

Social value of adult learning for community empowerment



This briefing paper on the social value of adult learning for community empowerment has been produced by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) on behalf of the Local Government Group for cabinet members, elected members and directors of economic development. It provides a short overview on how adult learning provides outcomes that support and add value to a variety of local priorities as well as being of intrinsic value in its own right.

It contains examples gathered through case studies and through using a Social Return on Investment approach. This approach recognises the value of each step and, in particular, focuses on the value to the beneficiaries of the intervention, as well as to the partners and funders.

NIACE believes that adult learning is essential, not only to create and maintain a more skilled and knowledgeable workforce, but also for personal development, and for a just, inclusive and democratic society. We work to secure high-quality education and training systems that are responsive to the diversity and complexity of adults' needs and aspirations as learners. Our work has a particular focus on those who have not benefited through formal education systems and those who are under-represented in existing provision. These concerns are reflected in our work to strengthen the role of adult learning within local communities and to maximise the contribution it makes to addressing disadvantage and empowering communities of both place and interest.

Further briefing papers are available on the social value of adult learning for children and young people's services and for adult social care. The series aims to support established and newly elected decision makers to take a broad based approach to considering the role of adult learning in their locality.

Introduction

The method of providing adult learning and skills in local authorities can take many forms: it may be facilitated through the voluntary and community sector, commissioned from a variety of local partners including through new business models such as community interest companies or social enterprises, courses may be provided directly by the local authority. In many localities it is a mix of all of these: decisions have been made to use the right solution to meet local needs. In the current climate these decisions will inevitably have a financial focus. However, alongside this sits a whole range of social, economic and community values. Adult learning and skills can support families to help their children to learn and raise attainment; support communities to participate in local democracy; facilitate responses to demographic change and provide the right mix of skills to support local economic growth.

Empowering communities to share responsibility for the planning and delivery of services is an increasingly important issue for local authorities. The localism agenda, which proposes the devolution of decision making powers in many social and economic policy areas from central government to local government and communities, is gathering pace. It is widely recognised that a top down, ‘one size fits all’ approach to service provision is likely to be both less effective and less efficient than one which reflects and responds to the diverse and complex needs of local people.

Across the spectrum of services that local authorities provide, from social care to housing, to leisure and cultural facilities, there are benefits to be gained from working with communities to make and implement decisions about what is provided and how. Services developed in this way can be

targeted to deliver what people genuinely need and value, helping to eliminate waste and inefficiency. Barriers that prevent some people from using services can be identified and tackled. New resources in the form of the skills, knowledge, time and energy of local residents can be harnessed and developed. When local authorities and communities work in partnership to improve services in their area the relationship between citizens and local democratic structures is strengthened. In the current context of reduced public budgets, empowering communities is critical for ensuring that residents are able to work alongside local authorities to take on new roles and responsibilities for their neighbourhood.

Adult learning has a central role to play in community empowerment. Those communities whose need for effective public services is greatest – due to income poverty, health problems, poor housing, and other

1 HM Treasury (2010) *Total Place: a whole area approach to public services*. London: HM Treasury..

challenging personal circumstances - are also those who struggle most to make their voices heard. Community-based adult learning builds the capacity of local people to take the lead in addressing issues affecting their area. It enables them to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence that they need to

participate in voluntary community action and to work in partnership with public sector bodies. Empowering communities to shape the services they receive means better services producing better outcomes with more efficient use of resources.

Social value

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a term used in many ways. NIACE, working with adult learning providers in local authorities, has tested a specific model sponsored by the Cabinet Office. It assesses social and economic value and was developed in 2008 by a consortium of the SROI Network, the New Economics Foundation (NEF), the Charities Evaluation Services (CES), the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and the New Philanthropy Council (NPC). It was also supported by the Scottish Government.

The model is based on seven principles:

- involve stakeholders;
- understand what changes;
- value the things that matter;
- only include what is material;
- do not over-claim;
- be transparent;
- verify the result.

It has a fixed six stage methodology and is a standardised approach.² It identifies the changes created by a project or activity through the relationship between the inputs into the project, the outputs and the outcomes

from the perspective of the people who have been changed by the activity. This approach is now being used in the UK and internationally.

It is particularly relevant for adult learning with its key message of valuing what matters and capturing the impact of learning in contributing to

changing learners' lives and assessing how a project or activity creates change for the provider and other key stakeholders.

It enables a fundamental review of what changes from an activity and an assessment of its level of success in creating social value for all involved.

It made us think not only about what is happening but why does it matter."

"Because we've done the SROI, decision makers know that we are there."

The approach provides critical information to inform local decision making. Examples and key learning points from our work with local authorities on SROI are included in these briefings.

² Assurance and accreditation of the approach is through the SROI Network: <http://www.thesroinetwork.org>

Adult learning and community empowerment in Herefordshire

Herefordshire Council's adult and community learning provision contributes to delivering the strategic agenda set by the Council's innovative public service partnership with NHS Herefordshire. The Community Learning and Employability Unit has a commitment to supporting the role of adult and community learning in tackling poverty and inequality within local communities. Most provision is targeted at deprived areas and disadvantaged groups. Learning is delivered in community settings such as schools, community centres and children's centres and delivery of most courses is contracted out to local third-sector partners.

Herefordshire agreed to pilot the SROI approach focusing on its Bridge Street Buddies project based in the market town of Leominster. In the Ridgemoor area of the town, over 40 per cent of people live in households experiencing income deprivation and the area faces a range of related challenges. The Unit recognised the need to prioritise this neighbourhood, but introducing learning opportunities into the community had proved difficult.

The Bridge Street Buddies project tried a new approach to outreach and course development, working in partnership with a small community learning and development organisation. The learning agenda has been set by local people. Learners on the project wanted to learn how to plan and deliver fun and interesting social events that would be accessible to children and families on low incomes in the Ridgemoor area. They identified the lack of such activities as a key factor contributing to the community's social problems.

The SROI analysis evaluated the impact of this new approach to community learning

and assessed the social value to all the key participants and the council. The analysis found that the project is successfully involving a growing number of residents in community decision making and voluntary action to improve their neighbourhood. Significant social value has been created for all those involved.

The range of outcomes reported by learners themselves includes new skills, less social isolation and better mental wellbeing. Some have gained paid work or gone on to vocational training as a direct result of their participation in the project. Others now have the skills and confidence to represent their community more widely, at local consultation forums and on the town council. Whole families have got involved in organising the community events, which has strengthened relationships between partners, parents and children and led to better mental wellbeing within families. Parents are more confident to support their children's learning. The impact of the project is felt across the community. Residents reported how the events organised through the project have brought people closer together. There are fewer incidents of anti-social behaviour and less tension between groups of young people on the estate, leading to a safer and more pleasant environment.

Herefordshire Council is targeting its resources more effectively to bring about improvements in an area of need. The Community Learning and Employability Unit is reaching new learners in its key target groups, and many of those on the project have gained formal qualifications in line with national adult learning and skills priorities. The Unit has been able to consult more effectively with residents so that it is offering learning opportunities that reflect what people value and need. This new approach has empowered residents to act as

partners with the local authority to develop and implement solutions to local challenges. Adult learning has acted as a vehicle for encouraging volunteering, enabling the council to access new resources in the time, experience and energy of local residents.

“I am delighted to see the difference that this project has made to the engagement of the community in Leominster. It shows how adult learning can strengthen the

partnership between residents and the Council to release the untapped talents within our communities. This project demonstrates that local people often know best what their area needs. We can enable them to get involved and bring about change.”

Cllr Phillips, Cabinet Member Enterprise and Culture, Herefordshire Council.

Adult learning and community empowerment in Liverpool

Liverpool Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL) Partnership is led by Liverpool Adult Learning Service and brings together a range of partners to develop, deliver, promote and monitor a strong, diverse adult learning offer. The partnership aims to engage local people and contribute towards delivering the City Council’s wider strategy.

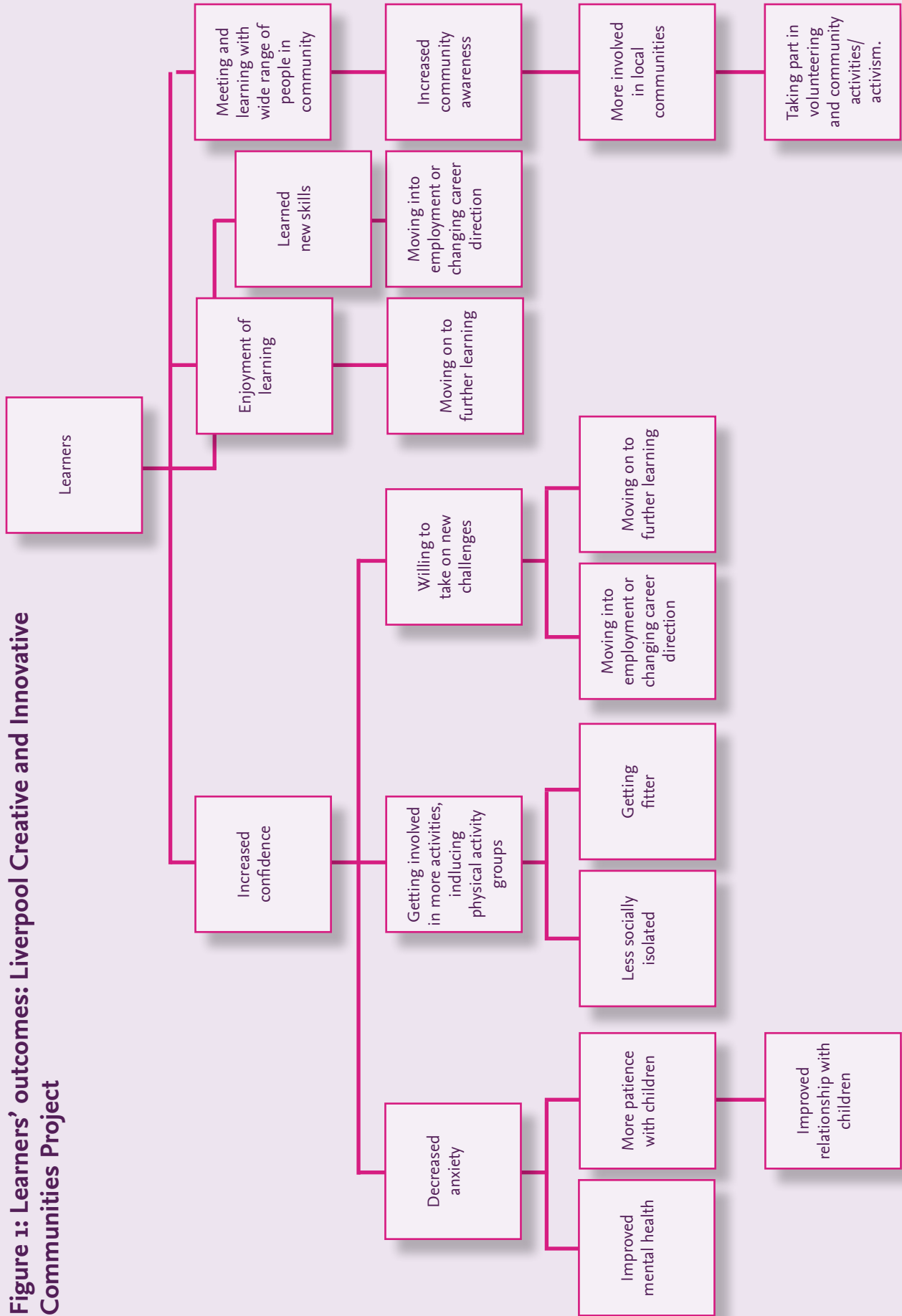
Liverpool City Council and its partners in the PCDL partnership were interested in carrying out SROI analysis of their Creative and Innovative Communities project. The project aimed to engage adults not usually involved in learning through innovative and creative new learning opportunities, underpinned by closer collaboration and pooling of expertise and resources within the partnership. The project targeted adults living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods across the city’s five Neighbourhood Management Areas. It took learning into the heart of local communities, delivering activities in locations such as parks, shopping centres, sports venues, markets, community centres and libraries – places where people already go. The learning activities focused on arts, crafts, culture, community heritage and social enterprise. They

were designed and developed in partnership with local communities, with volunteer learning champions playing an important role in providing information to learning providers about the needs and interests of local people.

Both the participants and the project team identified increased personal confidence and increased involvement in local communities as the main outcomes for participants. Since taking part in the project, learners reported doing more volunteering and being more active within their community. They were less socially isolated, and described the new social connectedness as ‘like being part of a family.’ Figure 1 shows the full range of outcomes identified for learners.

For Liverpool Council, the project enhanced partnership working. The range of adult learning opportunities offered in the city has broadened, and new communities are being attracted into learning. Partners within the PCDL partnership work together more effectively to identify new funding opportunities and develop successful bids, including some in new areas of work.

Figure 1: Learners' outcomes: Liverpool Creative and Innovative Communities Project



Policy issues

The localism agenda

It has been the stated intention of successive administrations to transfer more decision-making powers from central government to local government and communities. This devolution is seen as critical both for strengthening democratic accountability and for tackling entrenched social problems. The pace of change has been accelerated by the crisis in public finances. With the state able to do less, the focus has shifted towards developing the resources that exist beyond the public sector, including the knowledge, time and abilities of local communities. This includes both individual residents and the voluntary and community organisations that work in their interests. The Localism Bill, which is expected to become law in the autumn of 2011, will give new rights and responsibilities to local communities, including the right to challenge decisions on the closure of publicly funded services and to bid to take over those services. Under the twin pressures of localism and squeezed public spending, volunteering has moved to centre stage where it is promoted as an approach to addressing local needs from within communities at lower cost to the public purse.

However, the aim of putting more power in the hands of local people raises challenging questions about equality, fairness and inclusion. Disadvantaged and marginalised communities, who are most vulnerable to the effects of public spending cuts, are also the least well-equipped to shape the new agenda. At the same time, many voluntary

and community organisations are struggling to survive in a more straitened economic climate. Local authorities are in a unique position to strengthen the capacity of communities to respond to this agenda. They know their communities and how to work with them. For instance, in many urban areas a Neighbourhood Management approach has been adopted as a way of aligning resources, co-ordinating activities and involving residents in service delivery, often with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Evidence also shows, where current models of community empowerment work well, that adult learning is a key ingredient in the mix.

Voluntary action and active citizenship

Adult learning can make an important contribution towards addressing these issues. Indeed, localism policy points to an urgent adult learning agenda.³ Adult learning builds the capacity of local people to take control of their lives and fosters social action by building knowledge and skills for volunteering and active citizenship such as:

- speaking and listening;
- community leadership;
- community research;
- digital skills;
- planning and running meetings and events
- influencing local services;
- setting up a community group;
- funding sources; and
- running a successful project.

3 P. Lamb (2010) Adult learning and local democracy. *Adults Learning* October 2010.

When people understand how local power structures work and how to influence them they are more likely to feel empowered to take on new responsibilities and put forward a powerful case.

Local authorities are in a unique position to put learning at the centre of sustainable initiatives which support voluntary activity to flourish and strengthen partnerships between public bodies, community groups and local people. Adult learning services within local authorities have a wealth of experience of working with

voluntary and community organisations to develop and deliver learning opportunities to support active citizenship.⁴ Effective delivery of learning of this kind has lately been through the adult safeguarded learning budget. The role that adult learning can play in supporting diverse social policy agendas is widely recognised within local authorities. Across the country, adult learning services are found not only in Children's Services or Adult Social Care, but in a wide range of directorates including Housing, Regeneration and Economic Development.

Cheshire West and Chester Community Learning Champions

Cheshire West and Chester Council (CWaC) Community Learning Champions (CLCs) empower local residents to develop their skills as volunteer learning champions and in turn help to regenerate their communities through supporting engagement in learning. The scheme's work is focused on areas within the district which register high levels of multiple disadvantage.

CLCs and learners have been engaged through a range of partner organisations with strong links into the target communities, including housing associations, disability service providers, schools and children's centres. The CLC scheme has improved and enriched CWaC's partnership working with community and voluntary organisations in the targeted areas. This has benefited the residents with improved communication and information sharing, signposting and an increase in individual interventions.

CWaC seeks to engage people from community groups and voluntary and community organisations as CLCs, who can then act as a direct channel for the exchange of information. The CLCs create an environment for change in targeted communities. They consult with their peers and neighbours about what they want and need from learning and training. This local intelligence is fed back to the local authority where it influences the planning and organisation of adult learning provision in their area.

CLCs have become recognised figures in their neighbourhoods. They run exhibition stands at community events throughout the year to raise awareness of adult and community learning and provide a first point of contact in their communities. They have also assisted with events such as parents' evenings at targeted schools, coffee mornings within a community house and a range of ad hoc events as a way of reaching new learners and finding out about their concerns and interests.

⁴ See for example: NIACE (2010) Transformation Fund Legacy. Leicester: NIACE; NIACE / MYA / WEA / Unionlearn (2011) *Community Learning Champions: report on the national community learning champions support programme, 2009-11*. Leicester: NIACE; Turner, C. and Casey, L. (2005) *Neighbourhood Learning for Regeneration: lessons and case studies from the Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities Fund*. Leicester: NIACE; White, L. (2002) *Neighbourhood Renewal: case studies and conversations focusing on adult and community learning*. Leicester: NIACE.

Strengthening the role of the voluntary and community sector

Empowering communities to become partners with public service providers in local decision making often means that councils need to work with grass-roots organisations. Especially for people who are poor, educationally marginalised or in other circumstances that make them vulnerable, public sector providers can seem remote and inaccessible. Community organisations that reflect the needs and concerns of their constituency are well placed to reach and engage with excluded groups.

Adult learning services are experienced in working with and through community

organisations. Using both their adult safeguarded learning budgets and funding linked to specific initiatives such as the Transformation Fund and Adult and Community Learning Fund, they have a strong track record of developing effective capacity building partnerships with voluntary and community sector providers. Community based adult learning offers a powerful focus for the development of partnerships to support community empowerment. Its starting point is the needs and interests of learners themselves and its underpinning objective is to support them towards greater autonomy.

Leicester City Council's Multi-Access Centres

Leicester City Council's Adult Skills and Learning Service co-ordinates a network of community based Multi-Access Centres (MACs) which provide integrated advice on employment, skills and wider issues, together with access to learning and training opportunities, to adults who are out of work.

MAC services are delivered through partnerships of public, private and third sector providers. The work has been funded through the Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities adult

safeguarded learning budget. To ensure that each MAC reflects the needs of its local community, the adult learning service has undertaken capacity-building work to enable small third sector organisations with reach into key target groups to join the delivery partnerships with specific responsibilities for client engagement. These organisations provide a vital link between the local authority and some of the most excluded communities in the city. They feed back information to the Adult Skills and Learning Service about gaps in provision so that the needs of their communities can be effectively addressed.

Participatory budgeting

Putting power into the hands of communities can only become a reality if local people are given a greater say in how funding for services in an area is spent. Participatory budgeting describes an approach that has been developed to involving communities in making decisions on the spending and priorities for a defined

public budget.⁵ There is a clear role for learning in strengthening participatory budgeting partnerships, by enabling residents to develop the skills and knowledge to make appropriate decisions and exercise this new form of responsibility.

Great Yarmouth Borough Council Participatory Budgeting

Great Yarmouth Borough Council has undertaken a number of pilot Participatory Budgeting (PB) exercises under the banner of “Your Borough, Your Say” The pilots build on the Neighbourhood Management approach that has been developed in the borough’s most disadvantaged wards to bring communities and service providers

together and put local people at the centre of local decision making. In partnership with Norfolk County Council Adult Education Service, the Council has trained and supported a network of volunteer learning champions to work in pilot areas to strengthen the capacity of residents to engage with the opportunities for neighbourhood involvement.

⁵ <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/> .

Conclusions

Working closely with local authorities to assess the social value of adult learning has yielded both expected and unexpected results. Adult learning can impact on health, well-being and building stronger communities in a very specific and measurable way.

The research has shown how specific targeting of provision can contribute to and meet the strategic objectives of the locality. It has highlighted how joint working can enhance the value of provision and how using a specific methodology, such as social return on investment, provides evidence based outcomes on the impact of learning in communities.

Herefordshire Council and Liverpool City Council have identified changes and measured the social value from adult and family learning provision. The list is wide-ranging:

For learners:

- learned new skills;
- gained qualifications;
- met new people and became less socially isolated;
- increased awareness of how to influence change in the community;
- became more involved in the community;
- took part in volunteering and community activism;
- represented the community's views;
- improved mental wellbeing;
- built better family relationships;
- gained employment; and
- took up further learning.

For wider family members:

- parents and children do more together;
- built better family relationships;
- met new people and became less socially isolated;
- became more involved in the community;
- took part in volunteering;
- improved mental wellbeing.

For local residents:

- took up learning and learned new skills;
- met new people and became less socially isolated;
- neighbourhood became more safe and pleasant place to live; and
- less tension between communities.

For service providers:

- new and more effective approaches to service delivery;
- stronger partnership working;
- increased reach into communities;
- improved the accessibility and take up of services;
- developed services to address barriers and meet need;
- accessed the resources within local communities.

Capturing social value relies on working with a range of stakeholders to assess the true impact of adult learning in a process that is more than just a tick box consultation. The recipients of services are the key stakeholders and their

voice shapes, influences and flows through the process. It takes into account all the other factors that contribute to the changes: it does not over claim the benefits of the learning. The approach supports councils and their partners to answer fundamental questions that are needed to prove effectiveness at times of tough decision making such as “Why are we doing this? What’s the impact?” This is a method that can support local authorities to develop the new approaches needed to respond to the localism agenda.

But equally importantly, using a model to capture social value enables thinking about the objectives of a service in a different way. For adult learning providers it often brings their thinking closer to that of their partners, by focusing on broader outcomes for adults and children, as well as on learning specific goals.

NIACE promotes the importance of the social and economic value of adult learning

as an integral part to the national policy debate across government departments and as a key role in local strategic agendas. The evidence gathered from this research illustrates we are talking about much more than just delivering courses: adult learning provides wider outcomes that are fundamental building blocks to working with communities and enabling them to access other services and build autonomy, resilience and self-reliance – a starting place for further learning, gaining new skills, routes out of poverty and creating a culture of learning in communities. We support local decision makers to consider adult learning as part of a package of interventions to achieve their objectives at a time of change.

“We are now talking the same language as commissioners in the NHS.”

Further information

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. NIACE works in partnership with the Local Government Group to carry out these aims in localities. Further information can be found at www.niace.org.uk and www.local.gov.uk/adultlearning.

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