

## Reaching and engaging disadvantaged groups in and through community learning

### Introduction

This paper follows a NIACE seminar – *Meeting community needs: community learning providers and the voluntary sector: working together to meet the needs of disadvantaged groups*. The event aimed to encourage dialogue between community learning providers and voluntary sector organisations, in order to understand and address key issues in meeting the needs of very disadvantaged learners, and to share current effective practice. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills' (BIS) Further Education reform plan stated that the public subsidy given to providers for community learning<sup>1</sup> should focus on supporting access and progression for those who are disadvantaged and furthest away from the labour market.

This paper draws together methods of reaching and engaging disadvantaged groups identified from research, experiences of the seminar participants, and various toolkits and guides previously published. An appendix is also included, which highlights the barriers to learning identified in national and international research.

### Methods of reaching and engaging

Reaching and engaging disadvantaged groups requires a blend of actions at strategic and operational levels. Reducing barriers to learning means making routes in, and opportunities to progress, easier and more accessible. This involves addressing a range of practical issues and reducing the risks (psychological, social and financial) posed by learning for vulnerable groups. From research and on-the-ground experience, the following methods are found to be effective in reaching, engaging and, importantly, progressing learners from disadvantaged groups.

### Reaching

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Community learning is an umbrella term describing a broad range of learning that brings together adults, often from different ages and backgrounds, to pursue an interest, address a need, acquire a new skill, become healthier or learn to support their children. It is usually unaccredited and includes structured adult education classes taught by professionally qualified teachers, independent study online and self-organised study, often in groups. It is delivered by providers in the public, private and third sectors, or organised by people themselves through groups, clubs and societies.

- Use trusted intermediaries to contact people informally in their own neighbourhoods. These might be representatives of community organisations, volunteers such as Community Learning Champions, or staff or volunteers linked to service providers such as health centres and Children’s Centres.
- Go to where the potential learners are, rather than expecting them to come to you. Post offices, shopping malls, school gates have all been identified as effective places to reach disadvantaged groups.

## Engaging

- Use non-standard venues such as doctor’s surgeries, empty shops, local supermarkets.
- Make sure that learning programmes and modes of delivery are genuinely responsive to the requirements, needs and aspirations of specific disadvantaged groups.
- Family learning is a proven effective method for engaging parents and carers in their own, as well as their children’s learning.
- Ensure that learning is relevant to the every-day experiences of people’s lives and is genuinely purposeful and productive, with real benefits from involvement. Targeted information, advice and guidance is key to supporting prospective learners in recognising the relevance of the learning on offer to their lives.
- Target learning at identified excluded groups and design it (from outreach, through curriculum development and delivery, to evaluation and progression) in consultation with them to meet their circumstances and needs [see also *Curriculum co-design* on the Community Learning Reform website].

## Achievement and progression

- Make sure that targeted learning is linked to other, mainstream opportunities and learners transferring from one context to another are supported in their progression;
- Ensure learners are guided towards the right course, at the right level;
- Give learners constructive feedback on their learning based on formative as well as summative evaluation methods. Encourage self-assessment and peer assessment.
- When designing programmes, make sure they include opportunities for learners to help and support each other (both formally and informally).
- Include personal support for study and help with study skills. Make sure these are available easily and delivered, when necessary, with discretion (for example, help with fees, literacy or numeracy support, or counselling about the domestic impact of learning).
- Keep the curriculum flexible and allow learners to accumulate achievement in the sporadic and intermittent ways sometimes dictated by the patterns of adult lives.

## Connecting outreach and engagement with strategic planning

It is important to recognise that, in a climate of contracting public funding, the capacity for outreach work is often much reduced, as is the availability of outreach teams in, for example,

other local authority teams. This highlights the need to use new ways of reaching disadvantaged groups, in particular working in partnership with voluntary and community organisations who can help to reach and engage new learners, and also with other public sector professionals who work in the community, such as community health visitors. It is therefore important to think about where and how outreach and engagement work will take place within your strategic plan.

- Make sure you have the data you need – what provision is available, what is needed, who is missing, and who can help you reach your target learners.
- Share information with partners, in particular look at who is doing what with whom - avoiding unnecessary duplication while ensuring that learners get the learning that's most relevant to them.
- Think about how you might develop the capacity of organisations and individuals to enhance your outreach potential, eg. using a Community Champions approach ([www.communitylearningchampions.org.uk](http://www.communitylearningchampions.org.uk)).
- Look at how you might work with and support small community organisations to engage with you and extend your reach, eg. through a community learning forum, through simplifying processes as much as possible, through small grants [see also *Making community learning grants to the Third Sector* on the Community Learning Reform website].
- Think creatively about how you can meet the needs of disadvantaged learners – use forums such as LEAFEA, HOLEX and FLLAG to share ideas; use local forums to engage and share ideas with voluntary and community organisations.
- Be confident about what you're doing and how it meets the needs of disadvantaged communities, and most importantly have good evidence that supports your claims. Be clear with Ofsted inspection teams and Skills Funding Agency Regional Managers about the context in which you're working, and your aims, objectives and challenges. Be prepared to challenge their judgements and assumptions where necessary at negotiation and inspection meetings. Have staff and partners ready to provide evidence at short notice to back up challenges.
- Make sure that methods for evidencing impact are embedded in your and your partners' processes at all levels [see also [resources for measuring impact on the Community Learning Reform website](#)]

## Example - Surrey Champions Inspire

Champions Inspire Community Learning Champions (CLCs) are volunteers who work with disadvantaged communities of place and interest across Surrey. The scheme is run by Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership (SLLP) and funded as part of its core activity. Initially, the scheme recruited most of its CLCs from among the frontline staff of partner voluntary and community organisations that provided services to people with mental health difficulties, ex-offenders and Army personnel and their families. SLLP is now seeking to extend the scheme to geographical areas of multiple disadvantage in the county and to develop individuals who are active within certain BME communities to become CLCs (e.g. Muslim women).

Evidence from VCOs working with SLLP's target groups highlighted a lack of understanding among providers about what communities wanted and needed and why they were not engaging with the opportunities that were available. Mainstream providers wanted to respond to this challenge, but the target-driven environment they operated in did not allow them sufficient time to invest in engaging with excluded communities. The scheme was set up to provide a channel of communication between learning providers and community groups who understand the learning needs and interests of the target communities. In doing so, it takes forward SLLP's mission to engage those who have missed out on learning.

*A detailed [case study of Surrey Champions Inspire](#) can be found on the [Community Learning Champions website](#)*

## Appendix: Research summary

Research shows that the decision to participate, or not, in post-compulsory education and training is affected by a range of factors:

- *personal characteristics* (age, gender, ethnic background, social class);
- *immediate circumstances* (income, previous educational experience, employment status, family commitments, place of residence, state of health or disability); and
- *structural factors* (timing of learning, access to information, learner support arrangements).

These can have favourable or adverse consequences. For more vulnerable communities, the predominantly negative effects are exacerbated by the ways in which these factors work together to increase disadvantage, creating complex and intransigent barriers that require planned responses of equal subtlety, thoroughness and durability.

The main generic barriers are set out below, divided between situational, structural, and dispositional and cultural difficulties.

### Situational barriers

The most commonly cited barriers to organised learning are practical – time, place and money.

#### Time

Lack of time is the reason given most frequently in national surveys, due largely to caring responsibilities and work commitments. It emerges as a major problem for men in paid employment, who also identify lack of any training requirement by their employer and time off to learn as contributory factors. Shift work is also a deterrent.

Despite the greater availability of pre-school facilities, childcare remains a major, long-standing issue for women wanting to learn. Women are also more likely to be affected by caring duties for elderly, sick or disabled relatives.

#### Place

Distances from learning, coupled with transport problems (insufficient public transport or low incomes that prohibit car ownership), can make learning inaccessible for those with family and caring commitments, older adults, people in rural areas, those with health or disability problems, and residents of poorer communities.

The desire to learn locally, near the home, and to stay within known boundaries, is an understandable and practical response to a range of barriers. Experience shows that when sufficient opportunities to learn at different levels are offered within neighbourhoods, more disadvantaged learners are able to achieve in their learning, build on their successes, and follow coherent progression routes.

#### Money

Money worries are a particular problem for some groups of mature learners, adults on state benefits and low wages, and people with dependant relatives (children and elderly parents).

The cost of learning includes course and exam fees but also entails payments for materials and books, equipment, dependent care and transport. Escalating fees and the scaling back of public subsidy for courses outside current government policy priorities may prove a significant deterrent to participation.

## **Structural barriers**

Structural factors affecting the supply of learning opportunities result from the way learning is planned and delivered by funders and educational providers. These are usually beyond learners' control.

### **Insufficient information and knowledge**

Knowing about learning opportunities is a prerequisite for accessing them. Unfortunately, people who are not involved habitually in organised education can struggle to discover appropriate courses. Lack of information increases the confusion caused by numerous providers offering complex selections of courses and qualifications. This can be exacerbated by the assumption amongst more excluded learners that further and higher education is beyond their reach.

### **Postcode lottery**

The distribution of adult education and training opportunities across the country is very uneven. Residents of rural and poorer areas, people with fewer qualifications, those who live on lower incomes, and people with more limited job prospects, are generally more likely to have fewer opportunities to participate in organised learning. This situation can change dramatically, for example in response to the loss of a major local employer, and as providers respond to powerful policy imperatives, which privilege certain kinds of learning.

### **Institutional barriers**

The look and 'feel' of education centres or institutions affects learner access and achievement, particularly amongst more hesitant and non-traditional learners. Buildings that appear formal, confusing (with inadequate signage) and with a 'different', perhaps younger culture, can be a barrier to adult recruitment and retention. Staff who, by virtue of their other roles, become the first point of contact for learners (receptionists, security guards, switchboard operators) can also deter people inadvertently if they are insufficiently trained in setting people at ease. This includes responding appropriately to learners with disabilities and to those who speak community languages.

Inflexible delivery arrangements are a significant problem. The traditional offer of iterative learning through weekly sessions is almost impossible for those with substantial caring responsibilities or a highly variable life pattern. 'Bridging' and mentoring arrangements can help prevent missed meetings accumulating into a withdrawal from a course. Customary term times with long holiday breaks do not suit all adults, and the ubiquitous September start to the academic year falls at one the busiest times in rural areas. Again, institutional flexibility is key.

Providers' responses to supply side pressures can result in unintended damage. For example, the need to act on minimum student numbers can lead to new learners finding courses cancelled without prior discussion or notification, and their registration transferred to

other programmes. The impact of these (often unavoidable) steps on learner retention, progression and achievement will be intensified without sufficient help and advice available.

### **Lack of work-based training**

Evidence shows that the workplace is a major source of informal and formal learning. It plays a vital role not only in workforce development but also in widening participation amongst non-traditional learners. However, many businesses do not prioritise training for their workforce. Small and medium size enterprises in particular, tend to subordinate staff training to immediate and short-term business needs. This is in part a response to tight financial margins and lack of appropriate courses and expertise.

### **Dispositional and cultural barriers**

In order to tackle practical matters like selecting an appropriate course, finding the time and money, or arranging childcare, people must be motivated to learn and prepared to take a risk.

Psychological or dispositional factors that affect confidence and motivation can be difficult to address because they involve perceptions, attitudes and assumptions. These are subjective and do not always present themselves in easily identifiable ways. For example, people can cite problems with time or money when the greater barrier is lack of confidence or anxiety about structured learning.

### **Previous learning experiences**

School experiences have an enduring impact on adult attitudes towards education. Non-traditional learners are more likely to have had undermining experiences of compulsory education. Research suggests the association is particularly strong amongst young men who have developed a dislike of the academic nature of the school curriculum and carry this antipathy into adulthood.

Concern about repeating earlier 'failure' and fear of exposure to humiliation are powerful disincentives. These impact strongly on men but lack of confidence is probably the most common psychological barrier to learning. Fear of being too old is also significant and can affect adults of all ages, not just older learners.

### **Cultural factors**

Members of certain communities, occupational groups or social networks, can find departure from accepted cultural values, norms and behaviour patterns, exceptionally difficult. Growing up in a family or social milieu where adult learning is seen as (or has proved to be) irrelevant, where organised learning exists outside the cultural frame of reference and is something 'other' people do, is a significant barrier.

These perceptions are reinforced when there are no obvious, tangible benefits from participation. For example, unemployed people who fail to get sustained paid work despite successive training courses are likely to become increasingly cynical about the value of learning.

Families and immediate networks can actively discourage participation. For example, some married or partnered women can encounter opposition when their student role conflicts with



domestic and familial responsibilities. This is intensified by the cultural expectations of some minority ethnic communities that are more constraining for women.

Formal learning is incompatible with masculinity for some men, and detracts from their identity as 'doers', workers and breadwinners. Learning is expected to end at school and continuations are appropriate for women only – 'men earn, women learn'. The increasing number of women participating in education and training will tend to reinforce this view.

#### **About NIACE**

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is an independent non-governmental organisation and charity. It is a membership body with corporate and individual members drawn from a range of places where adults learn: in further education colleges, workplaces, local community settings, universities, prisons and in their own homes via technology. NIACE activities aim to secure more, different and better quality opportunities for adult learners in the UK, particularly those who have benefited least from their initial education and training.

#### **Contact:**

NIACE, 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester, LE1 7GE, United Kingdom

Tel: 0116 204 4200/4201

Web: [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk) Twitter: @niacehq