

Evaluation of the
Adult and Community Learning Fund

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Executive summary

The Adult Community Learning Fund was launched by the Government in July 1998, as part of its strategy for widening participation in lifelong learning. Its stated aims included

- Engaging new learners into a range of opportunities
- Improving basic skills
- Developing capacity in community-based organisations to deliver learning opportunities
- Building partnerships involving local people, community organisations, and voluntary agencies with education providers

Some £20 millions were allocated to the Fund, to be distributed through a programme of small and major grants between 1998 and 2002. Overall management of the Fund at national level was devolved to two intermediary bodies: the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) and National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), working in partnership with DfEE.

The evaluation covers the first four rounds of ACLF projects, spanning the period between August 1998 and May 2000. The key findings for the Fund overall are that:

- (i) the Fund has widened individual participation as was intended,
- (ii) the Fund has contributed towards new ways of improving basic skills, and
- (iii) a much wider group of organisations has got involved, going far beyond the “usual suspects” and promoting a rich harvest of non-standard approaches to learning.

However, other findings about impact are found throughout the report.

Learning gain. Accepting that a common framework of measurability is not feasible across such a diverse set of projects, it has nevertheless been possible to identify substantial learning achievements by individuals involved in the specific projects. As well as subject-specific learning gain associated with the learning opportunity

concerned – about football, pottery, horticulture, urban policy or history, for example – the projects were also generating significant gains in other areas:

- Personal qualities and capacities, including an enhanced sense of purpose
- Motivation and life planning for the future
- Improved basic skills
- Growing confidence and self-respect
- Social learning and citizenship skills
- The appetite and ability to continue learning

Together, these gains were helping individuals see and understand themselves as effective learners.

New learners. In broad terms, the ACLF projects have been highly effective overall in bringing about significant learning gains for client groups who are non-traditional learners. Case study projects had overwhelmingly attracted learners from the target groups identified in their original proposals. This included a wide variety of those groups that are least likely to participate. There was a broad gender mix, and considerable attention had been given to attracting members of minority ethnic communities. Most of the learners in the case studies had little or no previous experience of education and training as adults; some of those who had been required to undergo training previously had been deterred by the experience. Data held at national level were not sufficiently robust or systematic to allow for any judgement of the programme as a whole in this regard.

Impact on organisations. The Fund has also fostered a high level of “capacity building” at local level, and above all at the level of the organisation itself. In particular, the Fund was concerned with building capacity in the organisations that sponsored projects. Overall, the number of projects concerned explicitly with capacity building grew steadily in the early stages of the Fund, and remained constant thereafter. Over time, capacity building projects were less likely to be led by learning providers and more likely to be led by voluntary or community groups. The case study data also demonstrated clear learning gains for organisations including

improved managerial capacities, stronger group skills, and a greater ability to develop and deliver learning opportunities.

Progression. The case studies provided evidence of progression of individual learners, whether to further learning or to other positive outcomes, such as a new involvement as active citizens. As the evaluation took place before many projects had completed even a single cycle of activity, this evidence was extremely limited and should be treated with caution. Further, it was clear that for some new learners, educational progression might be delayed rather than immediate; for others, it might be horizontal rather than vertical. Such fragmented progression patterns may prove to be quite significant in allowing those with vulnerable ‘learning identities’ to test out and confirm their newly-won skills and aptitudes.

What works. There is a reasonably strong consensus on “what works” in engaging new learners. The case study projects included a number of strategies that appeared to be highly effective in making contact with excluded individuals and groups, and involving them actively in organised learning. The key messages included:

- The importance of direct person-to-person recruitment, drawing on existing networks and contacts
- The role of inspiration and example in encouraging diffident or uncertain adult learners to continue
- Building the curriculum on the basis of identified needs
- Flexible and adaptive teaching approaches, which can combine serious learning with a bit of fun
- Accreditation and assessment for those who wish formal recognition of their learning
- Learning by stealth, so that learning is a natural extension of other activities such as a hobby or voluntary commitment
- Building group cohesion and mutual peer group support as a way of shoring up fragile learning identity and maximising retention

The case studies also showed evidence of what might be regarded as ‘negative lessons’ arising from blockages and disruption to activities. Many of these arose from

the difficulties faced by all organisations, but which can be particularly damaging to small bodies that depend on the goodwill and energy of committed individuals. These included changes to key project personnel, changes in location, restructuring in larger supporting partner bodies (such as local government or colleges), problems of sustainability and the sheer physical risk – especially to women – of going out and developing learning activities in some areas.

Using intermediary bodies. A further level of analysis concerned the lessons learned from the Fund as a whole. Consciously and explicitly, the Fund was established in order to allow experiment and risk-taking. Perhaps the first innovation was the experience of operating through intermediary bodies. While well established in Northern Ireland, this is less common in the rest of the UK. In general, it seems to have worked extremely well in the case of ACLF. Both BSA and NIACE were able to exploit their existing reservoirs of networks and goodwill in the field, but also to go beyond their current constituencies in making contact with many groups and organisations who did not initially see themselves as concerned professionally or otherwise with adult learning. Projects enjoyed a high quality of professional support, part of which is attributable to the experience and resources that are available to the two intermediary bodies.

Learning lessons. In so far as the Fund involved experiment and risk-taking, there was also a commitment to ensuring that lessons were learned and shared. BSA, NIACE and DfEE shared responsibility for raising awareness in the field of the Fund's existence. BSA and NIACE were able to use existing networks in the first instance; once the Fund was established, the intermediary bodies appealed increasingly successfully to a wider and often new constituency, particularly in the community and voluntary sectors. In his remit letter to the Learning and Skills Council, the Secretary of State referred to the lessons learned from the Fund about the case for community based learning, and made clear his expectation that the Council would take this forward in the future.

1. Context

1.1 Scope of the study

The report describes the results of an evaluation of the Adult and Community Learning Fund commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment. The study was approved in June 1999, and covers the period from the launch of the Fund in August 1998 up to May 2000. The key aims of the evaluation were two-fold:

- first, to provide a summative evaluation of the Fund's effectiveness; and
- second, to provide formative feedback that could sharpen the focus of new projects, inform any further generation of funding, and provide examples of best practice.

Findings were to be analysed at three levels: that of the individuals involved, that of the organisations/projects funded, and that of the Fund as a whole. It was agreed that there would be clear recommendations on the future role of the Fund; these are indicated by an arrow at the head of each recommendation. The report also presents evidence of the distinctive gains that arise from community based learning.

Methodologically, it was agreed that the evaluation would follow a number of broad principles. Where possible, the approach would be congruent with the aim of the Fund itself, of encouraging projects to function as learning organisations, fostering dialogue over early findings and soliciting interactive feedback. Close collaboration with BSA, NIACE and DfEE would be maintained in order to identify and consider new developments as they emerged. And there would be a balance of qualitative and quantitative analysis. A number of interim papers were produced, including an interim report in February 2000 and a draft final report in April 2000. These were discussed with the evaluation steering group, consisting of representatives of the evaluators, BSA, NIACE, and DfEE, convened by DfEE Analytical Services.

1.2 Background

We are proposing to set up an Adult and Community Learning Fund to sustain and encourage new schemes locally that help men and women gain access to education, including literacy and numeracy (The Learning Age, February 1998).

In creating the Adult and Community Learning Fund, the Government aimed to promote innovative activities that would help bring new learners into the learning society. In his foreword to *The Learning Age*, the Secretary of State suggested that in coping with the challenges of rapid change and the demands of “the information and communication age”, it is no longer possible to rely on the ingenuity and knowledge of “a small élite”; rather, “we need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people” (DfEE 1998, 7). Particular attention was to be paid to those whose literacy and numeracy skills do not allow for full participation in the learning society.

Community-based learning and basic skills support were viewed as particularly significant in this process of broadening participation in lifelong learning. In its first report, the National Advisory Group on Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (NAGCELL) concluded that “If lifelong learning is to become a reality for all, a major focus for policy and for operational support must be the home and the community” (Fryer 1997, 56). For the Government, community-based learning was also to be valued as a way of promoting active citizenship and social solidarity:

Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation (DfEE 1998, 7).

Taking part in learning, therefore, can be a way of actively re-engaging excluded groups in the regeneration and rebuilding of their communities. In this perspective, community-based learning functions as a virtuous cycle, where adult learning and active citizenship mutually reinforce and nourish one another, allowing the least favoured to seize a greater measure of control over their lives.

A similar momentum lay behind the new Government’s emphasis on basic skills. Following a twelve nation survey by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, showing that literacy and numeracy levels in Britain were among the

worst in the developed world, a working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser argued that

At present all too little is done. The teaching of basic skills to adults is often marginalized, remaining something of a Cinderella service. In fact it needs to become a key part of the strategy for Lifelong Learning and for national renewal generally (Moser 1998).

Among other proposals, the working group called for an expansion in family literacy, involving parents and children together, which it saw as demonstrably “a particularly encouraging way of helping many parents to improve their own literacy”. It also argued that “Unless community-based provision is enormously expanded, we will not be able to reach hundreds of thousands of people who have real needs but don’t want to go to a college”. Voluntary organisations, community schools and other local places including libraries and sports centres should have a part to play.

Underpinning this approach lies evidence of a deep ‘learning divide’ in our society (Fryer 1997). Survey evidence has repeatedly shown that significant numbers of adults do not engage with the education and training system. In the National Adult Learning Survey (NALS), virtually a quarter of those questioned said that during the previous three years (or since leaving full-time education if sooner), they had undertaken no learning whatever. The proportion of ‘non-learners’, according to this survey, increased steadily with age, so that among the 50-59 age group the ‘non-learners’ outnumbered the ‘learners’; ‘non-learners’ also outnumbered ‘learners’ among women, and among all categories of manual workers, as well as among those not currently engaged in paid work (Beinart and Smith 1998, 37-41). A recent survey for NIACE found that 85% of 65-74 year olds thought it unlikely that they would take up any learning in the next three years (RSGB 2000, 5). The same survey showed that while 38% of adults in social classification AB reported some current learning, the proportion fell to 16% among adults in classification C2 and 12% among those in DE (RSGB 2000, 1).

Of course, divisions between ‘learners’ and ‘non-learners’ are not hard and fast. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that not thinking of oneself as a learner may be a

core part of some adults' social identities. When 'non-learners' in NALS were asked what might encourage them to do some learning, half (50%) said that nothing would encourage them, and another 6% did not know what would encourage them (Beinart and Smith 1998, 238-9). There is repeated evidence that those who have skills and qualifications enjoy wider access to employment and other economic and social benefits. Tackling the learning divide is therefore an important step in the wider process of tackling social exclusion and reengaging the least advantaged in society.

1.3 The evolution of the Fund

The Government announced proposals for the Fund in *The Learning Age*, published in February 1998. Launched in July 1998, the Fund was innovative in a number of respects, not least being the decision by DfEE to sub-contract both the day-to-day management of projects and the wider leadership of the programme to two intermediary bodies, the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). The Fund's existence was widely publicised, particularly through the publication in print copy and on the World Wide Web of a prospectus inviting proposals, which were then scrutinised by a specially appointed advisory panel, chaired by DfEE. By the time that the evaluation was completed, four rounds of bidding had taken place, and some 309 projects had been approved.

As a competitive challenge fund, the ACLF is unusual in the British context, in that its management is contracted out to two intermediary bodies. This was built into its design from the outset. Indeed, *The Learning Age* announced that "We will make £5 million available next year through the Basic Skills Agency and NIACE", and this was not put forward as an item for consultation, nor was there any public tendering process (DfEE 1998, 48). Under the terms of their contract with DfEE, BSA and NIACE were charged with:

- Promoting the work of the Fund
- Advising on project ideas and applications

- Contracting with and paying projects
- Providing specialised support and training to projects, particularly on content and project management
- Facilitating networking between projects
- Signposting projects to other sources
- Monitoring and evaluation the outputs and finance of projects
- Developing and disseminating good practice

In addition, the two organisations have been required to collaborate in order to facilitate the process of working in parallel.

In its early stages, the Fund developed rapidly. Following further developments of what had by then become a four-year budget, DfEE issued a prospectus in late July 1998, outlining the Fund's nature and purpose, and inviting proposals. Revised versions of the prospectus were anticipated as "likely to be issued March 1999 and 2000". A revised Prospectus was indeed issued in March 1999, drawing on the experiences of the first two rounds, incorporating a number of changes including the introduction of an application form and making adjustments to the original timetable. As well as comprehensive guidance on how to apply, the Prospectus also included details of arrangements for monitoring and evaluation, and described how applications would be dealt with. The first version of the Prospectus noted that the shortlist would be considered by "a small independent panel of people with particular knowledge and expertise", and promised to publish their names "as soon as possible"; the list of names duly appeared in the revised Prospectus.

According to the revised prospectus, the Fund's stated aims were to support projects aimed at:

- drawing more people unaccustomed to education into learning activities of all kinds
- opening up access to learning in terms of location, delivery and content
- improving basic skills among adults who have difficulties with them
- building capacity in community-based organisations to provide learning opportunities outside conventional structures

- supporting effective partnerships involving local people, community-based and voluntary organisations, education providers and other agencies in delivering learning
- adding value to activities supported by charities, trusts and private donors.

These aims were stated slightly more succinctly in the second than the first edition; the broad thrust, though, remained unchanged.

These aims were to be promoted by supporting projects with a number of key hallmarks. According to the first Prospectus, successful projects would (a) be innovative, (b) be sustainable, and (c) build effective partnerships. Two new, additional features appeared in the revised prospectus: henceforth, successful proposals would also (d) ensure quality and (e) involve participants

Two types of organisation were flagged in the Prospectus as most likely to succeed. First were what the revised Prospectus described as “community and voluntary groups and charitable trusts at national and local level” who wished to expand their activities to include adult learning. Second were “traditional education providers who have an idea for making their services more accessible”. Reflecting the Fund’s aim of “building capacity”, here was a strong expectation that bids would normally be led by community or voluntary groups; once more, this emphasis was strengthened in the revised Prospectus.

The first prospectus gave a detailed timetable for the first three rounds of projects, and a further three were outlined in the second version (see Table One). The original prospectus invited submissions for three main types of project:

- “small” (one-off allocations of up to £10,000), initially aimed at the delivery of new learning opportunities, to which the revised Prospectus added the task of developing capacity to deliver learning in the future that had previously been the aim of “planning grants” (see below);
- “major” (available over more than one financial year, up to £50,000 a year), for the development and delivery of new learning opportunities;

- “planning” (one-off, up to £10,000) grants, which might where appropriate lead to a further application for a small or major grant. With the revised Prospectus, planning grants were integrated into the small grants category.

Initially, major grants were expected to account for some 70% of the Fund; in the revised Prospectus, this was changed to 60%. Major grants were revised downwards to £30,000, and small and planning grants were amalgamated. All type of grants were awarded using the same procedure and timetable throughout.

At the outset, the Fund was to provide some £15 millions of Government funding over three years, subsequently raised to £20 millions between 1998 and 2002. According to the Prospectus, the Government “established the Fund with the aim of matching it with equivalent contributions from other sources”, including major grant-making trusts, charities, companies and private donors (though in the event, seeking matched funding at national level proved highly problematic). It also urged the more established providers, such as colleges, to commit a contribution in cash or kind to any project in which they are involved.

Table One: ACLF applications timetable			
Round	Bids due	Contracting	Start
First round	5 October 1998	November 1998	December 1998
Second round	30 November 1998	December 1998	January 1999
Third round *	8 April 1999	May 1999	June 1999
Fourth round	30 September 1999	October 1999	January 2000
Fifth round	30 September 2000	December 2000	January-April 2001

* revised from 1 March 1999 and March 1999

Table Two: allocations under the five rounds

	<u>Number of projects approved</u>	Total funding committed (£)
Round 1	70	4,343,911
Round 2	96	5,121,951
Round 3	56	2,420,560
Round 4	65	2,370,745
Round 5	131	2,860,531

Note: The total project funding amounts to less than the overall budget of £20m because a portion is spent on project support, promotional activity, seminars and management costs.

Round 5 was not covered by this evaluation.

The extent to which the Fund reached into new areas can be seen by comparing the grantholders for projects supported in Rounds 1 and 4 (Table Three). It should be noted that this is an imperfect measure of involvement, as a variety of organisations featured as partners in every proposal. Nevertheless, the figures in Table Three confirm the leading place of voluntary and community-based organisations. In Round 1, these two categories accounted for 54% of all project funds; by Round 4, this had risen to almost 66%, or virtually two-thirds of the total. This pattern was not a simple reflection of a few large scale, multi-annual awards. Particularly in the case of the community-based and self-help groups, minor and planning grants constituted a significant minority of all awards. By comparison, mainstream adult education providers did indeed fare increasingly less well over time. Involvement by further education colleges and local education authorities had dwindled to a trickle, while two significant voluntary providers (WEA and the Pre-School Learning Alliance) had submitted no successful proposals whatever. This is not to say that LEAs, colleges and other mainstream providers were absent, but that formal leadership of successful projects was increasingly being taken by voluntary organisations, charities, community-based groups and self-help groups (with many of the latter two categories being highly localised and limited in scope). Finally, a small but growing number of projects were being put forward in the name of partnerships, some of which pre-dated the ACLF application (including a successful proposal from a local learning

partnership) and some of which appear to have been formed in order to draft the ACLF proposal.

Table Three: Comparison of grant holders, Round 1 and Round 4				
	Round 1		Round 4	
	Number of projects	Share of total allocation (%)	Number of projects	Share of total allocation (%)
Voluntary organisation/ charity	21	31.0	20	37.3
Community group/self-help group	12	23.0	20	28.4
Local education authority	12	10.6	2	3.3
Further education college	6	8.2	3	4.5
Private sector (not-for-profit organisation)	6	9.8	5	8.5
Public bodies (not primarily educational)	4	6.5	4	6.8
Partnerships/ consortia	3	3.9	8	11.1
Main voluntary sector adult education body	2	7.0	0	0.0

The evolving focus on engaging with the community and voluntary sector has not been universally welcomed. One of the senior ACLF team members in an intermediary body, who saw the emphasis as stemming from the advisory panel, said that her team had come

under pressure to target small community groups who are not likely to have infrastructure, and can be very vulnerable to changes in membership or staffing, but because they are so close to their group we are encouraged to work through them.

She believed that more established organisations, with a degree of expertise in supporting adult learning, would benefit from engaging with the experimental and innovative approach of the Fund.

Are some regions more likely to engage than others? Is there a regional bias in approvals? In operating the Fund, DfEE had determined not to establish targets for regional allocations. One member of the advisory panel claimed that the more panel members knew of a bid, the more critical they tended to be, disadvantaging applicants from their own areas. Given the regional bias in the panel's membership (a clear majority worked in northern England, while another had recently moved from Yorkshire to the south coast), this may be plausible. Another panel member believed that there was a clear concentration of projects in London, resulting both from the experience of the voluntary sector in the capital in securing competitive funding, and from the overwhelming scale of the problems. A third recalled that "We hopefully rightly made a number of assumptions that the DfEE would want to see a reasonable geographical spread, and so whilst it wasn't in the criteria we did have an eye to those things".

Table Four: Number of Local Projects by Government Region					
Region	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Share of English population
North East	4	3	6	0	5.3
North West/ Merseyside	3	7	10	8	14.1
Yorkshire & the Humber	4	6	15	5	10.3
East Midlands	6	13	12	6	8.4
West Midlands	6	9	9	1	10.9
Eastern	6	6	5	3	10.7
London	16	20	14	18	14.3
South East	7	15	12	7	16.0
South West	7	5	14	11	9.9

Table Five: Share of Total Grant Allocation by Government Region (percentage)				
Region	Round 1	Round 2	Round 4	Share of English population
North East	3.7	4.4	0.0	5.3
North West/ Merseyside	4.2	6.9	7.1	14.1
Yorkshire & the Humber	7.5	6.2	7.9	10.3
East Midlands	9.7	11.3	8.9	8.4
West Midlands	8.6	11.2	2.1	10.9
Eastern	3.5	6.3	3.6	10.7
London	26.8	25.8	25.2	14.3
South East	12.8	11.7	13.6	16.0
South West	10.6	3.5	19.7	9.9
National/ multisite	12.7	12.7	11.8	-

1.4 Lifelong learning and social inclusion

The Fund brings together two overarching Government priorities: widening participation in lifelong learning and promoting social inclusion. Within DFEE, ACLF is one of a number of related measures aimed at re-engaging those who have turned their backs on education or training (Ward and Ciotti 1998). Basic literacy, numeracy and communications skills, for example, have been the focus of a range of new initiatives following publication of the Moser report. Social inclusion is also a

priority across departments, supported and co-ordinated through the Social Exclusion Unit, which has in turn encouraged all Government departments - including DfEE - to review its strategy for tackling such issues. At local level, county and district authorities are exploring strategies for community participation as a result of the Government's Best Value initiative (Brown and Elrick 1998/99). One consequence of this debate has been a series of policy developments that are broadly congruent with, and favourable towards, the type of activities and focus with which the Fund is associated.

In particular, the Fund has unfolded in parallel with an important series of policy initiatives sparked off by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU). In its report on neighbourhood renewal, published in September 1998, the Unit recommended that DfEE should review its role in regenerating disadvantaged areas (SEU 1998). As a result, a high-level Policy Action Team (PAT) on Skills was created with the remit of identifying how to tackle:

- the key skills gaps that need to be addressed in poor neighbourhoods to help those who are unemployed, in intermittent or unskilled employment, or lack basic skills and self-confidence;
- how well existing institutions meet these needs and whether there are any changes that would be cost-effective;
- how well alternative methods (including informal learning, outreach, IT and distance learning) work to motivate adults to re-engage in education and training, and how good practice could be spread better.

The Fund is therefore seen as contributing not simply to DfEE's goals, but also to wider Government objectives. In particular, its role has been precisely directed towards developing alternative approaches as a way of engaging new learners.

In its report, the Policy Action Team on Skills concluded that while there was abundant evidence of good practice in re-engaging adults in education and training, in large parts of the country current arrangements had failed to make an impact. The Skills PAT believed that this had happened for three main reasons:

- a) the education and training system is “not adequately addressing the needs of socially disadvantaged adults”;
- b) local capacity to develop initiatives is usually weak, and “local involvement in and ownership of learning activities equally so”;
- c) residents in the least advantaged areas often “believe that no matter what they learn, it will make no difference to their prospects, in the labour market or more generally” (DfEE 1999b, 45).

Most of the Skills PAT’s recommendations concerned the need for systematic and co-ordinated support for adult learning in the least advantaged areas. Among its recommendations was a call for DfEE to review by April 2001 its funding programmes and practices “with a view to creating a funding and regulatory environment that allows for more community-generated initiative and enterprise in the delivery of education and training”. Further, the Skills PAT recommended a code of good practice for public funding for the voluntary and community sectors (DfEE 1999b, 16), advice which influenced the resulting Compact between the voluntary sector and the Government.

Related policy lessons were drawn by a Policy Action Team led by the Social Exclusion Unit, which explored the lessons of previous experience in neighbourhood renewal. The SEU PAT focused particularly on the skills, knowledge and training needed both by public servants and by local residents to support those involved in neighbourhood renewal. Once more, while much had been achieved, there appeared to be a consistent gap between what policy-makers expect and what happens on the ground. One area of concern was the training and support available to community leaders and organisations, which is “highly fragmented” and goes largely unrecorded (SEU 2000, 30). Among other recommendations, many of them dealing with the support needed by professionals and policy makers who were required to work in partnership with communities, the SEU PAT called for a range of activities to help build local capacity, including:

- a bursary scheme “to enable directors of small community projects to acquire business and management skills”;
- a review of “options for providing easier access to social capital funding”;

- a “training and support strategy” for social and civil entrepreneurs; and
- routine annual monitoring of the support given to community leaders and entrepreneurs in the course of public regeneration programmes (SEU 2000, 34-5).

Subsequently, the Government announced a series of strategic initiatives on neighbourhood renewal, including

- better local co-ordination of services through Local Strategic Partnerships which bring together key players in a local authority area, including residents and community groups;
- a new Neighbourhood Renewal Fund totalling £800 million over three years in the 88 most deprived local authority areas;
- a new £36million Community Empowerment Fund to help residents develop and drive through their ideas to help them participate in Local Strategic Partnerships;
- Community Chests worth £50 million to fund grassroots residents’ projects;
- a Neighbourhood Renewal Unit in DETR to oversee policy across Whitehall, accountable to a cross-departmental group of senior ministers; and
- dedicated Neighbourhood Renewal Teams in the Government Offices in the Regions.

Progress across government departments will be monitored, and achievement levels published, on an annual basis (Social Exclusion Unit 2001).

The relationship between adult learning and social inclusion has also attracted wider political attention. In its report on post-16 participation, for instance, the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment noted that

A side-effect of the substantial improvement in overall participation during the last two decades has been to widen the gap between the educational ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’.

While it went on to praise the Government’s White Paper on post-16 education and training, *Learning to Succeed*, for striking a balance between social cohesion, personal growth and wealth creation, the Select Committee warned that this balance needs to be adhered to, otherwise there is a risk of the skills and labour market agenda making a disproportionate claim on the resource base available for

learning, to the detriment of the learning, personal development and social exclusion agenda (Select Committee on Education and Employment 1999). In its recommendations, the Committee acknowledged the “good argument for funding some kinds of community-based learning which may not lead to qualifications”, and commended “family learning schemes, the value of which was made clear to us in evidence” (Select Committee on Education and Employment 1999).

More generally, the educational policy thinking of the international community has also been increasingly favourable towards community-based learning. Indeed, the initiative of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in launching the International Adult Literacy Survey (which also covered quantitative literacy) gave a major focus to policy on basic skills needs (OECD 1997a). Gabriel Chanan has described European Union policy thinking as “sympathetic but unspecific”; recognising that strong local communities are a key to sustainable development strategies, the EU features community involvement or active citizenship in a number of its programmes, including notably the Structural Funds (Chanan 1999, 7). Particularly in its regional policy thinking, the EU has also shown increasing interest in investing in social capital across an ever wider range of policy areas, so as to build the infrastructure of social institutions in disadvantaged areas and communities (Mouqué 1999). Of course, the key policy actors in respect of community-based learning are largely at national and local level. Nevertheless, it is significant that a favourable policy environment encompasses the EU and OECD, as well as the UK Government.

It remains the case, though, that the two worlds of adult learning and regeneration/community development are often separate from each other. Our own fieldwork confirmed that each has its own language and its own assumptions. While the thrust of policy is to bring these worlds of practice into a closer relationship, at present the two communities of practice have only just started to engage with one another.

- DfEE, NIACE and BSA should consider how best to ensure better liaison, communication and co-operation at national, regional and local levels between those bodies responsible for adult learning on the one hand and those concerned with regeneration and community development on the other.

2. Method

2.1 Our approach to evidence

Fundamentally, the Fund exists to combat social exclusion by engaging new groups in learning. As Baroness Blackstone put it in her foreword to both editions of the Prospectus,

There are still those who remain untouched or unconvinced by the message that learning is for everyone . . . we want to find new ways to invest in learning opportunities provided through grassroots, community-based activities which are familiar and relevant to people's everyday lives.

More specifically, as already noted, the Prospectus identified the following as key features of the projects that it existed to support:

- they would be innovative, which might therefore entail “an element of risk – especially where the activity centres on efforts to involve people who are wary of learning”
- they would ensure quality, with a “strong focus on achieving individual and organisational goals”
- they would be sustainable, with the Fund “piloting new approaches which if proved successful can then be replicated and funded from mainstream sources”
- they would build effective partnerships, particularly to ensure that “the sum total of resources directed to a local area is used in the most effective way”

- they would involve participants as “a vital part of the learning experience and an important way of ensuring that community and voluntary groups involved are truly locally ‘owned’ self-help organisations” (quotations from the revised prospectus).

Although we have not limited ourselves to measuring performance against these broad objectives, they have formed a particularly valuable framework for approaching the evaluation, particularly when placed within the broader context suggested by Baroness Blackstone’s remarks.

In evaluating the impact of the Fund, we have sought to keep this wider view in mind, looking beyond the outcomes of the projects for signs of what is happening as a result of those outcomes. Within this framework, our approach has been to look for evidence that will help identify:

- what works, for whom, under what circumstances, and why; and
- what the results of this have been.

The research design is intended to allow for comparisons to be made. Of course, much of the evidence is qualitative and indeed normative - rightly so, we believe, as we were centrally concerned with feelings, attitudes and perceptions as much as hard indicators. Rather than thinking of our findings as hard and fast science, then, they are best seen as indicators to what might be called “promising approaches” (Utting 1999, 5).

In undertaking the study, the evaluation team used a number of varied approaches. The aim in adopting an eclectic approach was to find a range of evidence that might shed light on what has been a significant departure from conventional practice, not least in that the Fund was seen from the outset as encouraging innovative and even risk-taking approaches to engaging with new learners.

Fifteen case studies were undertaken at local level. In selecting the case studies, care was taken to strike a balance between projects managed by BSA and NIACE; between minor, planning and major sizes of award; between different types of new learner; between different types of lead agency; and between different types of approach. We also sought to ensure a spread between the different English regions,

and to include the experiences of both men and women and of people from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Case study selection followed consultation with BSA and NIACE. A brief summary of the case study projects is given in Table Six.

Each case study drew on a range of evidence. In particular, we drew on the following sources:

- A range of documentation held by BSA or NIACE was reviewed, including particularly the original proposal, quarterly reports (requested by NIACE), six-monthly and end-of-year reports (requested by BSA), and any correspondence; in all but a small number of instances, the documentation appeared to be complete.
- Each case study was visited between two and four times, with a view to holding interview with managers, tutors, and partners; in those projects concerned with providing learning opportunities, we also interviewed learners. In the case of the two planning grants, outstanding queries were resolved by telephone interview rather than a third visit. In the case of the two planning grants, learner interviews were not organised; in two other cases, promised interviews failed to materialise. In most cases, the venue and learners were photographed (with their agreement), in order to incorporate a limited visual element into the evidence.
- Finally, two external stakeholders were interviewed for each of the case studies, making 30 in total. These were relatively brief exchanges, following a highly structured topic guide, and were analysed with one eye on the likelihood of some degree of collaboration or rivalry between the stakeholder's own institution and the lead agency for the project. Stakeholders came from a range of backgrounds, including LEAs, TECs and voluntary adult education providers.

In addition, data were taken from a number of other sources to allow for a judgement on the Fund as a whole.

- Interviews were arranged with the members of the advisory panel responsible for recommending the successful bids.
- Interviews were held with the teams of staff at DfEE, NIACE and BSA who are charged with its administration, management and leadership.

- Observations were arranged of: team meetings within BSA and NIACE; of training events for project leaders, including those who had recently submitted successful proposals; of an awareness-raising event for would-be applicants; and of two dissemination events organised by NIACE (one being the Institute's annual residential conference). Other than the advisory panel interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, these events were written up in detail, and the notes discussed by the entire evaluation team.
- Telephone interviews were held with twenty respondents who had made unsuccessful applications to the Fund (and allowing in the analysis for the possibility that their views were influenced by disappointment).
- Four people working in adult education and one in community development (two full-time, one part-time, one volunteer and one self-employed) were asked to provide brief written reviews of the ACLF web site.
- An interim report was submitted to DfEE and discussed at an evaluation steering group; as well as producing valuable feedback in its own right, this latter process also generated two written responses from the BSA and NIACE teams.
- Finally, any documentation pertaining to the Fund was collected and analysed. Much of the documentation was incidental or ephemeral, such as passing mentions in annual reports of organisations including NIACE; some was more substantial, such as the internal review submitted by BSA and NIACE to the advisory panel.

Three planned elements of the evaluation were not pursued, for rather different reasons. First, a detailed investigation of a planned BSA/NIACE project database was dropped when it became clear that the two separate databases could not be merged within the timescale of the project; information from the two databases has been used selectively. Second, an attempt to use local statistical indicators of participation to measure the Fund's impact foundered when it became clear that no data were available for the year in which the first ACLF projects had operated. Third, an attempt to organise two focus group discussions met with considerable recruitment difficulties, and was therefore abandoned. In other respects, the evaluation proceeded largely as intended.

Table Six: ACLF - the case studies				
Case study	Round	Grant	BSA/ NIACE	Focus
Banbury Young Homelessness Project	Three	£10,000	BSA	Basic skills and job-finding among young homeless adults
Community Education Development Centre, Coventry	One	£9,000 over 12 months	BSA	Promoting fathers' contribution to family literacy (national project)
The Depot, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire Youth Service	Two	£68,400 over two and a quarter years	BSA	Mobile basic skills provision particularly aimed at long term adult unemployed
Fieldway Local Action Group, Wayside Centre, Croydon	Three	£25,732 over three years	NIACE	Recruiting and training 'learning promoters' on the New Addington estate
General, Municipal and Boilermakers Trade Union, Eastern Region	Two	£9,460 planning grant	BSA	Undertake training needs analysis among union members and pilot basic skills courses in two companies
Kaleidoscope, Kingston on Thames	One	£146,550 over two and a half years	BSA	Basic skills tuition and guidance for recovering drug dependents
L.A. Raiders FC Soccer Academy, Leyton, London	Two	£60,000 over two years	NIACE	Education programme for trainee footballers, recruiting young men from the Leyton estates
Magpie Resource Library, Deptford	Two	£87,969 over two years	NIACE	Development of capacity for community research among local residents wishing to influence the regeneration process in Deptford
National Association for the Care & Resettlement of Offenders, Osmaston, Derby	One	£50,000 over two and a half years	BSA	English and family literacy provision for parents of young children in a high crime suburban area
Norfolk LEA Adult Education Service, Wensum Lodge, Norwich	One	£9,100 planning grant	NIACE	Feasibility study to investigate potential for three local heritage centres using reminiscence therapy with older residents
Overseas Graduate Development Programme, Department of Environment and Development, Leicester City Council	Two	£99,938 over 3 years	NIACE	Developing courses for overseas graduates seeking recognition of their skills and qualifications in Britain
Refugee Council, Brixton, London	Two	£141,000 over two and a quarter years	BSA	Providing family learning workshops at weekends, after school, summer holidays and half term
Richmond Fellowship, Wakefield	One	£38,405	NIACE	Providing learning opportunities for adults with severe and enduring mental health problems and/or challenging behaviour

Saffron Arts Forum, Linwood Centre, Leicester	Three	£55,361 over three years	NIACE	Arts related learning opportunities for residents on the Saffron Lane estate
Willow Women's Centre, Hull	One	£89,425 over 3 years	NIACE	Tuition and child care to allow participation by women in north Hull

2.2 Measuring the learning gain: individuals

Having undertaken the fieldwork, the collected data was then analysed. The purpose of this analysis was to inform the evaluation in particular of two key aspects of the Fund:

- a) its overall management; and
- b) the learning gain that it had created.

In practice, the evaluation team found the former task to be relatively straightforward. While the management of the Fund was marked by complexity, as an arm's length process involving two intermediary bodies and several hundred distributed projects, this aspect of the work did not raise particularly challenging or novel issues. While in principle it was a straightforward matter to identify the learning gain, not least because virtually all proposals included clear numerical targets, in practice this proved to be considerably more difficult than envisaged, for reasons which require some elaboration.

There is a widely-held belief among specialists in adult learning that “informal learning in community settings constitutes the beginning of a learning pathway for a great many people, as well as helping them to progress in other dimensions of their lives” (McGivney 1999, 12). A team from the Tavistock Institute, in a recent study for DfEE, opened their report with the assertion that “Informal learning *is* widening participation” (Cullen et al 2000, i). Moreover, there is growing recognition among economists and others of the value of the wider social benefits of learning (McMahon 1998). But can this be translated into a standardised and measurable concept of learning gain?

First, there are practical issues of measurement in respect of activities supported by the Fund. Monitoring and evaluation are integral at the project level, and it was notable throughout the evaluation that the BSA and NIACE teams repeatedly emphasised to project co-ordinators the need to “speak with authority on whom we are reaching and what they have learnt - especially their unanticipated learning” (NIACE team member, induction meeting for Round 4 projects, December 1999).

Nevertheless, while it is always possible to find ways of measuring community-based learning, there are general problems in representing the results according to a common standard. McGivney has noted in respect of informal learning that “quantitative evidence on a national scale is impossible to find” (McGivney 1999, 21). She attributes this to the following reasons:

- it is diverse and takes place in a huge number and variety of settings;
- much is small scale, local in focus and precarious;
- it may be spontaneous and embedded in routine activities, so that progression outcomes go unrecorded;
- tracking would require cooperation across different sectors and harmonisation of recording methods;
- local groups rarely have the resources to track former users;
- informal learning has had a low status and professionals rarely ask about it.

Furthermore, as the Tavistock report noted, informal learning can be such “that its participants do not perceive themselves to be ‘learning’”; it is also both generic and highly contextually specific, having “evolved in response to unmet needs in a particular space and time”; and the individual and group learning outcomes are often unanticipated (Cullen et al 2000). It is noticeable that McMahon’s framework for analysing the social benefits of lifelong learning, for example, used participation in higher education as the basis for calculating the wider benefits that were returned to investment in learning; informal learning was discounted (McMahon 1998). So while it is perfectly possible in principle to provide a measurement of individuals’ learning gain in informal learning, there is a consensus among those who have investigated the field that it is virtually impossible to do so in ways that allow for comparison between different outcomes and different settings.

Further, it proved considerably more straightforward to measure the outcomes from the projects managed by BSA than those managed by NIACE. Because the two agencies have different concerns and expertise, they had different sorts of projects to manage. BSA projects had basic skills objectives which were more likely to involve a precisely specified outcome. Typically a BSA project would involve a given number

of people recording a measurable gain in a particular set of skills: for example, improved writing skills, accreditation, progress from level 1 to level 2. NIACE project outcomes tended to be more general (and therefore harder to compare), and were more likely to be oriented towards community development rather than the individual learner (making them harder to measure). In practice, the division was never quite as hard and fast as some interviewees claimed, since BSA routinely asked projects to report “secondary gains” as well as the basic skills gains that are its primary focus. Moreover, BSA projects were expected just as much as NIACE projects to make a contribution to capacity-building. Nevertheless, there were different approaches to the way that core outcomes were defined, with those definitions used by BSA lending themselves far more readily to standardised measurement than those adopted in practice by NIACE. This difference was also noted by interviewees, including members of the advisory panel who had to reach decisions on the basis of criteria that were often hard to compare systematically with one another.

Finally, for practical reasons the evaluation was only able to ‘capture’ full data for one year from a small number of projects, all of them from Round 1. Yet the programme supported by the Fund evolved and developed rapidly, as is shown below, so that the portfolio of activities approved under the later rounds looked very different from the earliest stages, where all concerned were still feeling their way.

The evaluation therefore focused on a search for largely qualitative evidence of individual learning gain. Given the goals of the Fund, the aim was to identify and analyse examples of perceived and recorded learning gains, under a number of separate headings. The Tavistock team grouped the outcomes of informal learning under four broad headings (Cullen 2000):

- individual (consisting of metacognitive skills, self-confidence and social skills),
- institutional (improved social integration and cohesiveness)
- community (new capacities including technical skills and transferable skills), and
- societal level (increased commitment to citizenship, higher social capital, and some contribution to the demand for a knowledge-based labour market).

Similar debates and initiatives have also been undertaken elsewhere in Europe. In a five-country development project concerning social inclusion and community empowerment through voluntary action (VIP, or Volunteering into Participation), a number of key lessons were identified in respect of individual and community learning through participation. This seems to offer a number of indicators broadly comparable to those of the Tavistock report.

Table Seven: Volunteering into Participation: defining the learning gain	
Individual volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acquire, improve and prove existing and new skills • more personal freedom and independent learning than through paid work • promotes personal growth (confidence and self-esteem) by revealing hidden qualities • builds new social contacts and networks • people learn how to improve and influence their lives and circumstances, reducing dependency • creates a sense of belonging and gives life meaning, increasing self esteem
Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal growth • new awareness of possibilities and raised aspirations • widening horizons and connections • self-help, advocacy and political pressure

Source: VIP 2000, 60-61

In section three of this report, we offer firstly a brief analysis of participant characteristics. This was undertaken in order to establish whether the Fund was broadly engaging with those hard-to-reach groups for whom it was intended. Our interest in learning gain was influenced by the thinking of such writers as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, who stress the importance of reflexivity of all kinds in helping people cope with the risks, transitions and challenges of late modern societies. In this perspective, particular significance is accorded to the capacity to undertake life planning. In our view, effective exercise of choice and the negotiation of risk also means having a number of personal capacities including self-confidence, the ability to overcome isolation, and above all a willingness and competence to continue learning (meta-cognitive skills).

We consider the evidence of learning gain, much of it inevitably anecdotal, under the following five sub-headings:

- personal qualities and capacities
- motivation and life planning
- self-confidence
- social learning
- meta-cognitive skills (learning to learn)

Like the Tavistock team, we are unable to say a great deal about skills directly related to employment, nor was it the Fund's purpose to secure these. We have also been open to the possibility that community-based learning has had perverse consequences for individuals. For example, it could be that projects have raised unrealistic aspirations in terms of the level of learner support that people can expect, or diverting their attention away from other opportunities such as work-related training. Following a brief analysis of costs and benefits, we conclude section three with an exploration of those factors that seemed to have favoured successful engagement with new groups of learners, as well as some of those that appear to create problems in this area of work.

2.3 Measuring learning gain: organisations

As well as measuring the impact of the Fund on individuals, we also sought to examine its impact on organisations. The idea of organisational learning has acquired widespread currency in the past decade, in part because business strategists see the ability of any commercial organisation to learn faster or better than its competitors as a key to sustainable success. Two authoritative British commentators have distinguished between two broad approaches to organisational learning:

- the technical view emphasises the effective retention, processing, interpretation of and responses to information – generally explicit - inside and outside the organisation
- the social perspective focuses on the way in which people in organisations make sense of their experiences, encompassing access both to explicit sources of information and to tacit, often unspoken forms that arise from social interactions in the work setting (Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999, 3-4).

This latter approach emphasises the role of behaviour and culture as much as structures and systems, and it is in this sense that the idea of organisational learning is deployed in evaluating the impact of the Fund.

Neither does organisational capacity building – also one of the goals of the Fund - lend itself naturally to standardised systems of measurement. The term itself may be usefully defined as increasing the capacity of voluntary and community-based organisations to manage their resources effectively and provide services and advocacy to their membership and/or target group. But this is deceptively simple, not least because there is little agreement on the size and nature of the groups and organisations involved. An authoritative series of highly detailed studies led by Konrad Elsdon throughout the 1990s showed that the voluntary sector is roughly ten times as large as suggested in the main official estimates, and that much of its public face is dominated by the ten per cent or so that has some professional staffing. Official, professional and public perceptions of the voluntary sector tend to be “surprisingly limited” (Elsdon, Reynolds and Stewart 1998, 59).

In community capacity building as in informal learning, it has been easier to find ways of measuring change than to agree on a single yardstick of measurement which would allow for comparability. For example, much work has been undertaken in Scotland and Northern Ireland to measure the impact of publicly-funded community development. In general, the resulting sets of measurements have proven too cumbersome to be widely adopted.

It may be helpful to illustrate the problems with reference to specific examples. One approach, promoted by the Voluntary Activity Unit, has identified ten 'building blocks' of community development (Voluntary Activity Unit 1996). These consist of:

1. a learning community, where people gain knowledge, skills and confidence through activity;
2. a fair and just community, concerned about civic rights, equality of opportunity, and the recognition of difference;
3. an active and organised community, where people are fully involved and which has a range of strong local organisations;
4. an influential community, which is consulted and whose voice is heard when decisions affect its interests;
5. a commonwealth, with a robust economic base, creating opportunities for employment and retaining wealth locally;
6. a caring community, aware of and supporting each individuals' needs;
7. a green community, with a healthy and pleasant environment, seeking to conserve resources and promote awareness of environmental responsibilities;
8. a safe community, where people do not fear for their lives;
9. a good place to live, which people like and do not wish to leave; and
10. a lasting community, which is well-established and likely to survive.

In itself, the length of this list as well as its scope suggests something of the difficulties involved in comparing achievement across different settings. Nevertheless, because of its direct relevance to community learning, the first of these 'building blocks' is worth exploring in more detail.

The VAU's approach identified a number of measures of change in respect of what it saw as "a learning community" (Table Eight). This approach involves some fifteen measures of change, broken down into four key elements. All of these are potentially relevant to the Fund; at least two thirds, though, appear to involve qualitative judgement rather than a quantitative measure of change.

Table Eight: Measures of change in a learning community	
Key element	Measures of change
In people	are people confident that change is possible and worthwhile?
	what knowledge and skills have been developed through involvement?
	how have these skills been applied to action in the community?
	what qualifications have people gained?
In the community	are people active in community affairs generally?
	are people active in local groups and organisations?
	are community organisations run in an open and democratic way?
	how do community organisations use their influence to create change?
In local services	what formal and informal opportunities are provided by schools, colleges and others to help people learn from their experiences?
	do any of these lead to or provide recognised qualifications?
	do agencies such as schools, Government offices try to identify and remove obstacles to people making their views known?
	do agencies have positive action to encourage people to take part in planning and carrying out their work?

In policies	do the agencies in the community have policies that encourage people to participate?
	do agencies seek to give users more power in planning, monitoring and developing their work?
	what systems are in place to ensure such policies are working?

Based on Barr, Hashagen and Purcell (1996, 21-2)

More recently, Gabriel Chanan of the Community Development Foundation has proposed a ‘community involvement index’, consisting of three clusters and a total of 26 factors (Chanan 1999, 49-52). While the detail of this model is not appropriate to community-based learning, his broad model is also worth considering (Table Nine). In general, this approach seems more geared to the study of localities, and possibly to the assessment of particular locally based statutory bodies, than to the evaluation of adult learning and its contribution to capacity building.

Table Nine: Community Involvement Index		
Cluster	Factor	Examples of indicators
People	Subjective	Proportion of respondents, by category, who feel they know what is going on, how decisions are made, etc
	Objective	Proportion voting in elections, awareness of local organisations, proportion involved in an organisation
Local community and voluntary organisations	Basic functioning	Number of ‘uses’ of responding organisations by local residents, number of volunteer hours

		mobilised
	Effectiveness	Proportion that are judged effective by users/residents, proportion demonstrating equal opportunities improvements
	Cohesion/infrastructure	Existence of umbrella bodies/support systems, degree of co-operation
Public authorities	-	Existence of policies to support the sector, changes of policy or practice made as a result of consultation

Source: Chanan (1999)

So far as organisational learning is concerned, a wide variety of measurement tools is potentially available to the evaluator. While the holy grail of a common quantitative yardstick may still be as elusive as ever, then, there are reasonable qualitative indicators of learning outcomes for collective actors. As they stand, though, they are far too complex, cumbersome and elaborate to lend themselves readily to a comparative assessment of organisational learning in the highly specific context of the Fund. While these models have a general value in drawing attention to important indicators of learning gain at the organisational level, more focused indicators are required in order to establish what gains have occurred under the Fund.

Such difficulties were acknowledged by those responsible for making recommendations on funding proposals. Although they generally agreed that they used the concept of learning gain in comparing the merits of proposals, advisory panel members were reluctant to offer a precise definition. One panel member felt it was very difficult actually to develop calibration criteria for that. But I think we applied that in reading and looking at what appeared to be the likely impact of bids were they successful.

Another believed that while “learning gain has been a factor in the assessment of the weight of bid outcomes” across the board, the BSA bids have tended to offer a clearer definition than those from NIACE, where it was harder to pin down the outcomes. A third said that

I don’t think it was discussed. . . . Having said that I think one was always looking for evidence of longer term benefits, and being assured I think that the monitoring of the project would - because the projects, most were only going to be approved for the first year, if things weren’t working out it would be stopped at the end of that first year.

A fourth referred to the Watts and Knasel framework for analysing learning, originally published to support the REPLAN programme during the mid 1980s (Watts and Knasel 1985).

As the Fund has evolved, it has worked increasingly with small scale and community based organisations, many of which have not previously had formal links with the mainstream education and training system. Taking a perspective informed by recent work on social capital and social exclusion (Field and Spence 2000), we have focused in section four on two particular areas of learning gain at the organisational level:

- capacity building in regard to organisations’ ability to manage, deliver and develop organised learning opportunities for their members or client group (this may include capacities that can be transferred into other settings, or applied to the management and development of the organisation itself)
- network building in regard to organisations’ ability to engage with the world of organised adult learning, to establish effective partnerships with the mainstream education and training system, and to engage more generally with the wider world.

Again, it is important to emphasise that the nature of informal community based learning – in particular, the fact that much of it is context-bound and may lead to unanticipated outcomes – mean that there may be perverse consequences, and the evaluation has sought to be sensitive to this possibility while focusing mainly on evidence of organisational learning gain. Finally, we reflect once more on the negative lessons from the Fund (mostly already well-known by workers in the field) and identify a number of continuing difficulties and challenges.

3. The individual level of learning

This section considers the extent and nature of individual learning arising as a result of the Fund's support. The Fund was created in large part to enable new types of learner to engage with organised learning in informal settings, and an analysis of participant characteristics was undertaken in order to establish whether the projects were in fact engaging with new types of learner. We then move on to examine the individual learning gains that arose from projects. As already noted, each project had distinctive aims, and this was reflected in a wide variety of learning gains by individuals. Following an analysis of organisational learning in projects, the section closes with an outline of the most promising approaches that have been tested and developed through the Fund.

3.1 Participant characteristics

In the Prospectus, the first aim listed for the Fund was that of drawing “more people unaccustomed to education into learning activities of all kinds”. The intention was clear, but in many other initiatives focused on the ‘hardest-to-reach’, it has often been possible to identify what some have called a “trickle-up effect”, as resources destined for the most marginalized have drifted towards those who are relatively well-placed to access them (Bramley, G., Evans, M., and Atkins, J. 1998). Although the evidence at our disposal is patchy, what there is suggests that the ACLF has been largely successful in getting through to new learners and new groups, and has not drifted down the line of least resistance.

First, some projects deliberately targeted their efforts on particular groups, and for the most part seem to have been successful in recruiting from these groups.

- The Depot, for instance, sought to attract unemployed adults in rural areas;
- among projects who recruited from existing clients, the Richmond Fellowship works with adults suffering from mental health problems, Kaleidoscope works

with drug dependent adults, and the Banbury Young Homeless Project is as its name suggests;

- the Refugee Council and Overseas Graduate Development Programme both recruited among minorities, of both genders in the case of the OGDG and women in the case of the Refugee Council;
- a number (including Saffron Arts, the Willow, NACRO and FLAG) targeted their recruitment on residents of local housing estates;
- others targeted recruitment at a particular community of interest, including the LA Raiders who attracted a multi-ethnic group of young men interested in football and decidedly not interested in education, Magpie Library with its focus on local regeneration initiatives, and CEDC who targeted fathers interested in reading to their children.

On the whole, we noted that learners present during our field visits came overwhelmingly from the target communities. The one exception was the Depot, which had attracted a number of older adults along with others that were drawn from its original target group. Otherwise, the projects had largely recruited from the groups originally identified in proposals as coming from under-represented categories.

In some case studies, detailed information is available on some key characteristic of participants. At that stage NIACE did not systematically require such information from its project leaders (since then, NIACE has asked that all exit reports should collect such data, including on ethnicity). Some relevant data for the period of the evaluation were available in projects' annual reports to BSA. These required a range of data in standardised form, including information on the gender and age of learners (though not all projects complied with this). Ethnicity and (dis)ability are monitored now, but were not collected at the time of our fieldwork.

For the three BSA case study projects that did report on gender, a mixed pattern emerges. The figures were as follows:

- Of the 54 people who took part in the basic skills sessions organised by the Depot, 49 were female and 5 male
- Kaleidoscope reported 38 males and 17 females, giving a total of 55

- CEDC's course, aimed at men, attracted 61 males

More broadly, the projects showed no clear pattern on gender lines. Some (for example, those aimed at ex-offenders) were likely to recruit predominantly men simply because of the nature of the constituency and others as a matter of deliberate targeting; others were likely to recruit mainly women for the same reasons. Some were mixed.

However, gender alone is a poor guide as to whether or not the participants are genuinely new learners. While more men than women are involved in learning, according to NALS, for many men the experience of learning is limited to the workplace, and may well be at the insistence of their employer or a regulatory agency rather than as a result of any intrinsic motivation. Similarly, although women are less likely to participate on average than men, there is a marked tendency for women to dominate numerically in any learning opportunity that is voluntary and not limited to the workplace.

In respect of age, most of the BSA learners were mature adults aged 25 or over. Those in the NIACE projects that we visited tended to have an even higher age profile (with the obvious exception of the LA Raiders). The figures reported for four of the BSA case study projects were as follows:

- 47 at the Depot aged 25+, and seven aged 16-24
- Kaleidoscope reported a balance, with 21 learners aged 16-24 and 26 aged 25+
- CEDC reported that 60 learners were aged 25 and over, and one aged 16-24
- GMBATU reported that 5% were aged 16-24 and 95% 25+

This is a significant pattern. Both Kaleidoscope and the Depot might be expected to attract large numbers of younger adults, since these form their normal client base. The fact that the over-25s form a clear majority in all cases – even in the Depot, which is associated with a county youth service – suggests that the projects are indeed reaching their target group, and drawing in new adult learners.

Systematic evidence on social class is not available. However, it is possible to reach some judgement as to the approximate socio-economic status of learners in most of

the projects visited. Virtually all the project proposals had focused on meeting the needs of those who, to quote the Prospectus again, are often regarded as “hardest to reach”. The LA Raiders, for instance, were concerned with providing learning for young working class men from a multicultural area of north London estates with relatively high unemployment levels. This target group could be defined as “hard to reach” on virtually every sub-category in the book, yet the Raiders had recruited up to target and had not only engaged but retained the vast majority in organised learning. Other locally-based projects, including the Willow Centre, Saffron Arts and FLAG, had all successfully recruited local residents, if not all up to their original targets. Given that these are areas of multiple disadvantage, it is therefore legitimate to conclude that these projects were engaging individuals from precisely those groups that the Fund aimed to reach.

Finally, the majority of learners in our case study projects had little or no previous experience of education as adults. Where they had some experience – for example, in a college – it had sometimes served only as a deterrent to further study. In only four of the fifteen case study projects did we come across learners who were already well-qualified. One was the OGDG, which restricts its activities to improving the skills and knowledge of those whose qualifications were originally gained overseas and are not recognised in Britain. The second was the Refugee Council, a minority of whose learners also had good overseas qualifications that were of little use to them in their new situation. The other case is more complex. Two of the learners at the Magpie Resource Library already had higher education qualifications. As a result of the project they were now engaged in sharing their knowledge with others – including their tacit “know-how” in respect of local politics and power structures – as well as acquiring new skills and knowledge themselves. In the circumstances, this seemed to be an appropriate way of achieving one of the Fund’s core aims, of enabling people to “engage with others in the community” as well as building their organisation’s capacity.

On balance, then, we are confident in concluding that the projects are generally engaging with the types of learner that the Fund exists to support. This is a significant

achievement, given the well-known tendency of targeted initiatives generally to “trickle up” (Bramley, Evans and Atkins 1998), as well as the more specific tendency of educational activities to attract mainly those learners who have already had the most education in the past. It is in this context of engagement with new learners that our findings on individual learning gain should be considered.

- In commissioning future programmes of activities of this nature, greater attention should be paid by the managing agent(s) to the specification of target groups and the subsequent collection of data on a range of participant characteristics, with a view to monitoring closely and systematically whether the activities are contributing to the programme’s objectives. As target groups are identified on the basis of locally identified needs and solutions, monitoring should be done project by project.

3.2 Evidence of learning gain

Measuring the learning gain across such diverse settings is, as already emphasised, fraught with difficulty. At a general level, however, there is no difficulty in providing compelling evidence that most case study projects are reaching new learners, and are promoting a wide range of different learning gains. Moreover, the evidence presented here comes from right across the Fund: citizenship gains, for instance, can be seen in BSA projects as well as NIACE projects. Equally, specific skills such as improved English language abilities were shown by NIACE projects as well as BSA ones. In some cases, the learning gain is a significant one, even judged by conventional yardsticks. The LA Raiders Soccer Academy, for instance, managed to recruit 30 learners from among young men in a disadvantaged district with high unemployment levels and a multicultural population; having recruited these new learners from a typically ‘hard-to-reach’ group, they secured average attendance rates of 95%. In parallel with this achievement, the Raiders’ first team won its local league and reached the final of the London FA Amateur Cup (LA Raiders Quarterly Report, March 2000).

Personal qualities and capacities

A number of learning gains related to personal capacities. Some of these were highly specific, such as the self-organisation skills valued by the young footballers from Leyton:

The punctuality, the discipline, the cleaning of your kit, the looking to the future spills over into the real world (LA Raiders)

In some projects, including the LA Raiders Soccer Academy, one important aim was to inculcate pride in self. Education and training were bound up with a culture of self-improvement (“It ain’t cool to be a fool”) and team identity, with all trainees receiving a soccer kit - including track suit and baseball cap - with the club logo and name. This approach seemed to be working:

You walk down the street with your head held high. It gives you the frame of mind of being a professional (LA Raiders)

A somewhat different sense of purpose emerged from the work of the Magpie Resource Library in New Cross. One man, a redundant film maker now learning research skills in order to shape local debates over regeneration plans, said that the project had

plugged me back into politics. It’s like coming home to me. My father was a trade unionist and a socialist and so was I, but that side of my life died with the film business which is essentially about money (Magpie Resource Library).

Another drew a contrast between the routine of his job and his desire to

do something substantial and meaningful in my life, rather than sitting at a desk staring at a computer all day. I now have an opportunity to make a difference and this is important to me. I’m getting a lot out of this process as well as being able to contribute something (Magpie Resource Library).

For a learner with severe mental health problems, the class was something to look forward to:

It stops us going up the wall at home (Richmond Fellowship).

- By plugging people back in to organised learning, community based approaches appear to be highly effective at enabling learners to acquire

new abilities and give a meaning to their lives. By helping people develop a sense of control over their lives, learning can contribute towards greater autonomy.

Motivation and life planning

Frequently, these personal learning gains seemed to be associated with a sense of control and purpose for the future:

It has given me hope and helped me to refocus my life. I am ready to go into work, to train for office work (Willow Centre)

I'm so glad about the Centre. Other estates don't have one, how do they survive? I was depressed and suicidal. I wouldn't come out of the house. Now my little one loves the creche and I've done cookery then English GCSE. I'm hoping to do a City and Guilds teaching course so I can teach about healthy eating (Saffron Arts Forum)

I've got a future. I look to my finances, a house I might want to buy, and a car. I'm well motivated (LA Raiders)

Some women who come are on a downward spiral or picking themselves up at rock bottom. . . at the Centre, you get a wider view of things and were then ready to move on (Willow Centre)

And, from a pottery student living on the Saffron Lane estate in Leicester,

I've got to expand myself. I want to do what I do now for a living. I already get some commissions so I know I can do it. . . . I realise it's hard, it's like going to work, but that's what I'm going to do (Saffron Arts Forum).

This future, for learners, was constructive.

Some contrasted their sense of the future with less constructive alternatives. Thus for learners involved in community regeneration research in New Cross, local political action was contrasted with:

smashing up the City or selling papers outside the tube station. It's about practical solutions, being an active citizen within the community, the sort of politics that changes people's lives (Magpie Resource Library).

On the New Addington estate in Croydon, some of the learners were hoping to stay in the area and work for further improvements in an estate whose reputation and role in providing local authority housing for single parents meant that “*We’re labelled before we start*”. One spoke of his sense of pride in the community, and of his wish to build on that:

It’s a lovely spot. Five minutes and you are out in the country. There are six or seven parks in this locality. It’s a nice place for children. There are plenty of activities around (FLAG).

For another, who had lived all her life on the estate, the project represented a possibility of escape into a quite different future:

It’s too cliquey [living on the estate]. I’m a single parent and I want the confidence to move away from my family, start up on my own again, and perhaps get a higher job (FLAG).

- By allowing new learners to test and prove existing skills, and acquire new ones, community-based learning raises aspirations and builds self-esteem. It is therefore a vital mechanism for entry into organised learning, as well as building motivation and staying power once engaged.

Confidence

Growing confidence was frequently mentioned as a learning gain arising from the projects. Similar views came from the learners:

I don’t stand for nonsense any more. People in my position are vulnerable and we get fast-talked and conned. Not any more! (Willow Centre)

Successful courses, developing self-confidence, can encourage new Union representatives (GMB)

It’s boosted my self-confidence. I meet new people, I have a network of support and new avenues into different groups. This is important to me (Kaleidoscope).

It's the confidence you get. At one time I couldn't face anybody. But now I don't care. I'll say it straight out. Yes! I get that from T----. She says, "Go for it! Don't be put off" (Osmaston NACRO Centre)

Learners from the Saffron Arts Forum organised Poetry and Pints evenings at the local British Legion Club:

Well funnily enough I am a poetess, a wordsmith. I stumbled across the talent while I was doing English. I just happen to have a copy of my poems here. To you only £2 (Saffron Arts Forum).

A worker at the Derby family learning project described how the new learners were overcoming what she called the “victim mode” they had adopted when dealing with authority. The learners now expected to be able to do things, rather than have something done for them.

- Community-based learning reduces dependence and increases confidence. In the often isolated and difficult settings faced by many of the new learners, these are vital assets in reconstructing a new social identity as a learner who is able to assume increasing responsibility and take greater control over their own lives.

Social learning

As well as judging individual outcomes, the projects also had a wider impact. Among the most frequent was a sense of social belonging, which was associated in turn with reduced isolation but also a dawning sense of wider obligations:

I used to think that I was in a boat on my own, do you know what I mean. But now I realise that I'm not alone. A lot of us are in the same boat (Osmaston NACRO Centre).

We draw on each others' strengths (Willow Centre)

Learners from both projects, as well as in FLAG, Kaleidoscope, Saffron Arts and the Richmond Fellowship, spoke of the ways in which their group had built trust and provided friendships, which they expected to continue after the programme was over.

One of the Leyton soccer players spoke of the impact upon team members with a shared passion for the game, with the resultant risk of being losing one's place to others:

You avoid stupid things like getting into crime. You go to a party and you don't start trouble and get locked up. Because that would be the end of it. There's other men waiting for your place (LA Raiders).

One of the New Cross learners was now playing an active part in his community's regeneration initiatives:

Eight months ago I was just running up the road like Victor Meldrew shouting at people who were driving too fast. Now I'm on the steering committee for the New Deal (Magpie Resource Library).

Others from this group were working with local sixth formers on activities such as the design of a local newsletter or the development of a logo, and two were running an after-school programme.

Occasionally, learners spoke in ways that suggested a broader view of society as consisting not of isolated individuals, but as depending on relationships which involved obligations and responsibilities. One learner at a church-based charity for the drug dependent described how he had intervened when he saw "a very big framed bloke" lecturing a girl for begging:

I don't like to see people downtrodden any more. I firmly believe that the rich people have to look after us poor people as well. We are the foundations of society, we are the ones that society is built over. If we crumble, society will crumble as well. If rich people keep grabbing, grabbing, grabbing, then society will eventually collapse. I pointed this out to the guy. You should treat the poor with respect. It could be you tomorrow losing your job and your house and ending on the streets (Kaleidoscope).

One potentially important spin-off from this activity was that both NIACE and BSA published flexible learning packages on adult learning and citizenship.

- Tendencies towards detachment and fragmentation through organised community-based learning appeared to be much weaker in the ACLF than

in the loose set of informal learning activities studied by the Tavistock Institute (Cullen et al 2000). This suggests that engaging with community based organisations can be a sustainable investment in social capital.

In her foreword to the Prospectus, Baroness Blackstone expressed the Government's intention of helping to "break through the isolation and exclusion" that characterised the lives of many of those at whom the Fund was directed. Very clearly, the case study evidence suggests that this is being achieved.

The appetite and ability to continue learning

As might be expected, this process of (re)engagement with education and training brought in its train a new or strengthened interest in further learning, as well as confidence in the skills to pursue that interest effectively. An older adult studying on a bus in rural South Warwickshire was planning a longer term involvement in using information technology:

Most old people don't want to go to classes at night. It's all come over so suddenly, these computers, now I'm seriously thinking of buying one (The Depot).

A basic skills learner in a charitable centre for drug dependents spoke of her own exploration of her place in the wider world:

I've been reading about spiritual development, how to open yourself up to use energies and stuff like that, how to connect with your higher self (Kaleidoscope).

In some cases, though, plans for further learning were also fragile or conditional. The learner in Kaleidoscope quoted above added, to the interviewer, "You haven't laughed - that's cool!". A learner in rural Warwickshire was worried less about the reactions of other people than the practicalities of getting to a relevant course:

This is just a taster. I might go to college after this. There is nowhere to go for classes in Alcester, we always have to go to Stratford (The Depot)

The fragility of learning identities is touched upon in the following section; at this stage, it is important to note that there is positive evidence both of raised aspirations and increased capacity for progression.

- Incentives – financial and organisational – are required to turn community-based learning into a more sustained engagement with the formal education and training system. Providers should systematically seek to identify barriers to continuing participation, and where possible they should be reduced or removed.

3.3 A cost-benefit perspective

In judging specific outcomes, the end-of-year project reports provide a number of possible baselines. BSA's standard forms, for example, require projects to report the number of learners 'attending workshops, guidance sessions'; the number 'enrolled on courses'; the number 'completing courses'; and the number progressing to other named destinations. Project reports for NIACE appear to have been more open-ended in their design (perhaps inevitably so, given the diversity of projects managed by NIACE), often making it difficult to compare the outputs with those reported by BSA.

A crude comparison of outcomes with costs is provided in Table Fifteen. It is important not to place too much weight on these figures, particularly for larger projects whose first year may involve developmental activity in order to support improved delivery later on. Second, at this moment it was not possible to compare major and minor grants, in that the former were developed over a much longer period, and therefore involved more preparation time. In addition, major grants could spend up to £25,000 in their first year on capital. Moreover, there seems to have been no requirement in assessing proposals for even a notional rate of costs against anticipated benefits. Nevertheless, interpreted with caution, the figures provide an indication of the average overall cost of recruiting and retaining new learners under the Fund.

Two patterns stand out. First, the two smallest projects, in terms of size of grant, show the lowest levels of cost per learner. Second, although the Refugee Council and Kaleidoscope projects drew from an existing client base, both involved engaging with notably hard-to-reach learners, and the costs per learner were notably high (though of course, both were in the first year of what were planned to be three-year projects).

Table Fifteen: Round One Projects: end-of-year costs per learner			
Lead organisation	Number attending	Annual grant	Cost per learner
GMBATU London Region	60	£9,460	£158
CEDC	61	£9,000	£148
Kaleidoscope	53	£48,850	£922
The Depot	68	£22,800	£335
Refugee Council	115	£47,000	£408

The obvious question is whether the Fund is funding work that is expensive in comparison with similar programmes elsewhere. This presents an obvious challenge, in that no similar work exists elsewhere on any scale; if it did, the Fund would be largely redundant. However, as the PAT report on skills has acknowledged, it is widely accepted that engaging the hard-to-reach is likely to be considerably more expensive than recruiting more easily-reached groups, and it is therefore sensible to benchmark the Fund's average costs against programmes with a similar purpose. For purposes of comparison, figures for community-based training programmes using open and flexible learning methods, run on an experimental basis a decade ago by the Employment Department, showed a similar range. While one of the four projects showed an average cost per client of £54, the other three averaged out at £200, £284 and £286 (Employment Department 1993, 13). Given inflation subsequently, it does not seem as though the case study projects were unduly costly, when compared with activities of a like nature. Similarly, the Further Education Funding Council funded its

non-schedule 2 pilot projects¹ at cost factor C (the same level used to fund basic skills provision), partly in order to allow for small group teaching with high quality equipment and materials. However, in some cases colleges did not invest at this level. Where colleges worked through partnerships with community organisations, there could be resentment at the size of the differential between the rate received by the college and the sum passed on to their partners (Greenwood, Merton & Taylor 2000, 84-5).

- Community-based learning initiatives must be embedded within local learners' circumstances. This involves costs that may not be necessary for mainstream programmes (for example, childcare, travel, study materials) where learners are unable or unlikely to pay towards these resources.
- Engaging new learners through small community-based organisations appears to be highly effective, both on educational and cost grounds, and further research and policy should reflect this.

3.4 What worked in engaging new learners

Working with hard-to-reach groups has been well-established practice in British adult education. In the 1980s, for example, much innovative work with unemployed adults was pioneered through the Government's REPLAN programme (which shows marked similarities with ACLF), as well as the growing volume of pioneering work with women. There are two main reasons why this long and thriving tradition did not generate as many lessons as it might have done. First, Government policies were not consistent in encouraging providers to engage with the hard-to-reach. Many professionals had no incentive other than their own values and aspirations to engage in work that was demanding and difficult as well as resource-intensive. In so far as professionals were able to test and develop new approaches, many initiatives were

¹ These projects were introduced by FEFC in 1999, with a view to developing partnership-based approaches to non-accredited adult and community learning (i.e. programmes not eligible for FEFC funding units under Schedule 2 of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act).

undertaken that were fragmented and depended on ephemeral funding streams. Second, during the 1980s and 1990s the supply side was transformed. Local colleges, largely confined to young people as late as 1980, rapidly overtook local authorities as the main source of publicly funded education for adults. By the early 1990s, adult learners had become a clear majority in the further education student population, although as most were part-time learners they did not necessarily command as much attention as their sheer numbers might imply. With a large number of new players on the scene, it was inevitable that there would be some discontinuity with earlier traditions of work.

- There is a reasonably strong consensus on “what works” in engaging new adult learners (OECD 1997b). What has been lacking until recently is a sustained and unambiguous message from policy makers and institutions on the value that is placed upon achievement in engaging new learners.

Person-to-person recruitment

In engaging new learners, a number of strategies appear to have been effective.

Existing contacts or direct approaches were frequently used to good effect:

I was press-ganged (FLAG)

Face to face nabbing at the door and in the coffee bar (Saffron Arts Forum)

One project in Croydon was tackling precisely this issue, by recruiting and training local volunteers to serve as ‘learning promoters’, encouraging residents on their estate to follow up opportunities and finding out what residents might want. Underlying this approach was the belief that “Local residents are the best people to talk to local residents” (Training Manager, FLAG). The learners themselves saw this as central:

I can identify with them. I was at home, I had nothing doing. Also I’ve been on the courses, you can sell them better (FLAG).

Because we come from the estate we can say, “If I can do it so can you”. Or people might just think, “If she can do it, so can I” (FLAG).

Trust, deriving from existing acquaintance or shared background of some kind, frequently provided a basis on which individuals already involved in education or training could in turn engage new learners.

- Better support is required for strategies to promote local learning in the community, drawing on the resources and networks already available within the community.

Inspiration and example

Individual teachers' and leaders' qualities were remarkably significant in engaging new learners. At the LA Raiders' Soccer Academy, the two leading organisers were both charismatic individuals and experienced athletes, who commanded universal respect among the trainees:

They've been there. They know what they're talking about. What they say makes sense (LA Raiders).

One of the leaders of the project made the point that:

I've always seen the Football Academy as a calling and not so much as a job. Anyway, it doesn't pay well enough (Noel Morris, NIACE Annual Conference, March 2000).

At the Magpie Resource Library, one local community leader was widely regarded as the "cornerstone" of the project. A lecturer at Goldsmiths' College who lived locally and was regarded as very well connected to local decision-takers, she was seen as

a very respected person in the community. She has the vision and the ability to get things done (Magpie Resource Library).

The literacy tutor at a family learning project in Derby (herself employed by the local authority) was a "brilliant" teacher whose contribution included constant motivation and encouragement to the new learners. Interestingly, the same person also tutors one of the BSA's homeless projects, and is said by BSA to be equally effective with that client group.

In several cases, then, the presence of a 'learning entrepreneur' helped to motivate and inspire new learners. Of course, this is a double-edged sword. Where a dominant

leadership figure comes to the fore, there can be risks that the ‘learning entrepreneur’ may silence other voices, and the group’s continued existence becomes dependent on his or her leadership. A clear focus on capacity building for the organisation as a whole should help ensure that a range of local voices gets heard.

Flexible pedagogic approaches

Learning styles and activities both appeared to matter. At the Magpie Resource Library, much of the learning occurred during meetings of a public regeneration Forum. The Forum meetings were described as being

fun, at the same time participative. We try to be different each time, we avoid boring meetings (Magpie Resource Library).

Examples included a problem wall, quizzes, group work, and the development of a Magpie Tree, with bricks for problems and leaves for solutions (subsequently displayed in the Museum of London). At a centre run by a charity for drug dependents, the informal teaching style had helped create a strong sense of connectedness among users and tutors:

It’s like coming to family, the friendliness and the companionship
(Kaleidoscope)

At the family learning project in Derby, a Friday morning family literacy session consisted on an hour of everyday literacy, based on assessment of the learners; an hour together with the children in the creche; and an hour working towards an OCN qualification. Here, the qualification was woven into the fabric of a varied and relevant programme of learning.

Part of the attraction, clearly, was the fun. On the crowded upper deck of the Depot’s bus, with its five personal computers and one laptop, learners engaged in lively banter, pretending to be “seasick” in windy weather, and shouting “Oooh, you are wicked” and “I’ll give you 15 minutes to stop that” as others tried to push past to take their turn. But it was not only fun that attracted the new learners. Flexibility combined with relevance was highly-prized:

I just want to get started. I don’t want to go to college on a regular basis and learn things I don’t need (The Depot).

Accreditation

Assessment and accreditation were sometimes seen as a good way to maintain learners' motivation, but only where they suited the learners' needs. Thus staff and learners at the Derby family learning project spoke warmly of a unit accredited by the local OCN. Learners who started with no interest in qualifications could change their minds once accreditation was offered in a way that appeared achievable and manageable given their current rate of progress. Moreover, public activities such as launch ceremonies and certificate awards provided an opportunity to express the value of the learning, and also to involve families and carers as well as bring the project to the attention of a wider world. An example from the Richmond Fellowship is discussed later, in the section on dissemination.

Gaining qualifications was more of an issue in BSA projects than NIACE projects. In other activities, BSA has established a policy of generally seeking where appropriate to assess specific, measurable learning gains. In each of the BSA case study projects within the ACLF programme, learners could work towards qualifications if they so wished.

Building on needs

In all the case study projects, tutors saw themselves as responding to clearly identified learner needs. For the most part, these needs had been identified by proposers when drafting their proposal, although sometimes projects then had to adapt as the learners' needs evolved in different directions from those anticipated. In some cases, project proposers had built in a process of learner involvement in needs analysis.

In a small number of cases, the learners' needs were straightforward. Most of these involved people who were not strictly new learners, but were rather learners who had immediate needs and without the Fund's support might not have been able to access learning opportunities. Refugee women, some of whom were relatively well qualified, had relatively uncomplicated language needs. A history teacher from Kosovo said that

For the moment I want to speak very good English. But after that I don't know
(Refugee Council project).

A Somalian graduate similarly said:

We need English to get a job. It's as simple as that (Refugee Council project)

Other learners had identified needs that were more complex, usually because they involved achieving something else that required some kind of learning as a corollary or prerequisite. Family concerns were often at the heart of this aim. One learner at the Derby family learning project spoke of her hopes of helping her daughter with her homework:

at the moment it's all double dutch to me (Osmaston NACRO Centre)

An older adult studying computing on a double-decker bus in Alcester said

I'd like to know what my grandchildren are talking about (The Depot).

Hobbies were mentioned less frequently, but those who did mention them were clearly highly motivated by their involvement. A retired librarian in Alcester said:

My hobby is genealogy and the mass of evidence you collect. After a bit the papers get really unwieldy. Now a computer is really helpful for this and it means you make fewer mistakes (The Depot).

In the LA Raiders Football Academy, the shared driving force was a passion for soccer. As one of the organisers said:

These boys have all got one thing in common. They all love footie. The carrot to get them on the course has to be something they love, you can't sit in an office and decide what's going to be best (Noel Morris, NIACE conference, March 2000).

Learning by stealth

In a number of projects, learning activities were integrated into a wider range of activities, so that they appeared a natural extension of the new learner's involvement. At the family learning project in Derby, an attractive and well-resourced pre-school nursery was described as a "carrot" to bring parents into the centre for classes. ACLF support was used to fund a programme consisting of parenting sessions, self-identity development, and English/family literacy. Staff at the Kaleidoscope centre, itself

attached to a Baptist church, frequently described their approach as “joined-up”; its core service for drug dependent young people lay in the provision of a methadone maintenance programme, a syringe exchange scheme, and a residential detoxification unit; alongside these it also ran a drop-in centre with vegetarian catering, counselling services, sport and a hostel.

Much of the learning that took place in case study projects was therefore incidental to the ostensible aims of the activity. Once undertaken, though, the learning was no less valued for that:

Take Maths - well, algebra never really comes into your life, does it? What you need to know is how to change an electrical plug and how to fix your car (Saffron Arts Forum).

The best way to learn is by getting out there knocking doors (FLAG)

Do you think - in your own time and at your own pace - you could write me a poem about Romeo and Juliet on the Saffron Estate? As a rap? (Saffron Arts Forum).

One of the BSA officials described this approach as “basic skills by stealth”: the project’s learning gain was the by product of the learners’ motivation to pursue a hobby, defend their community, or help their family. She contrasted this with traditional approaches to basic skills teaching:

“In the past I think it was someone being shut in to do something that they lacked somehow, whereas this is trying to give people the skills to do things for themselves that they think are important”.

The negative example of school

By contrast, anything smacking irredeemably of the formal education system was seen as an instant turn-off:

There is no way I would have gone into a class with an exam at the end of it, that would have been too daunting (Saffron Arts Forum)

You don’t feel judged. The groups are very relaxed and informal, there is no pressure for you to go for certificates. You can just sit and listen if you want (Willow Centre)

It's not like going back to school (The Depot)

Adult learning was frequently contrasted with the formal education and training system in this way:

Why do you have to go to school? It's no fun and you don't learn anything (LA Raiders).

Every man who comes here wants to be here. At school you can bunk off and pull the wool over the teachers' eyes. Here they [this included fellow-trainees] soon suss you out and trample all over you and show you up (LA Raiders)

A minority looked back to school with even stronger feelings:

What I was told to do I did, but I was very backward and I was placed at the back of the class and even demoted a class. I was very demoralised and also very bullied because I was backward and had a very very bad lisp. Kids can be so cruel and I was sensitive and took it all on board. Consequently I didn't learn very much and I had no interest in learning (Kaleidoscope).

This did not mean that formality went entirely out of the window, nor that learning was entirely unstructured. Staff at the LA Raiders Football Academy insisted on punctuality, regularity and commitment, not least because it helped build character and motivate the learners. Similarly at the basic skills project for drug dependent people:

Here, there's no structure. There is a timetable but you can use your time as you wish. You work at your own pace (Kaleidoscope).

It is important to emphasise that there was in fact a clear structure in the learning activities, but it was treated with a degree of flexibility and sensitivity to each individual's needs.

Group membership and the challenge of retention

New learning identities are frequently fragile, and vulnerable to changes in circumstances. Retention problems hit a number of projects. Although FLAG came close to hitting its original target of recruiting ten learning promoters, of the nine who embarked on the training programme, five left either to go into work or because of illness, and three new volunteers had joined the programme, leaving seven in all. One

woman at the Willow Centre recollected her first time in an adult class, feeling “nervous just coming out of the front door” and then after half an hour being “in tears with myself”.

Fears of being made to feel stupid, whether by peers or teachers, were widespread. Sensitive and nurturing teaching approaches helped here:

I'm not made to feel stupid. They say, "It's just something you haven't learned yet". For example, I learned my times-tables last year at the age of 23. That was a great achievement for me. I felt safe, secure, listened to and encouraged
(Kaleidoscope)

Both S----- and T-----, they're like one of the girls; they're on your level, they don't look down on you if you don't understand (Osmaston NACRO Centre)

Once engaged, groups had a variety of strategies for building their relationship with learners. Group support appears to have been vital:

We draw on each others' strengths. When you are up, you give support and encouragement. When you are down, you get lifted (Willow Centre)

Workers may suspect the management's motives and decide not to co-operate.

Good shop stewards as allies can make all the difference (GMB)

No matter what your problems is, no matter how small, personal, financial, a problem with a child, they're there for you (Osmaston NACRO Centre)

When one learner failed to attend the family learning project in Derby following the suicide of her partner, the other women visited her at home immediately to offer their help.

Group dynamics also require sensitivity and flexibility from teachers. In small voluntary organisations, individuals were often motivated to learn because they were already involved in an organisation, and the learning was relevant to their organisation's objectives. From a conventional providers' perspective, this motivating factor can also be a problem. The seven learners at the Magpie Resource Library, for instance, were more interested in learning how to do research and then getting on with using their new skills to draft community-led regeneration proposals, rather than

working towards a qualification, even though the qualification - accredited by London Open College Federation - had been designed around their requirements.

People join up because they feel strongly about one or two issues in the community and they do not necessarily want to become rounded researchers . . . This is not a play project, this is leading to a genuine and serious bid (Magpie Resource Library).

However, growth in group confidence also had its limits. As a discussion of racism with the multi-cultural group of learners at the LA Raiders Football Academy indicated,

of course there is racism out there in society, but what can you do? (LA Raiders)

It is also possible for groups to impose sanctions on learners who appear to step out of line, and thus hold back the emergence of a more robust learning identity.

In curriculum terms, group learning was particularly associated with the development of psycho-social skills and growth in social capital. In terms of participation, it was associated with the engagement of new learners. As one of the BSA staff put it, the organisation is “run by people they already know”, reducing the barriers and risks of involvement.

4. Organisational level of learning

One key aim in creating the Fund was to promote new skills and abilities within community groups. More specifically, the Fund was intended to “build the capacity of community-based organisations to provide learning opportunities outside conventional educational structures” (Prospectus, both editions). The Fund also sought to encourage voluntary and community organisations to engage in partnerships with formal providers of learning. Further, both in the Prospectus and in early discussions with BSA and NIACE, it was made clear to potential bidders that proposals had to be developed with regard to the views of potential end users. This

implies not only that the clients and members would benefit from new learning opportunities, but also that as a result of involvement in the Fund, the organisations themselves would be better placed to articulate and meet their members' or clients' needs in future.

This issue grew in importance as the Fund evolved. As NIACE and BSA moved steadily to work with new groups, so less could be taken for granted about project leaders' degree of familiarity with, or confidence in handling, the education and training system. One project leader told us she felt a translator would have been useful as her organisation embarked on their journey into the world of organised adult learning. This was a common experience for many of the smaller groups, or those working in marginal and disadvantaged communities, or those whose interests and expertise lay completely outside the world of education and training. In so far as they were familiar with that world, it was with the formal institutions - schools and colleges – with which they had dealt in the past, often unsatisfactorily. These organisations stood outside the world of organised adult learning, baffled and inadequate when faced by the assumptions, language and confidence of the insiders – or, more accurately, those who in the circumstances had the appearance of being insiders. For these groups, capacity-building was a guide to surviving in a strange new world.

4.1 BSA and NIACE – the framework for support

In dealing with projects, the two intermediary organisations provided a framework of support. Although taking separate responsibilities, with each managing a portfolio of projects that reflected their different areas of expertise, the two organisations worked closely together and the identification of projects as best suited to one body or the other was agreed on a mutual basis. By and large, it seemed to us that this framework worked well, particularly after early problems were identified and solved. One important sign of this was that not only were most project leaders satisfied with the support received; so were those whose proposals had been rejected.

The support framework started with preliminary enquiries. Readers of the Prospectus were advised to contact BSA or NIACE. Contact details were also given for the person responsible at DfEE. All the case study projects expressed satisfaction with the advice received at this stage. In a limited ‘mystery shopper’ exercise, we found that using the phone – the fastest and easiest option for most likely applicants – was not always successful; while two queries to NIACE were dealt with at first attempt, BSA’s telephone system was usually switched to voice mail, and although it was possible to leave a message (not necessarily the best way to deal with a community-based self help group) there was in our experience a one or two day delay before receiving a reply.

In the early days, both BSA and NIACE worked to raise general awareness of the Fund. Subsequently, this activity was both reduced and became more focused, once it became clear that general publicity tended to produce relatively few queries from those who were not among “the usual suspects”. NIACE and BSA held joint briefings/roadshows targeted at areas (including the North West) and groups (including minority ethnic communities) that it saw as under-represented among the successful proposals. This appears to have worked and drawn in new groups, as does the BSA’s decision to advertise in specialist publications whose readership included professionals and volunteers dealing with such potential target groups as the homeless, or those involved in the criminal justice system.

In addition, NIACE and BSA each held briefing/training meetings for successful bidders to prepare them for running their projects. These were specifically aimed at building capacity to manage the activities being funded – including through the production of support materials such as press packs, and models of self-evaluation. By the time of the fourth round, virtually all projects were attending these events. All the case study project leaders were highly satisfied with these events. To take one example from several, we were told that:

I was very impressed with the level of support from BSA, in particular the networking sessions with other Project co-ordinators (GMB)

Reasons for the satisfaction included straightforward factual and administrative benefits (“We had some difficulties with the budgeting, and they explained how things worked”). They also encompassed the opportunity for projects to learn from one another:

I found them useful, obviously, but the main thing for me, it was networking with other people and finding out what was being done that worked somewhere else (Local Heritage Centres).

The briefings therefore not only fulfilled their ostensible aim, of providing information and guidance about the Fund, and sharing best practice among projects; they also enabled project leaders and staff – many of whom had never previously had any involvement with the education and training system – to extend their networks and build their know-how. This contribution to social capital has been particularly significant in leaving a longer term footprint.

- In developing ‘learning organisations’, particularly among the more peripheral and smaller bodies, the support role played by the two intermediary bodies was central. This approach distinguishes ACLF from other similar Funds, and the lesson is an important one. The costs of performing this function need to be recognised in any future initiative of this nature.

Similarly, project leaders valued their ongoing contacts with officers from NIACE and BSA. Frequently, these contacts were valued in their own right, as a way of seeking advice and reassurance, particularly where advice and reassurance were not available from other sources. This was typically the case in smaller organisations, and in larger organisations where community-based adult learning was not well understood or valued before involvement with the Fund. Clearly it was more difficult by May 2000 to visit all projects than it had been a year earlier, as the number of projects had grown substantially, and both BSA and NIACE had sought to rationalise the visiting process by focusing particularly on projects that had not received a previous visit, or were facing difficulty.

In addition, contacts with BSA and NIACE enabled projects to access further support. Sometimes, this was material support. A number of the projects were able to access books or other resources. The most frequently mentioned was the DfEE laptop initiative, which was also administered by BSA and NIACE. Introduced in April 1999 and running for three years, the initiative allowed for the loan of 1500 ICT packages to local education authorities and selected voluntary and community organisations for use in adult and community learning. One worker at the Refugee Council described the lap-top initiative as “brilliant” and “the best use of under-spend I’ve ever come across”. Projects had also widened their networks thanks to the development officers, enabling them to call on new human support; examples included contacts brokered by BSA or NIACE development officers, sometimes with other local organisations and sometimes with national bodies (including NIACE or BSA themselves).

One key ingredient in the Fund’s success in engaging new learners, then, was the capacity of BSA and NIACE to provide sustained support to projects. This was particularly significant for those voluntary and community organisations that had least knowledge of, or confidence in approaching, the education and training system. By drawing these organisations into the Fund, and enabling them to provide organised opportunities for learning, it became possible to engage with a range of new learners, many of whom had little or no previous experience of post-compulsory education and training. It also promoted capacity building, in so far as incidental learning can take place for organisations as well as individuals.

4.2 Unsuccessful proposals

How did people whose proposals were unsuccessful view their dealings with the ACLF? Obviously, evidence based on interviews with unsuccessful bidders must be treated with caution. All the unsuccessful bidders stressed the time it had taken to prepare their proposals, which averaged out at around one person week; one organisation had subsequently decided to build in costs of 12% to all applications, in order to recover the time spent on failed bids. As noted below, though, this time was

not always seen as lost or wasted. Other than rejection, the subsequent reported experience of unsuccessful bidders seemed to vary considerably. Two thirds were satisfied with the information in the prospectus, though some of these believed that “the goal posts had changed” after applications were submitted. One concrete example mentioned was an alleged reduction in funds available during the application process (this perception relates to the reduction in the maximum funding allowable under major grants, which as noted above was announced in the revised prospectus).

Less favourable was the view of advice during the preparation of the proposal. This was partly because the proposers had not realised that they could seek such advice directly from the intermediary bodies, despite the fact that this was explained in the prospectus (three voluntary bodies had approached their local CVS staff for guidance, for example). One third said they were fully satisfied with the feedback that they had given on their proposal’s fate (one repeatedly described the feedback, from NIACE, as “excellent”). Two-thirds said they could not remember receiving feedback, and one claimed that feedback had not been forthcoming despite repeated requests; in another case, though, our informant’s memory varied considerably from the written feedback in NIACE’s own records. Those working in rural areas tended to believe that their catchment areas were relatively disadvantaged but the Fund tended to favour projects in urban areas. Voluntary sector applicants all believed that the majority of successful bids had gone to colleges and other large providers. Two thirds of the unsuccessful applicants said that they would have liked to have received a list of successful applications. All complained of the amount of time spent drawing up bids; in one large remote county, for example, managers in six adult education centres, as well as their support staff, were involved in meeting with partner organisations to draft a failed proposal. Organisations were allowed to further opportunities to submit unsuccessful bids.

- Competitive challenge funds are not necessarily the best means of administering scarce resources. For small and under-resourced community groups in particular, the opportunity costs of drafting unsuccessful proposals are considerable. They may also prove a significant deterrent for

larger organisations for whom education and training are – rightly or wrongly – a marginal activity. Of course the Fund exists to promote innovation, but generally there is a case for a more routine and less time-consuming process of allocating funding to community based learning.

Around half of all unsuccessful bids had not resulted in any further action. The common feature of these bids was that the key proposer had few or no strong links with the world of adult and basic education. One example was a local YMCA, which had sought to offer training in advice giving to groups dealing with issues such as welfare, disability, unemployment and so on. Not only did they lack any direct experience of promoting organised adult learning themselves, but they were outside the networks and contacts that might have provided useful advice or helped decode the discourse of the adult learning professionals. In the case of the YMCA proposal, for instance, the staff member who oversaw the application had heard no further news of the Fund, and did not know what it supported, “although I move in fairly wide circles”. His networks lay rather in the field of community development.

- In promoting community based learning, greater attention needs to be given by managing agents to building stronger networks between voluntary associations, local agencies and community groups on the one hand, and mainstream education providers on the other. Experience in the USA and elsewhere suggests that the internet can serve as a tool to promote networking.

However, ideas developed in an unsuccessful bid to ACLF often bore fruit elsewhere. All believed that their proposals had centred on the need to engage new types of learner, and that this at any rate had been valuable. Only one failed bidder could recall no positive outcome, taking the view that their organisation - a college - should put in no further bids to DfEE. One adult education service had implemented aspects of its proposal, working with hostels to develop opportunities for young homeless people. A voluntary centre working with young families had revised its application, again successfully; however, the new funding body would only support learning for parents

aged under 25. A housing association manager, again working with homeless people, reported that a “watered down” version of the project was under way, though the route taken had been “a lot harder and messy” than would have been the case with ACLF support; he also noted that a partnership with a local college would “not have happened without the DfEE proposal”. One organisation had not pursued the activity originally proposed, but following a meeting with one of the ACLF team at NIACE had applied successfully for another project.

- All applicants for challenge funding should routinely be notified of those activities that are successful, and where appropriate networking between successful projects and other applicants should be promoted. Where unsuccessful applicants had been followed up by BSA and NIACE in regard to alternative initiatives, the results appear to have been positive.

Most of those we spoke to also expressed themselves pleased, and somewhat surprised, to have been asked for their experiences. It would be wrong, then, to view unsuccessful projects as simple failures. Sometimes, it had proven possible for organisations to find resources elsewhere, or to scale down their original plans. In this sense, the Fund helped focus attention, and encourage new approaches, that engaged new learners in new activities.

4.3 The learning gain at organisational level

In some ways, the idea of organisational learning is rather nebulous. Many writers have “bemoaned the shortage of empirical work in the field of organisational learning”, and there is no sign in the field of business research that this is changing (Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999, 11). This rather worrying gap in the literature does not preclude us from attempting a judgement on the extent to which the Fund did indeed contribute to the development of new capacities in the voluntary and community organisations that it worked with. Both our case studies and the end-of-year reports maintained by BSA and NIACE suggest that there was a substantial

degree of organisational learning among those agencies and groups that were involved in the Fund.

As noted already, increasing organisational capacity was a key aim of the Fund. The number of projects with a marked element of capacity building, defined broadly, grew from 12 during Round 1 to 16 in Round 2, and it remained at that level in Rounds 3 and 4. Moreover, in the early rounds a number of capacity-building projects were led by mainstream education providers: two in Round 1 were college-led and one by an LEA adult education service, and four in Round 2 were college-led. By Round 4, two were college-led. In each round, the vast majority of the remainder were led by voluntary or community groups. In so far as there was a slight trend away from provider-led projects, the focus on capacity building appears to have sharpened slightly over the Fund's lifetime. Taking the Round 4 projects as an illustration of the range of activities involved, Table Eleven gives an indication of the type of activities supported by the Fund with the aim of building capacity, encouraging social entrepreneurship and promoting social capital.

Table Eleven:
Capacity-building - examples from Round 4 projects

- In London, the Somali Advisory Bureau is training unemployed Somalis to act as community researchers, learning promoters and substance abuse advisers
- The Learning Curve, in Trowbridge, provides training and accreditation in Training and Development to 40 volunteers in existing small rural organisations
- Derby Council for Voluntary Service is enabling members of self-help groups and small organisations to access training programmes focused on their own individual and group needs

- QUEST, a voluntary community development agency, is developing a programme of residential and online training for people involved in producing community newsletters
- TWICS in Southampton is developing local training in community consultation and research for people active in their communities
- The Prince's Trust Volunteers are developing a pilot project to integrate basic skills support into the training package they provide for volunteers, with the aim of transferring this model to schemes in areas where lack of basic skills has been shown to hold young people back

How effectively was this goal achieved? Most of the evidence comes from projects that were approved in the earlier rounds, since these have had longest to prove themselves, and have also been subjected to the greatest scrutiny.

Capacity building started with the requirement for consultation on need before a proposal was submitted. Interviews with the advisory panel and BSA/NIACE staff suggests that this message was widely shared by those responsible for the Fund. As one advisory panel member put it, the Fund was concerned with “only supporting initiatives where there had been a genuine attempt to actively discuss with the local community what their needs were”. Scoring sheets suggest that this was a key factor in judgements by BSA and NIACE as to the merits of proposals.

Evidence on capacity building is also provided in the reports submitted by project leaders themselves. BSA and NIACE each developed their own reporting systems; while both were relatively straightforward and user-friendly, BSA's reporting arrangements were rather more formal and structured to a finer level of detail than those adopted by NIACE. In the ‘final narrative report’, BSA explicitly required

project leaders to identify lessons learned. These included a requirement to report on ‘Things that did not work well’, ‘Things that went well’, and ‘Key Lessons from the Programme’. In six month narrative reports, BSA asked for indications of ‘areas of work which you feel would highlight good practice’. This feature focused attention on what had been learned through the project. While NIACE asked projects to say “What factors helped to make your project successful?”, “What factors hindered progress?” and “Which ideas did not work?”, a number of final reports did not follow this prescribed format. While this more open-ended approach to reporting did not preclude project leaders from reflecting on the lessons learned, it did mean that the process was reported in a less systematic and focused manner.

- The requirement that projects reflect on the factors making for success, and the hallmarks of good practice, was exemplary. It was not always carried through, and the use made of information was patchy. A coherent approach to lessons learned would make for transfer of best practice.

In our judgement, the requirement to reflect on lessons proved valuable. For the most part, project leaders provided responses that were appropriate, and indeed indicated that this part of the reporting process had achieved its purpose. Less encouragingly, a minority appeared not to understand the aim of this exercise, and answered less appropriately. For example, in the section headed ‘best practice’, one of the case study projects simply listed the four curriculum areas that it had provided. In other cases, as Tables Twelve to Fourteen demonstrate, the exercise generally proved a fruitful one.

Table Twelve: ‘Key Lessons’ from the BSA final narrative reports	
Lead organisation	Key lessons learned
The Depot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular partner meetings • Simple, direct, realistic publicity • Shorter periods of commitment from students
CEDC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firm commitment from the LEA as the key stakeholder

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools need a long lead-in time and clear timetable • Other agencies to be full partners and set clear objectives
GMBATU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work closely with shop stewards • Secure full commitment from company

Table Thirteen: ‘good practice/what worked’ from the BSA final narrative reports	
Lead organisation	What worked/good practice
The Depot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quality support, with a high staff student ratio • on-going commitment to confidence-building • clearly defined, achievable goals backed by personal diary • individually tailored programmes • ready availability of wide range of appropriate materials • opportunities for progression
CEDC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of IT to engage men • Recruitment through word of mouth supplemented by posters and approaches in the pub • The men came in twos and “felt safer!” • “Learners loved having ‘rewards’ - when the tutor brought them an easter egg they told everyone about it. We forget men like to have their learning

	<p>recognised too”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Involving grandfathers with their kids an excellent idea”
GMBATU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership between union and company • Initial research into needs before running courses

Table Fourteen: ‘Good practice’ from BSA six month narrative reports	
Lead organisation	Areas of good practice
Kaleidoscope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic skills integrated into a holistic range of services on a single site • Basic skills integrated into a diverse main programme
Banbury Young Homeless Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff flexibility allowing for ‘just-in-time’ basic skills sessions • Accessibility of venue • Up-to-date learning resources • Range of effective partnerships
NACRO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value of community-based provision • Use of appropriate learning resources • Involving participants in programme planning

Albeit less consistently than in the case of BSA, most project reports to NIACE that we saw also included reflection upon what had been learned. The final report for Corby Remembers (a popular history project, leading to a published volume) identified the following factors as making for success:

- group cohesion

- strong and persistent leadership
- access through the development officer to support and resources at NIACE

The OGDG reported that successful features include advice and guidance; challenges included the costs of linking up a database to four sites, staff changes and delays in providing staff training. The Gillingham Town Centre Community Rural Project (involving 20 adults, targeted at lone parents, unemployed people and the Asian community) report on the lessons learned, including:

- timing (summer)
- establishing links with a women artists group who supported the new learners
- regular meetings and a permanent space

Most factors hindering progress were practical ones, which had not been anticipated during the planning stage (such as the regular absence of a key centre manager on one of the days that the group met), while some ideas had fallen down through practical problems (lack of video expertise) and the intrinsic difficulty of original aspirations (involving the Asian community proved considerably more difficult than anticipated).

There was also persuasive evidence of organisational learning among the case study projects. The New Cross residents' group had learned how to shape the local political process. Three members had been appointed to the steering committee for the New Deal for Communities, and external stakeholders confirmed that the group's contribution had been instrumental in securing the New Deal grant. The research and consultation process funded by ACLF had boosted the group's self-belief and demystified the process of decision-making. As one tutor put it,

we firmly believe that local people should be able to run SRB programmes. It isn't rocket science, it isn't just for a few who should know how to do it
(Magpie Resource Library).

However, the projects also learned negative lessons about things that could inhibit progress, causing learners to switch off or give up entirely. Disruptive factors reported by projects included:

Changes in key project personnel

FLAG reported that “Our time for going out promoting learning has virtually been on hold” pending the replacement of a project manager (Quarterly Report, April 2000). Kaleidoscope found it difficult to replace a basic skills tutor, not just because she was a trained professional but because she knew and understood the needs of their client group. For the GMB, a change of personnel manager in a partner company led to difficulties when the new incumbent proved initially uncooperative:

All the work and mutual trust could have been for nothing (GMB).

Staff changes in OGDG meant that existing staff had to take on guidance work, planned drop-in sessions had to be abandoned, and staff training was delayed.

Changes in location (also noted by FLAG)

Moving premises was highly disruptive, particularly for those whose learning identity was most fragile and least well established, and in contexts where trust was least well developed. In the case of LA Raiders, the problem was rather uncertainty over the future of the venue, partly arising from prospects of redevelopment. The Norfolk heritage centres project lost access to three sites as a result of delays in approval of funding.

Reorganisation in the host organisation

The most extreme example of restructuring came, not in any of our case study organisations, but in the case of the East Midlands Sculpture Trail (as reported in a presentation by Lucy Banwell to the March 2000 NIACE annual residential conference). SHAPE, an arts development agency dedicated to improving access to the arts for disabled people and other excluded groups, hoped to create the sculpture trail partly in order to mark its 21st birthday. By spring 2000, with the trail completed, SHAPE was in the process of closing down; although the trail was successfully launched, to considerable publicity, much of the expertise gained through the project was inevitably dispersed as a result. The LA Raiders were faced with difficulties arising from serious administrative problems in the community association that leased the premises. Such volatility is not unusual among smaller voluntary and

community based groups, but the frequent restructuring of public agencies also brought discontinuity to some of the projects.

The physical risks involved in working in certain areas

Women serving as voluntary learning promoters in a Croydon estate expressed considerable concern about their personal safety, and tried whenever possible to remain in sight of another person (FLAG Quarterly Report, April 2000). At the Banbury Young Homelessness Project, equipment was stolen during a burglary before the project was even under way, further compounding earlier delays in getting started.

Finally, there were areas where organisations still faced unresolved difficulties. In some cases, the difficulties were intractable ones.

Sustainability

Some projects had not learned how to embed the activities in ongoing provision. Sustainability was a particular concern for all the case study organisations. Some envisaged little difficulty. The LA Raiders Football Academy, for instance, expected their education programme to continue under the auspices of the local college, which benefited from the higher than average rates of retention and completion among the trainees. This was confirmed by stakeholder interviewees, who confidently expected the educational work of what one called this “star” project to continue.

In some cases, sustainability was not a clear-cut matter. Some provision was being embedded and some was not, usually for financial rather than educational reasons. Timing of funding could be crucial: in Norfolk, for example, the planning grant for the Local Heritage Centres project had confirmed the feasibility of creating three centres. Funding was obtained, but too late, so that arrangements started to unravel; at the end of a year, it was expected that one centre would open, with European funding, in Thetford. In the case of the CEDC project, provision tended to falter once it went beyond materials development to the delivery stage. One school ran a fathers’ group for a term, but dropped it after the original headteacher resigned. Another group had been formed at another school, starting with a day at the races, but only one man

attended once the course got under way, and the initiative was abandoned despite the continuing goodwill of the head (who thought “any idea is worth trying”).

Elsewhere, provision was likely to continue, but not always as originally anticipated. In New Cross, for example, community activists had shown little interest in completing an OCN qualification in research methods; others, however, had started a degree module on citizenship and urban policy at Goldsmiths’ College.

Partnership issues

For most of the case study organisations, partnership was generally a positive experience. However, partnerships could and did go wrong, sometimes for relatively minor reasons such as the replacement of a key individual, or a breakdown of trust arising from reinterpretation of agreements. However, even unpromising circumstances could be turned around. When a new and initially uncooperative personnel manager was appointed at one of the GMB’s partner companies, replacing a more sympathetic individual, enthusiasm replaced scepticism once workers had registered for courses; the new manager subsequently attended the presentation ceremony, and was vocal in publicly valuing the work being done.

Multi-source funding

Complicated funding portfolios are increasingly the norm in community-based learning (McGill 1999, 29). Examples in our case studies included the Overseas Graduate Development Programme, which also handled grants from the National Lottery, ESF, SRB and other sources; staff confessed that keeping the activities separate posed problems, not least because the activities appeared to learners to be part of an integrated whole. Similar difficulties arose in regard to the Refugee Council project. Handling this complex and unstable cocktail of income and expenditure requires management skills of a high order. It also sometimes made it difficult to see just what was being supported by ACLF and what would have happened anyway.

- The difficulties in community based learning are well established, and most of those identified here are well known to practitioners. A ‘joined-up’

approach is needed to grants policy, cutting across different departmental and other boundaries.

5. Learning from the Fund

As well as individual and organisational learning, there is also the question of what has been learned from the Fund as a whole. From the outset, the ACLF was viewed as allowing for innovation and experimentation. As the Prospectus put it,

We see the Fund primarily as a means of piloting new approaches which if proved successful can then be replicated and funded from mainstream sources. The Prospectus also noted that “We need to know whether what we are doing through the Fund is working”, and outlined requirements for evaluation, monitoring and feedback.

Unlike a number of other governmental challenge funds, though, the Fund was particularly distinctive in two respects:

- It is managed by the Department at arms length, with much day-to-day management being undertaken through two collaborating intermediary organisations (BSA and NIACE) and proposals being scrutinised by an independent advisory panel;
- It has not been confined to the well-trying and tested (what many of our interviewees called ‘the usual suspects’) but has genuinely engaged with those to whom the world of organised adult learning was new and strange.

At overall level, the Fund has been managed by DfEE. It sits within the portfolio of the Adult and Community Learning Team, itself situated in the Access to Learning for Adults Division of DfEE. In 1999, the team was responsible for supporting the Policy Action Team on skills for neighbourhood renewal (DfEE 1999b). There has been a certain amount of internal turnover. Gaps before new appointments were made created some delays, not least in authorising decisions; these appear to have been relatively minor.

By contrast, the teams at NIACE and BSA have remained stable throughout the Fund's existence. In the case of NIACE, responsibility for the fund lies with a four-person widening participation team, each of whom works half of their time on the Fund. In BSA, three staff members are employed to work on the Fund, again combining this work with other responsibilities.

5.1 The intermediary body model: BSA and NIACE

As a competitive challenge fund, the ACLF is unusual in that its management is contracted to two intermediary bodies. BSA and NIACE were selected because each had a unique expertise that was not available within DfEE. As a model of governance, though, the Fund is a departure from standard British practice. In describing how this worked out in practice, two terms repeatedly used by the civil servants involved were “trust” and “light touch”. In the words of one of the DfEE staff involved: “It’s all a high trust operation”. This had advantages for DfEE in terms of the staffing levels required to manage the Fund directly, as well as that fact that both BSA and NIACE could take “the customer’s view” as they are “closer to the learner” than civil servants could be.

Views of project leaders on the role of the intermediary bodies have already been quoted. As noted, these views were uniformly positive, and it is clear that all those who ran projects found it easy to approach and contact the staff from BSA and NIACE, and had relatively few anxieties about sharing problems and bad news as well as good. It was also clear that the experience of individual staff members enabled them to spot the ‘early warning’ signs of impending trouble, and persuade the project to take action.

In addition to this perspective from the bottom up, views were also sought from the external stakeholders and the advisory panel on the advantages and pitfalls of the intermediary body model of working. Advisory panel members commented on this

innovative approach with a mixture of approval and interest. One, for instance, described the process as follows:

my perception is that the job that NIACE and BSA do is one of administering a fund, on behalf of DfEE. Of using their professional expertise to ensure that's done appropriately. But the Panel really provides a broader view that is nothing to do with the operation of the Fund. And in that sense, in my experience, a very different way of administering a fund to one that I've ever come across before.

Interviews with panel members suggest a high degree of satisfaction with the level of co-operation between the two intermediary bodies. One panel member was impressed by the way that the BSA and NIACE teams "clearly liaised and negotiated about how they dealt with the Fund. . . So I certainly didn't see any negatives particularly in them both doing it".

Members of the advisory panel expressed considerable confidence and satisfaction in the work of both intermediary bodies. As one put it:

If I am frank I would say it [the panel] probably didn't make all that much difference. It might have made a difference in a handful of cases but the officers did by and large highlight the projects that we selected. . . . They were experienced people, they would know the scene far better.

Another said that:

It's not simply all the sifting and the recommending that they do and the initial analysis which is so important. But actually it's also the informal advice and the contact and the linking and the talking that they are doing directly to the bidders before even some of the bids are made.

Another found himself persuaded that in future activities of this kind, DfEE could adopt more of a hands-off approach:

Clearly the Department needs to spell out exactly what it expects, but then it's got to trust people to get on and do it. Get the monitoring in - fine, assure it is all as it ought to be.

Yet another singled out the processes of organising project briefings and sector or regional meetings as particularly helpful to projects. In her view, these activities revealed the strengths of BSA and NIACE as “sources of support to weaker groups”.

Both advisory panel and external stakeholders commented on the intermediary bodies’ strengths. An external stakeholder, herself director of a large voluntary organisation, said that:

People trust BSA and NIACE. They don’t trust civil servants. That isn’t necessarily rational, it is just how it is.

Another, employed in community development training and support by a national voluntary agency, said that

They’ve got the networks, they’ve got the expertise, and they can call on other people not only inside BSA but outside as well, all the names are in the book.

If you created that afresh, you’d have to pay for it, and I don’t know what

BSA gets but think they [the Department] are probably getting it very cheaply.

One panel member believed that BSA and NIACE brought “background knowledge” and “the commitment to the work”, neither of which would have been available in the same way from officials. Those she had encountered in community based learning, she said, “have appreciated what BSA/NIACE have done”. Equally, she believed that the Fund had benefited the intermediary bodies, feeding into their other areas of work and encouraging them to learn and disseminate lessons.

Criticisms from the panel were rare. One took the view that some projects may have been initially allocated inappropriately, and that “maybe there needed to be a bit more clarification on just how projects got routed”. Only one panel member believed that there was a significant gap between NIACE and BSA. For this panel member, the experience of the Fund had produced one key lesson:

basic skills I think is now at the heart of adult and continuing education. And I think that’s separate from the sort of precision literacy that the BSA is expert in ².

² It should be said that BSA staff vigorously rejected the label “precision literacy” as a way of describing their work, stressing that “current basic skills practice embraces the accurate and the careful

An external stakeholder working for a large voluntary education provider also had misgivings, expressing concern that both BSA and NIACE had well-established (and differing) definitions of what they wished to encourage. These voices were, though, rare.

It was clear that messages from the Fund were also being passed back within BSA and NIACE. Within NIACE, for example, the widening participation team had made presentations to other teams; the work was reported to management team meetings; and both written and verbal reports were made to Executive Committee and General Meetings. The widening participation team itself also believed that the lessons had shaped their contribution to the FEFC's selection process for non-schedule 2 pilot projects, which covered such areas as outreach in the community and non-accredited adult learning in the further education sector.

In the British context, the use of intermediary bodies to manage government programmes is relatively rare. In so far as it is an accepted part of the system, this tends to be associated with some of the European Commission's programmes. Much monitoring of the European Commission's special support programme for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland has commented very favourably on the success of intermediary bodies in engaging with marginalized and alienated communities and drawing them into dialogue with a wide range of actors in the public sphere (Harvey 1997; Coopers and Lybrand 1997). One part of the special support programme was devoted to promoting community-based adult learning, managed at arm's length for the Department of Education by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults. The advantages of using EGSA as an intermediary body including not only the expertise and commitment of its staff and, but also the strength of its reputation as an independent-minded player in a crowded field (McGill 1999). Rather similar gains accrued to DfEE from using BSA and NIACE to manage the Fund.

Of course, some of this success was highly dependent on context. BSA and NIACE are deeply familiar with one another's work and style, not least because BSA started life as a specially-funded unit within NIACE. Staff in both organisations were well aware of sensitive areas and also had a clear, if largely tacit, sense of the boundaries between what each organisation might regard as its patch. Moreover, those who worked on the Fund clearly respected one another and found it easy to communicate (though pointing out to us that they regretted not finding more time to explore issues together in greater depth). Whether the intermediary body model would work as well in another context, with different people, is obviously open to question. In this case, with every indication of a high level of trust and reciprocity between the organisations, it worked well – sufficiently so to encourage its use more systematically in future.

- The intermediary body model shows considerable promise as a means of engaging with the least connected and most marginalised groups and individuals in the population on a cost-effective basis, and its use should be considered more widely in future.

5.2 Arms-length decision-making: the Advisory Panel

Responsibility for decisions over applications lies with DfEE, acting on recommendations from the advisory panel. Panel members are national figures in the field with experience in community-based adult learning and/or in basic skills education; all hold senior professional posts. They come from a range of backgrounds, including a college principal, a university assistant vice chancellor, a consultant, a member of OFSTED and a local government officer; one chaired an influential government advisory committee, while another was a member of the Kennedy enquiry into further education. Their service to the Fund was, expenses aside, entirely unpaid. While appointed by DfEE, their names were put forward in equal numbers by NIACE and BSA. Nevertheless, all panel members reported that they had never been approached on behalf of projects, whether to lobby in their favour or to explain why a

particular bid had been rejected. Only one recalled ever being approached for advice by someone who knew she was a panel member.

Routine meetings are held towards the end of each bidding round. One ‘extraordinary’ meeting was held, when the panel met to discuss the Fund’s future. Meetings were chaired by a DfEE officer, a fact that the majority of panel members appeared to find anomalous, while making it clear that they had the utmost respect for and confidence in the individual concerned. As one panel member put it, “I think it was chaired very fairly. . . . we were gently encouraged to say whatever we thought about every project”. However, in the views of another member, “there was a kind of dependency on them [DfEE], because, I think, it was all so unclear”.

Before the first round of bids were considered, DfEE, BSA and NIACE briefed the panel members on the evening before their first formal meeting. Two panel members did not attend the event. One member took the view that the briefing “in hindsight was probably of more value than we appreciated at the time”. However, one in particular regarded any induction as redundant and even potentially unhelpful given the circumstances in which the panel found themselves:

this was so innovative that we were bound actually to need to develop ways of working and approaches and processes as we went along, and to share that and to lay down almost a case-law approach. And I think I support the way it was done Because I think we had, through openness and mutual trust, to develop a way of working and to develop procedures. And anyone seeking to lay them down would almost certainly have got them wrong.

However, he believed that the Fund had by the time of the interview (April 2000) reached the stage where an induction might have been feasible and constructive, were new panel members to be recruited.

Panel members unanimously described their working processes as informal. As one member put it, “one of the joys of it is that it isn’t a sort of a rigid committee”. There are no written minutes of proceedings (one panel member believed that such minutes

were kept, and then qualified the comment with the word “hopefully”). One member concluded that

I think at times, because there were quite big gaps between the meetings, things were a little bit disjointed, and obviously again, when you collect busy people you inevitably get different members each time you are pulled together.

All panel members referred to the sheer workload, as well as to its concentration in the run-up to meetings. As one described it:

it wasn't a smooth process. . . . it came in a big [indicates size with his hands and laughs]. And then there would be a long gap before the next lot arrived. So you had these intense periods when you had to virtually switch off from your normal duties and concentrate on that. But I don't - I couldn't see this as a criticism.

It was also clear that sifting procedures developed quickly, particularly in the early stages when the Fund moved rapidly from conception to delivery. Initially the Fund's focus on innovation brought with it a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty. One panel member described how

it's much clearer now, to me at least, what it is this must do or is trying to achieve. I don't think it was clear at the beginning. And that was also evident in the kinds of bids that were coming through.

Asked to reflect on the procedures they had used, panel members identified a number of lessons. One panel member listed six lessons learned about procedures, most of which concerned clarity (of criteria, of the procedures, and of the options available to the panel), a review of the Fund's impact, and a greater emphasis on checking the processes by which BSA and NIACE prioritised proposals, rather than “re-doing their work”. This member thought that overall, procedures had become perhaps too informal: “I think by the time you get to your third meeting, you do need to be codifying a bit more clearly than perhaps we did”. Others expressed similar views, one suggesting that:

It goes back to clearly determining the parameters of the panel and the framework for the panel to operate in, whilst giving the possibility of changing the detailed implementation from meeting to meeting. . . . If I was doing it

again, I would want a much more structured approach, but which also allowed panel members to clearly exercise a degree of creativity and take risky decisions.

She believed that the panel's skills were best used by asking it to review solely a short-list of proposals, drawn up by the BSA and NIACE teams; in her view, this had been substantially achieved by the fourth round.

In the fourth round, panel members received a shortlist of proposals that the BSA and NIACE teams judged as most closely fitting the Fund's criteria. With the 80 or so proposals came a request for all panel members, whether attending the meeting or not, to rank the proposals in advance; if they could not attend, they were asked to submit their gradings in writing. BSA and NIACE prepared their own consolidated analyses of the projects already approved under previous rounds, documents described by panel members as "very useful" and "helpful". One of the most experienced members recalled that "we had a much better and more focused discussion about those about which we disagreed".

There was some ambiguity in panel members' minds over lines of accountability. All were agreed that they were appointed by DfEE, and were accountable to the Department, but they had not reached this understanding on the basis of a clearly stated agreement. Asked to define his 'employer' as a panel member, one responded:

Well I guess the DfEE because they were chairing the event and the invitations did come out from the Department. And so that would be the appropriate responsible body I think.

Similarly, there was broad agreement that then main stakeholders in the Fund were the Government, and more specifically the Department for Education and Employment (Table Sixteen).

Table Sixteen: Stakeholders in ACLF: panel members' views	
Member A	• The Secretary of State for Education

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “All of those communities and their representatives that he wants to have a foothold in the learning revolution”
Member B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the DfEE, in particular those specific parts who are working on social exclusion • the Government, with its concern to get real movement in the area of social exclusion • voluntary and community groups
Member C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the DfEE “because they have provided the money” • BSA • NIACE
Member D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think there is only one stakeholder, that’s the Department”
Member E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Secretary of State • “the voluntary organisations that see it as being their way in” • NIACE/BSA

Monitoring procedures at national level were largely informal. Other than a list of decisions, advisory panel meetings were not initially minuted (although this changed as from September 2000), and its decisions were reported through its Chair, who was also responsible within DfEE for oversight of the Fund. In many cases, decisions were straightforward; some proposals were approved, others were not. However, there were also less clear-cut cases, as where funding was approved conditionally or in part. Moreover, although there was a guarantee of feedback from BSA/NIACE to those requesting it in writing, the feedback was based on general observations on all bids received rather than the panel’s comments on individual applications. One panel member, asked about monitoring, replied that so far as monitoring the panel itself was concerned

I’m sure it was [done], but it wasn’t particularly transparent. . . . I think if I was the person managing that programme, I would be trying to assess the effectiveness of the panel, certainly.

However, the same interviewee took the view that monitoring projects was the job of BSA and NIACE. Another who shared this perception had found it useful during round 4 to see the analytical summary of projects approved in previous rounds, and suggested that it would be useful to have such feedback on a routine basis.

- While the advisory panel has proven a highly cost-effective means of drawing outside expertise and legitimacy into the decision-making process, it was thrown quickly into a process that might have benefited from more careful preparation.

Other panel members expressed doubt about the use of challenge funding in the longer term. While it was a good way of getting “ideas moving”, one said, the process inevitably raised expectations while placing high costs upon organisations who submitted proposals, and this was neither sustainable nor cost-effective in the longer term. All advisory panel members said that if the current structure were to be maintained, they would favour a more ‘hands-off’ role for the panel, leaving it to the intermediary bodies to make detailed decisions, with the panel scrutinising criteria and procedures rather than repeating work that had already been done.

5.3 Innovation and risk

ACLF might be compared with a laboratory, allowing innovative and untested approaches to be demonstrated in practice. Inevitably this involves a degree of experiment, with the consequent possibility of occasional failure. As the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has argued in the wider context of urban renewal and community regeneration,

This means taking risks, something which is seen as essential for economic enterprise and innovation in the business field, but must now be used in social policies. Of course there must be essential measures for probity. But if people are part of the solution, involved in participative democracy, not simply in

representative democracy - important as that is - then we will see a civic revival (Blunkett 2000).

This expectation was stated clearly in the Prospectus for the Fund, which emphasised that

We understand that innovation may entail an element of risk – especially where the activity centres on efforts to involve people who are wary of learning – but a calculated gamble may be worth taking if the potential benefits are significant.

Such an explicit commitment to experimentation and risk-taking was, like the use of intermediary bodies, an innovative and highly distinctive departure from customary government practice.

To what extent were these innovative aims pursued in practice, and with what results? Panel members certainly understood themselves as being engaged in a process that involved a degree of risk-taking. Panel members seem to have felt more able to take risks when the sums involved were, as with the minor and planning grants, relatively small. As one put it,

many of the existing providers are going so far but are not getting to the heart of some of the more serious issues in areas of basic skills, adult literacy, in deprivation and so on. And I think the idea of seeding some small projects so that maybe not all of them but some of them would sprout and would develop and would become a core part of community provision, was the way that I perceived it. I felt very comfortable with that sort of idea.

For this member, the panel's approach was that "the idea would be tested during that period and if it failed that had been lost but at least we'd not put up £30,000". Another took a similarly experimental view: "I was very keen to see whether organisations that aren't the conventional providers might do a better job on this than we do. . . for experimental projects to some extent everything is in the R and D of it . . . I think this was about the Government trying to try things out".

Panel members believed that the Fund had become more adventurous as it evolved. As one put it,

we were very disappointed generally in the Panel with the first round in that we felt that people were being much too timid. And things got braver and I think both NIACE and BSA said that, I think, people were encouraged “Be a bit more adventurous. People were so used to doing the safe thing.

Professional staff at the two intermediary bodies not all convinced that the emerging focus on smaller and more marginal community-based organisations had been beneficial. One senior staff member of one intermediary body took the view that the more marginal organisations were likely to pursue relatively conventional forms of learning activity, arguing that “if projects don’t involve the mainstream then they aren’t changing the culture and the work won’t be sustainable”. For this individual, the Fund had demonstrated the case for community based learning; what was now required was longer term change by mainstream education providers.

Timing, and particularly the short time for start-up, may have influenced the approach taken to risk and innovation. In launching such an ambitious and innovative undertaking, it was inevitable that initially the intermediary bodies and DfEE worked through their existing networks of contacts. This influenced the pattern of proposals under the first bidding rounds, and the funding decisions taken at that time continued to shape its overall project profile. Perhaps inevitably, it was the better-networked organisations, with well-established contacts, who were successful. While there was some disagreement on the precise impact that this had, all those advisory panel members involved from the outset all regarded the first round as unsatisfactory in this respect.

A similar response to pressure for a rapid start can be found in the distribution of adult education projects funded under the European Commission’s special support programme for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, where an evaluation concluded that “Well-organised groups were inevitably quicker off the ground, and produced better proposals, than new ones” (McGill 1999, 5). By comparison with the EC programme, ACLF was up and running much more quickly, and evidence of a problem disappeared by the time of the fourth round. Both the intermediary bodies and the panel appear to have functioned by this stage in ways that favoured small

voluntary and community based organisations. For one panel member, this was very much a conscious decision:

obviously learning providers are very important, but they are there to support the initiative, and to support the bids, and not to be substitutes for them. . . . I don't want this to be another route for college funding. And I felt that very strongly.

Another, with a senior FE background, made the same point, arguing that “we liked to see new blood in the driving capacity”. Another panel member with senior responsibilities in FE described themselves as “concerned that the big and powerful institutions, like the one I work for, who can produce fairly good bids, didn't get the lion's share of the cake”; rather, the Fund was aimed at “the grass-roots organisations”.

- The lesson is that communicating effectively with small grassroots organisations requires time, credibility and expertise, as well as sustained and consistent commitment from policy makers. These features have made a considerable contribution to the Fund's overall impact.

5.4 Learning operational lessons from the Fund

We have emphasised the innovative nature of the ACLF as a means of channelling public resources to supporting adult learning. Of course, a wide body of experience was available among those who took responsibility for the Fund – as civil servants, professionals in the intermediary bodies, or as panel members. Yet inevitably many lessons were learned, and adjustments made, as the Fund gathered momentum and those involved became more experienced at the new ways of working that were required.

One panel member expressed the view that the DfEE officers leading the Adult and Community Learning Learning team had “been extraordinarily important both as change agents but also learning themselves. And I think they have learned a great deal

through the operation of this small Fund”. Another described them as “civil servants who have open ears, they do listen”. However, the same person expressed concern that opportunities to learn systematically had been neglected: “if it’s going to be innovative, and if it’s short term like this, I think that we ought to learn things from it and not just have pump priming”.

Three advisory panel members thought that much more might have been learned had there been a conscious attempt to learn lessons and identify what worked. As one put it,

if we had been more aware of looking at how we did this job as a pilot, I think we might have had some slightly more productive discussions actually about what we were doing.

Without involving the Panel in the routine monitoring of the Fund in some way, it is difficult to see how this might have come about.

Panel members in particular were encouraged to talk about their views on lessons for the Fund’s future. Some took the view that a more regionalised approach might prove beneficial. For one, the sub-regional framework offered an attractive alternative to competitive challenge funding:

I would scrap this method of distributing public money. I would start with a sum of money, and a formula to distribute it to the regions. And the general view that I would take is that, through the regional bodies or . . . the new Learning and Skills Councils coming into place, that they should have a sum of money that they can target at those communities. . . . I think we could use the expertise of BSA and NIACE in a very different way, to advise communities on how to put their bids together - their proposals rather than their bids. . . . They could then be part of the monitoring process of how the regions were spending the available money.

Moreover, the Fund had shown this area of work “needs to have a little bit more resource in it”. It had been “almost too successful because it attracted huge numbers of bids”.

One expressed strong doubts about shifting responsibility either to the Learning and Skills Council or the Learning Partnerships. While he saw “much in favour” of placing the Fund with LSCs, because of their range of local partnerships, he believed that “you would then have to give them some very, very tough instructions that this was really about innovation and development”. The Learning Partnerships, on the other hand, were seen as “still too institutionally dominated”.

- In the event of the ACLF continuing substantially in its present form, DfEE should consider whether the advisory panel’s functions might include a greater degree of overall monitoring of progress at the level of the Fund as a whole, and less detailed involvement in the selection process.

Within NIACE and BSA, there seems to have been a clear recognition of the experimental nature of the Fund. As an illustration of the way in which the programme came to build upon, and draw on, its own experience, both BSA and NIACE mobilised existing projects to help induct and brief new and less experienced agencies. At a training day organised by BSA, for instance, the afternoon was given over to presentations from four projects, exploring problems and challenges as well as successes. There was also evidence that the two intermediary bodies had learned from the challenges of engaging new learners. An instructive example comes from BSA, whose approach to basic skills standards was criticised by two of the external stakeholders interviewed for excessive “bureaucracy”. Following discussions at training days, and feedback from individual projects, BSA developed new assessment methods that were easier to administer, more flexible, and less time consuming.

It should also be said that the twin ideas of risk-taking and learning from mistakes were repeatedly promoted by the intermediary bodies. At one of the briefing sessions observed, NIACE development officers explicitly encouraged project staff to adopt a risk-taking approach; if there were mistakes or problems, the important thing was to discuss them with NIACE staff. Introducing staff from one notably successful project

at the NIACE annual residential conference, a senior development officer emphasised the desirability of learning from the failures as well as the successes of projects. A similar view was expressed by BSA staff at briefings for existing projects; as one of them put it to us, “We make it clear that this is about taking risks, if they get in a muddle then we don’t mind, don’t get in a panic, but tell us about it”.

Risk may also be associated with the size of public grant involved. Particularly in engaging new learners through small voluntary or community-based organisations, small grants appear to have been very effective. This is not to downplay the value of the larger grants, which often seem to have reflected the larger start-up costs of major projects. The brief cost benefit analysis, admittedly on a very narrow evidence base, confirms the impression given to us by BSA and NIACE staff of the significance of the smaller grants in engaging with new learners at relatively low overall cost.

In an audit culture, it is not easy to promote risk-taking when public funding is involved. On balance, some selection panel members expressed regret that they had not caused the Fund to support more innovative work. One panel member put it this way: “In retrospect, if I was doing it again, I would want a much more structural approach but which also allowed panel members to clearly exercise a degree of creativity and to take risky decisions”. One had a more specific regret, that the Fund had done little to foster “curriculum innovation and not [just] delivery innovation”, concentrating on “how we engage students in learning and not whether we do it on a bus or do it in a pub”. Broadly similar views were expressed in print by one of the senior staff of NIACE with responsibility for the Fund (Cara 1999), though it is significant that this was published at a relatively early stage in the Fund’s evolution. Most of the advisory panel who took this view believed that the problem lay chiefly with the nature of submissions. One regretted that “in the things that I was looking for about content and delivery, I didn’t think there was anything that was very exciting”, a fact she attributes to professionals being “so beaten down in the last 18 years” that they need considerable encouragement to take risks at all. Others took absolutely the opposite viewpoint, stressing the Fund’s contribution to demonstrating the massive untapped demand for innovative and flexible learning.

Of course, there can be tensions between the need to innovate and draw in new groups on the one hand, and the requirement to embed and build on good practice on the other. Such tensions may be particularly acute in the context of a short-term funding regime. The Social Exclusion Unit, for example, has suggested that ‘lasting change’ in neighbourhood renewal is not being achieved in part because the pressures of competitive bidding and shortage of time and experienced, skilled staff mean that lessons are not learned. It recommended that

Grant programmes should explicitly recognise the benefits of backing ‘winners’. At present funding regimes often favour new projects at the expense of existing ones. Instead, those organisations who have already proved their success should also be eligible for support (subject to merit) (SEU 2000, 32).

In the case of ACLF, it may be that more established providers would have had the confidence and know-how to develop more innovative and risk-taking approaches to curricular and pedagogic issues than could be expected of organisations whose views of education and training were sometimes rather narrow and dated. Yet the Fund has provided a highly effective stimulus to engaging a wide range of new organisations in the provision of learning opportunities, however conventional some of those opportunities themselves. It may also be questioned whether the delivery, curriculum and pedagogy of the projects is really so conservative after all, particularly where the learning activity is incidental to the main focus of the project agency. This may be an area where there has been more self-criticism by the panel and the intermediary bodies than is warranted by the evidence.

- Investment decisions in ACLF were taken on the assumption that a degree of “calculated risk” was desirable in order to promote innovation. We have found no evidence of abuse arising from this, and the approach should continue to inform investment in innovation.

5.5 Sharing lessons learned

In thinking about sharing the lessons from the Fund, we have in mind two broad areas. The first is that of drawing the attention of wider publics to the Fund. Here there was an obvious dilemma for BSA, NIACE and DfEE, in that the more people knew about the Fund, the more unmanageable the selection process became. Moreover, the information requirements changed over time. While general awareness-raising might have been a priority in the early months, once the projects were under way the need was for more focused publicity work, designed to engage with those groups of learners who remained least well-represented among the projects. At the same time, the importance of dissemination increases the more that lessons can be drawn from experience. Dissemination is therefore the second area dealt with in this section.

5.5.1 Raising awareness

Publicising the Fund was a shared responsibility. As noted already, the challenge for BSA, NIACE and DfEE involved balancing the need to ‘broadcast’ information, which alerts a wider community to the Fund’s existence, with more focused efforts to engage under-represented groups. For example, BSA and NIACE jointly organised a briefing in Manchester to encourage more bids from the north-west, and another was held to promote the Fund among minority ethnic community groups.

Judging by the sheer numbers of proposals submitted from the very earliest days, the publicity campaign was highly successful in raising general awareness of the opportunities that the Fund represents. Judging by the slow but steady growth in the proportion of proposals from smaller community-based and voluntary organisations, as well as the growing tendency towards a balance between regions and target groups, the more focused publicity work undertaken chiefly by BSA and NIACE also generally reached its mark. As one panel member put it, the Fund was

almost too successful because it attracted huge numbers of bids. . . . And nobody can be blamed for that - the publicity that the Fund got clearly struck home where it was meant to strike.

As examples of the ‘broadcast’ approach, the evaluation team paid particular to the published materials made available by DfEE. The printed prospectus was described by almost all those we interviewed as user-friendly, clear and informative. The exception was one panel member, who thought that the prospectus could have been still simpler: “If you think it’s about trying to engage new groups, it’s a slightly formidable document”.

The five people who tested the website gave, as might be expected, differing responses. Generally, their responses suggest that these professionals found it relatively easy to navigate their way around the site, and all found the information useful (none of them had previously been involved with the Fund, or known much about it, before visiting the web site). There was criticism of the NIACE web site for offering little if any new information about the Fund. A number of improvements were suggested, including more information (possibly presented more imaginatively) on what projects were actually doing. The detailed responses are not included in this report, as many of the issues discussed by respondents have now been addressed.

- Self evidently, websites need to be user-friendly and up-to-date; there is also the opportunity to exploit more fully the potential of the technology for attractive graphics, and relevant links to other funding opportunities.
- In particular, websites enable interactive communication, sustaining momentum and promoting the exchange of good practice (as in the NIACE mailgroup for the laptop projects), and might facilitate continued networking after project funding has finished.

At local level, the intermediary bodies promoted general awareness of the Fund, and also undertook more focused awareness-raising activities with specific groups or in particular areas. Many of these involved using existing mailing lists or conference circuits. Both CEDC and NACRO, for example, learned about the fund from a national mailshot from BSA, while the GMB's training and development officer heard of the Fund at a basic skills conference. In two case studies, project staff came across the Fund through other methods. At Kaleidoscope, the learning centre manager wrote off for a copy of the prospectus after reading a summary of *The Learning Age*, and deciding "this looked like it just might apply exactly to what we wanted to do here". In Banbury, a youth worker happened to read a BSA advertisement in a magazine about homelessness.

Among our case studies, though, much initial awareness came from word of mouth and personal contacts. Of the Round One case studies, several of the organisers claimed to have heard of the Fund from one of the BSA or NIACE officers, usually as a result of having worked together or otherwise known one another previously. This was the case for example with the Norfolk Local Heritage Centres project. In the case of OGD, a NIACE officer who attended the launch of the Programme had mentioned the Fund to a newly appointed development officer. These examples may be atypical, as they are drawn inevitably from the earlier rounds. However, they do confirm the importance of being within the right networks, and being able to make sense of new information by placing it in some sort of existing context.

- While ACLF has been remarkably successful in breaking the hold of the "usual suspects" over challenge funding, it is important not to underestimate the considerable difficulties faced by small community-based organisations in decoding the language and assumptions of the world of adult learning, as well as in accessing and gaining support.

Dissemination

If lessons learned are to be applied more generally, then information about good practice and successful projects needs to be widely available. This is particularly important given that the Fund sought to promote learning among groups and individuals that had not previously been tempted or attracted by conventional provision. Informing community-based organisations, many of whom may have previously given little thought to adult learning, posed a considerable challenge.

Not all good practice is easily transferred from one setting to another. Particularly in community-based learning of the kind supported by the Fund, the variety of types of learning as well as the vast range of different contexts mean that what works for one group of learners may be highly specific and largely non-transferable. Nevertheless, those groups that have attended the BSA and NIACE briefings clearly found them useful, both as sources of new ideas and as ways of extending their networks. Dissemination, then, is unlikely to be a simple process of passing good practice on from one organisation to another, but is nevertheless an essential component in learning lessons and building social capital.

Much dissemination activity was undertaken at national level, using a combination of methods. As well as a national broadsheet for ACLF as a whole, both NIACE and BSA published a number of briefing sheets aiming at specific markets and workshops based on ACLF projects featured prominently in the annual NIACE residential conference. BSA had similarly promoted the Fund's achievements through its in-house newsletter, as well as through its staff development programmes, and published a series of attractive glossy booklets structured around specific themes such as health. Both BSA and NIACE published accessible and well-designed packages of loose-leaf teaching materials on citizenship drawing on their experiences from the Fund (BSA 2000; Dadzie and Turner 1999). Dissemination was still evolving when the evaluation was concluded, and it was impossible to evaluate the impact of these activities on the field. Overall, though, the intermediary bodies clearly gave considerable attention to dissemination, both among their existing networks and more broadly.

The DfEE team also publicised the Fund. It was particularly effective at placing articles in journals with specialist audiences (*New Start*, with a readership in community development, *Insight*, a forum for education providers, employers and others, and the in-house journal *Individual Learning News*). It was also able to attract wider coverage through press releases. Individual members of the team also gave a number of presentations and visited projects.

Projects themselves engaged in a wide range of dissemination activities. At induction meetings for new projects, both NIACE and BSA teams encouraged project leaders to view ACLF as “a demonstration fund”, placing considerable emphasis on the need to disseminate lessons from all projects (NIACE team member, induction meeting for Round 4 projects, December 1999). Particularly for the smaller community-based organisations, this forms an important aspect of capacity-building. Projects are encouraged to inform a wider audience of their activities. Project leaders are encouraged to keep a record of promotional materials, including press cuttings. A number of projects have made presentations to other bodies. For example, the coordinator of the New Cross project reported that the training coordinator had led a workshop at a recent London Regeneration Network conference, emphasising “the importance of innovative/flexible funding regimes such as the ACLF” (Quarterly Report, March 2000). Here again, then, the Fund is demonstrably building capacity among the organisations that it supports; given the isolation of many of the smaller bodies supported during the later rounds, and their lack of relevant networks and contacts, this is likely to become more important in the future.

In several of the case studies, projects promoted their work directly. At the Richmond Fellowship, for example, 79 learners received certificates from the local MP at a ceremony attended by nearly 200 people, including tutors, learners and their guests, the staff of partner organisations, a local choir, and the Principal of Dewsbury College; the event included music and food, and was reported positively in the local media. Richmond Fellowship also organised open days where learners presented their work to a wider audience. Saffron Arts used the idea of a logo competition to introduce their work to a wider audience, finishing with plans for a prize-giving and

display. CEDC secured Gary Lineker's agreement for his name to be associated with their fathers and children reading project. A presentation ceremony for learners with the Depot was attended by the Lord Lieutenant, the Mayor, the county council and various parish councils, and community education (as well as by a development officer from BSA). Having secured two PCs under the lap-top initiative, the Depot went on to develop a Powerpoint presentation to show to local groups. In the case of the East Midlands Sculpture Trail, there was an opening ceremony at each of the six sites involved, where learners - people with a variety of types of disability - came together with families, carers, teachers and local dignitaries (Lucy Banwell, NIACE Annual Conference, March 2000). A number of ACLF projects arranged open days in March 2001.

Again, word of mouth played an important part. OGDG, for example, attracted enquiries from minority ethnic community groups from as far afield as Birmingham, Coventry, Cardiff and Glasgow. This is clearly the tip of an iceberg. Many projects have had considerable impact on their local communities, as well as attracting attention more widely within the communities of interest to which the project promoters belong.

As in other areas, the nature of the intermediary bodies is bound to shape the process of dissemination. Both BSA and NIACE enjoy access to large, widely spread webs of networks and contacts; both have well established mechanisms for communication; both command the attention of practitioners and managers in the field.

- Given the growing focus of the Fund upon a diverse range of organisations, including many smaller and community-based groups, dissemination will be a significant task for the future managers of the Fund as its activities mature. Conferences and publications are useful but limited mechanisms for dissemination. DfEE, BSA and NIACE should jointly identify the most effective approaches for sharing ideas, information and experience with the wide range of organisations that the

Fund was intended to support, in order that the future managers of the Fund can develop the most promising approaches.

6. Conclusions

In a relatively short period, the Adult and Community Learning Fund has had a considerable degree of success. It was created primarily in order to engage new types of learner in education and training. The evidence reviewed here suggests that by and large, it has indeed supported activities that have brought men and women into organised learning who otherwise would almost certainly have stayed outside. This is itself an extremely significant achievement, but there are also important messages about process. The involvement of two intermediary bodies with considerable standing and experience in the field has allowed ACLF to flower more quickly than it would otherwise have done, and to work systematically to support and nurture the work of a wide range of organisations whose applications were approved.

The new roles given to partner organisations in the voluntary and community sector is one of the Fund's most distinctive features. This may of course carry risks as well as benefits, particularly where the allocation of public funds is involved. The idea of a worthwhile "calculated gamble" may seem attractive in the abstract, but it imposes awesome responsibilities upon the three bodies involved in managing the Fund. In general, our impression has been that while those responsibilities were taken seriously, they were not allowed to become a brake on action. As the Fund has evolved, so the emphasis on innovative activities involving a wider range of partner organisations has taken firmer root. Although some of those involved in the Fund expressed their concern that there was insufficient willingness to take risks, this fear seems largely groundless. Very few of the "usual suspects" are to be found among the Fund's beneficiaries, and this makes the programme unusual, not just in adult learning but also in the field of regeneration and community development. Much new ground has been broken, producing a rich harvest of non-standard approaches to learning.

Viewed from the perspective of the government's early ambitions for the Fund, there has been only one significant disappointment. ACLF was not particularly successful in securing large scale funding for the programme at national level from the private or charitable sectors. We found no evidence that this objective had been systematically pursued by any of the leading players, presumably because they did not see it as a practicable idea. The idea of securing matching funding at national level was perhaps unrealistic from the outset. On the other hand, we found substantial evidence in some of the case studies that the Fund had helped trigger approaches to other funding sources at local level. Indeed, even some of the unsuccessful applications had been advised, successfully, to apply elsewhere. While it is impossible to put a figure on this, there are good grounds for believing that the leveraging of additional funds into community-based adult learning as a result of ACLF has been significant.

ACLF's impact should not be viewed in isolation. In developing good practice, of course, the Fund has been able to draw on earlier experience. Particularly through the REPLAN experience of the mid-1980s – in much of which NIACE played a central part – a great deal had been learned already about “what works” in re-engaging non-participant adults (McGivney 1990). Further research evidence emerged from a series of large scale empirical studies of informal and nonformal learning in voluntary organisations in the 1990s under the directorship of Konrad Elsdon (Elsdon, Reynolds and Stewart 1995); for some reason, the findings from Elsdon's work seem to have attracted limited interest from either scholars and policy-makers (but see McGivney 1999).

Similar approaches are also attracting interest overseas. Some of the European Commission's activities show significant parallels with the experience of ACLF. In particular, the LEADER Community Initiative, which seeks to contribute to capacity-building and regeneration in remote rural regions, has pioneered a very similar approach to the use of intermediary bodies and bottom-up partnerships. More recently, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has published a study of adult learning and social inclusion as part of its “What Works in Innovation in Education” series (OECD 1997b). Many of the messages from the

OECD report confirm the experience of ACLF, particularly with respect to the importance of flexibility, sensitivity, quality and relevance in developing effective approaches to engaging new learners.

The work undertaken by the Fund, has proven highly effective at engaging with a wide variety of new learners. It has done so at a number of levels, including particularly significant learning gains in respect of those capacities and metacognitive skills that are needed before people can feel able to exert greater control over their lives.

- Our main recommendation is therefore that the work should indeed be promoted within the new framework for learning and skills. Whether this is best steered at local or national level is another matter. There are good reasons for determining strategy at national level - perhaps within a National Initiatives Fund held by DfEE - rather than spreading the activity too thin. Equally, there are grounds for arguing that as local agencies are best placed to identify and respond to local needs, they must take a view on the priorities and direction of any national fund.
- In either case, it will be vital to ensure that there is a clear and unambiguous requirement to focus attention on innovative and high quality activities that engage with new learners.
- There is considerable potential for increasing the role of community based learning with support from European Commission programmes. Co-funding from the European Social Fund, or the new Community Initiative EQUAL, could create significant growth. However, many of our interviewees had either experienced or considered applications to ESF, describing the process as remarkably bureaucratic and rigid, and comparing it unfavourably with the speed and flexibility of the Fund's administration. DfEE should ensure that European Commission programmes are sufficiently flexible to be accessible to voluntary associations and community organisations wishing to promote community based learning.

- Finally, there is the question of how best to take advantage of the expertise now to be found within BSA and NIACE, particularly in respect of building and promoting best practice. Without creating unnecessary bureaucracy, it should be possible for the Learning and Skills Council to build on this expertise and draw upon it in ensuring that type of the work currently undertaken by the Fund continues to evolve and develop.

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