

Response to the Learning and Skills Improvement Service consultation on  
**Effective community development: a strategic framework**  
from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)

## Introduction

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the debate about the role of the learning and skills sector in relation to community development. We are pleased to be able to respond in more depth through the LSIS Steering Group for Community Development. ‘Community Development’ may be a term which has been interpreted in different ways and with more or less enthusiasm over several decades, but it has continued in practice as a way of engaging and empowering communities, primarily but not exclusively geographical, in the development and shaping of their social and physical environment. Learning has a central catalytic role to play in community development. This may be through the use of premises as neighbourhood hub, through formal programmes of education and training and also - and equally importantly - through informal learning, including through artistic activities and festivals. The learning dimension of community development, provides a non-threatening way for adults to engage, co-operatively, in activities which build social and cultural capital as well as human capital; develop community cohesion in an inclusive manner; and help people achieve greater collective well-being as well enhanced personal growth.

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, universities, local authority services, community settings, prisons and in their own homes via technology. The ends to which NIACE activities are directed can be summarised as being to secure more, different and better quality opportunities for adult learners in the UK. It is particularly concerned to advance the interests of those who have benefited least from their initial education and training.

Over many years, since its foundation in 1921, NIACE’s work has undertaken a range of quantitative and qualitative research studies and development projects addressing barriers to participation and achievement and how these may be overcome. It has developed strategies for successful participation and progression in education and training, both formal and informal, from first-step learning to advanced study. NIACE has extensive experience of work supporting learning for community development.

Adult learning contributes to the economic, social and community well-being of local communities. The impact of adult learning and skills extends far beyond provision supported by the Skills Funding Agency. It includes enterprise education;

Universities of the Third Age; initiatives to tackle worklessness; public health education; neighbourhood regeneration; higher education outreach; care strategies for older and more vulnerable people; offender rehabilitation; library-led learning; Sure Start and other family-focussed initiatives; civic education (including political education) and the self-help and welfare activities of people affiliated through faith or national origin.

NIACE's recent management of the £20m Transformation Fund for the Department for Business Innovation and Skills has seen the blossoming of many community-based adult learning projects, based on local partnerships, the best and most successful of which were based on negotiation and consultation with local people, and were based firmly in a model of community development - empowering, collaborative, inclusive and, often, challenging perceptions, attitudes and received wisdom.

### **Comments on the objectives of the draft strategic framework**

NIACE notes that the focus of the consultation is about supporting providers of further education and training but would caution LSIS that there is a real risk that SfA-funded learning providers may, unless they approach community development through partnership with other organisations experienced in working with disempowered communities, be seen as 'colonialists'. Quite apart from local authority services of various kinds with democratic accountability, there are often a range of other statutory stakeholders, well-established third-sector organisations and local employers engaged in community development activity. An inclusive partnership approach which understands and values what various actors bring to the table is an essential pre-condition for effective work.

Community development has clear resonance with adult learning through its emphasis on empowerment, focusing on issues identified by communities, building on existing knowledge and experience, developing cohesion and participation. There is a long history of engagement with community development by third sector organisations and local authority adult learning services, as well as colleges and HEIs. Health promotion services, Leisure and Recreation departments and schools also have extensive experience of community development approaches which should not be ignored. It is important therefore to recognise and build on existing practice and experience within these organisations when developing new strategies for the learning and skills sector.

Community development is particularly pertinent to the government's increasing emphasis on localism, the Big Society and reform of public services. The engagement and involvement of individuals and communities is central to some of the key principles of the Big Society - active citizenship, volunteering and collective problem solving. Another key pillar of the Big Society is that of community enterprise and developing employability skills, and NIACE suggest that the development of a framework for community development also recognises the workplace as a location for community development (including the perspectives of

‘community unionism’ and the complementarity of the roles of union learning reps and community learning champions).

There has been a recently revitalised interest in ideas of community and the coalition government’s plans for a Big Society are complemented by a renewed and wider emphasis on localism and away from micro-management from the centre. In its more radical manifestations (in handing power to groups to run libraries or establish free schools) this throws up new educational challenges for providers - as people will need to learn the skills they need - and learn new ways of working. Providers will have to act, along with others, as important place shapers and agents of social change, but this will have to be done in consultation with local people and communities. Providers cannot simply work with ‘the usual suspects’.

NIACE sees the focus on community development as particularly timely. The clear commitment by the coalition Government to adult and community learning - including informally-organised learning (as one of its priorities for BIS), includes an acceptance of the principles of engaging with communities and the development of provision according to need and through consultation. NIACE’s two current Inquiries into Literacy and Numeracy, will report next year, with recommendations that we take a new look at reaching those with the poorest skills through an acceptance that discrete provision is not necessarily the best way of engaging adults, but that community based, ‘just in time’ learning, using community based mentors or Learning Champions may bring better results.

NIACE is shortly to announce more details of a third inquiry, in partnership with the Association of Colleges and 157 Group. This will investigate *Colleges and their Communities* and NIACE would anticipate a close and co-operative relationship with LSIS around this and would welcome further discussion on

- extending the strategic framework provided in the consultation document and the adoption of a widened view of community development more in line with ministers’ intentions;
- an explicit recognition that many learning providers, particularly in the third sector and local authorities, already are engaged in community development and can provide models of good practice;
- recognising that community development is usually seen as being focused on what communities need and want, not what learning providers can provide.
- how communities can better engage in existing learning programmes through outreach. NIACE suggest one question to re-reframe debate might be: ***How can learning providers engage with community issues and community change?*** This will be one of the key questions in the ‘Colleges in

Communities' Inquiry, and we would be happy to help support and shape further LSIS work to such an end

## Response to Consultation.

### 1. Do the definitions and explanations enhance your understanding of community development? Is anything missing?

The definitions of community development used within the consultation document do not, in NIACE's view, fully encompass some of the key principles of community development. The Community Development Foundation defines community development's purpose as:

*To help groups and networks of people take joint action on matters that concern them for the public good, and enable individuals to influence the decisions that affect their lives.*

Implicit within this definition are the notions of empowerment and collaboration, with individuals and communities identifying issues that are of concern for them.

Section 10 of the consultation document could be seen to be at odds with these principles, in that it outlines a list of benefits for providers. This suggests a top-down approach to community development and underplays the contribution that learning and skills providers can make in working *with* communities instead of doing things *for* them or *to* them.

In terms of what is missing within the definitions of community development, it may be helpful to consider the aspects of community development identified by the Community Development Foundation:

*helping people find common causes on issues that affect them*

*helping people work together on such issues under their own control*

*building the strengths and independence of community groups, organisations and networks*

*building equity, inclusiveness, participation and cohesion amongst people and their groups and organisations*

*empowering people and their organisations where appropriate to influence and help transform public policies and services and other factors affecting the conditions of their lives*

Within these more widely accepted definitions of community development; there is a significant role for learning and skills providers. Indeed many have been engaged in supporting community development activities for a number of years and examples are outlined in response to question 3 below.

NIACE suggests, for clarity, including in the strategic framework a definition of the 'FE sector', recognising that the sector encompasses local authorities, third sector organisations, private training providers, specialist colleges, sixth form colleges as well as general further education colleges.

**2. Can you associate with the strategic implications of the values underpinning community development? How do they resonate with your own organisation's values?**

NIACE encourages all adults to access learning of all kinds, particularly those adults who have benefited least from initial education, have low qualifications or are members of marginalised groups. NIACE also believes that involvement in adult learning makes an important contribution to social justice, active citizenship, and community cohesion and in addressing inequalities. In this context community development, as defined in our response to question 1 above, has an important role in achieving greater and wider access to learning.

The key values of community development outlined in the consultation document are: Equality and antidiscrimination; Social justice; Collective action; Community empowerment; Working and learning together. NIACE can see clear synergy between these values and its own, as long as the voice of the community is seen as central to each.

The values of community development link strongly with learner voice. For example, members of the Yorkshire and Humber learner panel are gaining OCN qualifications for their work. and the national Community Learning Champions project, managed by NIACE, is demonstrating how training and supporting local people can develop powerful advocates for learning in their communities.

**3. Does the framework represent an adequate picture the role of the sector and community development? What could be further practical implications and examples?**

NIACE suggests that the framework in the consultation document provides a partial picture of the role of the sector in community development. Many learning and skills providers, particularly local authority and third sector providers, but also some further education colleges, engage in community development or have close partnership workings with the organisations that do. Local authorities and third sector providers have many examples of community development approaches to deliver adult learning and NIACE could facilitate access to these.

Examples include:

- the capacity building work undertaken using the Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities fund. This includes working with local voluntary and community groups to enable them to develop and support relevant learning in their own communities
- engagement activity carried out through the 'first steps' elements of the informal adult learning budgets. This work includes working with mental health charities; developing skills and knowledge needed to set up community businesses such as cafes; providing organising and citizenship skills so that residents can inform and influence local political decisions; establishing self-help groups;
- the BIS-funded Community Learning Champions Project that provides training and support for local people to become learning champions.
- Some local authority adult learning services which work with local community planning forums to organise the whole curriculum in their area, thereby creating ownership and increasing the perceived value of learning.

What characterises much of this work is that it:

- is based on genuine consultation with local communities and individuals;
- involves working with grassroots organisations that already have the contact with local people;
- requires a long-term commitment to build and sustain relationships;
- often requires multiple partnerships with third sector organisations, local authority neighbourhood staff, health workers as well as learning providers;
- results in learning provision that is determined by the needs of learners or the local community, not by what learning providers feel the community needs;
- is linked to long-term strategic priorities of organisations;

- requires staff with appropriate skills, experience and personal credibility to establish relationships within communities and with individuals.

The experience of the sector repeatedly cautions against developing prescriptive models of community development: we need to understand the dynamics of communities and seek to engage with them rather than impose externally designed solutions.

#### **4. How would you use a framework in your organisation?**

NIACE is not a direct provider of learning and skills. However, we facilitate and contribute to a range of networks of organisations involved in delivery of learning and skills provision and these comments are made within that context.

A framework that sets community development within wider strategic objectives such as localism, the Big Society, active citizenship action and collaboration between public services, could encourage a systemic and planned approach to community engagement by learning providers.

Clearly one aspect of the strategic framework is to encourage learning providers not currently involved in community development to become involved. However, it is vital that community development is viewed as a long-term strategic commitment rather than a short-term marketing opportunity and one that needs to be developed collaboratively with a range of local partners. There is evidence that communities become resistant to a succession of initiatives. NIACE's recent management of the Transformation Fund projects has identified that some hard to reach communities are very sceptical about new providers coming into an area with short-term projects, and that the most successful are that unilateral action may not be successful and that a long-term commitment coupled with good grass roots partnerships is required.

Any organisation wishing to engage in community development work needs to identify existing activity and work closely with existing partners. NIACE suggests that the strategic framework gives due regard to supporting providers to develop this expertise and capacity.

#### **5. What support would you need from LSIS to support the use of the strategic framework in your daily work?**

We expect that, as a matter of course, LSIS will extend its principle of involving the sector in the delivery of programmes to this strand of work. There are a number of learning providers which are involved in community development and

NIACE urges LSIS to use its knowledge to support the sector in this development. NIACE, as the lead body on adult learning, is very well placed to work with LSIS in supporting the implementation of a revised community development framework. Also through our range of provider networks and our development work we would be able to identify models and examples of good practice in community development and learning.

NIACE would be pleased to elaborate on any aspect of this response. In the first instance, please contact Ian Yarroll ([ian.yarroll@niace.org.uk](mailto:ian.yarroll@niace.org.uk)).

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