

# CAPTURING THE WIDER OUTCOMES OF COMMUNITY LEARNING

FINAL REPORT

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report sets out the findings of a survey carried out by NIACE to investigate approaches to capturing wider outcomes and social value currently in use among community learning providers. It draws primarily on the responses received from 76 providers which have undertaken activity in this area. This represents 71 per cent of all survey respondents.

The research found that:

- Most providers' approaches to capturing wider outcomes and social value have been developed in-house and build on existing methods used to collect evidence on the learner experience, particularly individual learning plans (ILPs) and end of course evaluations. In some cases, providers draw on evidence from a range of sources.
- Providers use evidence of wider outcomes and social value in a range of ways. For many, it informs quality assurance and improvement processes, helps with the development of new partnerships and provision, and is an important dimension of learner voice activity. However, its use in relation to organisational operational and strategic planning, and to local strategic planning appears to be more limited.
- Providers are able to identify a range ways in which their learners and for their organisation have benefitted from adopting an explicit focus on wider outcomes. It leads to innovative partnerships, richer learner voice practice, better quality provision, more engaged and motivated learners, higher levels of staff satisfaction, more sustainable funding and an enhanced profile and reputation for community learning beyond the sector.
- The principle challenges and barriers to the implementation of effective approaches to capturing wider outcomes and social value are felt by providers to be: difficulties in generating good quality data; lack of time and resources to devote to the work; and the risk of excluding certain learner groups.
- The three most important success factors are involving learners, embedding a focus on wider outcomes and social value into organisational strategic plans, and providing staff training and development.
- While most providers are confident that their work is effective in capturing evidence of the immediate wider outcomes of learning for individual learners, they were much less so with regard to demonstrating longer term impacts or translating social into financial value.

## INTRODUCTION

### Purpose

This report sets out the findings of a survey carried out by NIACE to investigate approaches to capturing wider outcomes and social value currently in use among community learning providers. NIACE has a strong record of leading innovative development projects with the community learning sector that aim to strengthen the ways in which it understands, engages with and utilises wider outcomes and social value. The survey research was undertaken as part of our programme of work to support implementation of the national reforms of community learning. Findings from the research informed training for providers delivered in March 2015, and will help to shape future community learning development activity.

The aim of the survey was to gain a better understanding of the strengths, challenges and support needs of the sector in this developing area of practice. Specifically, it sought to find out about:

- methods used by providers to capture evidence of the wider outcomes and social value of community learning;
- the scope and focus of current work;
- how wider outcomes and social value integrate with providers' other strategic and operational activities;
- the benefits and impact of focusing on wider outcomes and social value;
- challenges and barriers to doing so;
- the effectiveness of current approaches;
- development support needs.

### Policy context

In common with other public services, community learning faces a growing expectation that it will be able to show how it delivers maximum value and benefit for the public purse. At a time of national austerity and shrinking budgets, the cross-government public sector reform programme seeks to reduce the reliance of services on funding from the state, while at the same time stressing the need to ensure that resources are used both efficiently and effectively. For public service providers, this presents the dual challenge of pursuing funding diversification and generating wider social impact with their work.

A key concept to emerge in this context has been social value. This is generally understood to mean:

*'The wider, non-financial impacts of programmes, organisations and interventions, including the wellbeing of individuals and communities, social capital and the environment. These are typically described as 'soft' outcomes, mainly because they are difficult to quantify and measure.'*

The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 came into force on January 2013. It places a duty on public authorities to consider how the services they commission and procure might improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area. It is increasingly important for organisations in receipt of public funding to be able to articulate and quantify social value in order to secure continued funding, although concerns have been raised about weaknesses in the implementation of the Act locally which hamper its effectiveness.

Closely aligned with the idea of social value is the principle of local accountability. Public service providers are required to be accountable to the communities they serve, both by pursuing outcomes that are valued by communities, and by measuring and sharing data on the impact that they create. Service users should be consulted so that their views inform the development and delivery of services. At a local level, it is expected that the development of more transparent and accountable approaches to defining, measuring and evaluating wider outcomes will be integrated into new arrangements for commissioning public services.

The Community Learning Reform Programme reflects these overarching policy imperatives. As the national policy objectives for community learning make clear, the reforms are driven by a commitment to deploy public funding as part of a sustainable 'mixed economy' for local learning which tackles disadvantage and promotes social inclusion and social mobility. Providers in receipt of public funding via an allocation from the Skills Funding Agency's £210 million Community Learning budget are expected, among other things, to:

- treat their allocation as a contribution towards the overall total cost of delivering community learning, adding value to it by generating revenue from other sources and making cost savings (termed 'Pound Plus');
- be locally accountable for their plans and strategies, through engagement and consultation with communities, local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships and other partners and stakeholders;
- plan and deliver learning that helps to transform people's destinies by contributing to improvements in their skills, capabilities and well-being in diverse aspects of life, such as digital inclusion, employability, parenting and health.

To meet these objectives, community learning providers need to forge new kinds of relationships across sectors which influence commissioning decisions, mobilise

resources and embed community learning within other organisations' responses to local priorities. Strengthening its focus on wider outcomes and social value is critical for positioning community learning at the heart of localist policies to tackle disadvantage and social exclusion. It enables the sector to demonstrate how much it achieves for the relatively modest public investment it receives. This is an important message to communicate, particularly to emerging bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships, which may currently have little understanding of the sector's relevance to their work.

As mainstream public funding becomes an ever smaller proportion of the resource that supports learning in communities, providers need to have effective approaches in place which enable them not only to identify and achieve the outcomes that matter for learners, their families and communities, and but also to capture robust evidence to demonstrate the wider outcomes and social value of their work. Developing the skills, knowledge and understanding across the sector to articulate the wider impact of community learning is key to organisational planning and quality improvement, as well as to the development of new strategic and delivery partnerships and the opening up of new funding opportunities.

## **Approach**

Our approach consisted of an online survey of community learning providers which was distributed via NIACE's networks.

Responses were received from a self-selecting sample of 107 providers. However, 31 of these respondents (29 per cent) stated that they have not done any work to capture the wider outcomes and social value of their provision. Therefore, with the exception of section 2.6 below on wider support needs, the analysis in this report is based on the responses of the 76 providers who have done work in this areas. The proportion of these respondents by provider type is shown in Table 1 below. A third were from local authority adult learning services, and just under a quarter from voluntary and community organisations.

**Table 1: Proportions of survey respondents, by provider type**

<b>Provider type</b>	<b>%</b>
General FE College	9
IAG/ National Careers Service	0
Independent Training Provider	3
Land-Based College	1
Local Authority Adult Learning Service	34
OLASS Provider	0
Other Adult Community Learning Provider	11
Sixth-Form College	1
Specialist College	0
Specialist Designated Institution	6
Third Sector	9
Voluntary and Community Organisation	23
Other	2
Total	100



## CAPTURING THE WIDER OUTCOMES OF COMMUNITY LEARNING

### FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

The research findings below describe the evidence collected from the survey of providers under the following six themes: approaches to capturing wider outcomes and social value; how evidence on wider outcomes and social value is used; benefits; challenges and barriers; effectiveness of current approaches; and further support needs.

#### Approaches to capturing wider outcomes and social value

Of the 107 respondents to the survey, 76 (71%) stated that they have undertaken work to measure the wider outcomes and social value of their provision, while 31 (29%) have not. Two-thirds of General FE Colleges and local authority adult learning services reported that they have done so, together with four-fifths of voluntary and community organisations and ten out of twelve other adult community learning (ACL) providers. While all responding independent training providers (ITPs) provided a positive response, the number of respondents in this category was small (n=3) so the data should be treated as indicative.

In terms of specific approaches used to capture wider outcomes and social value, these 76 respondents were asked to identify options from a list and could select as many as were applicable. As the findings shown in Figure 1 below indicate, the most common way in which providers have sought to address this issue is through approaches developed in house. These were cited by 61 respondents, or 80 per cent. Fourteen respondents (18 per cent) had undertaken Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis, and twelve (16 per cent) had used the NIACE Wider Outcomes Tool.

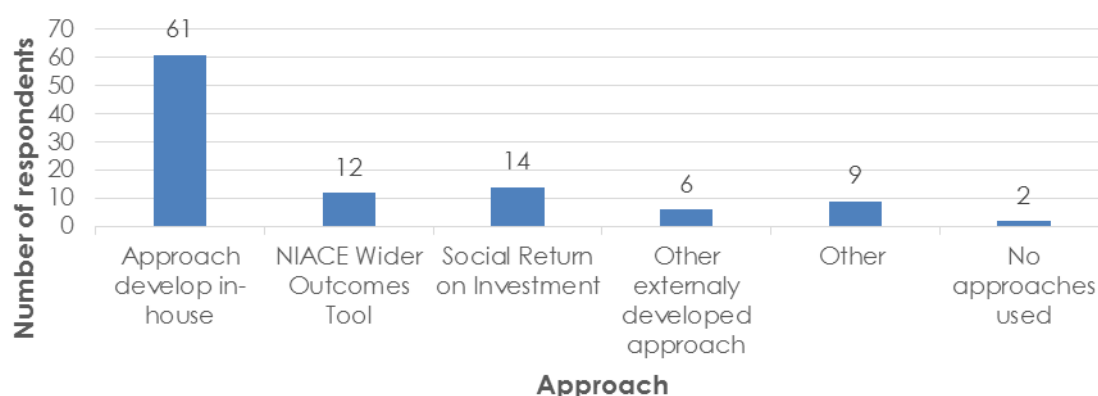


Figure 1: Number of providers adopting particular approaches to capturing the wider outcomes and social value of provision

Some 60 respondents gave additional information about how they actually apply these approaches within their provision. Their responses relate chiefly to the in-house approaches that have been developed. A range of methods and tools were described. The most frequently cited include:

- **Individual learning plans (ILPs):** These have been developed and expanded to include direct questions about the wider outcomes of learning, or other prompts to encourage learners to reflect on the difference that taking a course has made in areas such as confidence, wellbeing and social relationships. Some respondents described how they systematically collect and collate this evidence to produce robust, quantitative data. For example, a respondent from a local authority adult learning service described the following approach:

*'We have added questions to Learners' ILPs about how the learning has had an impact on six different areas of their lives (based on NIACE Wider Outcomes Tool categories). Tutors transfer this feedback to additional columns on the register to submit to MIS.'*

- **Learner surveys and evaluations:** End of course evaluation questionnaires and surveys and interviews with current and former learners were frequently cited. For example, a respondent from a local authority adult learning service described its learner exit survey which seeks to establish the wider social outcomes experienced by learners and includes questions on impact on health and wellbeing, capacity to manage finances and attitudes towards sustainability.
- **Case studies:** Personal narratives focusing on the journeys of individual learners – referred to as 'story catching' by one local authority adult learning service respondent - are used to illustrate the wider outcomes of learning.
- **Data from partners:** Interviews, surveys and other feedback mechanisms are used by providers to collect evidence from partner organisations that are in close contact with learners, some of which act as referral agencies. These include voluntary and statutory organisations such as Jobcentre Plus and the Health Service. Several respondents indicated that using this approach enables them to identify how their learning intervention has contributed to outcomes in areas including health, social care and employability.
- **Progression data:** Providers collect and report evidence about what happens to learners after they leave a course, focusing in particular on progression to further learning, volunteering or paid work.

Other methods that were mentioned include observation of teaching and learning, project evaluations, and action research. A number of respondents named particular tools that they use, such as Outcomes Star and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. A small minority of respondents specifically indicated that they sought to collect baseline data and establish 'distance travelled'.

It is evident that many of the organisations from which respondents provided this additional information use a number of complementary methods to collect evidence from different sources. A respondent from a local authority adult learning service stated:

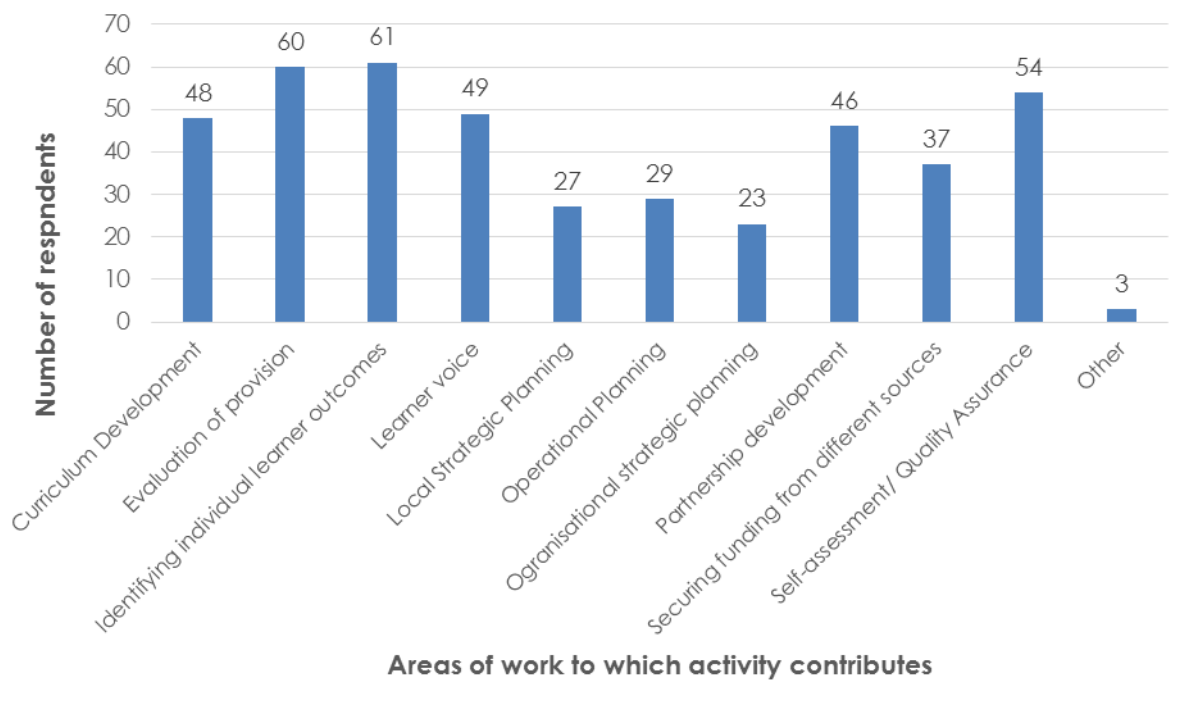
*'We used a combination of approaches to develop a tool that suited our service. We have also worked with other local authority providers and shared ideas. The end result led to user survey information, tutor information and progression information being collated onto a spreadsheet – this helps future planning and generally validates that we are generating the priority outcomes that policy requires.'*

Drawing on data from a range of sources provides triangulation and contributes to a more rigorous approach.

The widespread use of ILPs and learner evaluation surveys to capture evidence indicates that providers have primarily sought to integrate a focus on wider outcomes into their existing methods of monitoring learners' experiences.

### How the evidence is used

Information was collected about the ways in which activity to capture wider outcomes and social value contributes other areas of providers' work. Figure 2 below shows the results.



**Figure 2: Number of respondents using evidence of wider outcomes and social value to inform specific areas of work**

Around four-fifths of respondents indicated that their work to capture wider outcomes and social value contributes to the evaluation of provision and to identifying outcomes and progression for individual learners. In just under three-quarters of cases, it feeds into self-assessment and other quality assurance processes. For the majority of respondents it also contributes to the development of curriculum and partnerships, and is an aspect of their work to secure learner voice. In just under half of cases, the evidence is used to help to secure funding from different sources. Only around a third of respondents link this work to strategic planning at local or organisational level, or to operational planning.

Forty respondents provided additional, qualitative information about interesting, innovative or effective ways in which their focus on wider outcomes and social value supports their wider work. In doing so, the area to which they most commonly referred was the building of new partnerships for the planning and development of new provision to more effectively meet the needs of target learner groups and contribute to other policy outcomes. This was mentioned in around half of cases. For example, one voluntary sector provider stated:

*'We often take learning outside of the classroom and work with partners. We have very good relations with local museums and galleries. We have also worked with Manchester City Council on how we best encourage all our students that are eligible to vote to register to vote.'*

Others described how partnership working enabled the development of provision such as community development learning for older adults, ESOL embedded within gardening, and courses for parents in Children's Centres.

Another recurrent theme to emerge is the way in which focusing on the wider social outcomes of learning has deepened and enriched respondents' efforts to secure learner involvement in the development of provision. Taking a broader view of the ways in which participation in learning might make a difference for learners appears to have prompted some providers to strengthen their approaches to learner voice in order to ensure that they pursue the outcomes that matter to learners. Respondents described working with learners to identify priority development areas and to plan new courses that meet their needs and interests. One respondent stated that,

*'The provider I am involved with has genuinely looked to engage students in setting their own agenda for learning that includes social and personal outcomes and not just 'curriculum success.'*

Three respondents from local authority adult learning services highlighted the critical role that capturing evidence on wider outcomes and social value has played in enabling them to make the case for the value of community learning at a strategic level, with senior council officials and elected members. In one case, undertaking an SROI evaluation provided powerful evidence. Another respondent reported that:

*'Case studies [were] provided as an appendix to Council Committee reports to demonstrate that the impact of community learning goes far beyond, and far deeper, than council members might have realised (i.e. beyond 'learning pottery' or 'learning English'. This is crucial in aligning community learning with new Council priorities.*

## **Benefits of capturing wider outcomes and social value**

Sixty-three respondents (83 per cent) were able to point to specific benefits that they have experienced as a result of identifying the wider outcomes and social value of their provision. One of these might be considered as a fundamental benefit, and was highlighted by eleven respondents. They reported gaining better understanding of both the processes and outcomes of their work, and having richer intelligence about the impact of what they were doing, as a result of shining a light on the range and diversity of ways in which they made a difference for learners and partners, and contribute to other policy agendas.

To a considerable degree, the other benefits that were cited – discussed below – flowed from this enhanced awareness, supported by robust evidence, of what their provision was able to achieve and how.

- **Improved quality of provision:** Evidence gathered through work focusing on wider outcomes and social value directly informs providers' self-assessment and other quality assurance and improvement processes. Several respondents indicated that this work has strengthened their performance at inspection, and been well-received by Ofsted. By understanding better what outcomes learners value, and what types of learning activities are most likely to secure those outcomes for different learner groups, providers are able to target their services more effectively and to reflect what learners want and need. A respondent from a voluntary sector provider summed this up stating,

*'It is has helped us to identify where we can improve, and what is benefitting individual learners.'*

- Another respondent from an SDI reported that,

*'It enables us to identify how effective our provision is in meeting the explicit and often implicit needs of adult learners.*

- Respondents stated that this focus has illuminated gaps and imbalances in provision, for example by indicating a need to prioritise learning that relates to health, confidence building, and family and community support. In turn, this has led to the creation of new partnerships to develop new provision that addresses the needs of specific learner groups.
- **Increased learner satisfaction and motivation:** Respondents stated that focusing on the wider outcomes and social value of learning has helped to ensure that provision reflects learners needs, and thus results in higher levels of satisfaction. In addition, collecting evidence of wider outcomes and sharing this with learners

has made it possible to demonstrate powerfully to learners the progress that they have made not only directly in learning but also in areas of their wider lives. For example, an FE college respondent describing their targeted work with learners with learning difficulties and disabilities stated:

*'The impact is massive, for the learners involved they feel valued, they are contributing to society positively, they experience the wider community, they learn working skills, communication, social skills, they have practiced skills that are useful commercially, the projects open opportunities.'*

A number of other respondents highlighted the positive impact on learners' self-esteem of making explicit the full extent of what they have gained from taking part in learning.

- **Increased staff satisfaction and motivation:** Respondents also reported that staff satisfaction and motivation increased when the social value of their work and the breadth of outcomes to which it contributes is made evident. It confirms the value and worth of what they are doing. Several respondents used terms such as *refresh* and *renew* to describe how the work has boosted staff morale and commitment.
- **Enhanced external reputation:** Having good evidence about the social value and wider outcomes of their work has enabled providers to develop more effective communications and to raise the profile of community learning outside their organisation. Respondents cited a diverse range of audiences with whom they had raised their reputation, including: senior local authority officers; managers and staff in social and family services; elected members; partners in statutory agencies; and third sector organisations working in fields such as mental health and drug and alcohol recovery. As a respondent from a third sector learning provider stated:

*'The impact data ... shows the adult learning agenda to have cross-policy relevance.'*

- **More sustainable funding:** A number of providers stated that they have used data about the wider outcomes and social value achieved through their provision to make successful funding applications. One respondent from a voluntary and community organisation made explicit the link between robust evidence, enhanced local communications and reputation, and funding sustainability:

*'Benefits, to us have mainly focused on being able to evidence that the work carried out is effective and of benefit to those taking part. Frankly, being able to publish this in the friendly local press on a fairly regular basis has done no harm to the reputation and appreciation of the project and this in turn has helped ensure it's survival - now in its fourth year.'*

Importantly, it should be stressed that most respondents cited multiple benefits, and pointed to different and often strands of activity that were informed and enhanced by their work to capture wider outcomes and social value.

## Challenges and barriers

66 of the 76 respondents (87%) who have undertaken work to capture the wider and social value of community learning identified challenges and barriers that they have experienced. These can be grouped under three broad issues that were of frequently cited and evidently of widespread concern.

- **The quality of data:** Achieving methodological rigour and being confident in the quality and robustness of the data collected has been one of the major challenges for respondents in implementing an effective approach to capturing wider outcomes and social value. Specific concerns related to areas such as: lack of benchmarks; weak data collection methods; bias in evidence collection and interpretation; the subjective nature of much of the evidence; difficulties with trying to quantify and monetise qualitative data; and incomplete or inconsistent reporting.
- **Lack of time and resource:** Almost a quarter of respondents stated that capturing the wider outcomes of learning is demanding of staff time if it is to be done well, and is therefore both difficult and costly to implement. Collecting, collating and analysing evidence were identified as time consuming activities, and the difficulties of engaging already hard-pressed teaching and support staff to undertake the work was cited as a barrier. Several respondents noted that the casual and sessional nature of tutor contracts made this problem particularly acute. A number of respondents referred to the particular challenge of resourcing the collection of data from learners once they have progressed from a learning programme.
- **Equality and inclusion:** In a development of the broad concern noted above around the quality of data, around a fifth of respondents highlighted specific challenges relating to equality and inclusion. They pointed to risk that data collection with certain learner groups could be tokenistic or leading, because doing the work in a rigorous way is more resource intensive. Particular anxieties were cited with regards to ESOL learners, literacy learners, learners with learning difficulties and disabilities and learners with physical disabilities. Several respondents referred to the very limited data that has been collected from some learner groups, because it has not been possible to put in place effective approaches to engage them to respond.

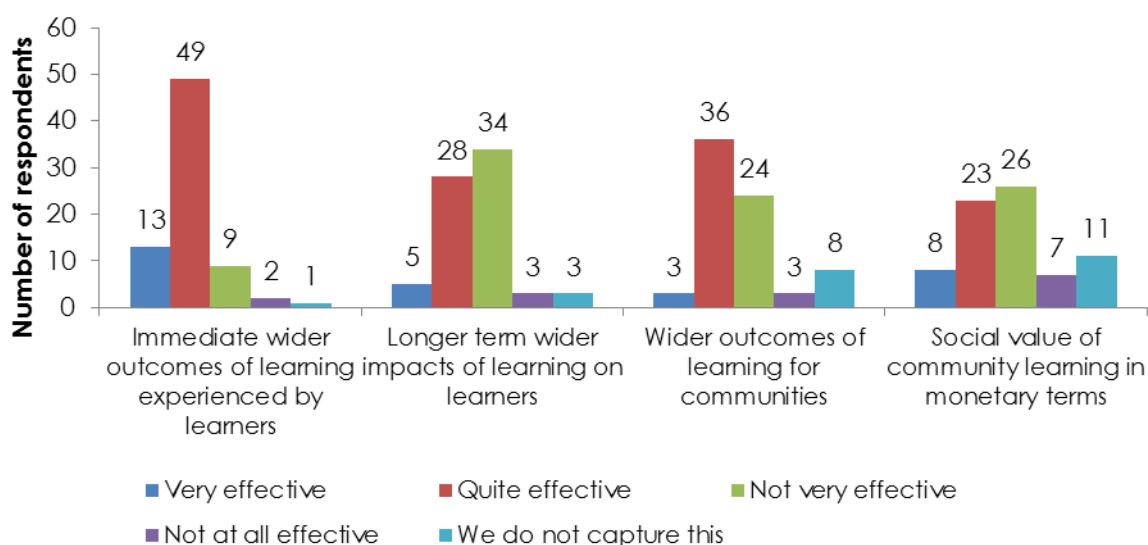
## Effectiveness of current approaches

Seventy-five respondents provided an assessment of how effective they felt their current approaches were in demonstrating the wider outcomes and social value of their provision in relation to the following four key areas:

- the immediate wider outcomes of learning experienced by learners;

- the longer term wider impacts of learning for learners;
- the wider outcomes of learning for communities;
- the social value of community learning in monetary terms.

Their responses are summarised in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3: Respondents' assessment of the effectiveness of their approaches in capturing data on the wider outcomes and social value of community learning**

This evidence suggests that most respondents are reasonably confident about the effectiveness of their approaches in capturing evidence on the wider outcomes of learning experienced by learners. Eighty-two per cent of respondents (n=62) rated that their practice is either very or quite effective in this area. In contrast, only just over half of respondents (52 per cent) rated themselves as effective in capturing wider outcomes for communities, and under half thought they were effective in capturing the longer terms wider impacts for learners (44 per cent) or showing the social value of learning in monetary terms (41 per cent).

Respondents were asked to identify, from a list, any factors for success which have enabled them to develop effective approaches to capturing wider outcomes and social value. All 76 respondents answered this question, and Figure 4 below summarises the results.



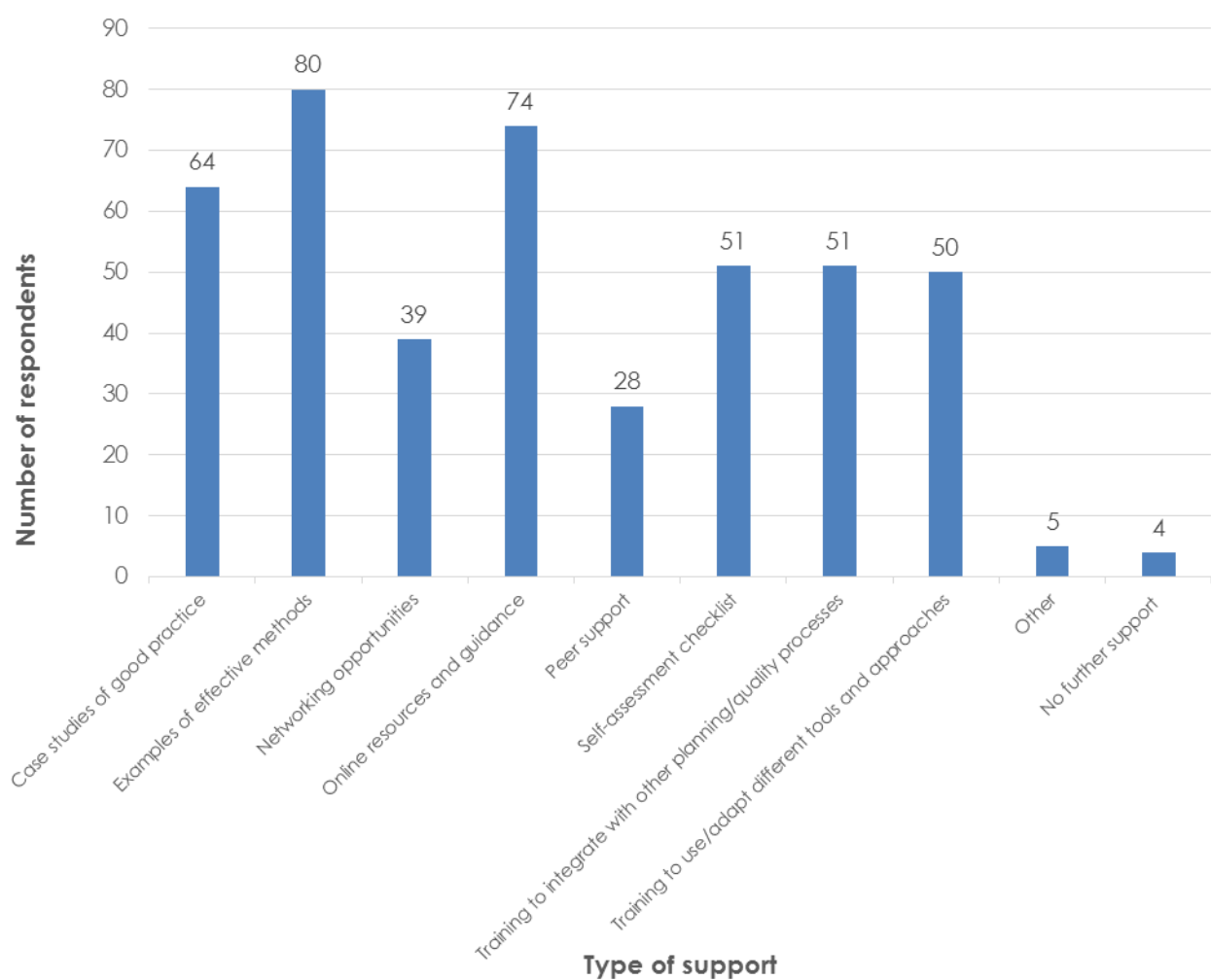


**Figure 4. Factors for success in implementing effective approaches to capturing wider outcomes and social value**

These data suggest that the two most important success factors, cited by almost two-thirds of respondents, are involving learners and embedding a focus on wider outcomes and social value into organisational strategic plans. Providing staff training and development also appears to have a major part to play, being identified by over half of respondents.

### Further support needs

All of the 107 survey respondents provided information about the additional support that they felt would enable them to embed the capturing of wider outcomes and social value more effectively into their work.



**Figure 5: Further support identified by respondents to help capture wider outcomes and social value**

As Figure 5 above shows, the form of support that respondents stated would be most helpful, cited in three-quarters of cases, was examples of effective methods. Also felt to be particularly useful were good practice case studies, which were indicated by 60 per cent of respondents. Overwhelmingly, respondents stated that they would like to access this and related information via an online resource (70 per cent). Just under half of respondents stated that formal training would be helpful, and relatively little demand was articulated for access to networking or peer support opportunities.

### CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the survey suggest that there is growing awareness among community learning providers about the importance of integrating a focus on the wider outcomes and social value of learning into their work. The majority of respondents described how they are putting processes in place to capture evidence about the impact of their work, over and above the direct learning outcomes that are achieved. Moreover, they were able to identify a range of ways in which their learners and for their organisation have benefitted. When providers make wider outcomes explicit, it leads to innovative partnerships, better quality provision, more engaged and motivated learners, higher levels of staff satisfaction, more sustainable funding and an enhanced profile and reputation for community learning beyond the sector.

However, it is apparent that practice across the sector remains patchy. Over a quarter of respondents have yet to engage with the wider outcomes agenda. Among those that have, anxieties are evident about the quality of data and their capacity adequately to resource the implementation of credible approaches. It is clear that many providers are not confident to translate the evidence that they collect from individual learners into robust quantitative data. As a result, the potential for evidence on wider outcomes and social value to support strategic planning and development work, both internally and externally, is not being fully realised.

Nevertheless, the survey's findings also point to ways in which the rigour, ambition and effectiveness of practice could be strengthened and made more consistent across community learning provision. Some providers have good and effective approaches in place which could be disseminated, and respondents indicated that examples and case studies that do this would be very helpful. They also stated that they would like to access such resources and support online, suggesting that there is scope to develop this aspect of the Community Learning Reform website. There would also be value in making targeted training opportunities available, which draw on the practice of experienced providers to help build the capacity of others.