

 Case 4

A 'Community canvas' of adult learning

Barton Hill Settlement in Bristol enables the local community to participate in positive, life-affirming activities. Annie Oliver, its Community Inclusion Manager, told us:

'For us, community organising, community development skills and the provision of adult learning are indivisible and go hand in hand. People must know you are trustworthy and have a sense that you're advocating for them and on their side. You can engage with people in communities once they're being supported in terms of what they want to do, but people find it difficult to study if they have these other major stresses in their lives. Once you deal with the things that are the most pressing, people can then think about other things such as study or work. So we deal with informal learning and the precursors to formal study by providing services that help change people's conditions and enable them to think about personal progression. The emphasis is on people finding solutions themselves.

'We have a "community canvass" where we talk to everyone. If people ask for arts provision, we try either to provide this ourselves or make it happen by working with another agency. Adult education in our context could be ESOL, sewing, or community organiser training. These can give people agency, enabling them to change their lives. It could lead to them taking a course at a local college. It's not necessarily one size fits all.

'For example, a local Somali mum came to us because she understood that Somali parents didn't always value the kind of education that happens through play. So we worked with her about learning through play. This resulted in us setting up an arts and crafts play and stay activity in the flats. The woman went on to a "strengthening families and communities" programme. Recently we redesigned a 6 week "setting up a community group" course. We design workshops on "keeping kids out of gangs", "crime, drugs and alcohol" and on other topics people want. "Improving self-confidence" is a workshop focusing on work we do on positive thinking and becoming your own teacher. Informal adult education has a positive impact on community

cohesion – we need more solidarity in communities, and you can create that by bringing people together to learn and work on issues of common cause. People can only realise these commonalities when they have the chance to get together. This needs support; and without this support people lose the impetus to make demands of institutions and this in turn further breaks down communities.

'People learn in different ways. For example, the diaspora use new technologies to keep in touch with people globally. But there's still nothing like getting people together in a room. You need to do this to build trust and create a safe, warm, friendly place. It's important not to judge people negatively, your approach has to be spot on – otherwise people won't open up and learn. The people we work with already feel like they are on the margins and displaced and have often not had much formal education. This is why a community-centred approach is so vital and why staff who understand how to work with communities is so important too – so the community feels like we are on their side and are their people.

'We're a social action hub – part of the Community Organisers network. We're also part of "The Network" which is funded by Bristol City Council which is about supporting communities. We will struggle without social action hub finance, due to end next year. We were founded by the University of Bristol and we're working with them to develop a "micro-settlement" – a set of shipping containers for community groups – "The Centre for Social Justice Innovation", to be run as a partnership and be funded by Power to Change and others. What's important is to have a menu that suits different people – some value more formal routes to learning, others need less formal forms of support. One isn't necessarily better than the other. People need different things at different times. In terms of policy, we need longer-term investment – we'd like a 20-year plan.'