

“I can influence change – I am part of the solution”

A national scheme to train and support community learning champions demonstrates how modest amounts of funding can help transform the lives of learners and build communities' capacity for positive change, write **MARTIN YARNIT** and **LIZ COUSINS**

Enthusiastic learners acting as community learning champions are scarcely a novelty. But there has been a surge of interest in what they have to offer in the last couple of years, thanks in large part to a government programme, which has funded training and support for learning champions through 50 community projects across the country, and a welcome increase in the range of people volunteering to take part. Changes in the way that services are funded and delivered over the next few years will open up new ways in which community learning champions might help to link service providers and users, and maybe even help turn the Big Society project into practical reality.

Community learning champions (CLCs) are volunteers who become active in their community promoting the value of learning to others. Their enthusiasm for learning reflects the difference it has made to their lives. Because they have local credibility, CLCs are able to promote the value of learning to friends, relatives, neighbours and workmates. Evidence collected for our 2008 report *Learning Champions: A Vital Link* suggests that CLCs are very successful at encouraging people to learn, especially those who feel it is 'not for them'. They perform a role in the community similar to that undertaken by union learning reps in the workplace.

CLCs can provide an effective, impartial signposting service to local learning opportunities, both formal and informal. They help learners to succeed and can help providers improve what they offer through the feedback they collect. Acting as CLCs enables volunteers to gain the skills, knowledge and experience through which to progress to further or higher education, other volunteering activities or paid employment.

CLCs are very effective at reaching out to the so-called hard-to-reach, those groups that professionals typically have difficulty engaging. So it is vital that CLCs are drawn from the whole spectrum of learners. Early data from the 50 projects set up with government funding this year suggest that this is indeed the case. From the homeless CLCs at London homelessness charity St Mungo's, who are using learning to encourage others like themselves to take the first steps to a new life, to the group of CLCs who are acting as guides to the heritage of Blackpool, CLC project managers know that the people they recruit and train must be seen as authentic representatives of their community.

Growing diversity

There are two reasons for the growing diversity of people acting as CLCs. The first is to do with the nature of the programme through which the new CLC projects are funded. The *Learning Revolution* White Paper was a crucial turning point: it was the first time since the Second World War that a government had given its blessing explicitly to informal adult learning, to learning for its own sake – a policy stance now endorsed by coalition ministers. The White Paper proposed a CLC programme to ease the route into learning, targeted at disadvantaged groups and communities, and it referred to groups which had missed out on previous educational opportunities, for example, unemployed people, the homeless, people with learning difficulties and ex-offenders.

A consortium comprising Martin Yarnit Associates, NIACE, the Workers' Educational Association and unionlearn successfully bid to run the national support programme for CLCs. Most of the funding was awarded to 50 new CLC projects. In the past there would

have been a requirement to set targets for skills and qualifications. This time there were no such restrictions. As a result, a greater variety of projects were funded, including many that might previously have been excluded.

The consortium did insist on a couple of output targets to focus minds and effort. Every project had to commit to recruiting and training 30 CLCs with the expectation that each volunteer would engage with 30 learners, targets that were felt to be achievable based on our earlier research.

The second reason for the diversity of volunteer activity was the steer given when bids were invited in the autumn of 2009. Applicants were expected to give evidence of partnerships and the consortium made a skew towards those organisations that previously would not have formed part of a traditional adult learning programme. Many of the successful bids were led by councils of voluntary service and other voluntary sector organisations, while many of the local authority led bids included organisations that were not traditional adult learning bodies. The guidance also encouraged organisations to define learning creatively.

Together, these factors have opened up the CLC approach to organisations – voluntary and local authority – working with a wide variety of people and communities. That was an approach fully supported by John Denham, when he was Secretary of State, and now by his coalition counterpart, Vince Cable, and Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, John Hayes.

And the approach is working. There are now more than 1,000 volunteers registered nationally as community learning champions, including higher-than-average numbers of men, young people and people from black and minority ethnic communities. Data



Princess Anne meets community volunteer Khadra Magan at a NIACE Royal Reception

from the projects show the unusual make-up of the CLC cohort recruited through this programme. In the North West, reports Nicky Crosby, manager of the Sefton project, 'Many of our CLCs are themselves carers, recovering drug-users, women taking refuge from domestic violence'.

Ownership and change

Just as the CLCs are unusual in reflecting the diversity of communities, especially disadvantaged communities, they are often different from CLCs we have interviewed for previous surveys in another important respect: they are more avid for ownership and change. This may reflect a new national mood that favours local activism, coupled with a sense that public funding and state agencies are on the retreat.

This attitude is reflected in volunteers' desire to be actively involved in shaping the future both of their local projects and of the national programme through the representative CLC Voice group, set up as part of the national programme. In addition, they are also keen to extend the boundaries of the traditional CLC role beyond engaging and signposting. In many of the new projects, the CLC role includes identifying gaps in provision and filling them. This is the Big Society writ large: citizens who come from the margins with a will to be in the driving seat for a change, with an intimate understanding

from their own experience of how services sometimes fail to work and a desire to make them better.

Certainly, CLCs want to play a greater role in shaping the future of the national CLC programme as well as their local schemes. That was the key message from the meeting of CLCs representing six of the nine English regions which took place in London on 8 July. Volunteers said that, as a result of being involved in the programme, they felt a growing sense of confidence that they were making a useful contribution to their communities. As one volunteer, Anthea Felton from Preston, commented: 'This scheme has made me feel that I can influence change, that I am part of the solution.'

Perfect model

The national support programme offers a perfect model for cascading this approach: 50 projects set up to each recruit and train 30 CLCs, each with the aim of engaging with 30 would-be learners, many of whom will themselves become CLCs in turn. That is 46,500 lives changing for the better for an outlay of £3 million or £64.50 a time.

CLCs are living proof of the personal benefits of learning. But when they get involved actively in organising learning opportunities they become people transformed. Their confidence grows, sometimes almost overnight, and they are ready to take on challenges

they would have fled from weeks or months previously.

So, the CLC approach is a low-cost and effective form of capacity building. Here are some typical trajectories of CLCs:

- *Kerry Duggan* went from being a single parent on benefits on an outer-city estate (Broxtowe, Nottingham) to learning champion to community engagement officer with a community development trust.
- *Vivien Hindley*, from Chester, is off to university next year, a big step forward for someone whose schooling effectively ended at 12, when she became her little brother's carer. After a brief spell in a remedial unit, where she was labelled unteachable, the next step was a job and then an early pregnancy. A CLC helped her into learning and, eventually, Viv become a CLC herself. Now she has a job and a place at university.
- *Ana Nogueira*, a migrant worker from Portugal who began working in a coffee shop in Bridgewater, decided to volunteer to help her community. Now Ana is building a career helping others, some of which is paid and some as a volunteer. She is now a part-time advocate working for Somerset Advocacy and a part-time Community Development Worker with Somerset Race Equality Council.

- *Peter Fear*, from Peterborough, lives in supported housing and began learning three years ago, completing certificates in literacy and numeracy up to Entry Level 3. Before, he was afraid to speak up in front of others, but now he has become a learning champion, advocating the benefits of learning to others.
- *Stephanie Pickett* was bullied at school and became homeless. Then she got a place at Coventry Foyer and trained to be a CLC and her life changed. She became a member of the Foyer Board and was recently appointed as project assistant with Groundwork West Midlands with support from the Future Jobs Fund.

Alongside the many examples of volunteers being changed by the experience of working with and supporting others, there is a growing body of evidence about the impact of CLCs on better delivery of services and on the communities in which they live and work.

Kerry Duggan says that the CLC team in Broxtowe has changed the community's attitude to learning and skills. It's considered 'cool' these days to enrol on a course, she says, a view endorsed by Anna Mimms who runs the estate's training centre: 'Colleges [are] getting a lot more people through their doors as a result of this ... the impact has been huge.' One of Kerry's converts is Anthony Bardel who helps to run a gym, reaching out to local youth and getting them involved in learning and other activities. 'Because Anthony's got the same background, he's been able to encourage them to change so that they're not seeing crime as so cool anymore', says Kerry.

In Salford, the new CLC scheme has helped to boost the number of adults taking part in learning. The Broughton Trust can claim an increase of 25 per cent in registered learners doing non-accredited courses in the academic year 2009-10. Informal learning is worthwhile in its own right – often giving people a new sense of identity and wellbeing – as well as providing a stepping stone to new opportunities.

Learning, like every other service, requires brokerage to work effectively and CLCs are the missing link between would-be learners and providers. In the past, CLCs were often frustrated as they could not make an impact on service design and delivery. Sometimes providers were not in touch with CLCs or simply failed to listen to their advice. Now we see CLCs making a real difference in this relationship.

In Gloucester CLCs identified the need for a first aid course which a local provider agreed to put on. Later the CLCs found that the course had failed to recruit. The provider had sent formal letters to prospective learners. The CLCs knew that letters would put people off and a quick series of text messages filled the course and created a waiting list.

CLCs in North Somerset worked with a group of Asian women whose first language

is not English to translate the names of body parts and common ailments on to a handout for them to use when they visit a doctor or hospital. A local doctor is now using the sheet they produced to save time and confusion in his practice.

In some areas CLCs have brought different communities together. In Lancashire CLCs brought together two dads-and-kids clubs, one from predominantly white Skelmersdale, and one from an Asian area of Preston. In Gloucester CLCs organised coffee mornings, one in a predominantly white working-class area, and the other for an Asian group from across the city. The two groups did not meet and had little experience of each others' lives.

time, skill and patience provide a safe base for training, development and progression for CLCs. This year, government has paid for 50 such projects to be created. Civil servants and ministers are coming to realise that CLC projects are a very cost-effective approach compared with the alternatives, especially for people who are struggling with ill-health, unemployment or for a foothold in mainstream society. There are signs that other departments are realising the potential of the CLC approach to their own programmes. The Department for Work and Pensions, for example, is exploring ways of using volunteers to promote active ageing. Local authorities are also thinking hard about the contribution

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One member of the white group, Sam, wanted to share her skill of cake decorating, a skill the Asian group wanted to learn. The volunteers organised a visit by Sam to the Asian women's group. Now Sam and two others from her group regularly attend the Asian group, something that would not have happened before. Sam is now keen to gain her first-stage teaching qualification for adults.

Volunteers in Preston have been working with museums on a programme of introductory visits for people from a poor Asian community. In London, CLCs working with the RSVP project arranged to take elders from the Spanish and Portuguese communities to local festivals, museums and exhibitions. Sometimes this is what it takes to make a service truly public, an intermediary which is trusted by a community, knows its way around the system and can act as an advocate if needed. These examples show the potential for the CLC approach in service improvement. Local authorities and other agencies struggling with the new systems for personal budgets for commissioned adult services could look at this approach. Public value reviews and reviews of Total Place are two other contexts in which the local know-how of learning champions could usefully be drawn upon to inform service design and delivery.

But such changes do not happen of their own accord. CLC project managers with

volunteers might make. Barnet, for example, is proposing to recruit a cadre of voluntary 'life coaches' from the local community to work with members of disadvantaged groups to help them access services and promote independence.

We now have evidence that the CLC approach is good for the individuals involved – both volunteers and the people they engage with – and for their communities. People live better lives through learning, become better citizens, get jobs and new horizons, and can develop the capacity to set up new services and to promote cohesion between perfect strangers.

There is evidence that it can save money as well. The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning demonstrated that '33 in 1,000 more adult learners taking one or two courses will quit smoking than non-learners, a substantial public health benefit'. Estimates put the annual cost to the NHS of smoking at £2.7 billion, with 440,000 admissions in 2007-08. For a sense of scale, if that cost were accounted for by those admissions, the individual cost of treatment would be £61,363. Cheaper by far to recruit and train a CLC who engages 30 adults in a couple of courses.

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They write in a personal capacity