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1 Overview

This report presents the findings of work to identify the impact of community learning on volunteering, undertaken as part of the Community Learning Innovation Fund (CLIF). The evidence gathered shows how learning and volunteering are complementary activities, which together can produce opportunities and benefits that are greater than the sum of the parts; from modest amounts of investment, significant outcomes have been realised for learners, families and communities. This report will be of particular interest to national and local policy makers and commissioners of public services. Community learning providers in local authorities, colleges and third sector organisations will also find the report helpful in supporting their work to develop local planning, funding and delivery partnerships.

With grant funding from the Skills Funding Agency, CLIF supported the delivery of 96 new community learning projects across England to run from September 2012 to August 2013. The projects aimed to use learning to empower adults, particularly those who are socially and economically disadvantaged, to improve their own lives and those of their families and communities. Through new partnerships and a wide range of creative approaches, CLIF projects engaged over 15,000 learners, many of whom were from groups that are among the most excluded and least likely to participate in learning. Most projects have firm plans in place to continue at least some elements of the work initiated through CLIF, highlighting the way in which diverse sources of funding can create sustainable opportunities for learning in communities.

This report is one of a series of six thematic papers demonstrating the contribution of community learning to key policy areas that have been produced by NIACE (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) as part of its management of CLIF.¹ NIACE is an independent charity which promotes adult learning across England and Wales. Through its research, development, publications, events, outreach and advocacy, NIACE works to improve the quality and breadth of lifelong learning opportunities

¹ See also the thematic reports on Digital inclusion, Employability, Families, Health and Socially vulnerable groups.
available to all adults. As part of its commitment to strengthening the role of learning in communities, NIACE has contributed to the development of a wide range of work linking learning and volunteering. It currently leads the Community Learning Champions National Support Programme and the national advisory group on learning and volunteering.

1.1 Key messages

Evidence from CLIF projects confirms that there is a strong, mutually beneficial relationship between the twin activities of learning and volunteering in communities. A total of 55,800 hours of volunteer time were contributed through CLIF. From disabled learners in Derbyshire who seized opportunities to become active citizens in their local area, to learners in Exeter who set up and ran computer drop-in sessions in their community centre, volunteers have been instrumental to the success of all but a handful of projects. Key messages from the project are as follows:

**Community learning is a route to participation in volunteering – and vice versa.** Learning stimulates motivation and builds skills and confidence, enabling learners to become active in their communities. Equally, the opportunity to volunteer on projects that benefit local neighbourhoods provides a practical and appealing route to re-engaging adults in learning.

**Volunteering in community learning produces better outcomes for individuals.** Volunteering gives adults opportunities to learn and practise new skills. It helps to increase independence, raise self-esteem and develop a range of qualities that make them both more effective community activists and more employable. Small amounts of investment in providing integrated learning and volunteering opportunities produce mutual benefits and deliver substantial impact.

**It is essential to provide a coherent framework of support and development for volunteers.** This is critical if voluntary action is to play a full role in public services. Volunteers who are appropriately supported are more effective in their role and are thus able to help secure

2 www.communitylearningchampions.org.uk
better outcomes for the individuals and communities with whom they work. Equally, volunteers whose own development needs are addressed are better equipped to progress into further learning, volunteering or paid work.

**Volunteering is a learning opportunity in itself.** Recognising and nurturing this opportunity, by enabling people to identify, understand and articulate the skills, knowledge and attributes that they have developed through volunteering, should be integral to volunteer support. Both intended and incidental learning should be captured through processes which encourage volunteers to reflect on their experiences.

**Embedding learning and skills development for volunteers contributes greatly to the potential sustainability of community-based initiatives.** In doing so, it helps to ensure that the value of the resources invested in a local area is not lost. Volunteers are able to continue and develop aspects of provision in partnership with professionals in cost-effective ways.

### 1.2 Actions

The project findings suggest a number of actions that would help to realise the benefits of more integrated approaches to community-based learning and volunteering programmes.

#### 1.2.1 For policy

**Support for volunteers’ learning and development should be integral to publicly funded volunteering programmes.** This will require the building of cross-departmental recognition of the ways in which learning in communities strengthens volunteer programmes and produces better outcomes for volunteers, the communities they work with and the organisations that support them. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) is well placed to take the lead role in articulating the contribution that community learning can make to other policy agendas, and to work with the Office for Civil Society to communicate these messages to other government departments.
It is crucial that the Education and Training Foundation recognises the role and contribution of volunteers within the education and training workforce. This will enable opportunities for volunteer development to be embedded within wider staff development, infrastructure and programmes. At the same time, attention should be given to ensuring that paid staff develop the knowledge and skills to support volunteers effectively. In taking this work forward, the Foundation should build on and complement the work of the Community Learning Champions National Support Programme and the Community Learning Trust pilots.

**Closer strategic collaboration should be encouraged between community learning and volunteering initiatives.** This would enable organisations to share resources and experience, identify opportunities for joint working, and achieve synergies and efficiencies from a more co-ordinated approach.

1.2.2 *For practice*

**Strong local partnerships should be formed to bring together diverse organisations with knowledge, experience and opportunities relating to learning and volunteering.** The new community learning networks that are currently being established as part of the community learning reform programme present a potential mechanism for strengthening links between different groups. The networks will develop local approaches to the funding, planning and delivery of community learning, building on the work of the Community Learning Trust pilots, and offer an opportunity to forge an enhanced role for third sector organisations in relation to learning in communities.

**Community volunteering initiatives should ensure that they provide adequate support for volunteers’ learning and development.** This could be achieved internally, or through partnerships or signposting to other organisations. Support should include not only opportunities to undertake learning directly related to the delivery of a specific project, but also support to access English, maths, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and digital skills where appropriate, as well as supported reflection to aid the consolidation of learning.
2 Introduction

This report presents the findings of work to identify the impact of community learning on volunteering, undertaken as part of the Community Learning Innovation Fund (CLIF). It is one of a series of six thematic reports demonstrating the contribution of community learning to key policy areas, as evidenced by CLIF.\(^3\)

CLIF provided grant funding from the Skills Funding Agency for 96 community learning projects across England to run from September 2012 to July 2013. The projects provided creative learning opportunities that aimed to increase learners’ self-confidence and give them a better quality of life, as well as building stronger families and communities. Over 15,000 learners were engaged through CLIF, including many from groups considered more disadvantaged and least likely to participate in learning. 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. As part of that role, it supported projects in the collecting, analysing and reporting of evidence on the difference that their work made for learners, families, localities and delivery partners.

The evidence in this report comes from two main sources: the final evaluation reports submitted by CLIF projects in August 2013, and the data returned by the 31 projects that opted to take part in an additional exercise to collect quantitative evidence from a sample of learners at the beginning and end of their episode of learning to show ‘distance travelled’. NIACE did not stipulate what methods and tools individual projects should use to collect data. Instead, it assisted in identifying and applying the approaches that were most appropriate for the projects’ context, learners and learning activities.

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3 See also the thematic reports on Digital inclusion, Employability, Families, Health and Socially vulnerable groups.
Projects were, however, required to apply a consistent framework to their evaluation. The *Wider Outcomes Planning and Capture Tool* is an innovative model for identifying the wider social outcomes of community learning.\(^4\) It was developed by NIACE to address the need for resources to support the community learning sector to engage with the growing public policy agenda around wider social outcomes. The tool supports all stages of evidence collection, analysis and reporting, and encourages a clear focus on capturing outcomes in the key areas of mental and physical health, family and social relationships, volunteering, employability, progression and personal agency. This approach has enabled data from multiple projects to be collated to build up a picture of the focus, scope and scale of the outcomes achieved with CLIF funding.

A technical annex, including a detailed description of the additional evidence collection exercise and data charts and tables is available to download.

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\(^4\) [www.niace.org.uk/communitylearning](http://www.niace.org.uk/communitylearning)
3 Policy and research: learning and volunteering

3.1 Why is this work important now?

Volunteering occupies an increasingly prominent place in public policy. In recent years, it has become explicitly positioned within the mainstream approach to public service delivery. In the challenging economic conditions that have prevailed since the 2008 downturn, policy makers have looked to volunteering to form part of the solution on a number of fronts. It is integral to programmes tackling unemployment and worklessness, and is now routinely accepted and promoted as a route through which young people and adults can gain employability skills and work experience and prepare themselves to join or rejoin the world of work. Alongside this, the role of voluntary social action has increased within a decentralised and diversified approach to the funding and delivery of public services, placing less reliance on what can be achieved with the resources of the public purse alone. Indeed, it is apparent that harnessing the time, skills and commitment of volunteers will be critical for maintaining the breadth and reach of many aspects of public service provision.

The government’s strategic commitment to extending the scale and scope of volunteering is articulated primarily through its policies on Localism and Giving. These policies aim to encourage and empower individuals and communities to take a greater role in shaping responses to social challenges in their localities. Fostering a culture in which people from all backgrounds and circumstances give more – of both their time and money – for the benefit of their local area is key to this social action agenda. For instance, the Giving White Paper pledged to invest £40 million in initiatives to increase involvement in local social action, particularly by strengthening the infrastructure that supports and enables volunteering.\(^5\) Lead responsibility for the implementation of policy on volunteering and giving across government sits with the Centre for Social Action in the Cabinet Office.

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The community learning reform programme echoes this wider policy focus. Explicitly, it aims to maximise the contribution that publicly funded community learning makes to volunteering at a local level. The national policy objectives for community learning include:

- helping to develop stronger communities in which people take on more responsibility for their area, including through volunteering;
- involving citizens in decision-making about the learning offer in their locality, within a framework of local accountability;
- expanding the role of volunteers in the delivery of learning, especially through third sector organisations and self-organised groups.

CLIF was launched to support the implementation of the reform programme. As such, it articulated a clear expectation from the outset that projects would demonstrate and exemplify the ways in which community-based learning could support volunteers and volunteering.

### 3.2 The evidence base on community learning and volunteering

Evidence from a range of sources suggests that there is a clear correlation for individuals between participation in adult learning and involvement in volunteering. For example:

- **Eleven per cent of adults interviewed for the 2013 Community Learning Learner Survey Report stated that, as a direct result of undertaking their course, they had become involved in volunteering.** Respondents who were classified by the survey as ‘disadvantaged’ in some respect (for example, because they were unemployed or in receipt of benefits, had low household incomes, or did not speak English as their first language) were proportionately more likely to report having become involved in volunteering than those who were not. The kinds of voluntary activities in which learners most commonly reported being involved were organising or helping to run an
event, befriending or mentoring someone, and giving advice or counselling.\(^6\)

- **Respondents to the 2013 NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey were most likely to be current or recent volunteers if they were also currently engaged in learning.** The likelihood of a respondent stating that they participated in volunteering declined as the length of time since they had participated in learning increased. Forty-one per cent of current learners reported that they had current or recent experience of volunteering, compared with just 13 per cent of those who had undertaken no learning since leaving full-time education. Respondents who were learning for leisure or personal interest were twice as likely to be volunteers as those whose learning was undertaken for work-related reasons.\(^7\)

- **Research undertaken for NIACE, the SROI Network and the Local Government Association found that participating in a part-time course increased the likelihood that adults would volunteer on a regular basis.** The study calculated that the value of this impact was £130 per course to the individual.\(^8\)

In addition, evidence from specific initiatives confirms that community-based learning can play a vital role in enabling adults to engage in volunteering and wider social action. For example:

- Evaluation of the **Take Part** programme found that it helped thousands of people to gain the confidence, knowledge and skills to become active in their communities, influence local decision making and be effective in their participation.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) 2013 NIACE Adult Participation in Learning Survey, unpublished data.

\(^8\) NIACE (2012) Valuing the Impact of Adult Learning: an analysis of the effect of adult learning on different domains in life.

The **Community Learning Trust** pilot evaluation reported that harnessing volunteer time was the single most significant way, in terms of equivalent financial value, in which the pilots secured additional resources to support the delivery of learning.\textsuperscript{10}
What does CLIF tell us?

Evidence from CLIF projects confirms the important role that community learning plays in providing opportunities and motivations for adults to get involved in volunteering, as well as the wider benefits that can be realised for individuals, communities and organisations when volunteering is supported within a community learning context. In addition, the evidence highlights some of the key features of project design and implementation that can help to maximise the outcomes of volunteering in learning. These are discussed in more detail below.

4.1 Participation in volunteering

Involvement in community learning through CLIF increased people’s participation in volunteering. Volunteers were involved in some capacity in the delivery of 87 out of the 96 projects funded through CLIF, and they contributed a total of 55,800 hours of volunteer time. Assuming an average value of £11.09 per hour of volunteer time, this means that CLIF projects secured resource with a value equivalent to £618,822 in financial terms.  

Volunteers’ roles fell into three main categories. Around half of projects involved volunteers in community outreach, while more than two-thirds involved them in the development and/or delivery of learning programmes. On 56 projects, volunteers performed a range of other roles such as community consultation, buddy and mentoring, administrative tasks, reception duties, marketing and publicity and evaluation.

Figures 1 and 2 opposite show the number of individual volunteers involved in these different capacities and the proportion of volunteer hours devoted to each type of activity respectively.

11 The figure of £11.09 per hour used here was accepted by BIS as the measure for the value of volunteer time secured through the Community Learning Trust pilots.
**Figure 1** Total number of volunteers involved in different capacities

*Note: Volunteers could have been involved in more than one activity*

**Figure 2** Distribution of volunteer hours, by type of activity
While community outreach accounted for the largest volume of volunteer activity, the delivery of learning programmes was the route through which individual volunteers most frequently participated. A striking feature of volunteering in CLIF projects is that, in many cases, volunteers took on roles that involved them not simply as supporters and champions of learning, but as developers and leaders. The following examples illustrate the range of activities undertaken by CLIF volunteers:

- Volunteers on the Culture Vultures project developed and led guided local history tours within Hull Museums Service.

- Two TimeBank volunteers in Birmingham received specialist training to provide advice on Universal Credit and support with digital skills for users of a neighbourhood one-stop-shop advice centre (see Case study 2 for more information).

- Volunteers at a community house in Lancashire led and contributed to five environmental projects to clear local ‘grot spots’; local police have reported a reduction in anti-social behaviour at these sites as a result (see Case study 3).

- Volunteers with @SidwellStreetOnline supported learners in practising their digital skills at a regular ‘Coffee and Computers’ drop-in session at a community centre in Exeter (see Case study 4).

- Projects reported that many of those who became involved as volunteers with CLIF were new to volunteering, and had indicated that they intended to continue volunteering in the future.

- Over a third (36 per cent) of the sample of 333 learners for whom evidence was collected on attitudes to volunteering reported an increase in their motivation to volunteer over the period during which they were participating in learning through CLIF.
4.2 Individual benefits of volunteering in community learning

The distinction between learners and volunteers was not clear-cut on most CLIF projects. Often, volunteers were either initially engaged as learners and subsequently supported to progress to volunteering roles, or they were recruited as volunteers and learning formed part of the package of support that the project provided to help them in the role.

Twenty-one projects reported having collected good evidence of wider outcomes experienced by learners linked to their participation in volunteering. These findings suggest that volunteering in a community learning context can produce enhanced outcomes for learners. In addition, a third of projects (32) reported outcomes for volunteers as a distinct category. The outcomes from volunteering most frequently reported by learners and volunteers were:

- increased community participation
- gaining skills for work
- increased self-esteem. (See Figure 3 below and Figure 4 overleaf.)

![Figure 3](image-url) Numbers of learners who experienced various wider outcomes as a result of volunteering as reported by projects
4.2.1 Increased community participation

CLIF supported many kinds of community participation, reflecting the diverse aims of the projects. A recurrent theme, however, is the way in which becoming a volunteer opened up new opportunities for learners and volunteers to:

- develop new social relationships;
- contribute to the life of their community;
- develop greater understanding of how to influence decisions and actions in their locality.

Specific examples of these kinds of outcomes reported by projects include the following:

- Adults with mental health difficulties made new friendships and became less socially isolated as a result of volunteering on a community gardening project in Birmingham (see Case study 2).
What does CLIF tell us?

- Learners with learning difficulties and disabilities took part in voluntary social action which enabled them to connect with and influence community groups and networks across the health and social housing sectors, the police, and local politics in Kent.

Through a community learning and volunteering project in the Walworth area of Southwark, London, learners from a diverse range of social and ethnic backgrounds came together to set up their own volunteer projects covering interests from break-dancing to English classes, and these groups subsequently attracted further volunteers from the local community.

**4.2.2 Skills for work**

Many projects focused on developing learners’ and volunteers’ employability skills, as part of a wider aim to improve the social and economic position of disadvantaged learners. Providing volunteering opportunities within the project enabled participants to develop and practise attributes and skills that are known to be valued by employers. Eleven projects specifically reported that they had collected evidence that showed that the confidence and motivation of their volunteers to seek paid work had increased. Examples of the ways in which CLIF projects supported the development of employment-related skills through volunteering included the following:

- A community radio project, Swindon Voices, provided opportunities for learner–volunteers to develop teamwork skills and collected evidence which demonstrated that for most of those involved this was their first experience of working in a group.

- A group of learners volunteering with the Birmingham Time to Learn project’s TimeBank undertook transferable food safety training, which enabled them to contribute to catering for events (see Case study 2).

- Forty-two learner–volunteers with a community radio project in Surrey reported that they had gained new skills which had enabled them to update and enhance their CVs.
4.2.3 Increased self-esteem

The positive impact of volunteering on learners’ and volunteers’ confidence and self-esteem was generally attributed to the sense that they were:

- making a contribution to the development and delivery of a project that was recognised and valued,
- helping others in their community, and
- passing on or sharing skills and knowledge.

For example:

- All 18 volunteers on the Pass It On project, which engaged unemployed residents in a disadvantaged area of Birmingham in a range of learning and volunteering activities, reported an increase in their self-esteem and confidence in contributing to their community.

- Adults with long-term health conditions who volunteered on the Creative Directions project reported that being able to work alongside the artists who delivered the project and to contribute ideas and skills to the development of the learning activities made them feel worthwhile and appreciated, with a positive impact on their mental wellbeing.

4.3 Community benefits

As was demonstrated above, volunteers made a substantial contribution to the delivery of many projects. The skills, knowledge and experience of volunteers provided projects with additional capacity, new perspectives and an often first-hand understanding of the needs and interests of the target learner groups. For delivery partners and the wider community, a range of benefits resulted from deploying the resources of volunteers within a community learning context.
4.3.1 Increasing local learning

Some of these benefits related to the expansion of sustainable opportunities for learning and volunteering within a local area. In particular:

- **Offering a blend of volunteering and learning opportunities helped organisations to extend their reach into their localities and engaged more diverse members of the community in social action.** Community Learning Champions and other volunteers in similar roles were instrumental in bringing in new learners whom more conventional outreach activities had failed to inspire (see Case study 4). In addition, the provision of volunteering opportunities with embedded learning motivated new adults to participate (see Case study 3).

- **The creation of a pool of trained and experienced volunteers made a major contribution to the sustainability of project activity initiated through CLIF, and in some cases to the sustainability of the delivery organisations themselves.** Over a third of projects (36 per cent) stated that volunteer-led self-organised learning groups formed a key plank of their sustainability plans. All the projects featured as case studies in this report illustrate this approach, and plan to continue elements of their work as embedded volunteer-led activity. At Mercer House (Case study 3), volunteers play a vital role in all aspects of the management and running of the organisation and, as such, are helping to make a range of new commercial ventures viable and to secure the longer term future of the community centre itself.

- **Several projects have established sustainable volunteering hubs which will strengthen the future potential of volunteering both as an opportunity for individuals and as a dimension of local service delivery.** This approach ensures that there are systems in place to manage volunteer turnover; to engage, develop and support new volunteers; and to deploy volunteers effectively within the locality. Time to Learn (Case study 2) and Mercer House (Case study 3) exemplify this approach.
4.3.2 Enhancing local communities

Other benefits derived from the specific activities undertaken by individual projects demonstrate the kinds of outcomes that can be achieved by well-executed learning and volunteering initiatives. For example:

- Environmental projects such as the development of community gardens both **enhanced the aesthetic environment for local residents** and **helped to address problems of anti-social behaviour** associated with neglected spaces (see Case studies 2 and 3).

- **Projects brought together residents from diverse cultural backgrounds and of different ages, helping to build a stronger sense of community and a commitment to working together to pursue a common goal.** The ‘Boots and Roots’ exhibition based around experiences of migration delivered by learner–volunteers working in partnership with museum staff in Nottingham on the Universal Roots project, and the Culture Mash festival run by Time to Learn volunteers (see Case study 2), along with many other projects, achieved this outcome.
• Volunteering contributed to the development of more inclusive communities by enabling people who were marginalised by their personal circumstances (such as age or disability) to take on new social roles and secure a stake in their community (see Case studies 1 and 4).

4.4 What works well?

CLIF projects highlighted a number of features of effective practice in relation to volunteering in community learning contexts. They showed how incorporating these features into volunteering programmes can help to maximise the impact for individuals and communities.

• A coherent framework of support and development enabled volunteers to fulfil their role effectively, motivated people to volunteer by demonstrating a commitment to helping them to give their best, and fostered progression.

• The most effective support presented volunteering explicitly as a learning opportunity, and nurtured the mutually reinforcing relationship between learning and volunteering. It included initial appraisal of individuals’ motivations and skills; access to learning and skills development, both to address gaps and to stimulate participation in learning; and support for reflection, to consolidate learning and ensure that participants recognised and could articulate what they had gained from the experience and the progress that they had made.

• Strong partnerships, which brought together a range of organisations, enabled adults with different interests and experience to engage in volunteering and learning. Effective partnerships included organisations that had experience of supporting volunteers and those with expertise in engaging key target groups. Ideally, they were able to offer a variety of volunteering and learning opportunities in varied settings.
What does CLIF tell us?

- The best projects offered learners the choice of a range of different volunteering opportunities and enabled them to contribute to decisions about what specific activities were undertaken and how, to negotiate their individual roles, and to give feedback to influence the development of projects. This openness and flexibility helped to develop learners’ self-esteem, independence, decision-making and critical thinking skills, and fostered enjoyment of – and pride in – their role. In doing so, it provided a stepping stone towards giving learners a stake and a voice in their local community.
5 Case studies

Case study 1
Connected and Learning Glossopdale

Summary of the project

Led by Volunteer Centre Glossop, this project aimed to encourage active citizenship and community participation among older people and adults living with long-term and chronic health conditions in the Glossopdale area of Derbyshire. Close working relationships were developed with 19 local groups which were able to offer a wide range of meaningful supported volunteering experiences. By providing opportunities to engage in sustainable learning and volunteering activities, the project’s aim was to develop learners’ skills and self-confidence and raise their aspirations.

Fifteen places were offered on a mixed programme of learning and volunteering. Learning was both formal and informal. It included an initial two-day ‘core’ learning programme, followed by an individual goal-setting session for each learner and a volunteer placement with access to ongoing support, as well as opportunities to undertake further courses in topics such as IT, First Aid and Derbyshire County Council’s ‘Volunteer Passport’ courses to work with either young people or vulnerable adults.

Impact on volunteering

The project has enabled individual participants to re-engage with the community and access learning and volunteering. Many came to the project with deep-rooted feelings of being socially disconnected and disempowered, not only by their own life experiences but also by their
relationships with local agencies, which often treat them as passive recipients of services. Volunteering has enabled them to have influence in the community, to be part of the dialogue, and to express opinions. For those wishing to move into paid work, the project has enabled them to experience a regular routine and demonstrate that they can be punctual, reliable and a team player. Positive personal outcomes for learners have included finding employment, being accepted on to a residential course and improved confidence and independence. Typical comments from learners about their volunteering include:

   **I feel it gives me an identity and a purpose in life.**

   **I have been waiting for a long time for something to happen, and now it has.**

All participants are continuing to volunteer in some capacity and have expressed a commitment to volunteering and learning in the future.

Critical to the success of the project was its commitment to providing a framework of appropriate individualised support for adults who find it difficult to actively engage. Local organisations offering volunteer opportunities are now more aware of the additional support that needs to be provided and have indicated a long-term commitment to offering supported volunteering opportunities that make community participation accessible to all.
Case study 2
Time to Learn

Summary of the project

This project established a TimeBank with the aim of raising the level of community participation and learning among residents in the Northfield district of Birmingham, as well as helping to address significant local issues relating to poor health, worklessness, poverty and a lack of opportunities for social and cultural learning. The TimeBank approach encourages volunteering by valuing equally the contribution that everyone in the community can make and providing a framework for people to share and develop their skills, knowledge and experience.

Led by Northfield Town Centre Partnership (NTCP), in partnership with the Eco Centre, the Time to Learn project created a diverse range of community learning and volunteering opportunities to engage local residents, foster community involvement and build cultural capital. Specific initiatives included the development of a community garden and related environmental projects, family learning days,
inter-generational learning and local cultural events. Beyond this, numerous sustainable community learning groups were established that reflected learners’ needs and interests. In addition, volunteer opportunities and work experience placements were available through the wider work of NTCP and partner projects. An innovative aspect of Time to Learn was that hours ‘banked’ through volunteering could be exchanged for the opportunity to undertake structured learning on a wide range of subjects, from ‘Introduction to Volunteering’ to ‘Beginners’ Gardening’ to ‘Building a Creative Community’.

**Impact on volunteering**

The approach proved immensely effective at engaging people in learning and volunteering. In total, 477 adults joined the TimeBank and contributed 4,675 volunteer hours. Volunteers included older people, adults with mental health difficulties, people who had experienced domestic violence, unemployed adults and ex-offenders. They reported a wide range of benefits, including improved physical and mental health, stronger social relationships and increased confidence and employability. Comments from learners include:

*It’s good to know we are all learning together and are as good as each other. I am enjoying learning in the group.*

*It’s totally different to what I expected. It has given me lots of opportunities to develop and learn new skills... I now feel more confident about myself and my career path.*

The TimeBank has been a high profile development locally and will continue as a volunteer hub for Northfield. Volunteers will play a key role in sustaining the activity, and partnerships are being strengthened with key local agencies, including the Clinical Commissioning Group and the Police and Crime Commissioner, which have recognised the contribution that structured volunteering can make to supporting their agendas around health improvement and crime reduction.
Case study 3
Mercer – Learn and Share

Summary of the project

Based in Clayton-le-Moors, Lancashire, this project provided training and support for volunteers running Mercer House, a community social enterprise offering learning, advice and support services to the local community. By enabling volunteers to cascade their learning to local people, the project widened the range of learning opportunities offered by Mercer and, in the process, engaged more residents and strengthened the house’s role as a hub for community learning and volunteering. The focus of the project’s activities reflected a concern to address specific issues facing the local area, by widening participation in learning, developing skills for work, improving the local living environment and promoting better health.

Impact on volunteering

Ninety-six new volunteers were engaged through the project, to work alongside the 55 already engaged with Mercer House. This has greatly increased the scope and scale of services that the centre can
A range of positive outcomes were identified as a result of the volunteers’ work, including the establishment of a local health focus group (Clayton Cares), healthier eating among residents following distribution of a health awareness pack, and the clearance of five ‘grot spots’. Central to the project’s success was having a structured approach in place to provide information, training, support and guidance to volunteers. A volunteer co-ordinator was appointed, who carried out appraisals with all volunteers and directed them to learning that would meet their interests and help to fill skills gaps. A key theme that emerged from discussions with prospective volunteers was that they wanted the role to have a purpose and for them to be effective in helping others. Providing appropriate support and access to learning encouraged participation and helped to ensure that these ambitions were realised and the project got the best from its volunteers. Volunteers reported that the community learning had increased their determination to ‘do a good job’ and had given them the knowledge and skills to become better volunteers. They stated that they were more likely to identify and tackle issues in their community and to take the lead.
The project has put the future of Mercer House on a sustainable footing. A wide base of skilled volunteers are able to manage the centre for the benefit of the local community and the individual projects established by CLIF will continue. New partnerships have been developed, and existing ones strengthened, to ensure that community learning remains at the heart of the House’s work. Crucially, the centre is committed to continuing the role of volunteer co-ordinator, recognising that this is key to ensuring that volunteers are fulfilled, safe and able to realise the many benefits of volunteering.
Summary of the project

This project, led by Exeter College, combined the skills and experience of community partners to identify and train volunteer Community Learning Champions (CLCs) to revitalise learning in and around the community centre in Sidwell Street, Exeter. @SidwellStreetOnline promoted the sharing of skills and knowledge between generations, targeting hard-to-reach learners amongst unemployed 19–23 year olds and older participants, valuing volunteers and encouraging lifelong learning. Learning opportunities included IT tasters and longer courses on gardening, history, digital photography and budget cookery.

Impact on volunteering

Fifteen volunteers were involved in a variety of capacities in the management, development and delivery of the project, at the same time increasing their own skills, confidence and networks. They played a key role on the steering group, ran informal ‘Coffee and Computers’ drop-ins, delivered sessions in care homes, were instrumental in engaging people in groups outside the centre and passing on information about learning opportunities by word of mouth, fed back information about the learning needs and interests of others within their community, and undertook administrative and other ‘behind-the-scenes’ tasks. Volunteers were provided with full training and support to fulfil their roles and gained confidence to recognise the value of their own skills and how they could use these to help other people. The project worked hard to develop a range of volunteer roles so that it accommodated the different ways in which people felt able to become involved. Ten volunteers have gone on to further voluntary work, employment-focused training and formal courses, including Access to Higher Education and PTLLS (an initial teaching qualification). The
Coffee and Computers drop-ins were delivered entirely by volunteers and are being sustained in that way beyond the period of CLIF funding.

Partnerships and engagement with a variety of organisations and community groups were central to the project’s success. Key partners included St Sidwell’s Community Centre, Exeter CVS (Council for Voluntary Service), Citizens Advice and local community associations. Staff from partner organisations reported that, as well as increasing learners’ digital skills, the project helped to strengthen links between different community groups, increased the sense of community cohesion and brought more new people into the community centre.