee levels, criteria for fee remission and payment options. It also commits partners to aim to increase income by applying for grants and other funding, and by developing further partnership approaches to sharing resources.

An initial piece of work on Pound Plus has been undertaken to support the development of WACLP's financial strategy. Partners used a common template to identify the additional funding and other resources that they generated to support community learning. It has been agreed that this information will continue to be collected, and it provides powerful data to enable the Lifelong Learning Service in particular to make the case to the local authority about the value for money and added value of community learning.

The Service acknowledges that achieving a universal offer based on fees presents a particular challenge as until recently it has focused entirely on delivering fully funded provision targeted at excluded groups.

Innovation and achievements

Community Learning reform has encouraged a widening and deepening of the Partnership, bringing new partners and closer co-operation. Innovative partnerships are being developed to shape provision in direct response to local needs, and alternative models of delivery, such as the establishment of self-organised groups, are being tested. The integration of planning and the alignment of fees policy across WACLP indicate a high degree of trust and commitment to collaborative ways of working.

4. Conclusions

The five case studies presented here offer a snapshot of the ways in which Community Learning providers are implementing the CL reform programme. It would be inappropriate to claim that they provide anything like a complete picture of the situation across the country, and indeed providers who to participate in a research project of this kind are likely to be those who are confident that they are making good progress. However, for the very reason that they reflect emerging effective practice, these examples point to a number of conclusions which will have wider relevance to the sector. In particular:

- For providers, taking forward the CL reform agenda does not mean “business as usual.” Although themes such as partnership working, capacity building the Third Sector and addressing local need are established aspects of the work of many providers, the changing policy context demands a developmental approach and a willingness to innovate.
- Implementing CL reform locally requires time, energy and commitment from CL funded providers and their partners. It does not happen by accident. Developing and sustaining the partnership, building trust, developing new provision, consulting with communities, and so on, need sustained attention and collaboration.
- Health and wellbeing, and engagement with the work of Local Enterprise Partnerships, are emerging as two key development areas for local CL partnerships. They can provide important catalysts for closer collaboration between partners. However, on both these agendas there is scope for the sector to work more effectively, and in doing so to access potential new sources of funding.

