



Frontline agencies in partnership

## DIUS - Informal Adult Learning consultation

### Homeless Link Response

Homeless Link is the national membership organisation for frontline homelessness agencies in England. Our mission is to be a catalyst that will help to bring an end to homelessness. Our two goals are to:

- Raise standards in the services that support homeless people and tackle homelessness
- Influence the development of policy, strategy and investment at all levels of government.

The homelessness sector is key to engaging the most socially excluded people in informal learning activities.

We welcome the DIUS recognition of the value of informal adult learning and believe there is great scope for informal adult learning to achieve positive outcomes for homeless people and a number of cross government targets.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this response in more detail, please contact Oliver Hilbery, Head of Policy Analysis at Homeless Link, [oliver.hilbery@homelesslink.org.uk](mailto:oliver.hilbery@homelesslink.org.uk) or 020 7960 3071.

## 1. Understanding & improving current provision

### Key messages

- Informal adult learning - or meaningful occupation - is a priority for homelessness agencies and Communities and Local Government (CLG)
- The homelessness sector is key to engaging the most socially excluded people in informal learning activities
- The positive outcomes from informal learning projects are wide ranging and contribute to a number of cross-government targets.

Homelessness agencies offer a wide range of informal learning opportunities that are often referred to as meaningful occupation or activity. These activities are extremely varied but most would fall within Dr McGivney's second category of informal learning, as identified in the consultation document: *'planned and structured learning such as short courses organised in response to identified interests and needs but delivered in flexible and informal ways and in informal community settings'*.

The CLG's Places of Change programme has put informal adult learning at the heart of homelessness services, investing £160million in infrastructure and £450 000 seed-corn revenue funding through Activating Places of Change to develop learning activities. These projects included informal learning opportunities, for example gardening groups, drama workshops and short courses in woodwork, photography and music, as well as more structured learning courses.

The homelessness sector is key to engaging the most socially excluded people in informal learning activities. The most socially excluded people in society can experience significant barriers to engaging in learning activities, both practical and personal (details on barriers to learning they face are in section 2). The homelessness sector works with many individuals experiencing multiple social exclusion and has developed techniques to facilitate an initial engagement in informal learning activities. Key factors in achieving an initial engagement are:

1. Informal learning activities happening in familiar settings (such as hostels or day centres), where people feel comfortable and can see their peers engaging. Findings from older homeless people's projects found potential learners could spend weeks or months observing activities before feeling able to participate.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interim Report of Help The Aged Meaningful Activity Project for Older Homeless People

2. Quality teaching by a specialist in the topic area is a key factor in motivating people to engage.
3. A learner-led programme of activities, asking homelessness service clients what they would like to learn.
4. Recognition of achievement is a key motivator, with certificates for attendance or participation often highly valued by learners.

Engagement in informal learning can often lead to further positive outcomes that impact upon cross government targets. Where more mainstream or formal learning opportunities are clearly signposted, many learners choose to continue their learning journey. 259 learners who engaged with Activating Places of Change projects went on to enter employment, volunteering or further training immediately.

We welcome the recognition in the consultation document that outcomes do not always have to be qualification based. Many other learners reported positive outcomes in other areas of their lives, including enhanced self confidence and motivation, decreasing substance or alcohol use, increased engagement with health services, developing friendships and social networks and a greater capacity to deal with other problems. Informal learning activities can also lead to wide ranging improvements in mental and physical health for homeless people<sup>2</sup>. In this way informal learning supports skills & employment, health, crime and social exclusion targets.

For example, older homeless people often have high care and support needs, meaning formal learning and skills training are inappropriate to their aspirations and needs. Help the Aged has funded a pilot in informal learning activities for this group, which has included a reminiscence group, producing a booklet on early memories, museum visits, pottery workshops and allotment projects.

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<sup>2</sup> Broadway & Westminster PCT (2005) *The impact of social and cultural activities on the health and well-being of homeless people*

## 2. Equality of Access

### Key messages

- Many homeless people's barriers to learning are multiple and complex
- Mainstream provision is not able to overcome these barriers to achieve initial engagement of the most excluded
- Targeted learning opportunities linked to homelessness services are needed to ensure the most excluded in society can enjoy the benefits of learning

For many people, homelessness is a cause or consequence of a range of issues in their life. Substance misuse, mental health problems and offending behaviours are common among people accessing homelessness services. Around half of projects estimate that over 50% of the people they see have multiple needs (defined as three or more support needs).<sup>3</sup> A survey of the older homeless population found 60% have 4 or more separate support needs, which may include mental health issues, alcohol addiction, disabling physical health problems and poor self care.<sup>4</sup> This combination of support needs constitute extreme physical and psychological barriers to accessing learning opportunities.

Accessing mainstream learning services can present additional barriers for people who are outside mainstream society. As identified in the consultation, financial cost, individuals' prior experience of learning and consequent negative association with colleges or learning institutions, can be key barriers to accessing mainstream informal learning opportunities. In addition, homeless people facing multiple exclusion can find interaction challenging and may struggle to participate in unfamiliar group settings or self-organise their attendance. Actual or perceived discrimination by staff and/or peers in mainstream services towards homeless people can also be a barrier to initial engagement.

To engage this group it is vital that homelessness services are supported to operate informal adult learning opportunities. Homeless people become familiar with homelessness services through using their practical services (e.g. food and accommodation), creating a sense of a 'safe' environment to engage with group learning activities. Initial engagement in this manner has positive outcomes in itself and may lead to more structured engagement.

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<sup>3</sup> Homeless Link (2007) *Survey of Needs and Provision (SNaP)*

<sup>4</sup> Coalition on Older Homelessness *Needs audit of older homeless people*

### 3. Government Contribution

#### Key messages

- Other than the CLG Places of Change programme investment, there is limited funding available for informal adult learning in homelessness services, despite evidence that outcomes impact on cross government targets
- Targeting funding at formal learning does not allow the most excluded to access appropriate opportunities to start a learning journey
- There is a need for sustained cross government funding for informal learning activities which can initially engage those unable to engage with formal learning

The CLG Places of Change programme is investing £160million in improving homelessness services' physical environments to enable them to work to transform lives. Central to this are opportunities to engage in both formal and informal learning. In response to difficulties in sourcing initial revenue funding, the CLG Activating Places of Change grants provided £450 000 seed corn funding for learning activities. Many of these projects comprised informal learning, reflecting clients' needs and abilities to engage. There is little engagement in this agenda from other government departments, however, we have outlined in section 1 how cross government targets can be met through informal learning.

The Leitch review has rightly placed the emphasis on the development of skills and qualifications for those of working age. However, this has led to an increased focus on formal skills and fewer non-accredited non-vocational courses, alongside outcomes linked to formal skills targets, such as entering employment or achieving level 2 qualifications. Such offers are not appropriate for those facing extreme barriers to learning linked to their social exclusion, and can reinforce perceptions that learning is 'not for me'. By targeting government funding at formal learning, those currently excluded from learning opportunities will remain excluded, unable to access suitable opportunities to start a learning journey.

The Places of Change and Activating Places of Change grants have provided examples of what can be achieved when socially excluded groups are offered informal learning opportunities appropriate to their interests and needs. The Outcomes Star<sup>5</sup> captures these improvements in a measurable way, using a person centred approach.

There is a clear need for longer term funding for the provision of informal learning activities to sustain and increase the range on offer and the

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<sup>5</sup> More information at [www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk](http://www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk)

outcomes that can be achieved. A wide range of government departments should engage, recognising cost savings and the shared cross-government outcomes.

#### 4. DIUS Contribution

##### Key messages

- We welcome the DIUS recognition of the value of informal adult learning
- The DIUS safe guarded budget for informal adult learning could significantly increase opportunities for homeless people to benefit from informal learning
- Such funding should be accessible to the voluntary sector which would require relatively small grants with minimal yet robust administrative requirements
- There is great scope for DIUS funded work in informal adult learning to achieve positive outcomes for homeless people and cross government targets

DIUS recognition of learning's wider value for 'personal enlightenment and fulfilment' and the contribution it makes to 'the well-being and health of our society' is extremely welcome.

Informal learning activities can greatly enhance individuals' quality of life. The Places of Change programme and Activating Places of Change projects have demonstrated that as well as often motivating learners to undertake further learning, informal learning activities can also lead people to progress in other areas of their lives, from offending behaviour to health. Homeless Link believes the value of informal learning activities in alleviating social exclusion should be recognised more widely across government, and hopes DIUS can contribute to that end.

There is a lack of sustainable funding for informal learning opportunities targeted at homeless people. Good practice learning indicates quality teachers or activity leaders are key to successfully engaging homeless people in informal learning activities. The DIUS safe guarded budget could make a significant contribution to widening participation in informal learning through funding informal learning activities targeted to homeless and socially excluded people's needs.

DIUS funding directed at homeless people and agencies needs to include small-medium grants, which are often sufficient to fund informal learning activities. Activating Places of Change grants ranged from £2 000 -

£20 000. Whilst it would be beneficial to increase this ceiling, much can be achieved with relatively small amounts of money. Minimal, yet robust, administrative requirements are key to ensuring small agencies and their clients have the capacity to engage.

Homeless Link has concerns around the proposal to use real or virtual vouchers to build on the Skills Accounts mechanisms, intended to make services more learner-led. There may be potential in this for engaged, motivated and skilled learners, but such a system would prove a further barrier to socially excluded groups. Virtual vouchers would also exacerbate the digital divide.

We believe that there is great scope for DIUS funding focussed on informal adult learning to achieve positive outcomes for clients and a wide range of government departments.

We would be happy to provide links or arrange visits to successful Places of Change or Activating Places of Change projects. We have included a DVD about the Places of Change programme in this submission (post).