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Community-focused provision in adult literacy, numeracy and language: an exploratory study

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and Carrie Birch, University of Sheffield
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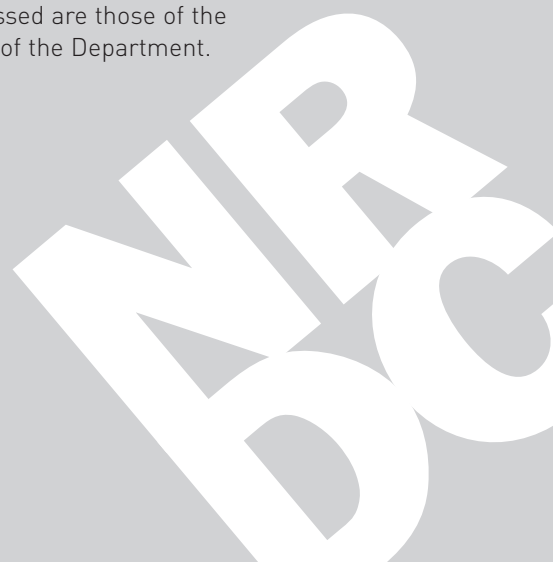
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Summary

- This report concerns outcomes from a six-month exploratory study, funded by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). The study investigated *community-focused provision* for the teaching of adult literacy, numeracy and language, a form of provision that may complement traditional provision and that may be particularly useful for reaching priority groups of learners identified in the ***Skills for Life*** strategy.
- The starting point for the study was that community-focused provision is under-conceptualised, under-researched and possibly insufficiently appreciated in the current policy context. The study therefore aimed to add to current understanding by searching for, and building on, relevant previous research and then conducting case studies of providers in England thought to be taking a community-focused approach.
- The study was collaborative, carried out by a project team in which two University researchers worked with three practitioner-researchers whose immediate experience included national policy analysis, direction of a large-scale literacy partnership and LEA planning of adult and community education. All members of the team had professional experience of community or family literacy and four of the five had worked as basic skills tutors.
- A systematic literature search was carried out and identified over 70 studies or reports that had a bearing on community-focused provision of adult literacy, numeracy and language. Results of the search are available as a booklet (or electronically) with full bibliographic details of the identified items and a description of the search strategy. Results are also available as an EndNote file including annotations by the project team of some items.
- A review of the literature that had been identified concluded that, although there are several areas of research and theory that are *potentially* relevant to understanding community-focused provision, there is very little of *direct* relevance. Therefore a study of such provision could add to understanding in the field.
- The study began by consulting agencies and individuals in England (and Scotland) to determine whether the concept of community-focused provision was meaningful, whether practitioners, policymakers and researchers thought it was worth studying, and whether they could point to cases in England that might be studied. The consultation established that the concept was meaningful and that the research could be taken further.
- A sample of 11 providers was chosen for case studies on the basis of their answers to a set of screening questions identifying them as likely to be taking a community-focused approach and so as to be representative of different kinds of providers (LEAs, voluntary organisations, partnerships) in different parts of England (North, Midlands, South, South East, South West).
- As suited an explanatory study, case studies were brief. They were carried out by three members of the team who visited providers, interviewed the relevant director or strategic manager, interviewed a related provider in the area, interviewed at least one learner and, where possible, conducted brief observations of provision. Field notes were written up and key sections of interviews transcribed. Visits to one case study could not be arranged in the time available, leaving 10 for analysis. A data archive of some 50,000 words was prepared for analysis (and could be made available, when anonymised, to other researchers).

- Analysis was carried out by examining data for themes and issues that had been expected on the basis of the initial conceptualisation of community-focused provision. This led to some themes and issues being confirmed as helpful for understanding and others being discarded because they were not found in the data. In addition, several issues and themes that had not been expected were noted and incorporated into a revised understanding. The coding scheme for data analysis was developed and revised collaboratively by the team and applied by two members of the team to all 10 case studies. Codes were organised into four clusters for purposes of reporting.
- It was found that the providers studied did all believe that their provision was distinctive in a way that was captured by the concept of community-focused provision. From their accounts, what they did could be understood in relation to three main issues: *vision*, *development* and *delivery*. The third of these could be understood further in terms of holistic view of learning, concern about learning situations, quality, integrating basic skills without making them too apparent, and achievement and progression. A fourth issue, *funding*, emerged as absolutely critical for all the others.
- The above findings were presented by the project team to practitioners, policymakers and researchers at a national invitational dissemination seminar. The outcomes of discussions of focus groups at that seminar are documented in this report.
- The general conclusion of the project is that *community-focused provision* is an appropriate and reasonably robust concept for understanding one way of meeting the needs of adults literacy, numeracy or ESOL learners. Issues that may be helpful for understanding community-focused provision have been identified. Given the paucity of research in this area, further studies of learner progression, teacher training, and comparisons of community-focused provision with other sorts of provision, particularly in relation to learners' views and learning experiences, would be appropriate.

Introduction

The starting point for the research to be reported here is that there is a significant form of adult literacy, numeracy and language education that is under-conceptualised, under-researched and probably insufficiently appreciated in the current adult basic skills policy context. We call this *community-focused provision*.

Background to the project

The initial concept of community-focused provision that prompted this study emerged in the context of a county-wide literacy initiative in England, Read On-Write Away! (ROWA!), that three of the present authors, (Peter Hannon, Viv Bird and Carol Taylor) were involved in evaluating (Davies, et al. 2002). One part of the evaluation concerned how the teaching of adult basic skills was provided in a particular community, referred to pseudonymously as 'Greenhill' (Davies, 2002). Provision of basic skills teaching in that community seemed also to address issues of social inclusion, to value a variety of progression routes for learners, to be willing to work with learners in groups rather than only as individuals, to have a community empowerment agenda, and a commitment to inter-agency working. We had no reason to consider Greenhill to be unique. On the contrary it resembled, for example, other provision with which we were familiar, such as the Sheffield Community Literacy Campaigns of the 1980s (Gurnah, 1992), work done in London in the 1990s (Bird and Pahl, 1994), the Rochdale Parent Education Service (Jackson 2001). There were echoes from an earlier era when community education was part of a radical agenda which emphasised working class students' experience, such as the work of Edwards in Liverpool and re-articulated in McGivney's *Recovering Outreach* (Edwards, 1986; McGivney, 2000).

In the current era of regeneration initiatives and attempts to build capacity, tackle under-achievement and improve employability in local communities that include socially excluded groups, there seemed to be renewed interest in such initiatives. We began to refer to this type of provision as *community-focused*. It seemed to be valued by those involved. In *Skills for Life*, a recognition exists that in order to tackle poor literacy and numeracy skills amongst disadvantaged communities, provision needs to be flexible and there is a recognition that each learner will have his or her own specific needs (*Skills for Life* 2001:13). However, there is no explicit reference to community-focused provision in that document.

Starting point for the research

Our initial concept of community-focused provision of adult literacy, numeracy and language was one of provision that recognised the community identity of learners, the affinities between learners in the same community, the advantages of providing experiences and learning progression for groups of learners, learners' needs for security as well as challenge, the usefulness of linking into community groups and processes, and the need for sustained input over a period of years. At first we contrasted this with *individual-focused provision* that treated learners more as individuals, not necessarily as members of their communities. We made a distinction between 'focus' and 'base', in that it is possible for either form of provision to be based in the community (e.g. college classes run in satellite locations) or to be based physically in an institution such as college or workplace. What mattered more than the

'where' of provision was the 'why' and the 'how' – its *focus*. From this perspective, therefore, it is perfectly possible for provision to be community-based but not community-focused. The contrast between community-focused and individual-focused types of provision was not meant to be evaluative. Individual-focused provision could have many strengths (e.g., in terms of choice of learning opportunities, the fact that learners are likely to be treated similarly without regard to their community background) and community-focused provision might have weaknesses (e.g. in terms of not having clear outcomes). In the light of empirical research, our conceptualisation of community-focused and individual-focused as mutually exclusive types of provision was later revised to something more like a spectrum of provision between two poles or to seeing community-focused as a development of individual-focused.

The concept of community-focused provision – whilst immediately recognisable to many practitioners and policymakers – proved difficult to define exactly. There was a need for a study to explore putative instances of the concept (i.e. cases) to define it better and to assess whether it was a useful way of thinking about provision. The study began with a concept of community-focused provision sufficiently well defined to enable cases of interest to be identified but loose enough to avoid pre-emptive theorising.

It was not within the scope of the present research to study non-community-focused provision or to compare it to community-focused provision. Our aim, rather, was to explore the nature of community-focused provision, its characteristics, challenges, dilemmas, and possible advantages and disadvantages. We accept that in describing and analysing one thing it can be difficult to avoid some degree of implicit comparison with alternatives. Future research in this area, building on the findings of this study, could be designed to make direct comparisons between community-focused and non-community-focused forms of provision (and possibly other forms too). However, this should only be attempted after some exploration of the characteristics and critical issues relating to community-focused provision.

The project

The National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) undertook to fund the project as an exploratory, six-month study, with the following outcomes:

1. A systematic literature review archive to be available in EndNote format to other researchers
2. A case study archive available to other researchers
3. One refereed journal paper
4. A project report available as an NRDC monograph and on its website
5. An invitational seminar for policymakers
6. Recommendations for practice that will feed into Strand C and Strand D and generate further research questions.

The project team was funded to conduct research within a range of cases of community-focused provision, and to develop recommendations for practice. The team was an unusual collaboration in which two University researchers worked with three practitioner-researchers whose immediate experience included national policy analysis, direction of a large-scale literacy partnership and LEA planning of adult and community education. All members of the team had professional experience of community or family literacy and four of the five had

worked as basic skills tutors. The team was therefore able to draw upon a wide range of knowledge and experience in conducting the study. In addition, two 'critical friends', Angela Jackson, Rochdale Parent Partnership, and Jo Weinberger, University of Sheffield, were invited to comment on methodology and data analysis.

Systematic literature search

The literature search was complex for several reasons. Firstly this was an under-researched area of literacy, and it was anticipated that the literature scene was not well mapped and difficult to navigate. Secondly the COMMUNITY-FOCUSED PROVISION project included the development of theory and concepts. The focus of the literature search was not static, and time constraints required the search to be conducted as a process alongside the research project. To take account of this evolutionary approach, the search process had to be adaptable and integrated with the research project itself. Thirdly the references identified were subject to a process which evaluated their significance in terms of theory and practice. The significant items are those which analyse theory and concepts of COMMUNITY-FOCUSED PROVISION rather than descriptions of good practice. The process employed in the literature search therefore added to research knowledge about literacy.

Search strategy

From the outset of the literature search it was clear that among the huge number of studies in the field of adult literacy, few combined all the features and concepts identified as community-focused provision. This sparsity means that, although there was a 'thin' primary literature which demonstrated community-focused provision features, other relevant but secondary literature will be found in strands, as reflected by the key words and the areas they cover. The dispersed nature of the literature among many separate strands led to the development of a complex strategy for the literature search, using traditional and non-traditional methods combined.

The search strategy combined four courses of action to gather relevant literature and to evaluate its relevance and relative significance to the literature review and research project. Stages of review of each course of action were necessary. Again review of significant changes and finds would inform new directions of the search:

The four courses of action were:

1. Use of traditional methods searching BIDS, BEI, ERIC, PROQUEST which led to an awareness of the place of community-focused provision in relation to other perspectives on learning.
2. Accessing archives and conference reports of specialist agencies likely to have an interest in policy, in particular the National Literacy Trust, the Learning and Skills Research and Development Agency, Scottish Community Education Development Council, Centre for Language in Social Life, ESRC, Informal Learning Search Conference, Centre for Research on Wider Benefits of Learning and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals.
3. Contacts and use of professional networks and centres to discuss the project with other researchers and practitioners to take account of their work and knowledge of the literature

and its value to the community-focused provision project.

4. Using search engines as well as websites and databases of academic and research institutions and agencies (Edinburgh, Lancaster, Warwick, ESRC, LSDA, NIACE, IOE, LISU, NCSALL).

Searches, using the four approaches listed above, were carried out on keywords which linked to community-focused provision features, concepts and definitions which the research project developed concurrently. These keywords included: community, community education, community learning, community literacy, culture, lifelong learning, socio-contextual perspective, widening participation, outreach programmes, outreach development, partnerships, informal learning, transformational learning, emancipatory learning, family learning, engaging and recruiting, achievement, retention, learner progression, adult education, adult and community learning, adult basic skills, adult literacy, adult literacy research.

The combination of sources helped to identify a sufficiently wide range of items on theory and practice that could be considered for literature review purposes. A bibliography of 77 items was compiled and is available electronically or in hard copy.

Review of previous research

Having identified a literature, it was necessary to review it. We found that, although there are several areas of research that are *potentially* relevant to understanding community-focused provision, very little of it is of *direct* relevance. Among the huge number of studies of provision in the field of adult literacy few combined features and concepts associated with community-focused provision.

The lack of previous research may be because community-focused provision has rarely been recognised as a distinct form of provision by practitioners, policymakers or researchers. Where something resembling it has been recognised, the literature is restricted to descriptive accounts of particular cases, or groups of cases which all are funded by the same funding stream, rather than research reports aiming to develop cross-case understanding.

There is a literature on community education in the UK, dating back to the 1970s, which has looked at, for example, the history of the settlements, the voluntary sector and organisations such as the Workers Educational Association (WEA) (Kelly, 1970; Titmus, 1999; Lovett, 1988). There is also a literature concerning outreach and community-based provision of adult basic skills. This has mostly manifested itself in reports and evaluations discussing community-focused approaches produced by such organisations as NIACE, the BSA and the LSDA, in an attempt to both support, describe and evaluate existing work and to shift policy (McGivney, 2000; Lavender and Stevens, 2001; Grief and Taylor, 2001). In Scotland, it is noteworthy that there is a more developed literature on community-focused approaches to adult basic education, as the way provision has been developed has historically been in the context of the community (Crowther, Hamilton and Tett, 2001). Some of this work has been documented by Tett and Crowther (1998) and has linked together research, policy and practice issues (Tett, 2002). Some of the literature from Scotland and the United States on family literacy describes how a community-focused approach can be used in this field (Tett and Crowther, 1998;

Heywood, 2000; Auerbach, 2002). There is a developing literature on community and adult education in the UK which questions the concept of learner as deficit in relation to provision and places the onus on to providers to reach learners (Gerard et al. 2000; Grief et al. 2002; Taylor, 2003).

There are several other areas of literature that would appear to be relevant to understanding issues within community-focused provision. For example, many literacy researchers have investigated the community dimension of literacy practices (e.g. Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Moje, 2000). None of these, however, are directly concerned with community-focused *provision*. Rather, they provide a resource that providers could turn to in understanding and extending the community focus of their provision. The same can be said about other areas of research literature such as social capital theory, in particular work developed by Luke and Carrington in Australia which adopts a critical literacies approach to family and community literacy practices (Luke and Carrington, 1997, 2002), community development (Martin, 2000), situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), research and practice in adult literacy education (Barton and Murphy, 1990; Hamilton, Ivanic and Barton, 1992; Purcell Gates, 2002), the 'New Literacy Studies' (Street, 1993; Barton and Hamilton, 1998) and recent work on community literacy practices and adult literacy (Kell, 2003). All these have a bearing on community-focused provision but they are not immediately relevant to the aims of the present study. The conclusion that the research team drew, therefore, was that the literature in this field was thin.

Research methods

The team began with the concept of community-focused provision outlined earlier. To operationalise the concept, a set of questions was drawn up (Appendix 1) and used in informal telephone interviews with experts in the field who by virtue of their positions in national agencies such as the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), the Basic Skills Agency (BSA), and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) had wide knowledge of the provision of adult literacy, numeracy and language in England. The purpose of the set of questions was to establish whether the concept of community-focused provision was meaningful and whether there were likely to be examples of it in practice. Results from this stage of the study were encouraging: the concept of community-focused provision made sense to key individuals in the field and they were able to direct the team to possible examples that might become case studies.

At the same time, drawing on the expertise of the National Literacy Trust (NLT) and Read On – Write Away!, the project team drew up a list of potential cases of community-focused provision in basic skills. The team also started to develop a conceptual framework. The decision was made to interview the *providers* about their strategy and see how it was translated into practice on the ground. The team then used initial key questions (Appendix 2), put to providers, usually by telephone, to determine whether a project should be included in the study. Some providers turned out not to have a wide enough focus; others were rejected because their primary purpose was not adult basic skills provision (e.g. schools).

The list of potential case studies was then sorted into a number of categories. It was felt that the cases chosen for study should reflect different types of provision – in a further education

college, a local education authority, the voluntary sector or a partnership, often specifically set up to do community-focused basic skills provision. Attention was also paid to geographical location (North, Midlands, South) and to the setting (rural; urban, which would be a smaller urban area; or city, a term used to describe a large urban centre such as London). At least one case would be an ESOL provider and at least one would be a numeracy provider (Appendix 3). 11 cases were selected. In the event, visits could not be arranged with one provider to meet the project's tight timetable, leaving 10 cases for study.

Having selected the cases some *case study questions* were devised. These were developed partly out of the process of doing the initial interviews, and were the structuring force for the interview questions when collecting data. The questions were not the direct interview questions, but acted as the team's *orienting theory* when developing key themes.

1. What is the context of community-focused basic skills provision?
2. What is the mindset of those managing or delivering community-focused basic skills provision?
3. How important is the developmental role of workers within the community-focused basic skills provision?
4. What does community-focused basic skills provision tell us about recruiting/retaining hard-to-reach learners, their achievements and progression?
5. What impact does the National Curriculum and tests have on the delivery of community-focused basic skills provision?

Ten case studies were then visited by the research team. In each case, the researcher attempted to interview the main provider and, where possible, a related provider who was working in partnership with the main provider. In some cases, the interviews were with the development worker and the strategic manager of the project. In most cases, learning sites were visited and tutors and learners were interviewed. However, for practical and logistical reasons this was sometimes too difficult to complete. The data collected included tape-recorded interviews of cases, observations and, in some cases, documentation from the projects visited. The interview with the manager was often a second interview (the first having been the initial telephone interview) when some of the questions were revisited. These providers had, in some instances, two months to reflect on their answers and consequently their responses were more thoughtful and the data enriched. Community-focused provision therefore was approached from a number of different angles, from the point of view of the main provider, from the perspective of a related provider, from the perspective of a tutor and, where possible, from the perspective of a learner.

Data analysis

The way the theory emerged from the project's 10 case studies, the data, involved a process which was iterative and recursive. The data was both shaped by and in turn shaped the conceptual framework used to understand community-focused provision. Theory and data had a dialectical relation to each other, and the construction of theory was arrived at through collaborative work within the team, coding and sorting data, checking the field for accuracy and then returning to the data.

The process was similar to that described by Barton and Hamilton (1998) in being about "looking for patterns in the data...where the discovery of theory comes from data systematically obtained and analysed. It is based upon principles, such as the constant cycling back and forth between data and theory." (Barton and Hamilton, 1998, p.68). The project team spent a long time defining both the field and the research questions in relation to what they thought were the key characteristics of community-focused provision.

Certain themes were noted in the data (a process described by Barton and Hamilton as *memoing*). These were placed in relation to established themes that were part of the orientating theory (Barton and Hamilton, 1998, p.69). For example, the team began with a concept which it called 'mindset' to indicate the ways in which community-focused providers often had a clear vision for what they were doing, which was then translated into practice. As the project team read and re-read the data, the concept of 'mindset' began to change. No longer simple, it began to have a three-stranded aspect: mindset as the main provider's key vision; mindset as part of a developmental strategy working in partnership across organisations, and mindset as translated into teaching and learning practices.

The team then moved on to a process which Barton and Hamilton refer to as *selecting*, which involved choosing some part of the data that was more significant than other parts (Barton and Hamilton, 1998). Sometimes this involved selecting bits of transcript, at other times, it involved a synthesis. This enabled the team to refine the concepts further. The next process was *summarising*. Key themes were synthesised, and the data put together to form a coherent summary. For example, 'funding' as a key theme was summarised. It became both a precondition and a determinant of community-focused provision, and the data revealed that providers both manipulated funding and were reliant on funding for survival.

Coding was a part of this whole process and the team worked with codes to create linkages and to see relationships between codes. Initially, for example, the team had 11 codes which were used to describe data. As the data was returned to, the *links* between codes were apparent. For example, a number of codes could be grouped under the delivery of community-focused provision whereas others could be seen as chiefly to do with teaching and learning. The team reflected upon these links and used the links to develop a coherent set of concepts.

The team also *triangulated* data in that by interviewing both the main provider of COMMUNITY-FOCUSED PROVISION and a second, related provider, with often a learner or tutor's perspective as well, data could be looked at from different perspectives. The process of arriving at a final conclusion was a challenging one, involving a focus on both the data and a synthesis of what it told the team, which led to the key findings overleaf.

Findings

Findings from this study related to the research questions stated above and therefore concerned how providers perceived and delivered community-focused provision. The view of providers was taken to be that of the director of strategic managers (hereafter simply referred to as 'managers'). Tutors, learners and related providers were also interviewed and limited observations were made of teaching and learning situations. These other data were not to investigate teaching, learning or partnerships *per se* but as a check on what providers told us about these matters and to gain a wider perspective on the networks and partnerships involved. In the event we found that the additional data was generally confirmatory of managers' accounts. The managers' accounts, however, were fuller and more detailed and managers tend to be quoted more often in what follows.

One general finding to be stated at the outset is that, although the term 'community-focused provision' had been coined for the purposes of this study, when our manager informants were introduced to it, most appeared to grasp it without need of explanation. Some went on to adopt the term in their interview responses.

Another general finding, for which we had not been wholly prepared, was that it emerged that at least three of the providers studied were national leaders in pursuing community-focused provision (one college, one LEA and one partnership) and that they had served as a model for providers elsewhere in England, including other providers in our sample. We cannot easily elaborate this point without revealing the identities of our cases but it suggests that community-focused practice has been understood and spread through high profile examples. It follows that providers varied in the depth of their experience of community-focused provision and in how clearly they were able to articulate what they were doing and why they were doing it. Consequently some managers' views are more illuminating, and are quoted more often, than others.

What we learned from our case studies was that providers had a distinctive strategic *vision* of community-focused work, and that this was translated into practice through a commitment to *development work* and a view of *delivery* that encompassed issues of quality, a holistic view of learning, and of achievement and progression. A general issue to emerge was the critical importance of *funding* to enable these things to happen.

Vision

A key feature of the community-focused provision we studied was that much of it relied upon an over-arching vision that imbued each organisation and was also translated into practice. The vision was, in the first place, that of the manager but it seemed also to be shared by tutors working at community level. The concept of *vision* is intended to capture a distinctive, strategic way of thinking about provision. Although at first somewhat intangible, it seemed, as we read and re-read our case study data, to grow in importance. It was a way of thinking about provision that sometimes reversed conventional ways of thinking. An example of such thinking noted by other researchers (Grief et al. 2002) is where, instead of thinking of certain groups of learners as 'hard-to-reach', providers think of provision that is inaccessible or unwelcoming as hard-to-reach, not the learners. That kind of thinking was characteristic of the community-focused providers we studied.

The vision found in the case studies varied in relation to the level at which it was focused, and in relation to how it was translated into practice. The vision of managers was at the strategic level.

"I see community-focused basic skills as a complex strategy that offers multiple interventions and support." (Manager, Case Study H)

In another case the strategic vision was explained in terms of what it was not.

"... starting from a different point of view, not starting from 'these are our number of courses, we've got to meet this many units, we need this many courses, this many people to sign up' – therefore a top-down model." (Manager, Case Study K)

This manager expressed an orientation that we encountered in all the case studies.

"You have to go to people where they are. Valuing those people and what they want to learn is important. What is their shopping list?" (Manager, Case Study G)

Managers were conscious of the need for vision to be shared by their staff.

"All the workers have the concept of community-focused provision 'ingrained in their hearts'. The concept is translated in the form of job descriptions and the induction process." (Manager, Case Study K)

One way to share such a vision would be to have it incorporated in some kind of mission statement. Yet it was interesting that very few providers could produce any documentation on the matter.

For tutors, a community-focused vision could be something quite personal that gave them an intuitive understanding of the way learners interacted with the provision and that led to rewarding practice.

"Part of that is seeing the results because you will go out as a community tutor into the community and you will start with a group lacking in confidence, not sure why they have put themselves through this, and you will go through that and you will see everybody lift and see those people want to go further and it is that little buzz that makes you want to do it again ..." (Manager-tutor, Case Study I)

Tutors' vision of provision was that it had to be flexible, fitted to learners' circumstances and that it involved a personal commitment from them. This tutor spoke of what was required to reach a particularly socially excluded group.

"You have to be able to move quickly. Initially it was scary. I didn't want to go back. Then, the more I went there, they saw that I never gave up on them and the more they appreciated that, that I wasn't judging them." (Tutor, Case Study H)

Vision was often part of a person's life history and experiences. For example, here is a provider, working in a partnership project, talking about how she came to develop a community-focused approach.

"I started a toddlers club for mothers and children at [original work place] when I was at home most of the time with my children and ...I did start noticing from my own experience how things worked and it was the way I could marry things that I knew about from my own experience with what I knew about ... academically ..." (Manager, Case Study F)

Vision took different forms in different contexts. In some cases, it involved choosing an approach that was not necessarily the easiest. For example, one city-wide partnership was concerned with supporting the voluntary sector, in order to provide a coherent model for enhancing basic skills in the community and to meet ambitious local targets. The manager reflected that the 'old model' by which funds were available for basic skills within individual organisations was not working, and instead he worked funding streams so that voluntary sector organisations were supported with a 'menu' of options to develop the basic skills of both the staff and the users. The manager reflected that this had not been easy, and he admitted to a few 'grey areas' around the map, saying, "It has been hard for [us] to think that way, it's not a natural way of thinking." Here, his vision drove policy, working against the grain of a conventional concept of voluntary sector organisations bidding against each other for funds.

In summary, the vision we found in community-focused providers was something articulated at a strategic level but shared also by tutors working at the level of individual learners, groups and community. It had clear practical consequences in terms of the nature of provision that resulted. Vision was often linked to a strong personal commitment on the part of managers and tutors towards learners. As one informant put it, "I'm really passionate about it." At a strategic level, vision helped providers in controlling and directing funding streams rather than being driven along by them. In relation to communities and learners, vision meant a readiness to find ways of fitting provision to learners rather than learners to provision.

Development work

A recurrent theme in the case studies was that, in order to realise vision, development work was vital. In practical terms, development meant staff whose job included going beyond the organisation, networking with community groups and organisations, talking to people who might be interested in attending provision, putting on taster courses that reflected their interests, and ensuring that provision continued to meet those interests but also challenged learners to move on. The more that learners were hard-to-reach, the more necessary was development. Our informants emphasised that development took time. It is to reflect that view that we refer to this issue as 'development work' rather than simply as 'development'. It involves work; it has to be part of someone's job. There are implications for funding that we return to later.

A college that was community-focused in its approach talked of the importance of time for development work.

"It takes up so much time but it has to be done. Other programme areas seem to manage without development time and they say, 'Why are they making such a fuss about this development time?'" (Manager, Case Study C)

The concept of development work operated at different levels. At a strategic level, development time meant serving on management committees, learning partnerships or

borough-wide steering groups to raise awareness of basic skills, getting the issue on the agenda and influencing the strategic direction of key organisations. There were indications that partnerships, in particular, saw this as an important role for them. One such provision in a large Midlands city described their structure as follows:

“We are set up as a company ... and on the Board are the chief executives of various organisations and the chair of the Board is the chief executive of the Voluntary Services Council so the whole notion of working with voluntary and community groups is written in at board level and it’s written in at the other two levels ... strategic managers who write an annual business plan.” (Manager, Case Study J)

Next there was a semi-strategic level of development work, making contact with other community organisations/service providers and identifying how a literacy/ basic skills dimension might support their client groups.

One partnership project was proud to have built the capacity of the local crèche provider by providing a coordinator in working with the local Surestart project.

“We came to an agreement so that we all put extra money into any crèche we asked for, for the early years to appoint a crèche coordinator, because otherwise it was impossible for them to respond to the expansion of crèches ... I thought it was really terrific that we were able to do that.” (Manager, Case Study F)

By working across providers, to capacity build the community, this provider could see the long-term gain for community-focused provision in basic skills.

Finally, there was development work at the level of communities: responding to, or identifying need and promoting learning. In one case this activity was termed, ‘lurking’ – meaning being around the places potential learners are to be found and listening to what they say, making suggestions about what they might like to do and persuading them to get involved in taster sessions, visits or activities. In one case study, the researcher reported how a project worker for a family literacy project described her role working with families with ESOL needs.

[She] talked about her development role, working with the parents, acting as a link between school and home, home visiting, teaching family literacy and putting on workshops and courses as requested by the parents. (Field notes, Case Study A)

Another provider insisted that all its workers had a developmental role.

“In our funding streams we do get development money – we don’t get delivery money but we have set up relationships that enable that to happen. All our external funding streams enable us to have people to walk the streets, sit in pubs, go to mother and toddler groups, and so on.” (Manager, Case Study K)

Lurking was very much connected to vision, making connections with the local community and providing something they wanted. This is not to say that providers simply went into communities and asked people what they wanted. It is difficult for learners to ask for things that they may not know exist or that they have never experienced. In practice, providers usually developed provision in the context of their communities by offering a menu of learning opportunities. Those courses on the menu that attracted interest were run and appropriate

follow-up courses developed; remaining courses on the menu might be offered later or not at all.

Providers felt that basic skills could come into a wide range of activities, and some found the Adult Core Curriculum a useful framework. Negotiation was mentioned as important in establishing curricular options, and many providers identified a range of options that they were prepared to offer. It was identified that there were different routes to basic skills accreditation and that a flexible approach benefited learners.

"We've got a lot now that's mapped to basic skills. We have one that starts off being a course on 'Positive Thinking' but everything's mapped to the basic skills standards and usually the group that have started 'Positive Thinking' think they would like to do the next one, which is 'Personal Development', so usually that was a group decision but this is a course where the focus is very much from the beginning sort of on how you are coping – self-awareness – so that's a group decision." (Manager, Case Study F)

Development work was also about innovation, finding new ways to do things, and was linked to risk-taking and being brave enough to try something. An extreme example of innovative, risk-taking development of provision in the context of the community was given by this provider.

"The tattoo thing is a perfect example. [The development worker] says 'Well I was sat in the residents' association and we got to talking about tattoos and why people have them and I thought, we could do something with this' so she then set up this little group of people to come and talk about their tattoos. That turned into writing about their tattoos, and a display in the residents' office of photographs about people's tattoos and little bits of writing." (Manager, Case Study K)

Another example of development in the context of the community came out of an ESOL family literacy course.

"During the course there was lots of talk about the state of the walk to school – run down area, old derelict industrial site. What emerged over the year was the desire to do something about it and the idea of a community garden emerged. The following two years the garden was built by members of the community. ... The garden is used by kids for projects. At weekends people wander in it. Food is grown, different seeds tried out. Some of the men work in the garden at the weekends, and a lot of labour was involved in shifting tons of soil about, creating a mosaic, building planters, etc." (Field notes, Case Study A)

This development provided a context for learning that was exploited in associated literacy, ESOL and family learning. For example, women learners in one course designed and made the mosaic which constituted a 'story circle' in the garden.

In summary, development work relied on partnerships being put in place and involved both high-level partnership work across the traditional organisation lines, as well as networking at local level. On the ground it could be translated into a concept which involved being responsive to community needs, setting up courses as and where possible, often 'lurking' in mother and toddler groups, or community organisations, before suggesting a menu of courses. Often undervalued by funders, it was a key component of community-focused provision.

Delivery

Vision and development work are preliminaries. What matters is the actual delivery of something. It was beyond the scope of this study to investigate in detail what was delivered but we were able to explore how providers thought about delivery. One aspect of delivery, *developing provision in the context of community*, was touched on in the previous section. From providers' accounts we were able to distinguish five further, inter-linked aspects of delivery that concerned them.

A holistic approach to learning
 Learning situations
 Quality
 Basic skills integral but not apparent
 Achievement and progression

Holistic approach to learning

- Providers were extremely concerned to root learning in the lives and interests of learners. Taking this holistic approach to learning sometimes meant that, whilst a learning outcome might be traditionally expressed (e.g. in the award of a certificate), the route to that outcome might be unorthodox. One partnership project working across a city to support the voluntary sector said that:

"We are ready to be able to have that capacity to think [learners] might be able to specify their own learning as opposed to being sucked up into somebody else's learning system."
 (Manager, Case Study J)

- A holistic concern with learners extended to the way teaching was provided, with tutors often adapting learning plans in the context of learners' requirements, and allowing learners to progress at their own pace. Words like 'empathy' and 'support' came up frequently in the data to describe the way in which tutors managed learning. Here, a manager in a college talked about a drinkers' project and how the tutor managed the situation:

"What united them all was a total disrespect for any education they had had – at school. A key issue is having a very good rapport with the tutor. They (the students) were owning their learning." (Manager, Case Study H)

The way the curriculum was adapted within community settings was an issue which could not be fully investigated within the constraints of the study but which could repay further investigation and research.

Learning situation

- One important aspect of community-focused provision was that providers were very concerned to have the appropriate learning situation. Often this manifested itself as concern about venue. For example, this provider used people's homes:

"It is more relaxed than college because this is where people live." (Tutor, Case Study E)

- However, there was often a tension between getting the learning situation right and quality concerns. Here, a manager accepted that some less than ideal situations did meet learners' needs:

"Recent inspection criticized us for the quality of buildings/sites. However, some learners are happier learning in primary schools on children's chairs because their children go there rather than going 200 yards down the road to a new community centre. It's actually about meeting the needs of people." (Manager Case Study G)

This awareness that the situation was a complex area, and that providers needed to take account of venue when planning projects, pervaded community-focused provision.

Quality

One manager of a financial literacy project in a large city said of her tutors:

"All our tutors are very strong in making people feel welcome and supported in the learning environment. The people skills are more important than knowledge of the new curriculum." (Manager, Case Study G)

This quality – people skills – was identified by strategic managers as being vital for both development workers and tutors. Many tutors had been employed because their specific backgrounds had been helpful; one had been in social work, another had counselling skills. This finding has implications for teacher training in Adult Basic Education; while the focus on curriculum is welcome, the project team found that tutors brought a complex range of skills to their job, and often these 'people skills', while unrecognised, were most important in community settings.

Providers' concepts of quality was affected by vision. Quality was highly valued within community-focused provision, as in this partnership project:

"When we produce something, it is as good as it can possibly be – the booklet for the ICT website thing: it's high quality, it's been printed properly it's got a really nice cover, a designed cover, that sort of stuff. Anything we produce – I'm fanatical about it going out right." (Manager, Case Study K)

However, definitions of quality differed in community-focused basic skills provision to concepts of quality generated by college-based provision. For example, here a manager reflects on how in the community there is an aspect of:

"Being brave enough to try something different – with the quality thing as well – you are not going to know... what are your quality measures, are they building people that are confident, or building people that are meeting national targets or are they a blend of both ... I think you have got to be quite brave sometimes to go out into the community." (Manager, Case Study I)

Another college which offered community-focused provision saw quality in terms of the quality of staff:

"From a quality perspective there is no difference – the systems and standards are there ...

the staffing is in fact more rigorous – the best staff are in the community. We look for experienced people to go into community.” (Manager, Case Study C)

All community-focused providers argued that very skilled and experienced tutors were needed within a community context, and that the skills required were different from mainstream providers.

Community-focused providers developed provision in the context of community, and this involved issues both of quality and situation. As described above, the venue was often problematic. A partnership project working in a rural area identified this conundrum:

“I think where we run lots of courses aren’t suitable in many ways. They are suitable because they are near where people live and so they will come to them and also funnily enough people find some of the venues more friendly than perhaps I would think they would [laughs]. It must be a health hazard, I feel. We have the scout hut on M_____ which again and again people evaluate as liking having training in but we think is awful and has been condemned from time to time and is only barely not condemned at the moment.” (Manager, Case Study F)

Many providers used laptops and a high quality of teaching with good quality teaching resources to emphasise that the community offer was high standard, and there was a general agreement on quality being key in the community, with a proviso that the concepts of quality were shared with the community. Sometimes while the situation was not ideal, this was accepted as part of the context for developing provision. Likewise, timing was a precondition for community-focused provision in that courses had to be flexible and in many cases learners needed to be able to join up at any time, or return to the course after a time away. Work with groups who were homeless, or had substance or alcohol difficulties had to have this quality.

Basic skills integral but not apparent

In many cases, this meant that the basic skills offer was hidden but not apparent within the course menu. The offer to learners may not be called ‘basic skills’ but in many cases the activities were mapped on to the core curriculum or came into all the learning:

“but basic skills comes into everything we do because we are trying to support parents’ learning – virtually everything we do we have some kind of basic skills – discussion, reading or writing, but it will come out of the activity they are doing, rather than be the reason they are going to that class.” (Manager Case Study A)

There was awareness that the term ‘basic skills’ could be seen as pejorative by learners, and so imaginative ways round this were found, including using taster courses, running courses on such topics as ‘Positive Thinking’, or ‘Keeping Up with the Kids’, or Following Learners’ interests and then looking at the basic skill elements afterwards.

Achievement and progression

Providers stressed the importance of delivering a curriculum that was geared to learners’ needs, at their own pace. Achievement and progression in community-focused basic skills

were often identified again, in relation to the structure of people's lives and how they perceived progression, rather than external sources. A large cradle-to-grave high profile partnership project stressed that progression needed to be defined in learners' terms:

"I realised progression was not about doing another course ... in some people's terms it wouldn't be, if you did a GCSE English what you decided is to help your son in school in some people's terms that would not be seen as progression because it's not that linear thing, in hard academic terms, but it is progression because she is brave enough to go into school because all those things are progression." (Manager, Case Study K)

Progression here was being viewed holistically, as enhancing a child's literacy skills, as much as supporting the adult's development. Progression in this city college was seen as physical movement:

"It's a physical progression, it's a geographical progression ...they go from a community centre to a [learning centre] and then perhaps to the main site. Not just a progression in terms of level." (Manager, Case Study C)

Many tutors included a level of advice and guidance within their job descriptions and saw their role as one of encouraging progression; where this was not specified, a provider would ensure that a student support adviser visit a group to support students. Informality was important when supporting and advising students.

Tutors learned to wait for students to work at their own pace. This tutor, working at a drinkers' project in a large urban setting, recognised this:

"I could stick to the curriculum and get them through their units really quickly but I don't think it would be interesting for them to do that. I would be ignoring their needs." (Manager, Case Study H)

Both tutors and students talked of concepts such as informality, friendships, empathy, being 'looked after' in relation to learning. While these qualities did not preclude the curriculum they were working to, or raising students' expectations of what they could achieve, tutors were able to incorporate a wider view of the curriculum and measuring achievement, often developing long-term relationships with students.

In summary, the project team found that the delivery of community-focused provision involved a focus on learners progressing at their own pace, an awareness of situation or venue as part of the 'offer' made, that the menu offered to students was tailored to suit local needs and mapped on to the curriculum, and that tutors had a holistic view of their role. Informal learning situations were nurtured where possible, and students were encouraged to enjoy learning, and were not put under pressure.

Funding

One of the clearest findings to emerge from the case studies was that funding related to all the issues above and was an absolute precondition for community-focused provision. The funding of post-16 basic skills in England and Wales is complex. The Learning and Skills Council, an overarching funding body, provides the bulk of funding to the major providers

within England through a number of routes, but there are, inevitably, restrictions on the way in which the funding can be used. It should be noted that the DfES have made it clear that there is almost unlimited funding for basic skills activity, as the Government seeks to meet the targets that it has set.

There was considerable evidence from the case studies that the restrictions around LSC funding make it difficult to fund basic skills work in the early stages of development where group numbers may be small, or where a significant amount of groundwork is needed to engage particularly hard to reach groups:

“The college says there must be a minimum number. But to get three people together is often quite an achievement. If it is a ... Surestart group which we run then we can have any number and people can join at any time, can bring a friend or a grandparent.” (Manager, Case Study D)

Additionally, the case studies showed that funding had to be sought from elsewhere to engage in the innovative developmental work required to use the range of groups identified within the Skills for Life document. Most providers sought additional external funding to enable them to carry out work which is more risky, more developmental and more innovative than LSC funding currently enables them to be. This funding often enables providers to support crèches, support learners moving on to other provision.

“If you look at ‘normal’ funding regimes and compare it with ... the ratio of activity to funding is better in projects because it’s explicitly identified as developmental ...you can build into a bid something new so that the worker who is involved ...is given more time to develop.” (Related provider, Case Study K)

Providers were ‘canny with the money’, finding ways in which to continue to engage in developmental, innovative and risky activity, or those that seek to engage the hardest to reach learners. It was clear that providers were aware of the emphasis being put on the national test, despite individual concerns about whether it was sufficiently challenging or was a true indicator of whether students had made progress.

“The target is now about getting the test. If you want the funding to do it, then you have to do the test.” (Manager, Case Study G)

In summary, funding while being apparently available to every provider, was actually hard to access particularly for development work. Core, long-term funding for community-focused provision was often identified as being difficult to obtain. Providers who decided upon their priorities, and followed a strategic vision, working funding streams to their own advantage, often, however, did achieve their goals. Areas not covered by other funding streams concerned with regeneration, appeared to suffer and there were gaps in provision according to level of need and whether an area qualified for a particular type of funding.

Dissemination seminar outcomes

A dissemination seminar was held in Sheffield at the end of the research project. It aimed to present the results of the project to an invited audience of practitioners, policymakers and academics in order to disseminate the findings of the project, provide an opportunity for findings to be challenged or affirmed and initiate discussion about implications for policy and future research. Participants included members of national organisations concerned with adult learning, basic skills, neighbourhood renewal and community action, senior managers in LEAs and adult basic skills, community-focused providers and practitioners, academics and participants from the case studies. Some 25 people attended, including the project team.

The seminar began with a general introduction to the project by one of the project co-directors, followed by a detailed discussion of the project's methodology and the literature search. In the afternoon, the key findings of the project were presented by members of the project team who had carried out the case studies. The seminar then split into groups to discuss research, policy and practice in the area of community-focused basic skills and to make recommendations for future research. A plenary at the end enabled the participants to gather together and reflect on future development.

The outcomes from the small group work were as follows:

Policy

The following areas were identified as needing to be highlighted:

- The need for funding for development work
- The importance of long term, core funding for community-focused provision in basic skills
- The need for increased awareness of basic skills issues amongst other agencies/local community contacts

Research

The following questions were identified by the groups:

- What is the concept of learner progression within community-focused provision?
- What is the learners' experience of community-focused provision?
- Do the learners know the difference between kinds of providers?
- What difference does the concept of 'vision' make to teaching and learning and learner progression?
- How does community-focused provision interact with learners' lives?
- How do community-focused basic skills get into the mainstream?
- What is the skills level of students in community-focused basic skills provision?

Practice

The following were identified as issues for practitioners and managers:

- The need to identify tutors' skills in community-focused provision
- The need to identify volunteers' skills and develop their roles
- The need to explore with practitioners the nature of the curriculum in community-focused basic skills

Seminar participants were given feedback sheets, and presented with research options which they were asked to help the team prioritise. The following were highlighted (in order of importance):

- research comparing community-focused provision to other forms of provision (particularly examining what sort of literacy/numeracy skills do people learn in community-focused provision, and are they different from what people learn in other provision)
- research studying learner progression (particularly learners' experiences of being drawn into or joining provision, their learning experiences, and progression to other forms of provision)
- strengthening practitioner-research links
- a mapping exercise
- research seminars in this area

Additional comments about the seminar by participants included the following:

'Affirmed some of the experiences and ideas developed through working in community contexts ... stimulated further thought, ideas and considerations, and raised even more questions.' (Staff member of national organisation)

'Clarified lots of issues/values that I've grappled with throughout my own basic skills career. Identified key issues that need further exploration to shape future policy and development work.' (Staff member of national organisation)

To summarise, the main research recommendation from the seminar was for a study comparing community-focused provision to other forms of provision. There was interest in what teaching and learning looked like in community contexts and in the learners' experience of that. Participants observed that research could usefully illuminate the issue of what is the 'curriculum' in community-focused basic skills, and explore issues of tutor training, particularly in the context of the findings that tutors had specific 'people skills' or wider qualities when working in the community.

One member of a national basic skills organisation said of the seminar,

"It was an affirming experience being here today. The seminar crystallized my faith [in community-focused provision] and gave it value."

Conclusion

This project hopes it has contributed to the field as follows.

The study, despite being small-scale and exploratory, made a start in filling a gap in the research literature. The *concept of community-focused provision* has been shown to be a meaningful way of understanding one way in which the teaching of adult literacy, numeracy and language can take place. Significant ways in which community-focused provision can be further understood are in terms of the *vision* which informs it, the *development work* necessary to implement it, and the nature of its *delivery*. Underpinning all this is the importance of appropriate *funding*.

Key questions for future research concern differences between community-focused and non-community-focused provision and the experiences, progression and achievement of learners in each. Key issues for policy and practice are the importance of funding and the preparation and support of teachers to work in a community-focused manner.

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Appendix 1

What is community-focused provision? Initial attempt to operationalise the concept in terms of questions to be discussed with providers and staff of national agencies

Organisation, Strategy, Policies and Management

- Do you deliver Basic Skills in local communities? What percentage of your work is delivered in local communities (as opposed to your 'main' site)?
- Does your provision take account of context? E.g. recognise needs and difficulties of different groups such as shift workers, single parent families, communities in decline, etc.?
- Does your provision recognise the 'importance of groups'; i.e. do you enable groups of learners to move on as a group?
- Does your provision recognise that learning/progression is not necessarily linear? I.e. can

people move across and between different provision without an emphasis on always moving on/up?

- Does your Basic Skills work underpin other learning? Do you develop provision as part of other learning based on expressed wants, e.g. First Aid + Basic Skills, Health and Safety + Basic Skills. Give some examples.
- Is family learning (Basic Skills), e.g. family literacy, family numeracy, an integral and integrated part of your provision? How?
- Do you work in partnership with local organisations to jointly develop provision? What percentage of your provision is delivered in partnership with others? Can you give examples of partnership working in Basic Skills?
- Do you have clear policies about first steps learning/community based provision/other....
- Does your organisation have a clear statement about Basic Skills? (L, L, N) – (Aiming here to get at the ‘functional’ versus ‘liberating’ approach. BS for empowerment, social inclusion, etc.)

Staff and Volunteers

- Do you employ, e.g. development workers/*community* Basic Skills co-ordinators, etc. to work in and with local communities? Who? What do they do?
- Have all your staff who interact with Basic Skills learners, in whatever post, received training about Basic Skills?
- Do you work with volunteers? How important are they to your provision? What proportion are trained? Do they receive regular CPD? What?
- What percentage of the people working in your organisation have come from the local community? How many of your staff have come into post from being a learner?
- How many of your staff have appropriate community languages?

Consultation, Evaluation, Dissemination

- Do you regularly evaluate your provision, not just in terms of statistics on enrolment/retention/achievement, but also:
 - Demographics?
 - Customer satisfaction?
 - Percentage of new learners?
 - Hardest to reach learners?
 - Progression?
- Do you contract for external evaluations of different aspects of your provision? Would you be able to tell us what percentage of your learners are new to your provision? (What percentage has attended a course/group before?)

Access Questions

- Do you always offer childcare (even if not used)? If not always, what percentage of your provision is supported by childcare?
- Is the majority of your provision delivered in traditional or ‘mainstream’ learning environments, e.g. college buildings, schools, and adult centres? OR What proportion of your provision is delivered in community or non-traditional learning environments? E.g. libraries, pubs, community centre, mobiles, places of worship, the workplace.
- Can learners ‘sign up’ at any time? Do you operate a minimum number policy in community based provision? If so, what number?
- Something about access issues? E.g. disabilities? Language?

- Are the majority of all your 'classes' delivered as 'two hours a week, once a week' type provision? If not, what percentage is?
- Do you work with local people to find out what they want? How?
- How do you make your provision accessible to people whose strong/preferred language is other than English? English?
- Are your venues culturally appropriate? What percentage/ (probably need to balance this against the number of ESOL learners they have)?
- Are any materials translated?

Appendix 2

Initial interview questions

1. What proportion of your basic skills (i.e. ESOL, literacy and numeracy) provision is delivered in community/non-traditional learning environments?
2. Can learners join up at any time?
3. What documentation do you have in relation to community-focused provision in basic skills?
4. Do you have people whose job is developmental, working within the organization whose role is to develop community-focused basic skills provision?
5. Can you describe the way in which you work in partnership with other organisations including voluntary/statutory to deliver community-focused provision in basic skills?

Appendix 3

The case studies

Case Study A	LEA	Urban	North
Case Study B	Voluntary	City	Midlands
Case Study C	FE	City	North
Case Study D	Partnership	Urban	North
Case Study E	Voluntary	City	South West
Case Study F	Partnership	Rural	South East
Case Study G	LEA	City	South
Case Study H	LEA/FE	City	South
Case Study I	FE	Rural	Midlands
Case Study J	Partnership	City	Midlands
Case Study K	Partnership	Rural/urban	Midlands



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NRDC is a consortium of partners led by the Institute of Education with:

- Lancaster University
- The University of Nottingham
- The University of Sheffield
- East London Pathfinder
- Liverpool Lifelong Learning Partnership

- Basic Skills Agency
- Learning and Skills Development Agency
- London Language and Literacy Unit, London South Bank University
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
- King's College London

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