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**Evaluation of Community Learning
Trust Pilots: Summary of Key
Findings**

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RESEARCH

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Evaluation of Community Learning Trust pilots: Summary of Key Findings

1. Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Preface

This summary report presents key findings from an evaluation of 15 Community Learning Trust (CLT) pilots¹.

1.2 Introduction

The pilots were set up by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to test new ways of planning and delivering community learning, and understand whether these have the potential to effectively deliver new community learning objectives.² The pilots were run between August 2012 and July 2013 and involved more *local* development of Community Learning offers, with local people, organisations and providers working together to:

- shape their own community learning priorities;
- develop local strategies and partnership structures to deliver these; and
- ultimately, tailor community learning provision to meet the needs of their communities.

After a competitive tender, BIS commissioned a consortium consisting of TNS BMRB, RCU and the Campaign for Learning to conduct the evaluation. The evaluation ran from August 2012 to May 2013 – exploring the first nine months of pilot activity.

This report summarises some of the main findings from the evaluation, with the proviso that many trusts took time to establish - so the evaluation is only able to report on the impacts achieved during a relatively short time. This report covers:

1. introduction and methodology
2. establishing the pilots: what worked well
3. partnership-working and engaging disadvantaged learners
4. devolving planning and accountability
5. Pound Plus (income generation and cost savings)
6. headline lessons from the pilots.

The CLT pilots received no additional funding to take part in the pilot. However the Skills Funding Agency agreed certain freedoms and flexibilities in some instances. The pilots were also supported by the National Institute of Continuing Education (NIACE).

¹ See <http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/community-learning-trust-pilots> for more details of the CLT pilots.

² Details of the new community learning objectives can be found here, in BIS' https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32291/12-625-community-learning-trust-pilots-prospectus.pdf

1.3 Context

The BIS Community Learning budget funds a range of flexible courses, usually unaccredited, for adults aged 19 and over. These courses and activities are designed to help people of different ages and backgrounds acquire a new skill, re-connect with learning, pursue an interest, prepare for progression to formal courses and/or learn how to support their children more confidently.

Community learning contributes to wider government policies, including social justice, stronger families, digital engagement, social mobility, inclusive communities, healthy ageing and strengthening civil society. Learning topics can range from personal development, arts, culture and health to family learning, employability and community development.

In 2013-14, the Government is investing £210m to support the delivery of community learning, with the same indicative allocation for 2014-2015.

1.3.1 New community learning objectives

After a comprehensive review and national consultation with both providers and learners in 2011, new community learning objectives were published³ and then introduced into the sector in August 2012. These objectives were developed with a wide range of partners in order to build on effective practice and ensure the involvement of representative bodies and learning providers. The new objectives can be summarised as requiring providers to:

- **Focus public funding on people who are disadvantaged** and least likely to participate, including people in rural areas and those on low incomes with low skills;
- **Collect fee income from people who can afford to pay** and use this, where possible, to extend provision to those who cannot;
- **Widen participation** and transform individual's destinies by supporting progression relevant to personal circumstances;
- **Develop stronger communities**, with more self-sufficient, connected and pro-active citizens; and
- **Commission, deliver and support learning** in ways that contribute directly to these objectives.

1.4 The pilots

In April 2012 a prospectus invited providers directly funded from the BIS £210m Community Learning budget to put forward proposals to become pilot CLTs. The invitation attracted 78 proposals, involving more than half of all Skills Funding Agency-funded community learning providers. Following a selection process which considered the proposed models, priorities and themes, 15 local CLT pilots were selected and then launched in August 2012.

1.5 Research methodology

The core evaluation methodology consisted of an initial scoping visit and three further qualitative

³ For full details see BIS (December 2011) *New Challenges, New Chances: Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan: Building a World Class Skills System*.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32313/11-1380-further-education-skills-system-reform-plan.pdf

site visits in each of the 15 CLT pilot areas. It included an Evaluation Expert Group, facilitated by the Campaign for Learning and attended by representatives of national organisations with remits for relevant issues such as tackling homelessness, digital inclusion and mental health. The final report will also include an analysis of relevant ILR data and information on how the CLT pilots maximised their public investment (Pound Plus⁴).

1.6 Comparison areas

In order to consider how effectively different approaches deliver against the community learning objectives, the evaluation also included five anonymised areas that did not have CLT status. These were comparison areas selected on the basis of their having similar demographical features to the pilot trust areas rather than orthodox control areas. Four out of the five selected comparison areas had applied to become a CLT pilot. Two of these proposals had been shortlisted.

2. Establishing the pilots: what worked well

- Pilot status helped develop trusts' identity and vigour. This provided momentum and enthusiasm, particularly for exploring new partnerships and re-invigorating old ones.
- Early buy-in and support from senior players and local decision-makers increased efficiency. These partners 'opened doors', raised the CLT profile, and helped ensure quick sign-off of CLTs' plans.
- Transparent divisions of responsibility supported progress. Trusts reported that defining strategic and operational roles and setting up specific task groups helped them achieve their objectives.
- Setting and agreeing a limited number of SMART⁵ objectives provided clarity for CLT partners. Wide familiarity with their own CLT's objectives smoothed the path in preparation for delivery and helped avoid the frustrations associated with unrealistic targets. CLT objectives became SMARTER as the pilot progressed and partners became more confident.
- Early partnership-wide investment in agreeing objectives ensured alignment around a common goal and helped avoid the need for later redrafting. This investment of time enabled CLT partners to be more agile in tailoring and adjusting objectives in response to emerging issues and/or opportunities.

2.1 Learning points

Developing a CLT and establishing a solid and effective partnership took time. At the time of the final evaluation visit many CLTs were only beginning to deliver on projects developed as a result of their partnerships. In some cases the full impact of this activity will not be seen until 2014.

CLT pilots used a range of leadership and partnership approaches. Models which provided clear leadership were generally faster and more efficient in making progress towards the CLT's objectives – particularly in the early set-up and development stage.

⁴ 'Pound Plus' refers to additional income generated *over and above* core income. It includes direct income, cost savings, value for money, fee setting strategies and how income is re-invested in community learning

⁵ Smart, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time specific.

Conversely, other approaches tended to result in slower decision-making and slower progress overall, particularly for those working in partnerships with several equal partners rather than one defined leader.

However, this is not to suggest that the evaluation found one 'winning' infrastructure model. A single leadership model would clearly not have worked in all areas – and in some a more distributed model of leadership, although perhaps more slow-moving, helped to bring all partners fully on board and build the solidarity required in more challenging times.

There was evidence of 'over-promising'. Some providers, in an effort to develop a strong, winning trust application, proposed activities that were very difficult to achieve within the timescale of a year-long pilot.

Although some pilots were able to draw up ambitious plans and deliver on them, these tended to be CLTs who were using the pilot to build and expand on their existing programme rather than building things 'from scratch'. Developing relationships and innovative delivery approaches of this type takes time - an important lesson for new partnerships.

One CLT, Liberate in West Sussex, was led by Aspire - one of the first Local Authority adult learning services to spin-out and set up as a charitable staff-run mutual / social enterprise. The social enterprise model enabled local flexibilities that generated a great deal of interest among other CLTs and in the comparison areas.

3. Partnership-working and engaging disadvantaged learners

Partnership approaches were critical to achieving an effective community learning offer in a given locality. CLTs facilitated a number of partner and provider meetings with the aim of developing more strategic approaches to deciding the shape of provision across the whole CLT footprint and in much smaller local areas, to meet the needs of specific learner groups. In Luton and Bedfordshire, senior staff from the core CLT partners took part in both strategic and operational groups in order to steer activity and demonstrate organisational commitment.

The partnerships helped CLTs to map provision, avoid unnecessary duplication, plan progression pathways for learners and signpost these pathways to learners. This joined-up working encouraged CLT partners to experiment with their curriculum offer, course titles and marketing approaches. In West Sussex, Aspire found that their partnership arrangements led to more structured curriculum planning and increased co-operation.

In some cases, working together outside the CLT helped individual providers to attract additional grants and win tenders; in some cases it even helped to ease pre-existing tensions. Several CLTs already had experience of putting together bids as a consortium and working jointly on other agendas and projects such as CLIF (Community Learning Innovation Fund)⁶.

⁶ CLIF was £4m grant fund from the Skills Funding Agency for the academic year 2012/13, administered by NIACE <http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/clif/community-learning-innovation-fund>

The evaluation findings suggest that strategy and leadership are key to the process of driving a partnership forward and therefore critical to the success of any new or existing partnership. Partnerships flourished with a lead organisation and individual at the helm. Partnerships also tended to thrive when CLTs established:

- a clear identity;
- a launch event;
- underpinning protocols; and
- regular celebration of achievements.

Some CLTs built capacity by bringing in a wide range of local partners, others recruited specific partners selected to align with their own priorities and themes.

Sunderland CLT's priorities were to address local obesity and substance misuse, so they worked to attract partners and providers working in those areas. The starting point for this recruitment strategy was discussion and development of a recruitment plan. This type of strategic approach helped many CLTs to be effective and successful.

A substantial challenge for CLTs was the time it could take to get to a point where a partnership was established and active. Some CLTs speeded up this rapport-building period by 1) formalising the partnership with an identity, logo and name and 2) creating documents, maps and charts with the structure and roles and 'go to people' within each task group.

3.1 Examples of effective partnerships

3.1.1 Partnering with Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations

Overall, voluntary and community sector organisations were found to be helpful partners because the community learning objectives align so closely with their own. However, in some areas, these organisations were under immense pressure and lacked the time to be able to participate fully. Some also faced challenges in meeting the requirements of the Skills Funding Agency. Staff working in these organisations were sometimes fearful of what would happen during an Ofsted inspection if their learners were disruptive (which was often the case). They were also concerned about learner numbers and retention rates. CLT pilots have reflected these concerns back to the Skills Funding Agency for consideration.

There was evidence of effective VCS partnership-working by CLT pilots despite these challenges. They found that partnering with larger voluntary organisations and well-established VCS umbrella organisations tended to help streamline planning and communications. Taking practical steps to smooth the bidding process for potential VCS partners helped mitigate issues with general time pressures in the voluntary sector.

3.1.2 Partnering with local business

Some CLTs created links with local businesses in order to secure resources and attract new and different learners. While it was often difficult to get commitment from big business at a national level, local branches were sometimes able to provide one-off sponsorship for relevant projects or engage with the delivery of learning activity at grass roots level.

B&Q provided gates, tools and plants for projects to 'green' back alleys in Blackburn; a local firm had loaned a digger for community use. A group of B&Qs offered DIY lessons in-store to try and encourage more people to do DIY. This had the advantage of engaging more male learners, currently under-represented in community learning

CLT's were also able to engage employers to support some of their disadvantaged or low skilled employees, where this fitted with CLTs' objectives.

Solihull has been working with an employer to provide demand-led courses, where possible in the workplace.

3.1.3 Partnering to target learners with mental health issues

Working with specialist agencies across the VCS who were already working with a specific client group was found to be the best way to target disadvantaged learners. Approaches included bringing together these agencies to share information and using them to: help provide insights into learning needs, consult with their users / client groups and help refer them to learning opportunities, including through social prescribing. In some cases, these organisations were supported to develop their own community learning courses and this was working well.

Social prescribing was one way that CLTs targeted potential learners (working closely with GPs and social workers). This approach uses community learning and other non-medical approaches to help people manage chronic illness, tackle depression and improve their general health and well-being. It is being used successfully by GPs and other primary care practitioners to complement, or in some cases replace, medication. It helps to draw hard-to-reach groups into community learning. Previous research demonstrates the positive impact on wellbeing and health, including mental health, from learning.⁷

In the West of England, Development Officers worked closely with midwives and organisations running support groups to tackle post-natal depression.

"A lot of it is through family support. Having depression and going to the support groups, we find out these courses are available. A lot of the women on courses with me have gone through the same thing (depression)" (Learner, West of England CLT)

CLTs also faced the challenge of retaining learners who had challenging, and sometimes chaotic, lifestyles. Erratic attendance did not fit easily with the way funded providers need to operate. In some cases, providers also needed staff with specific skills to deliver this more tailored provision. Making use of specialist facilities and attracting volunteers with a commitment to certain types of learners helped CLTs reach these groups.

⁷ [Review and update of research into the wider benefits of learning](#)

[The relationship between adult learning and wellbeing: evidence from the 1958 National Child Development Study](#)

[Learning & Wellbeing Trajectories among Older Adults](#)

[The contribution of basic skills to health related outcomes during adulthood: evidence from the BCS70](#)

A drama group called *Hocus Pocus* in Birmingham offered personnel and premises for activities with learners with mental health issues.

Artcore in Derby works with a range of learners, including people with depression and bipolar disorders, and were engaged by the CLT to run art courses.

MIND Groups in Birmingham and Luton offered a wide range of sub-contracted provision ranging from art classes to health and wellbeing programmes.

A women's refuge in Exeter ran a creative writing group driven by the learners themselves. They had plans to extend the creative writing approach used with ex-homeless women to support women with mental health and substance abuse problems. The tutor reported that learners enjoyed the courses and that they boosted participants' confidence.

3.1.4 Partnering to support people affected by substance misuse

CLTs found that one of the most effective approaches to working with individuals affected by substance misuse was to engage specialist partner organisations that work regularly with these clients. Pilots found that disadvantaged learners often experience a range of challenges in their lives - for example a person with mental health issues may come from a difficult family background and also have an addiction. This reinforces the need for cross-cutting Government initiatives such as the Troubled Families scheme.

Sunderland has been highlighted nationally as a city with increased substance misuse. Education, training and employment is key to helping to ensure that people have sufficient social capital to move on from substance misuse and re-integrate into their communities.

The CLT worked closely with specialist partner organisations to develop their curriculum, map provision and make sure there was no duplication. Organisations working in this field were invited to be part of a substance misuse provider group which met regularly. These meetings enabled providers to discuss learning needs and delivery approaches. Organisations included those helping people who were substance misusers and others that support the families of people involved in substance misuse. Organisations working in this field appreciated taking an active role in the network and actively shared ideas, resources and contacts.

3.1.5 Partnering to support people in employment with poor basic skills

CLTs recognised that working people who lacked basic skills can be neglected or excluded because targeted provision tends to take place during the daytime. Working with this group required good partnership-working with employers, who want to boost employees' skills and are also often committed to offering their employees access to wider learning opportunities.

West of England, recognising that the Local Authority was the largest employer in the area, developed an LA-wide learning initiative - *Love2learn* - in conjunction with UNISON. Informal lunchtime learning sessions were facilitated by employees and the project was delivered entirely through volunteer activity on the part of UNISON and employees, overseen and promoted by the CLT.

3.1.6 Partnering to support families

Family Learning tends to focus on families in disadvantaged areas and with multiple forms of disadvantage, so it can make a very useful contribution to wider initiatives to strengthen families.

In Cheshire, the CLT partnership expanded to work with the *Together Better* pilot, which involved working with families around employability. Community centres were rebranded as Work Zones, with a work-focussed curriculum and support from organisations including Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and Debt Advice. The aim was to support more people from 'troubled families' into employment. Case studies will explore the impacts.

3.1.7 Partnering to support the cross-Government digital inclusion initiative

Enrolments in the Information and Communication Technology Sector accounted for 10.4% of all Community Learning aims in 2011/12. The move to online claiming and Universal Credit is giving this agenda more urgency and many of the CLTs saw it as the focus of their IT activities. Many invested in developing partnerships to support this agenda, including with Jobcentre Plus, Universities and the private sector. In other CLTs, rurality was an important driver and new technologies were being introduced.

Across the pilots, a range of approaches were used to address digital exclusion, including using volunteers or digital champions and bringing IT learning into a familiar environment, such as a community centre, library or pub, or into venues used by people from a particular community or age group.

CLTs were able to use partnership-working to map provision, swap learners, and develop relevant, targeted provision. Some pilots created cross-organisational task groups (e.g., across businesses, universities, charities, community centres and volunteers) to build capacity in relation to equipment, connectivity and skills development. Three of the CLTs had taken part in the eReading room pilot⁸, a six-month action research project managed by Online Centres Foundation.

Many of these CLT partnerships pre-dated the formation of the CLTs. This was unsurprising given CLT status was awarded to the most innovative proposals. Although they were already working in partnership, the focus on wider partnership-working and the enhanced status accorded to pilots helped raise awareness of community learning among local partners and often supported the creation of broader and more innovative partnership arrangements.

4. Devolving Planning and Accountability

CLTs used a range of strategies to engage local people in conversations about community learning and give residents a stronger voice in deciding the shape of local provision. Approaches included setting up opportunities for face to face dialogue with local people using tutors and/or volunteers in pop-up shops and community centres or 'piggy-backing' on existing community forums to generate discussion and feedback.

⁸ eReading Rooms: 'A vision for dramatically increasing the numbers of people engaging in informal learning by providing free and friendly eReading Rooms where, through the power of the internet, any topic can be discovered and explored, revolutionising informal learning and placing the world of learning at people's fingertips' (OCF, 2012)

To obtain the views of more marginalised groups, some CLTs worked with volunteers and/or peer researchers from local communities. Informal venues such as community centres and Children’s Centres proved to be useful spaces for this kind of consultation. Many other kinds of spaces were used. In Brighton, a group of providers who worked with disadvantaged groups ran coffee shops and cafes on their premises and used them as a forum for consultation with the public. Age UK in Derby did the same in a café at their premises. Local schools were the ideal place to reach families in rural areas. In Cumbria, CLT partners visited schools to talk to parents during parents’ evenings, armed with flyers about community learning. This gave providers immediate feedback on the kinds of courses that parents wanted.

5. Pound Plus: maximising the value of public funding

5.1 Background

‘Pound Plus’ is a new term that describes how learning providers can show how they are maximising the value of public investment. Pound Plus refers to the additional income providers generate over and above core income from Government’s Community Learning budget. This includes income generated through course fees, financial sponsorship, access to new learning spaces made available at no or reduced cost, the contributions of volunteers, donations of equipment or consumable items and / or access to other funding sources or grants.

Pound Plus Category	Examples
Direct Income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fee income from learners • Sponsorship • Grants and tenders • Sales from products and services
Cost savings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Savings in accommodation • Use of volunteers to support learning • Savings in staffing through partnership • Shared services e.g. back office functions
Value for Money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting up self organised groups • New methods of delivery

Although the term is new, this is not necessarily a new way of working. In order to develop new provision and meet community needs, some community learning providers have always used their public funding allocation as part of a rich funding mix that includes private sponsorship and external grants. However, the new community learning objectives gave pilots a renewed impetus to increase revenue and the pilot initiative required providers to record their cost savings and generation of income for the first time.

5.2 Benefits

The Pound Plus process helped CLTs think differently about their work and financial efficiency, and recording this ‘from the start’ encouraged partners to look for further Pound

Plus opportunities. The process helped CLTs recognise and record the value of additional contributions to their work – for both themselves and partners – and demonstrate that value to the outside world. This was considered helpful, particularly in relation to seeking additional funding and attracting new partners.

Across all the CLT pilots, the strongest examples of Pound Plus were savings resulting from the use of volunteer time and cost savings secured through ‘in kind’ contributions. Some partners and providers also responded to tenders and applied for grants and other government sources of funding, for example from the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Skills Funding Agency CLIF project. A minority focused on generating additional fee income.

5.3 Volunteering

Volunteers have been a feature of community learning for many years and proved to be central to the work of CLT pilots. Volunteers varied significantly in terms of their backgrounds, motivations and volunteering roles. They were widely used in all CLTs to enhance learning and help support learners across a range of course types, particularly in ICT where learners often progress at very different speeds. In Kent, Amicus Horizon, a Housing Association partner, provided volunteer champions to encourage people who were living in their accommodation to take part in community learning classes.

Most volunteers want to volunteer because they enjoy helping other people and contributing to wellbeing in their neighbourhoods. However, volunteers do need training and support, both of which need to be factored into the development of any volunteering strategy and taken into account in the monetising of the associated Pound Plus value of volunteering. CLT pilots have developed incentives and support mechanisms to maximise the contribution of volunteers and their satisfaction in the volunteering role.

5.4 Fee income

In Sheffield, extra effort was put into recruiting learners in the more affluent areas of the city. The CLT used volunteer Learning Champions and a voluntary sector partner, made use of a bursary to run road shows and proactively recruited learners through the UK Online e-learning agenda. This led to an eventual tripling of learner numbers, with a corresponding increase in fee income to support more disadvantaged learners.

Some CLTs tried to collect fees in the past and had hit logistical and practical difficulties around collecting fees in some community settings, including identifying who should do the collecting, meeting the additional costs of administering the fee collection and finding a secure place to store the money. In some cases, tutors had refused to take on the role of collecting fees. In some CLTs, the cost of collecting the funds in community venues was considered to outweigh the income gained.

5.5 Perceived drawbacks of recording Pound Plus

Some pilots reported drawbacks to the Pound Plus initiative, particularly at the start of the pilot. The main concern was that collecting Pound Plus evidence a) would be a distraction that could prevent staff from getting on with delivering community learning, b) was difficult to explain to partners who used different recording systems and c) would be time-consuming to collect. Some CLTs believed that this requirement might deter potential partners from participating in a CLT partnership. However, by the end of the evaluation most CLTs were keen to continue collecting Pound Plus data in some form.

6. Headline lessons from the pilots

- The combination of the new community learning objectives and the national CLT pilot has provided a focus and structure that has helped to raise the status of community learning.
- CLT pilot status helped revive established partnerships and supported the development of links with new partners, including voluntary and community sector organisations, Local Enterprise Partnerships, local businesses and local services.
- Partnership-working was critical to identifying priorities and shaping provision to address local needs.
- CLT approaches, regardless of the size of the public funding allocation, can create an environment in which localism thrives to meet the needs of local people, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.
- CLT pilots have begun to use their public subsidy to develop a truly community-focused learning offer, but the partnerships required to deliver that offer require time to mature; it was too early to demonstrate impact.
- The most effective CLT pilots developed a strategic vision underpinned by SMART objectives to which all CLT partners signed up, alongside clearly differentiated roles.
- CLT infrastructure models and approaches need to reflect the local context. There was no one 'winning' CLT approach.
- VCS organisations and other small partners, though harder to engage, have specialist skills that attract and meet the needs of disadvantaged people who can benefit significantly from community learning.
- CLT pilots found that the Pound Plus exercise helped them reflect and collectively re-examine their local financial strategies. Despite initial misgivings, by the end of the evaluation most CLTs wanted to continue collecting Pound Plus evidence in some form.

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