

AONTAS Northern Ireland Community Education Census 2021-2022



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and Aisling Meyler

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We thank the members of the AONTAS NI Census Advisory group:

Open University

OCN NI

Conway Education Centre

Ballybeen Education Centre

Belfast Met

University of Ulster

Women's Tec

Phoenix Education Centre

Women's Resource and Development Agency



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Forewords

It is increasingly evident just how many people in our communities have to overcome real struggles on a daily basis, and don't always have the 'net' of family or financial supports to catch them if and when they fall.

However, there is a place that is unique in its ability to provide a safe and caring environment. It welcomes people from all walks of life, with open arms, and gives them hope. In this place, relationships are built, health is improved, and learning is central. This place can strengthen communities, and help people realise their true potential. This place is community education.

Community education helps people who want to return to education or learning, but may not have the confidence or opportunities to do this in a formal setting. It is rooted in values of equality, justice and empowerment. It creates a voice for those who are furthest from the education system, and – crucially – it is based on what people need and is driven by communities.

In AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, we see every day that the impact of community education and learning goes far beyond employment skills or accreditation. It's life-changing and it's lifelong. It develops learners' confidence and self-esteem, which is often the most important change that people experience. Without this grounding, it is harder to think through things clearly and to make decisions that will benefit ourselves and our families. Confidence and self-esteem allow us to mind both our health and our relationships. As one learner puts it in this report, "[Community education] has saved the Government a fortune not having to treat me for mental health."

This research shines a light on the power of community education and the impact this model has on people, their families, and society in Northern Ireland. Addiction, poverty, discrimination, exclusion, isolation, and a lack of meaningful learning opportunities are just some of the issues that learners have faced. The research also tells us about the difficulties faced by providers as they struggle to pay bills and manage with short-term income from multiple funding streams, while many learners are leaving their courses because of the cost of transport, materials or a lack of internet access. Providers have also seen an increase in requests for mental health support that paints an alarming picture of the toll such struggles are taking.

Sadly, this is a story that has often been told. People in working-class families; those impacted by trauma; or communities that have been marginalised are the first to feel the brunt of austerity. Community education, which services those most in need, has to struggle to survive in a competitive and employment-focused environment.

Research like this is key to creating meaningful change. It gathers and concentrates the voices of learners, providers and organisations across Northern Ireland into a collective call for action. Their experiences also create a strong evidence base for working with policy-makers, funders, local councils and Government to address the issues identified. We hope the evidence presented here will serve as vital support for community education providers in their own advocacy, lobbying and funding applications.

I'd like to give my sincerest thanks to all those who engaged in this research: members of the NI Census Advisory group; our Chairperson John D'Arcy; Board member Martin Flynn; co-author Dr Colin Neilands, and my AONTAS colleagues Dr Eve Cobain, Dr Lauren Swan, and Aisling Meyler.

AONTAS will continue to work in partnership with community groups, providers, representatives and key stakeholders to make a positive impact and provide a hopeful future for our communities. We aim to be a catalyst for change and increase support for the life-changing power of community education.

Dearbháil Lawless

AONTAS Chief Executive Officer



As Chairperson of AONTAS, Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation, I am delighted that we have undertaken this innovative and groundbreaking research into community education and adult learning in Northern Ireland. The findings will be both timely and important for policy-makers and practitioners alike.

As an all-island organisation, working across both jurisdictions, AONTAS understands that despite different education and support systems, the challenges facing community education and adult learning are borderless.

This research closes the gap in understanding the challenges in Northern Ireland, by establishing a robust evidence base using methods and techniques that have already done so much to support the non-formal education sector and adult learners in the Republic of Ireland.

The publication of the Department for the Economy's *10X Delivery Plan* in July 2023 highlights four pillars through which the strategy will be implemented and measured. This report will clearly inform two of these pillars: Inclusive Growth and Cross-cutting policy.

Adult Learning has a particular role to play in Inclusive Growth, which is defined as "Economic growth that is distributed fairly across society and creates opportunities

for all”. For example, it highlights the need to close the employment gap between men and women; between people with disabilities and people without; and between the most and least deprived areas of Northern Ireland. It also states the aspiration to increase the proportion of the working age population who have qualifications at level 3 and above, from just over 57% to 70%-75%. Learning among adults must be central to this goal.

While community education and adult learning falls within the remit of the Department for the Economy, it is clear that the objectives and goals of other Departments can be enhanced through a coherent approach to adult learning and its delivery. The benefits of learning and achievement to health and wellbeing are well documented as is the need to have clear, accessible pathways for citizens to continue their learning after they have completed compulsory schooling.

I would like to thank the AONTAS Board for its support for this work and also Dearbháil Lawless, CEO, and her team for their vision and energy in engaging with the sector in Northern Ireland in a such a collaborative and collegial way. Special thanks to the Research Team led by Dr Eve Cobain and including Dr Colin Neilands, Dr Lauren Swan and Aisling Meyler for the thoroughness of their work.

I would also like to thank colleagues from the Lifelong Learning Alliance (The Open University in Ireland, the Open College Network Northern Ireland, the Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland, CO3 (Chief Officers 3rd Sector) and AONTAS) for their work in highlighting the contribution of lifelong learning on an ongoing basis across Northern Ireland.

John D’Arcy
AONTAS Chair



TEACH THIS DEVELOPING YOUR OWN BUSINESS
Can I take your order?

MENU

STARTERS	DESSERTS
SPIRAL ROLL	CHEESECAKE
SALAD	CHOCOLATE CAKE
GARLIC BREAD	ICE CREAM
TOMATO SOUP	DOUGHNUTS

MAIN DISHES	BEVERAGES
PILGRIM STEAK	SOFT DRINK
ROAST CHICKEN	TEA
FRIED FISH	COLA
ORROTTO CARBONARA	WATER

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to thank the members of the AONTAS NI Community Education Census Advisory Group: John D'Arcy (Open University), Martin Flynn (OCN NI), Pauline Kersten (Conway Education Centre), Amanda Marshall (Ballybeen Women's Centre), Mary Coffey (Belfast Met), Rosemary Moreland (University of Ulster), Patricia Fleming (Women's Tec), Emma Shaw (Phoenix Education Centre NI), Deirdre Quinn, and Sarah Stack (WRDA). Your support and advice have been critical in shaping this research.

We would also like to thank all of the community education practitioners who took part in consultations, interviews, and practitioner focus groups. Your involvement in this research is greatly appreciated. We hope that this report will be a resource to you and your organisation. We would also like to thank all of the community education learners who took the time to make their voices heard at the learner focus group. It is hoped that this report will serve to amplify your experiences and the wide-ranging benefits of community education provision.

A number of community organisations shared photographs and/or facilitated the taking of further pictures and so our thanks go to Conway Education Centre, Kilcooley Women's Group, Women's Tec, Belfast Exposed, Turas, NOW Group, Family Caring Centre, NICVA, GEMS and CDHN.

“It’s not just about the learning, it’s about the whole [person]”

– Community Education Learner





Executive Summary

This report examines the current state and position of the community education sector in Northern Ireland. The analysis is based on data collected from September 2021 to August 2022, and comprises findings from a survey (completed by 60 organisations), as well as practitioner and learner focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. This report addresses readers, particularly policy makers and community education practitioners, who are interested in understanding the scope and impact of community education in Northern Ireland, as well as live challenges facing the sector.

Key Findings

The findings from this report show community education to have a profound impact for a huge number of learners in Northern Ireland, with the **60 organisations** that completed the survey **delivering 798 courses to 50,285 learners**.

Wide-Ranging Provision with Personal and Social Impacts

Learners were interested in community education options for a range of reasons, with those taking part in accredited learning gaining certification and meeting a wide range of learning objectives including “Employability” (41%)¹, “Community Development” (27%) and “Essential Skills” (20%). Additionally, non-accredited learning options in the areas of “Health and Wellbeing” (45%), “Community Development” (32%) and “Creative Arts” (7%) were popular, with learners reporting the huge impact that non-accredited courses in particular had on their own wellbeing, and by extension, frequently on the wellbeing of their family. While both accredited and non-accredited options were widely accessible, significantly more learners were engaging in non-accredited provision overall. This breaks down to 313 accredited courses delivered to 9,891 learners and 485 non-accredited courses delivered to 40,394 learners. Learners and practitioners across the board reported increased confidence, resilience and social integration as positive impacts of engaging in community education courses.

¹ Percentage of accredited courses reported as having this focus.

Supporting Diverse Learning Needs

The three most common learner cohorts engaging in community education were “Women” (43 groups)², “People who are unemployed” (41 groups), and “People living in areas of high unemployment and deprivation” (40 groups). In line with this, the sector was providing an impressive range of holistic supports to assist a diverse range of learning needs and to ameliorate disadvantage faced by the different groups engaging in community education. Mental health support (n=33) was most commonly reported, and a large number of groups were operating “Drop-in centre[s]” (n=24), “Career guidance” (n=24), and providing access to resources (such as a digital library, lending schemes and books) (n=24). Learners spoke of the profound benefits of engaging in learning in this supportive environment. As one learner in the focus group described: “It [community education] has saved the Government a fortune not having to treat me for mental health.”

Both Sector and Learners Facing Financial Difficulties

While the learning delivered by organisations participating in this research was resource intensive, groups reported facing a great deal of financial uncertainty. The funding landscape for community provision is highly complex and diverse, with organisations accessing a mix of government, local government and philanthropic funding sources.³ Practitioners described challenges around securing funding from, and then reporting to, a large number of funders, as well as a lack of ability to plan due to the short-term nature of funding contracts. This was compounded by the impact of the cost of living crisis, which has caused centres’ running costs to skyrocket (a new challenge following in the footsteps of the COVID-19 response). Meanwhile, they are seeking to offset some of the worst impact of the crisis faced by their learners. 68% of groups surveyed stated that they had seen an increase in requests for mental health supports, while 61% stated that had seen an increase in support requests for food or meal provision services (e.g. foodbanks, meals on wheels, free lunch). Learners, as well as practitioners, were highly attuned to the very real financial challenges faced by the sector, and the impact on individuals and communities should funding demands not be met. As one learner neatly summarised:

What would we do if the centre had to close? There’d be a lot of isolation. Families can’t do without these supports.

Strengthening Links with Further and Higher Education

Also examined in this research are the links that community providers share with Further Education and Higher Education Institutions. A large proportion of community groups are already linked in with their local Further Educational College (62%, n=37), while almost half were linked in with a University. These partnerships are working well in most cases, however research participants described a number of ways in which these relationships could be improved upon to foster better understanding and partnerships and further support learner progression.

² Number of groups who reported this cohort as one of their top three groups engaging.

³ 34 unique funders of accredited courses were named, while there were 41 unique funders for non-accredited courses. Some of these funders provided support for both accredited and non-accredited learning.

A Way Forward

Those working in the sector are highly dedicated and very focussed on how provision might be improved for their learners. As part of this research, participants were asked to reflect on how they think the sector could be better supported and made more sustainable, and the recommendations below arise from the findings of this research broadly:

- Community providers are addressing long-term needs, but their impact is restricted by variable and short-term funding coming from a plethora of sources. **Ringfenced funding for community education is urgently required**, which takes account of all the resources required to provide a truly supportive learning environment.
- With the **60 organisations** that completed the survey **delivering 798 courses to 50,285 learners**, community education has undeniable scope and impact, and must receive greater recognition. Recognition is needed not just in terms of financial support, but also in terms of **inclusion in policy and policy-making at local and regional levels**. This would bring the needs of community learners to the centre of decision making.
- **Further investment into impact measurement** is also needed. More training in impact measurement could lead to greater uniformity of practice, so that when impact-focussed research such as this comes to be carried out in the future, collating data will prove easier. Consistent reporting structures should be developed and put in place, to ease the burden on practitioners reporting to multiple funders.
- Uniformly, organisations expressed a desire to **build stronger relations with statutory providers and policy-makers**. There is a need for greater mutual understanding and trust building. This relationship building should centre on learner needs, with the creation of improved provision and progression as common concerns. There needs to be a mechanism to facilitate this relationship building, as effective collaboration requires support, structure and purpose.
- **A single strategy for adult learning** that unites all the providing sectors would help address the above concerns. Relationships would be improved through working together, which should ultimately lead to better learning and progression opportunities for learners.



Project Overview

This is the first census of adult learning provision delivered in connection with Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations in Northern Ireland. It was part of a wider project carried out between January 2022 and May 2023.

The project is based on a needs assessment carried out as part of a scoping exercise commissioned by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation. AONTAS conducted the first census of community education (the CEN Census) in 2020, identifying priorities and challenges for community education providers in the Republic of Ireland. While this was a significant step for evidence-based dialogue with policymakers in the Republic of Ireland, it was not within the initial scope of this research to capture data on provision in Northern Ireland. Through collaboration and research into community education provision across the island of Ireland, which capitalises on AONTAS' experience of the CEN Census, the AONTAS NI Community Education Census sets out to examine the current state of community education in Northern Ireland, and to demonstrate the impact of the sector.

AONTAS is undertaking a Census, which seeks to:

- **Demonstrate community education's impact in Northern Ireland**
- **Identify learner profile and supports**
- **Identify funding streams**
- **Examine the impact of the Cost of Living Crisis and COVID-19**
- **Assess the relationship between community education, FE and HE**



An advisory group was established in September 2022, comprising experts in the field, including community education practitioners and academics. The Advisory Group helped to ensure the efficient and effective implementation of the research.

A central aim of this project has been to address the current lack of a network for community education providers in Northern Ireland. An integral part of this research, therefore, was the creation of such a network to allow community education organisations in NI to come together to share vital knowledge and resources to build a thriving community education sector. Two online meetings were held to establish the AONTAS NI Consortium (6th April and 7th June 2022). The first in person Consortium event took place in Belfast at the Open University on 27th September 2022. A further in person meeting took place at North West Regional College on 26th January 2023. These events helped support promotion of and participation in the research, as well a greater understanding of advocacy needs.



***“It [community education]
has saved the Government
a fortune not having to
treat me for mental health”***

– Community Education Learner





Methodology

This research takes a mixed-methods approach. Findings are drawn from both quantitative data (e.g. survey responses) and qualitative data (e.g. focus groups and interviews). To help maintain respondent anonymity, all group and provider names have been removed and survey responses anonymised.



Survey

As part of the research, an online survey was undertaken using the Online Surveys (formerly BOS) tool. This was open to all community education providers. It was promoted chiefly through AONTAS and the NI Census Advisory Group. It was publicised through print and social media outlets, direct email, sector ezines, FE College community networks, and word of mouth. The researchers are grateful for the generous support of Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), who sponsored a promotion campaign, allowing the research to be promoted across five newspapers and in eight online news stories.⁴

⁴ Kelly PR supported the placement of the research in the Irish News, the Derry Journal (two editions), Derry News and Londonderry Sentinel. Online news stories appeared in News Letter, Irish News, NICVA, Derry Now, Derry Journal, Business First and View Digital sites. Social media was extensive generating 53 Twitter posts with 570 interactions.

The survey was open from February to May, 2023 and generated 60 returns.⁵

The online survey was divided into seven sections. The focus of these sections is as follows:

- Centre Details
- Staff (including full time and part time)
- Programmes in 2021-2022 (this included accredited and non-accredited courses and examined impact and outcomes)
- Profile of Learners
- Community Education and COVID-19
- Community Education and the Cost of Living
- Links in the Community (examining relationship with Further and Higher Education Institutions and other organisations).

These sections each came with a series of direct responses, with space also provided for open responses as required. Qualitative feedback was analysed by theme. All questions, with the exception of organisation name and post code, were optional; however, participants were asked to fill out the form with as much detail as possible.

There were factors which will have impacted on the return rate. These limiting factors include:

- During the period in which the survey was active, organisations would have been busy with end of year returns
- Many organisations were facing great uncertainty as their European Social Fund (ESF) contracts were ending at the end of March and the results of applications to the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) did not emerge until the eleventh hour. Some organisations faced job losses as a result of unsuccessful bids to SPF
- There was more general anxiety in the sector regarding a lack of Government and a budget being set which would clearly have a negative impact on finances for the coming year.

In spite of these limitations, the survey generated a very strong response.

⁵ There is no precise figure for the number of organisations in the VCSE sector which deliver adult learning. The following statistics are offered to give some perspective on this return rate. According to NICVA's State of the Sector 2022 findings, there are 7,486 VCSE registered charities, of which 15.75% or 1,180 declare the advancement of education as a charitable purpose. There is no breakdown to provide a figure for those delivering adult learning specifically, but from an examination of the list of organisations, it is clear that a high proportion of these charities have children and young people as their chief beneficiaries. The Open College Network NI (OCNNI) is the awarding organisation most commonly used by VCSE organisations in NI. It has 150 recognised centres in the VCSE sector. The Forum for Adult Learning NI (FALNI) has 176 VCSE organisations on its mailing list.

In discussion with research participants, it came to light that there were a range of different approaches to data collection operating across organisations (often as a result of different reporting requirements). Organisations participating in this research were self-selecting. This research has been faithful to data inputted in the survey.

Focus Groups

Six focus groups were carried out as part of this research. Four of these were held in person with practitioners and two were held virtually (one with practitioners and another with learners). The focus groups aimed to achieve good geographic spread across Northern Ireland and a wide range of ages.

Three, concurrent in-person discussions took place as part of the AONTAS NI Consortium event held in North West Regional College on 26th January 2023. There were 22 participants across these three discussion groups. On the day, two forty-minute discussion sessions took place. The first focussed on “learner support”, including what supports were offered and how they were funded; the second focussed on the impact of the cost of living crisis, including challenges faced by organisations and learners. Another in-person practitioner focus group with four participants took place at the OCN NI offices on 30th March 2023, and lasted for one hour. Discussions focussed on the subject of funding for community education and relationships with Further and Higher Education Institutions. Additionally, a virtual focus group for practitioners took place on 4th May 2023, with a focus on impact and measuring impact. Practitioners also discussed their vision for the future of the sector. Six practitioners took part in this hour-long discussion.

Finally, a learner focus group was held on 25th May, with five learners across two centres taking part. The focus of the hour-long discussion centred around the personal impact of community education.

Semi-structured Interviews

Hour-long interviews were carried out online with senior staff from four community education organisations. They were chosen to represent two of the largest sub-sections of community learning providers (women’s groups and those working within the disability sector), and to represent a range of geographical locations and organisational sizes. The interviews focused on impact – the impact of provision, of external factors (including funding, COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis) and of relationships with the statutory sector, as well as ideas for future development and improvement.



The Impact of Community Education

The census shows that in the academic year 2021-22, the 60 organisations that completed the survey delivered 798 courses to 50,285 learners. This breaks down to 313 accredited courses to 9,891 learners; and 485 non-accredited courses to 40,394 learners.



In the same year, statistics from the Department for the Economy (DfE) show that the Further Education sector enrolled 51,483 students on regulated courses. Open College Network of Northern Ireland (OCNNI) figures for the year show 9,789 learners registered by organisations in the VCSE sector.

Organisation Profile

As can be seen in **Figure 1** below, all local council areas in Northern Ireland are represented in the survey results. The largest number of respondents were located in Belfast City Council (53%, n=32/60), Derry City and Strabane District Council is also strongly represented, with 13 responses. A number of organisations had sub-offices elsewhere and delivered learning across additional council areas. Fifteen organisations indicated that they operated from multiple locations. The majority of groups responding to the survey were based in urban areas (78%, n=47/60), with

8% (n=5/60) of groups indicating that they were based in a rural location, and 13% (n=8/60) responding that they were based across both rural and urban areas. While the large number of organisations identifying as urban must in a large part be due to high numbers in Belfast City Council area, the low level of organisations identifying as rural could suggest a lack of resources and infrastructure for learning delivery in rural areas, which warrants further examination.

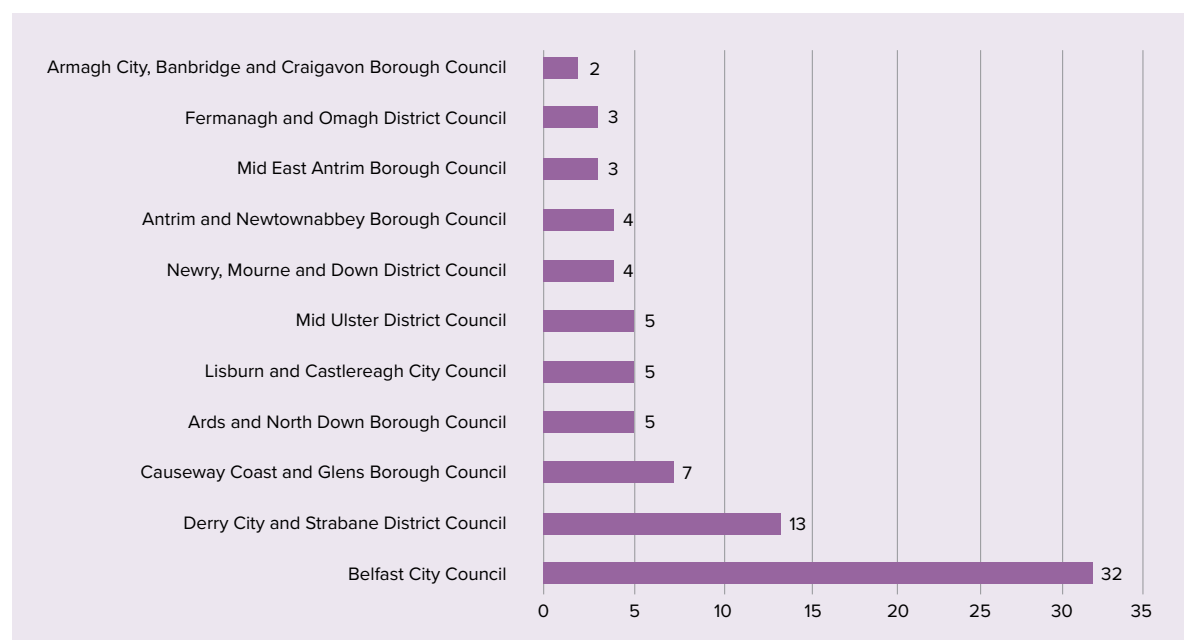


Figure 1: Number of community education groups per council

44 respondents to the survey were small organisations, having fewer than ten staff members (see **Figure 2**); however, an additional 517 casually contracted tutors were also employed (an average of 9 per organisation), showing that community education has a substantial workforce.

As shown in **Figure 3**, groups varied greatly in terms of number of learners engaging. These figures highlight the breadth of scale in groups working on the ground in community education, with a number offering targeted learning opportunities to a smaller group of learners. The 16 groups responding to the survey that had 501 or more learners engaging, were mostly a mix of women's centres and organisations delivering regionally across several centres.

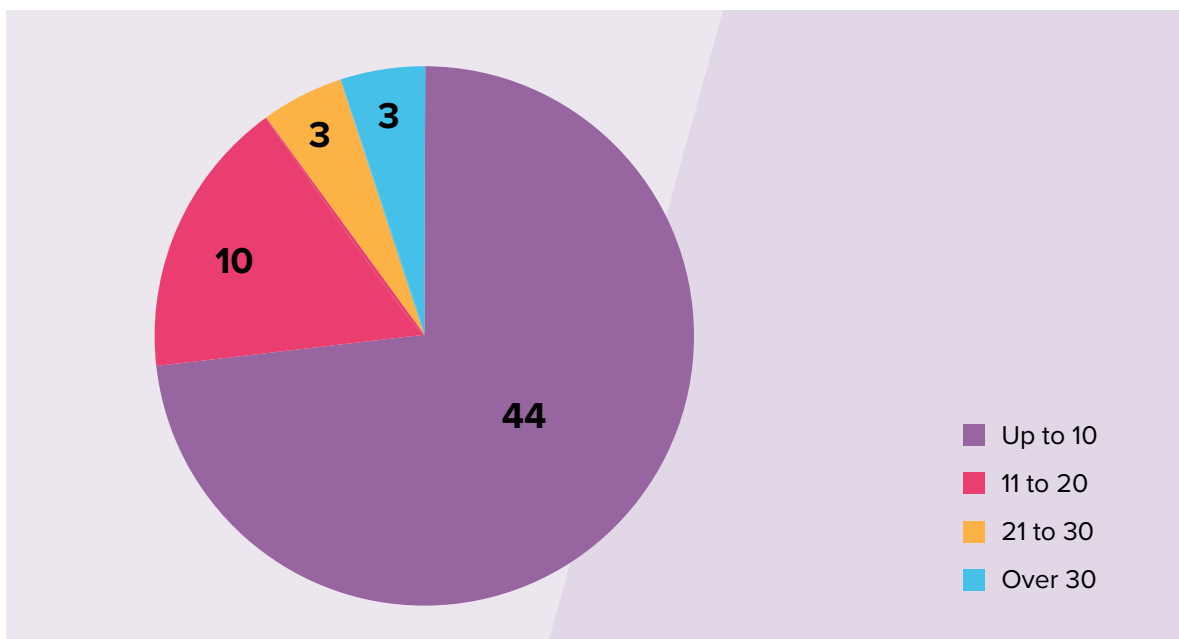


Figure 2: Number of community education groups by staff size

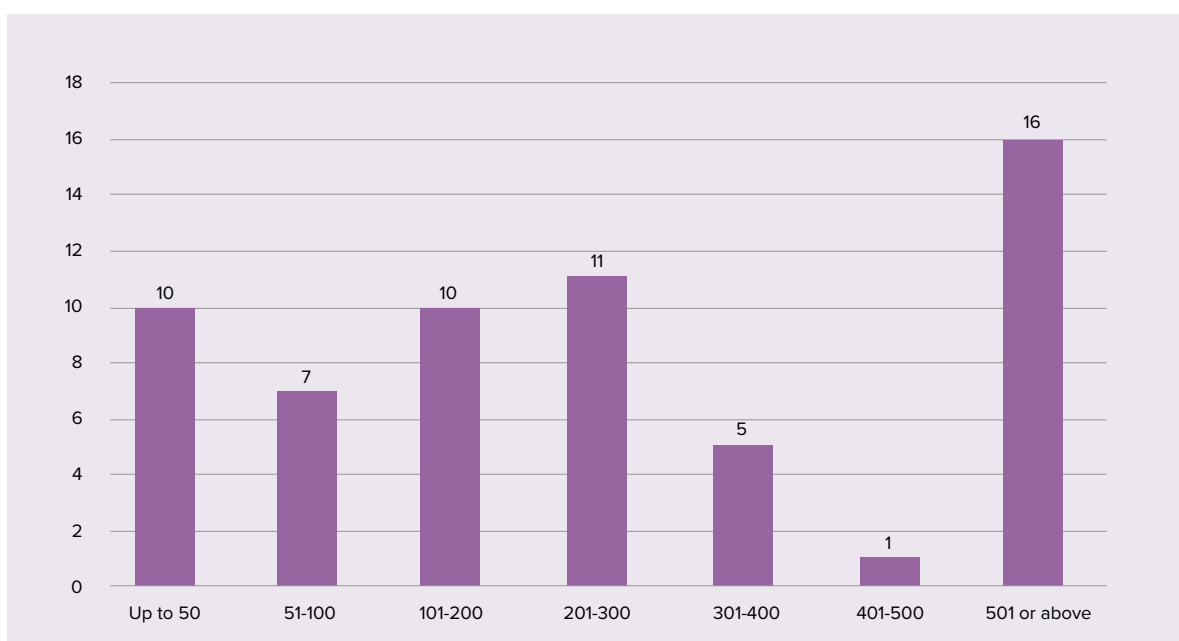


Figure 3: Number of community education groups by learner totals

Respondents were also asked to share their three most successful recruitment methods (see **Figure 4**). The majority of responding groups indicated that they relied heavily on “Online promotion – social media” (n=45), with “word of mouth” (n=39), and “Online promotion – other (i.e. own website)” (n=27) also providing important opportunities for course promotion.

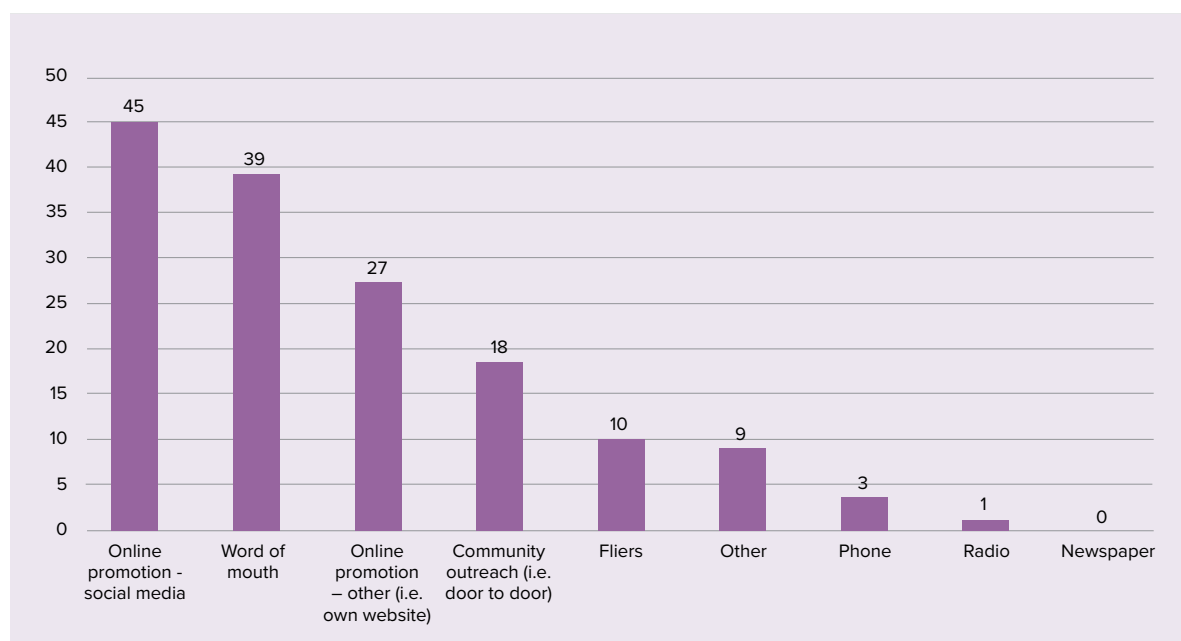


Figure 4: Responses to “How did you recruit learners in 2021-2022?”

Responses provided in the “other” category highlighted that engaging in community education itself supported recruitment and further engagement with learning within the responding organisations and beyond. Learners were also referred on from youth organisations, Health and Social Care Trusts, and Jobs and Benefits Offices.

Learner Profile

In the survey, community education groups provided information about the profile of learners engaging with their organisation. In focus groups, it came to light that there were a range of different approaches to data collection operating across organisations (often as a result of different reporting requirements); therefore, data on learner age and gender were not collected consistently or reported by all groups completing the survey.

Figure 5 shows the total number of learners by gender engaging across organisations who responded to this question (8 groups did not enter any data). Females represented the largest category of learners engaging in community education accounting for 63% of learners reported in this section (n=25,525/40,638). This will come as no surprise given the importance of the women’s sector in engaging female learners and the VCSE sector generally being acknowledged as a preferred choice for women returners. For comparison, FE figures for the same year as this survey show 45% female and 55% male.

As depicted in **Figure 6**, learners from across the lifespan are engaging in community education, with 53% being over 30, contrasting with FE statistics of 28% over 25. In the survey, adult was defined as 18+.⁶

⁶ Two large organisations reported very high numbers in the category “20 or under”, with learner totals of 7000 and 3600. Another reported 1000.

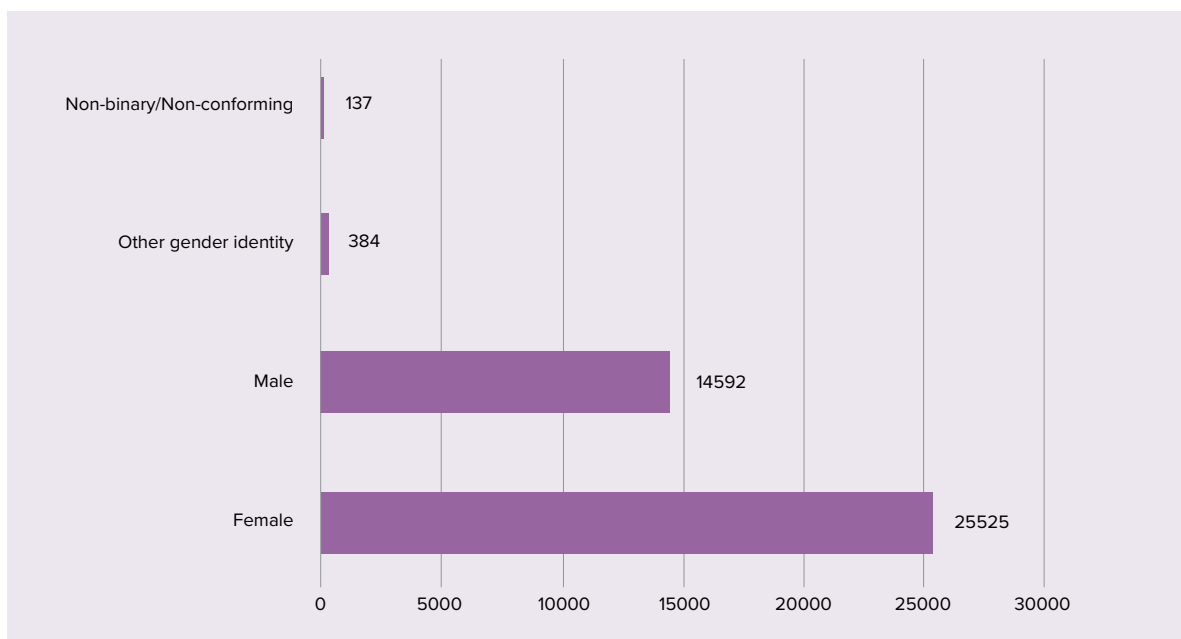


Figure 5: Number of learners engaging in community education by gender category

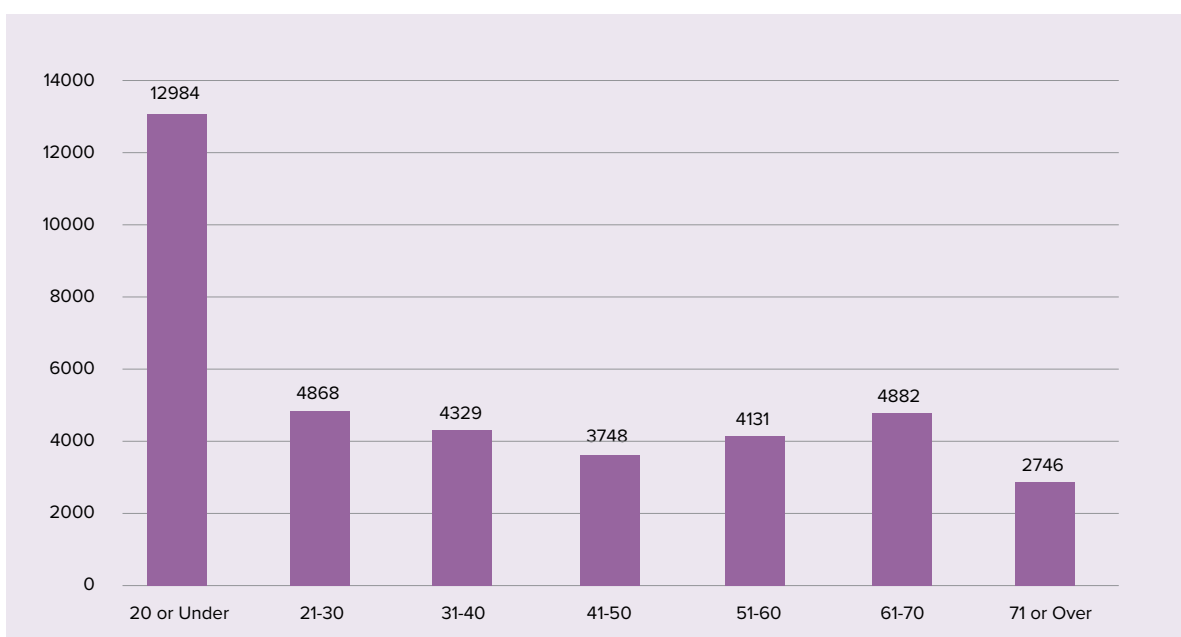


Figure 6: Responses to “During the 2021/2022 academic year, how many learners from the following age groups took part in courses?”

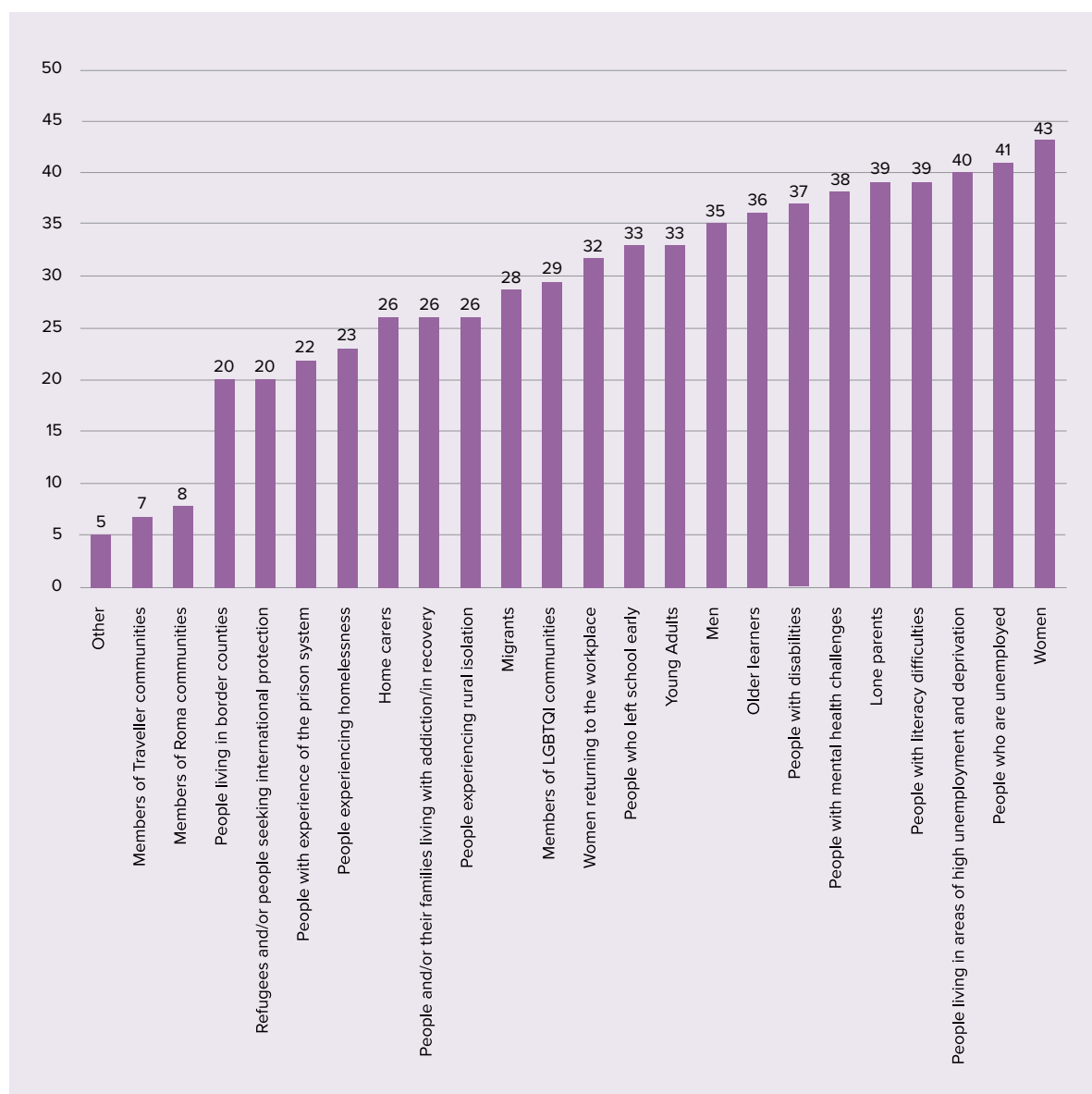


Figure 7: Number of community education groups engaging a particular group of learners

Figure 7 provides a summary of the number of community education groups that engaged with specific learner cohorts. Groups could select multiple learner cohorts. This data demonstrates that community education providers are supporting a very significant range of target groups who often have much more limited access to mainstream educational pathways, or experience a range of barriers to learning. The three most common learner cohorts selected were “Women” (43 groups), “People who are unemployed” (41 groups), and “People living in areas of high unemployment and deprivation” (40 groups).

The learner cohorts depicted in **Figure 7** are among the key target groups outlined in the *Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland* as needing immediate attention. Citing *The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures* (NIMDM), the strategy highlights that “in the most deprived communities, up to 60% of the workforce have low or no qualifications. For comparison, the same statistic in the best performing area is 11%” (Department for the Economy, p.46). As such, providing supported learning pathways

in these communities is crucial to creating a more equitable society.

Accredited Learning

Proportion of Community Organisations Providing Accredited Courses

Of the 60 respondents to the survey, 44 stated that they provided accredited courses in 2021/2022 (73%). A total of 313 non-accredited courses were reported in the survey.

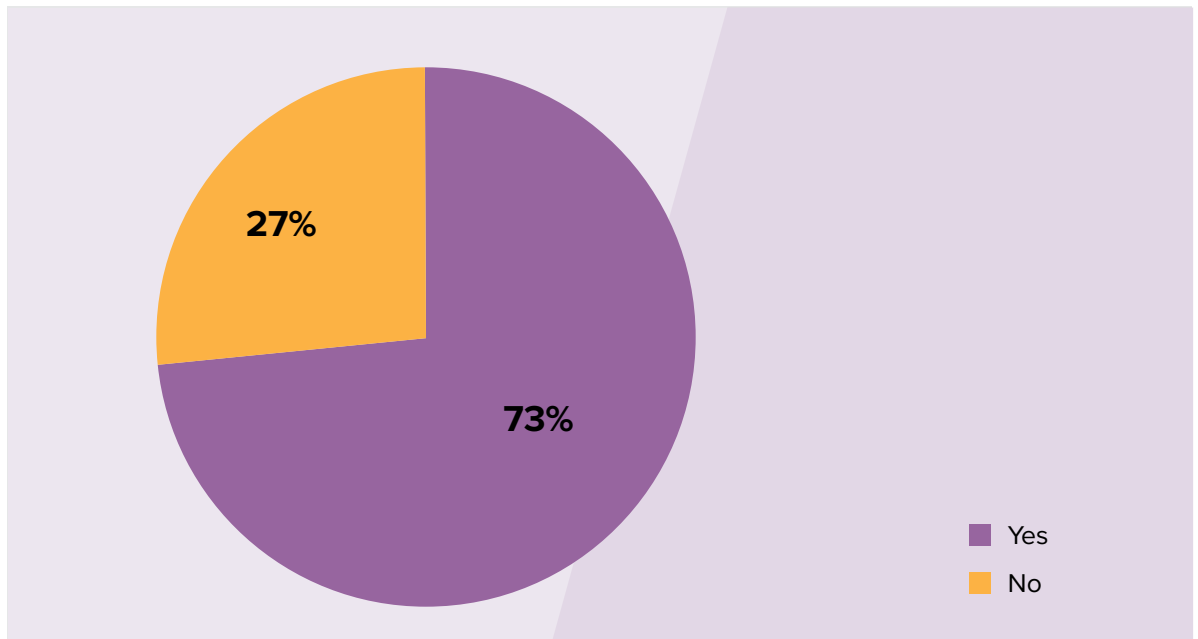


Figure 8: Responses to the question, “Did you provide accredited courses in 2021/2022?”

Number of Learners Participating in Accredited Courses

Of the 44 community organisations who confirmed that they provided accredited courses, data on the number of learners participating in accredited courses was available for 43 respondents. Among these community organisations providing accredited courses, there was an average of 230 learners engaging in accredited courses. This ranged from over 3,500 in one large, regionally active organisation to just two learners reported by another community education provider.

As highlighted in the *Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland*, “Northern Ireland’s working age population remains relatively low qualified compared with the UK. Almost 13% have no qualifications, almost double the UK rate” (Department for the Economy, p.38).

Yet the expansion of the demand for accreditation and qualifications (from funders, employers and learners) over the past couple of decades has changed the face of adult and community education. As one practitioner who took part in a focus group described:

Gaining an accredited qualification is integral to the growth and development of adult community learners. It allows adults to increase their knowledge base, improve job skills, and gain independence, as well as increasing employment opportunities and earning potential. Adult community learning is integral to both social and economic growth.

Learners taking part in the focus group also highlighted the benefits of engaging in accredited provision in a community setting, noting the warm environment and significance of supportive relationships with staff:

They always follow up with you to see how the training has helped you.

Levels of Accredited Courses

Community education organisations provided courses across a wide range of levels, however, as shown in **Figure 9**, most accredited courses were provided at Levels 1 and 2 (n=221).⁷ The sector's strength therefore lies in introducing learners to accreditation, building their confidence and supporting the development of foundational skills and knowledge.

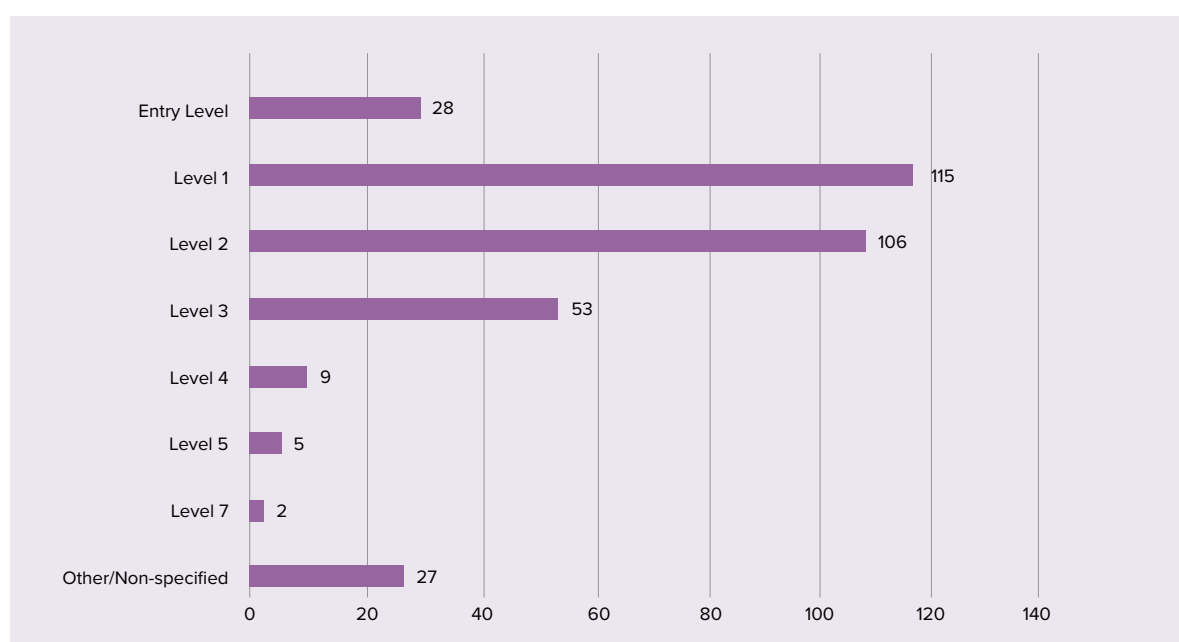


Figure 9: Accredited course level

⁷ The total number of levels is greater than the number of accredited courses because some organisations noted that a course is provided at more than one level.

As well as providing (often vocational) pathways of progression, achieving accreditation even at the lowest level can mark a significant outcome for an individual engaging in community education, many of whom left school without any certification (33 groups indicated that they supported “people who left school early”). It is not always high-level qualifications that people need to secure employment, and findings demonstrate that there is clearly a need for VCSE organisations to continue providing a range of lower level courses, often to supplement existing skills and qualifications. As noted by one practitioner:

We had a student who was wonderful at sewing and really wanted to work for Dunelm in their haberdashery services. She could not get the job because she didn’t have any IT qualifications. She came to us and did an OCNNI Level 2 in IT and had secured employment with Dunelm even before she had completed the course.

Accredited Course Category

As can be seen in **Figure 10** below, community education groups were providing many different types of accredited courses. Categories identified in the Figure below were provided in a drop-down menu, allowing for meaningful grouping of a diverse range of reported courses. Most of these courses were categorised by respondents as “Employability” courses (41%, n=127), followed by “Community Development” (27%, n=85). If “Digital Skills,” “Literacy Skills” and “Numeracy Skills” are combined (Essential Skills), this becomes the third largest category, at 20% (n=62).

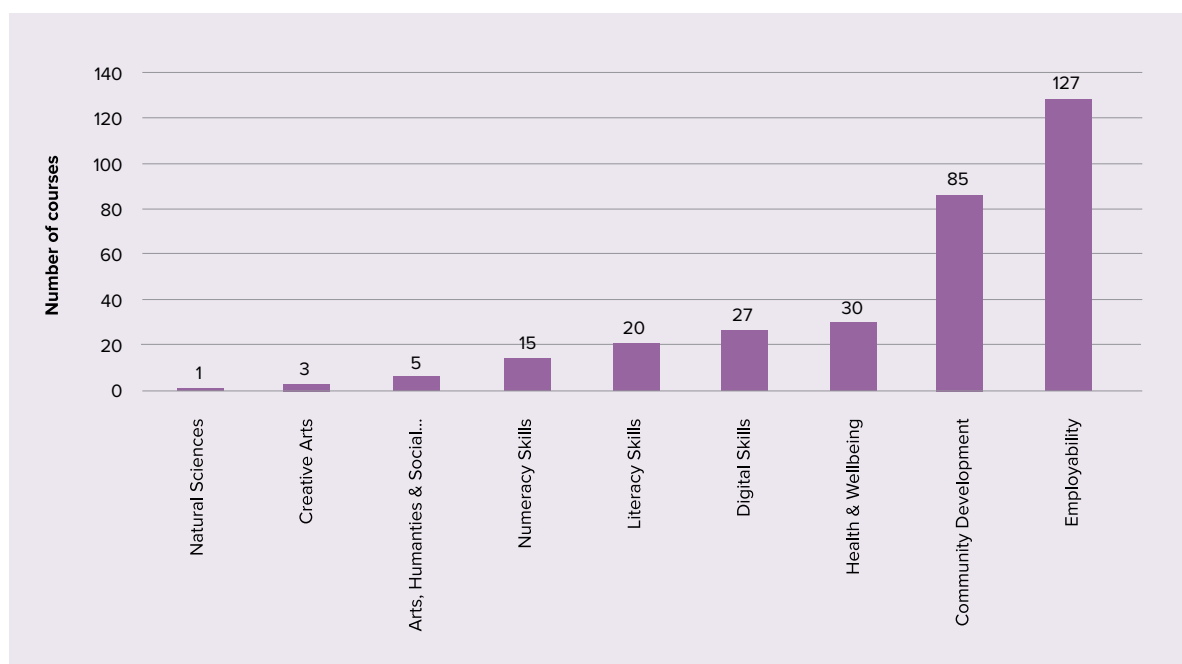


Figure 10: Category of accredited courses

Funders of Accredited Courses

Of the 44 respondents who confirmed that they provided accredited courses in 2021/2022, information on the funding sources of these courses was available from 41 organisations. 34 unique funders of accredited courses were reported overall. Respondents reported multiple funding sources supporting the provision of accredited courses in their organisation. On average, community organisations reported three funding sources for these courses, ranging from nine different funding streams in one organisation to just one funding source in another. A large proportion of groups received Government support for their accredited programmes, mostly from the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy.

The most frequently reported funding sources for organisations providing accredited programmes are detailed below (**Figure 11**):⁸

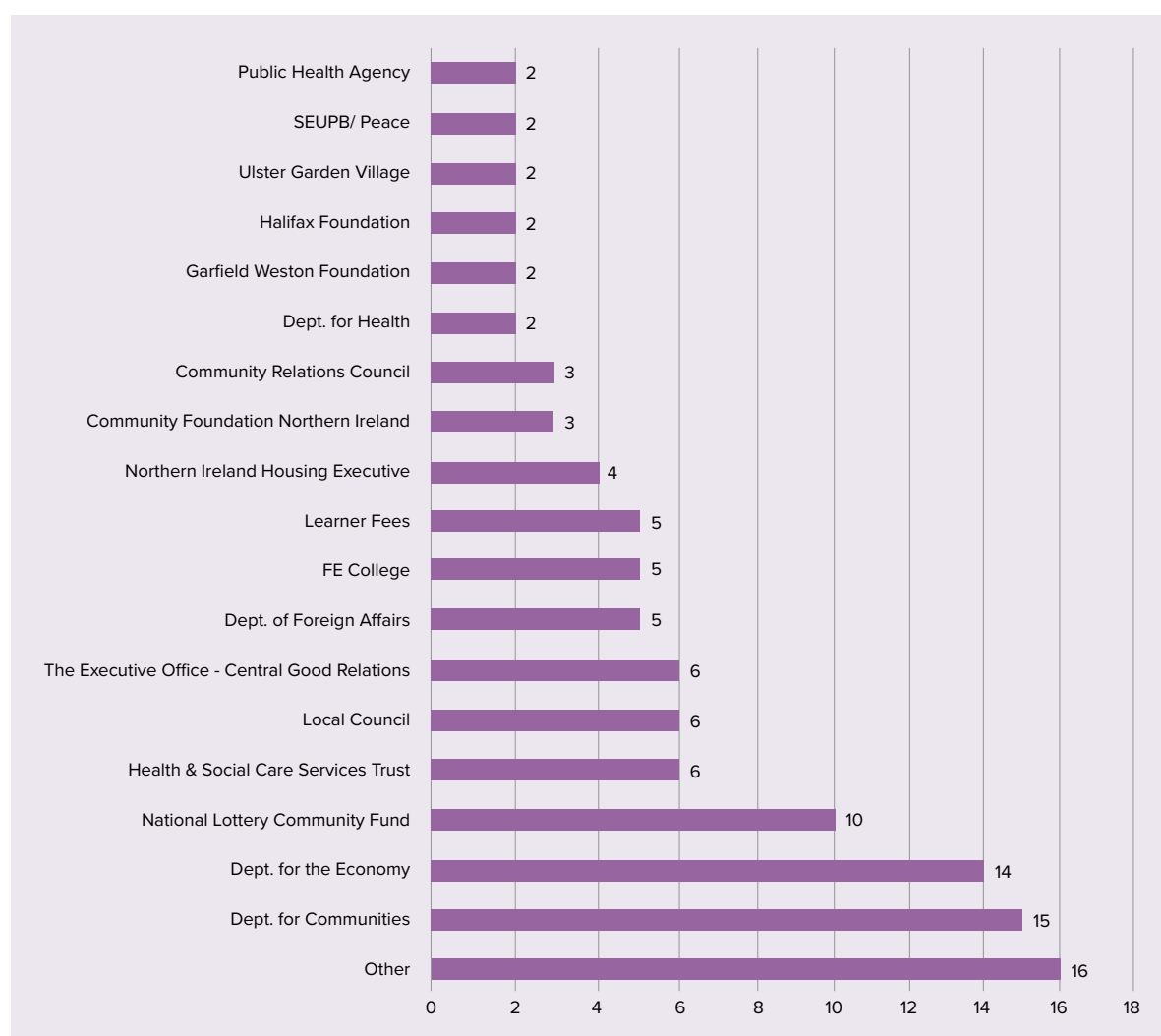


Figure 11: Funders of accredited programmes 2021/2022

⁸ All funders supporting two or more groups providing accredited courses are named in the graph. The "Other" category includes 16 funders that were reported by only one respondent. It should be noted that the Department of Foreign Affairs is a Republic of Ireland government department.

Non-accredited Learning

Proportion of Community Organisations Providing Non-Accredited Courses

As shown in **Figure 12**, of the 60 respondents to the survey, 51 stated that they provided non-accredited courses in 2021/2022 (85%). A total of 485 courses were reported in the survey.

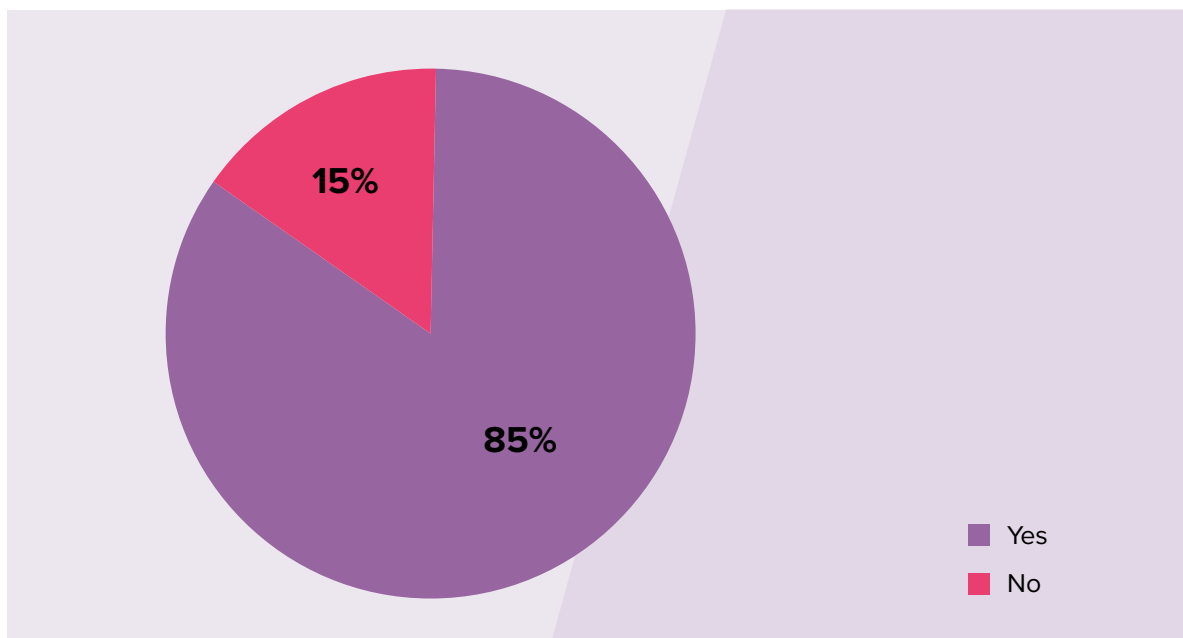


Figure 12: Responses to “Did you provide non-accredited courses in 2021/2022?”

Number of Learners Participating in Accredited Courses

Of the 51 community organisations who confirmed that they provided non-accredited courses, data on the number of learners participating in non-accredited courses was available for 48 respondents. Among these community organisations providing non-accredited courses, there was an average of 840 learners engaging in accredited courses. This ranged from over 12,000 in one mental health focussed regional organisation to just 12 learners in another community education provider.

As well as offering first steps for many returners in a non-threatening environment, non-accredited courses also offer learning, with a wide range of benefits, to those not looking to enter mainstream education or employment e.g. older people, or those seeking a means to broaden their social connections. As described by one practitioner:

Non-accredited learning is important as it provides that first initial step back into lifelong learning. Many of the participants may have had a poor experience within mainstream education, or have a mental health challenge, which means they need an element of nurture before they jump straight into accreditations which they may not be ready for.

Non-Accredited Course Category

As highlighted in **Figure 13**, a high proportion of non-accredited courses were categorised as “Health and Wellbeing” courses (45%, n=171), followed by “Community Development” (32%, n=121) and “Creative Arts” (7%, n=28).

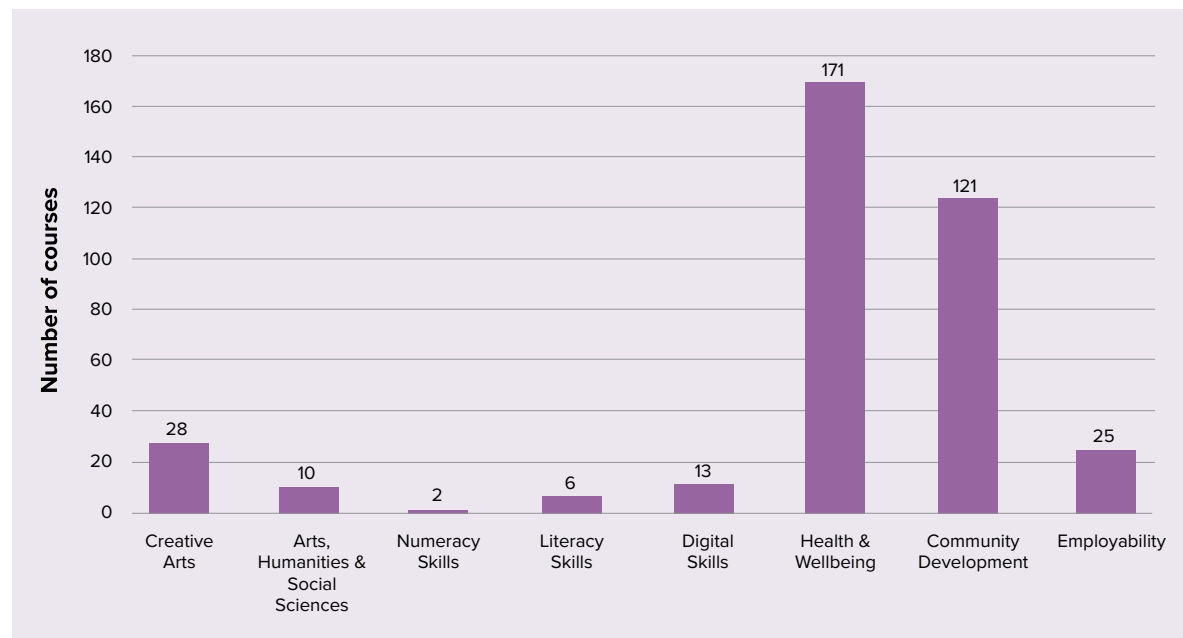


Figure 13: Category of non-accredited courses

Funders of Non-accredited Courses

Of the 51 respondents who confirmed that they provided non-accredited courses in 2021/2022, information on the funding sources of these courses was available from 47 organisations. Respondents reported multiple funding sources as supporting the provision of non-accredited courses in their organisation. 41 unique funders of non-accredited courses were reported overall. On average, community organisations reported three funding sources for these courses, ranging from 11 different funding streams in one organisation to just one funding source in another.

The most frequently reported funding sources for organisations providing non-accredited programmes are detailed below (**Figure 14**):⁹

⁹ All funders supporting two or more groups providing non-accredited courses are named in the graph. The “Other” category includes 18 funders that were reported by only one respondent.

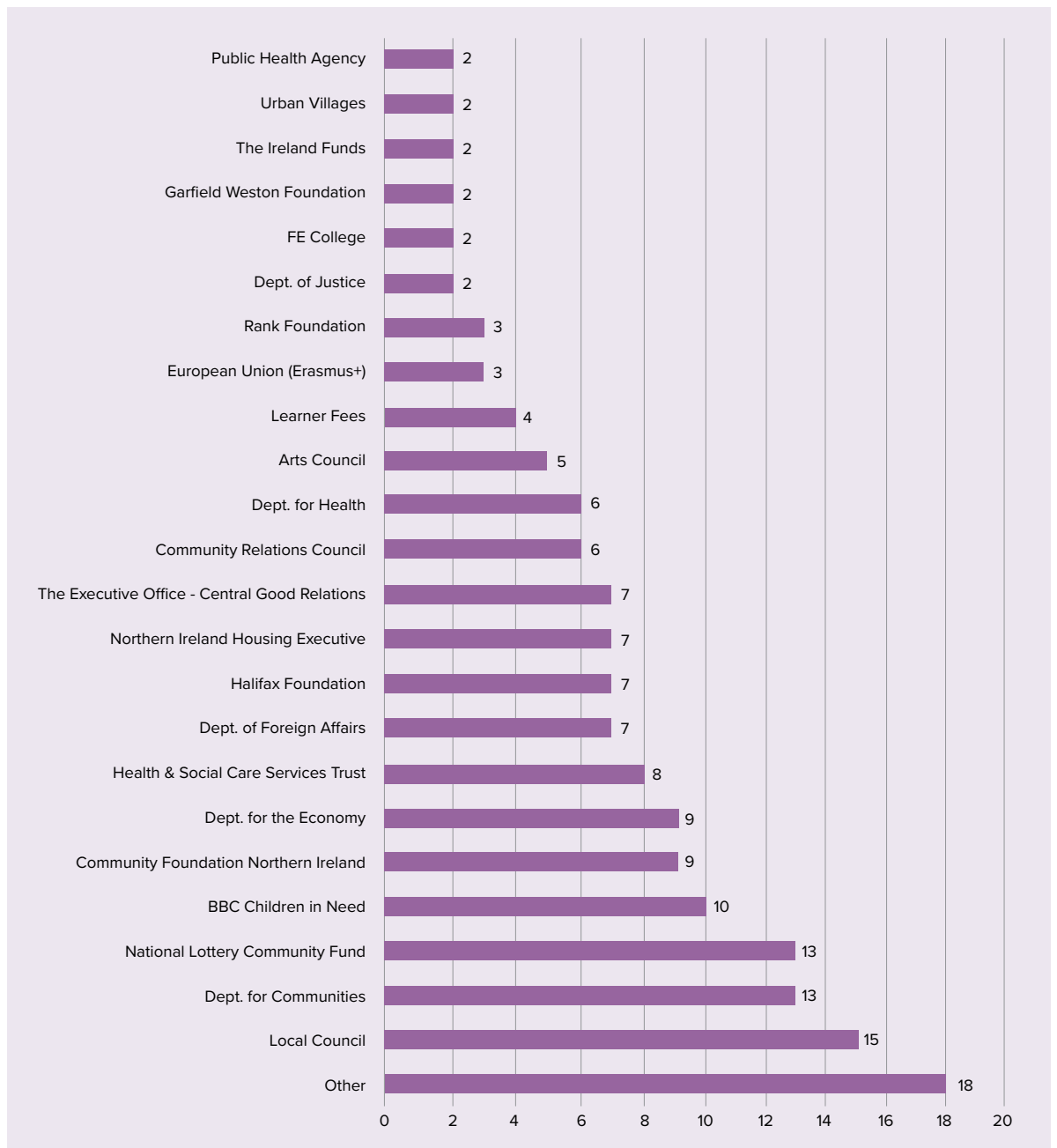


Figure 14: Funders of non-accredited programmes 2021/2022



Reported Benefits of Engaging in Community Education

Impact and Outcomes of Accredited and Non-Accredited Courses

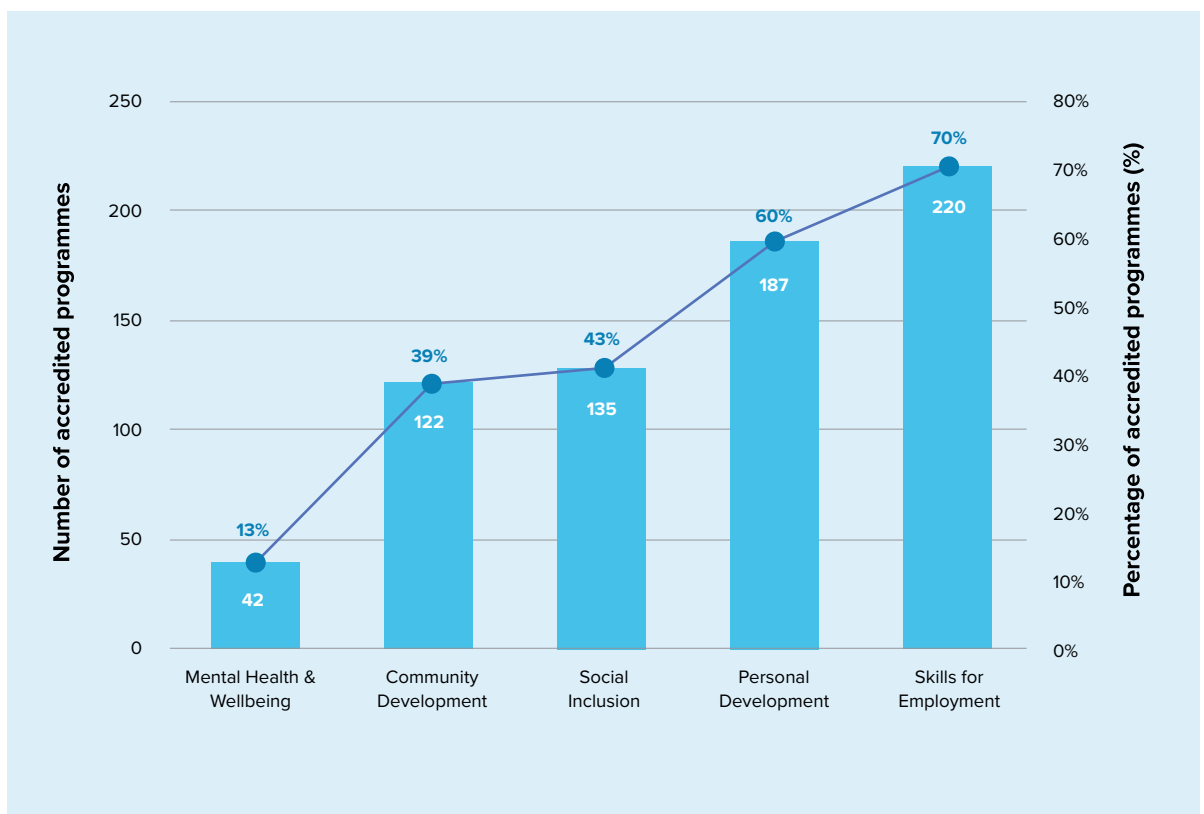


Figure 15: Impact and outcomes of accredited courses

In addition to course category, respondents to the survey were asked to identify no more than three impacts or outcomes for each course they entered; the pre-determined categories can be seen in **Figure 15**. Mirroring course category with Employability coming out top (41%), this focus once again came through strongly, with “Skills for Employment” being identified as one key outcome for 70% (n=220/313) of reported courses. However, employability was closely followed (and significantly underpinned) by other outcomes, particularly “Personal Development” (60%, n=187/313), demonstrating the learner-centred approach of organisations responding to the survey.

It’s not just about the learning, it’s about the whole [person]

One learner taking part in the focus group highlighted the major impact that taking this first step in accredited learning had on their self-confidence:

I got qualifications for the first time and now I feel I am as good as everyone else.

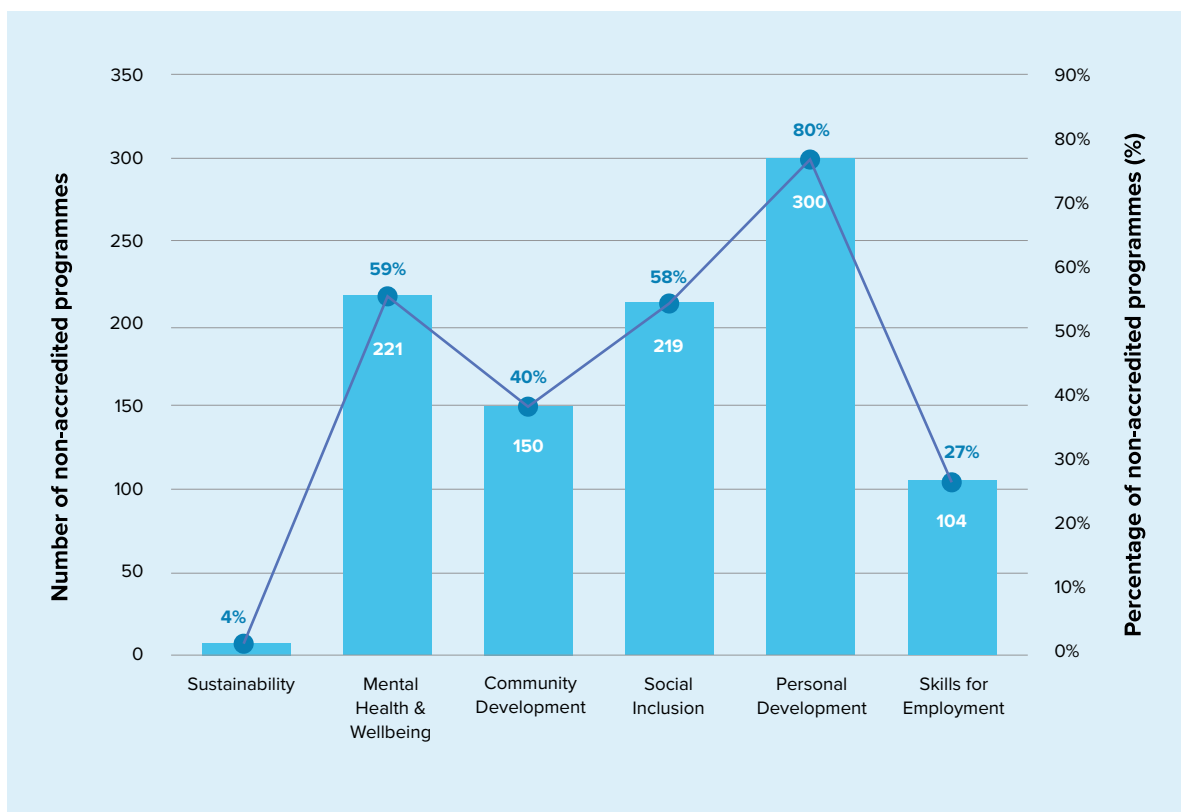


Figure 16: Impact and outcomes of non-accredited courses

The stated impact and outcomes of non-accredited courses tended more towards wellbeing-focused and community-oriented outcomes (**Figure 16**).

Top three outcomes for accredited and non-accredited learning

ACCREDITED:	NON-ACCREDITED:
Skills for Employment	Personal Development
Personal Development	Mental Health & Wellbeing
Social Inclusion	Social Inclusion

These benefits should not be under-valued. In the focus groups and interviews, a number of learner cohorts were described as benefitting particularly from non-accredited learning. Indeed, these non-accredited learning opportunities impact on women, the most popular learner cohort engaging in surveyed organisations, in a number of ways. Reported benefits in discussion groups and interviews included encouraging women back into education/training, increasing confidence and self-esteem, reducing social isolation and inactivity, promoting positive health and well-being, and bringing important health information and messages into the community. Non-accredited learning also had major reported benefits for other learner cohorts. As identified by one practitioner:

Non-accredited learning is very important for elderly people, for their mental health and getting them out of the house, addressing isolation.

Moreover, health benefits of non-accredited courses, in particular, were described by learners as inter-generational – since these courses were developed with a community development model at their core:

My daughter has a lot of mental health issues and comes here to the art classes as she finds that so good for her.

Yet it is important to note that a number of the non-accredited courses provided by community organisations achieved similar outcomes as accredited, with “Personal Development” a stated outcome/impact of 80% (n=300/375) of reported non-accredited courses (60% for accredited, n=187/313), and a significant number of non-accredited courses also delivering “Skills for Employment” as one of their top three outcomes. As another practitioner noted, highlighting the impact of community education broadly on supporting positive employment outcomes:

Actually, I’ve come to realise recently that all our provision, including non-accredited courses, contributes to employability.

As evidenced by both qualitative and quantitative data on outcomes, community learning delivers much more than the acquisition of knowledge and skills and the achievement of qualifications. Respondents identified numerous benefits accruing from engaging with community learning, regardless of its subject matter. Many of these are, of course, also attained through statutory provision, but operating on a smaller scale, and usually within the learner's neighbourhood, means that closer, more open relationships are possible between centre staff, tutors and learners, leading to a more holistic experience of personal growth. This, together with other practical supports, makes community-based learning the natural choice for so many wanting to return to education. As one practitioner explained, these centres provide secure stepping stones for those starting out into an unknown and often intimidating world of learning. One learner taking part in the focus group described the experience of engaging in community education as highly motivational:

When you get into a centre and you get into learning, you don't just stop at one course, you keep going.

Indeed, for learners taking part in the focus group a universal outcome of engaging in learning was a growth in confidence – a deepening awareness that their ability to learn is much greater than they had realised, to a point that for some learning was now felt to be addictive. This confidence was felt to be nurtured through tutors and centre staff, but also by their peers. One learner described becoming involved in classes at her local women's centre because a friend persuaded her that she'd love it and she has stayed involved ever since, in large part because of the friendships that she has made.

In community education, friendships and greater self-esteem therefore combine to help address problems of isolation and mental wellbeing. Learners reported not just the benefits of classes around wellbeing, but the chance to "off-load" with their peers and learn from the experiences of those in similar circumstances, including from other generations. The classes, and the interaction around these, helped to facilitate social opportunities that, for example, mothers alone at home with their children felt were integral to their personal wellbeing and sense of community. This was summed up by one participant in the focus group, who took part in discussions alongside her toddler:

It [community education] has saved the Government a fortune not having to treat me for mental health.

Community education classes are often the first time that learners encounter those different from themselves – whether that be religious/cultural background, racial difference, or people of a different sexuality or gender identification. As indicated in the survey results (in Figure 7), the sector is engaging a diverse range of learners, including migrants (28 groups), refugees (20 groups), Roma (8), and Travellers (7). This social integration (sometimes occurring naturally and sometimes specifically nurtured by centres through diversity training, or exchanges with centres in other

areas) is building acceptance of difference and countering the prejudice and stereotyping that are so prevalent today. As one practitioner highlighted:

We have a minimum of seven nationalities coming here, so one of the impacts, aside from education, is that we're a centre that's almost cosmopolitan ... where everyone is accepted.

These practical and social, and emotional skills combine to produce people with greater resilience, better able to (re)take their place in wider society and employment. As articulated by one learner:

It gives you a chance to shine – to find yourself as an individual.

This is particularly pertinent for those learning centres working in the fields of disability and wellbeing, which provide unique learning services that complement not only statutory education, but also statutory healthcare.

Moreover, becoming involved in the local learning centre can also lead to greater awareness of community issues and, if there is ongoing involvement, can often lead to engagement in other projects and community action. One learner shared how she has progressed from undertaking her first classes some years ago, to now sitting on the management committee of her centre, giving back and bringing her experiences as a learner to the centre's development. She noted that:

When you're able to learn it gives you more confidence as a person and you progress to do other things too.

Crucially, learners and practitioners both spoke of the ripple effect of community learning, so that in terms of beneficiaries, the impact of community education stretches far beyond the individuals enrolled in classes. One example was how learning from a project on cervical cancer reached much greater numbers than could ever be quantifiably evidenced to the funder, as the women involved all shared their learning with friends and family members.

There are important ripples within a family too. A number of women in the focus group spoke of returning to learning in order to be able to help their children with schoolwork. One learner spoke of attending maths classes to overcome her phobia based on school experiences, so that she wouldn't pass this on to her children. Another spoke of her son quizzing her about taking Open University classes, with the result that he now aspires to go to university. "[My son] said he was doing schooling and I was doing schooling too." As such, one parent returning to learning can change how learning is viewed in a whole family.

Wrap-around Support

Something that distinguishes community provision from mainstream provision is the breadth of support given to learners to enable them to access learning, to maintain their commitment and also to address other needs that may be impacting their well-being. As demonstrated in **Figure 17** below, supports offered by community education providers were wide ranging, catering to a diverse range of learners' needs both in and beyond the classroom. Respondents could select multiple supports from the list.

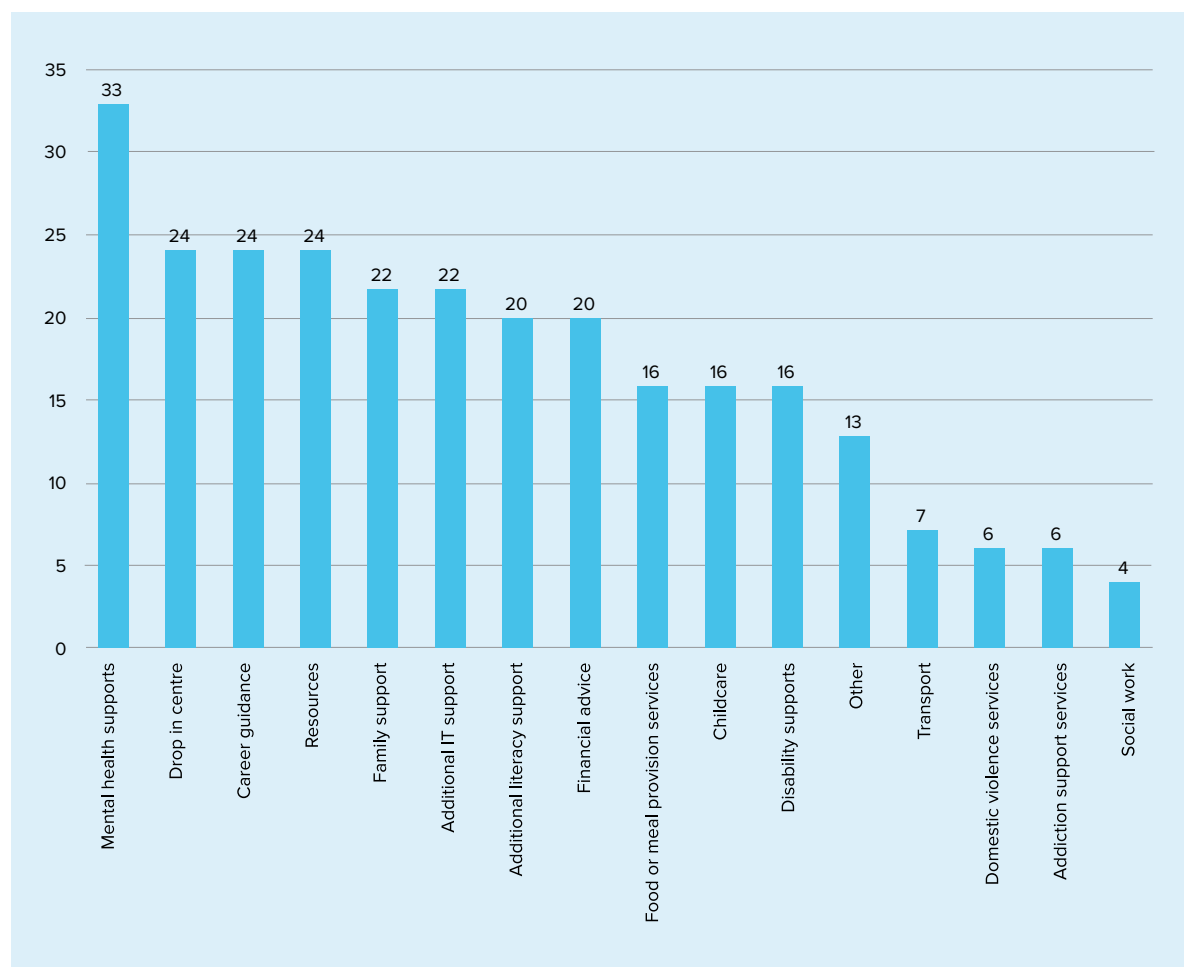


Figure 17: Responses to “What support services does your organisation offer to learners?”

“Mental health supports” were the most common type of supports offered by providers of community education. This included counselling, or mental health awareness activities, support groups, resources etc. 33 groups provided these critical supports. Groups also commonly provided “Drop in centre[s]” (n=24), “Career guidance” (n=24), and “Resources” (such as a digital library, lending schemes and books) (n=24). “Other” supports, not included in the survey options, were also reported, including developmental support and mentoring (such as interview and CV skills), and networking opportunities. Respondents also described support provided around integration activities and political engagement on behalf of learners broadly (e.g. in relation to asylum issues). As such, the range of supports offered by each organisation is tailored to the specific learner cohorts engaging in

community education and seeks to address individual barriers to learning. The ethos of community provision means that the learners attending are regarded always as equals and that the centres are there to offer as much holistic support as possible.

Staff in centres take time to get to know the individual learners and so have the ability to offer personalised guidance; for example, they can advise learners on other courses they might like to engage in, including those at the centre, the local college, or online (for example Open University Courses). As described by one learner:

They always follow up with you to see how the learning has helped you and what you want to do next.

This close relationship between the learner and centre staff (possible because of the smaller numbers involved, but also driven by the ethos of community provision) frequently extends beyond the immediate learning issues. Learners can be offered information and advice around finances and benefits, as well as referrals to services that the centre cannot provide.

The provision of childcare facilities available in a number of centres (n=16) was described as critical by women taking part in the learner focus group, as many do not have other family support available to give them the time to attend classes. Childcare is either free or available for a small charge through community education providers offering this facility. Women reported how knowing that their child was cared for within the same building, by qualified staff, enabled them to relax into their learning and offered precious “me time” and a chance to engage with other adults. As one learner noted, describing the vital importance of this provision to their learning journey:

I couldn't have done any of this if the centre didn't provide a creche.

The supports provided by those offering community education are also flexible and adaptive to changing circumstances. In one example, a centre recognised that it needed to change the timing of its classes to evenings when parents were more likely to be able to access childcare from family or friends. More widely, this was evident during the isolation and restrictive meeting periods of COVID-19 in 2020-21, when centres quickly adapted to move learning online, access laptops for learners, and then to ensure buildings and classrooms were modified to meet health guidelines. Now, with the current cost-of-living crisis, many centres have responded with relevant learning around managing finances, cooking on a budget etc., as well as in some cases providing practical assistance in the form of meals and food vouchers.

Capturing Impact

All of these remarkable outcomes deserve to be given due status alongside the benefits of gaining certificates and employment; and yet, when it comes to measuring impact, the emphasis, as described by participants in this research, remains on counting outputs. Our research demonstrates that this measurement is too simplistic by far and fails to reflect how learners themselves view their achievements. Quantitative evaluation fails to capture the full impact of community education.

Most centres do collect qualitative data on learning outcomes, often for advocacy as much as reporting back to funders. Exactly what and how they collect such data varies. Capturing outcome data can be very time-consuming, particularly if different data and different methodologies are favoured by different funders. A number of methods were reported as part of this research – for example, outcome stars, impact walls, focus groups and case studies. Not many organisations employ the Social Return On Investment (SROI) model, but some participants argued that there should be more investment in this as it produces results that are very impactful in their advocacy.

All learning centres are keen to engage more in qualitative data capture, but the reality is that this activity is often not supported within their funding. This is particularly the case when it comes to longitudinal evaluation. Since most funded programmes are relatively short, organisations are not supported to carry out follow-up evaluation two or three years after the learning delivery, although it is generally acknowledged that many impacts do not manifest until some time after the learning is complete. This means that the centres do not receive the credit deserved, but furthermore, funders do not learn of the full impact of their investments.

Evidently, very successful projects run every day across Northern Ireland, but there is a lack of an appropriate mechanism for sharing these successes, and for sharing the proven methods and learning materials developed. The impact of a successful employment programme in Bangor, for example, remains local, whereas if there was a repository and a culture of sharing across providers and funders, the impact could be much wider.

“They always follow up with you to see how the learning has helped you and what you want to do next”

– Community Education Learner





Challenges Facing Community Education Provision

Funding Landscape

The funding landscape for community provision is highly complex and diverse. As described earlier, organisations are accessing a mix of government, local government and philanthropic funding sources. The number of funders per organisation varies between one and 11. In the survey, respondents were asked to include details of funders for any accredited courses provided as well as any non-accredited courses provided. 34 unique funders of accredited courses were named, while there were 41 unique funders for non-accredited courses.¹⁰ 50 unique funders were identified across both accredited and non-accredited courses, with six government departments funding community education.

While it might be considered good that there are so many funding options, in focus groups and interviews conducted as part of this research, practitioners described the challenges of securing and then reporting to a large number of funders. One participant noted that:

We've had 45-50 funders over the past 5-6 years.

Funding difficulties dominated discussions, with more than one participant saying that the current state of funding is the worst they have ever experienced. The loss of European Social Fund support has hit the women's and disability sectors hard and has only been partly ameliorated by the new Shared Prosperity Fund. The lack of a working Assembly frustrates the sector's efforts to advocate with local politicians and meant that the 2023-24 budget for Northern Ireland had to be set by the Secretary of State. The cuts instigated by this budget have led to large numbers of

¹⁰ Some of these funders provided support for both accredited and non-accredited learning.

organisations being placed in very insecure positions, with staff offered no more than three months' job security.

From discussion in the learner focus group, it is clear that awareness of this increased instability is filtering out to learners. As one learner taking part in this research questioned:

What would we do if the centre had to close? There'd be a lot of isolation. Families can't do without these supports.

Other learners were aware that their centre had to lay off staff. The bond that is built between centres and their staff and learners is what attracts and retains community participation, so any threat to centres can destabilise learners' engagement.

Like so much of the VCSE sector, community learning providers are in relentless pursuit of funds in order to secure their staff and continue their services. The demand this places on staff time is considerable – as one participant explained, she spends probably a third of her time completing funding applications, time that is then taken away from actually working with learners. There is additional time spent constantly researching suitable funders, as some are not open to consecutive applications, or place time restraints on these, while others change criteria, or areas of interest. Applicants are also always working in the knowledge that a proportion of applications will be unsuccessful.

Many funders now want to see collaborative projects. While many organisations feel there are benefits to such delivery, especially for learners, building and maintaining collaborations is very time-consuming. Unfortunately, the spirit of competition that dominates funding means that some are reluctant to collaborate with a feeling that they need all of the pie, not a portion of it. As summarised by one practitioner:

There are community organisations here that just won't work with one another. They don't see that there's a better chance if six of us work together on a bid. It's "No, no I want to put my own [bid] in."

Wherever the funding is coming from, it is almost all short term and project based. This has many negative consequences. Crucially, forward planning is extremely difficult and organisations can struggle to generate unrestricted income for their core costs. As one practitioner described:

We can secure programme funding, but what is there to cover my [CEO] salary and that of our finance officer?

Indeed, staff do not have security of employment, often leading to mental ill-health, burnout and moving to other sectors. One practitioner described the relentless precarity of their situation regarding staff contracts:

Everybody every year goes on notice in February and often don't know until the end of March if they are secure for another year.

Provision for learners varies from year to year, while the societal issues the centres exist to address continue. "I had to let down a woman the other day", explained one provider, who was frustrated with their inability to access funding to deliver a popular programme. "She came because she'd heard about one of our programmes, but the funding's run out and we're not running it anymore. And I wonder, will she ever come back?"

The argument may be posed that competition drives innovation, but having to constantly invent new projects without core financial stability means that few organisations are in a position to incorporate or translate the successes of their short-term projects into sustained, everyday provision. Slightly different wheels are always having to be invented to travel the same roads. This invites the question – is the current system best serving the needs of learners?

Having secured an admixture of funding, a learning centre then must administer these funds, and like the application process before it, this administration necessitates large time commitments as the levels of reporting are often disproportionate to the size of the award, and there is no consistency of reporting or evaluation across funders. This has become a matter of great frustration for those participating in this research, again taking time away from the direct and continued delivery of learning to those who need to access it. As noted by one practitioner:

It's hard because I can't ever forward plan. I can't have a three-year or five-year plan and I can't look at providing progression for the learners. It's so frustrating.

Overall, funding for community learning is inconsistent, leading to instability for providers and learners alike.

Cost of Living Crisis

Another challenge currently facing community education providers and their learners, is the cost of living crisis.¹¹ Centres' running costs are skyrocketing, with one reporting their heating bill had gone up by 80%. In response to the survey, another stated: "We have astronomical gas bills to pay and as a centre for older people we need to keep the building warm but we are struggling to keep every room heated." Such costs are causing many to restrict their opening hours (thus limiting access to their learners, although every effort is made to minimise this), and/or doubling up room occupancy so some heaters can be permanently off. Respondents to the survey reported an "increase in requests for payment of student fees in instalments, increase in students who fail to pay" as a result of the cost of living crisis. Generally, budgets are being squeezed and all staff are being asked to make whatever savings they can. Meanwhile, there are "higher levels of referrals" for many

11 In July 2023 NICVA published a report on the impact of the cost of living crisis on the VCSE sector as a whole, with many similar findings to those detailed below.

organisations. One respondent reported seeing an “increase in calls impacting capacity issues and adviser mental health” and an “increase in need and complexity of cases impacting time needed with clients.”

As highlighted earlier, the learners that community learning centres work with frequently come from the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland, and so even in better times they are facing the multiple problems that poverty brings. As one survey participant noted, “without exception all our learners have experienced difficulties with the cost of living crisis, our users tend to be from low income/unemployed areas that have been affected most”. Another stated that many of their learners “live on their own, are unemployed, retired, [or] single parents.” Challenges for these learners have now been exacerbated. 68% of groups (n=34) surveyed stated that they had seen an increase in requests for mental health supports (e.g. counselling, or mental health awareness activities, support groups, resources etc.) One respondent noted that women in particular “are experiencing a decline in mental and physical health as they try to manage their finances and provide for the families.” Another stated:

We predict that more women will avail of the centre over the winter signing up for courses and training to have somewhere to go and save costs in their home during the day such as heating and electric. Free and quality onsite childcare will also be a motivator to ensure children are safe, warm, cared for, able to eat and have free food.

While many centres have reported learners coming in simply to be somewhere warm, others note learners seeking more and more help from food banks just to get by. 61% of respondents (n=31) to the survey stated that they had seen an increase in support requests for food or meal provision services (e.g. foodbanks, meals on wheels, free lunch). 60% (n=30) indicated an increase in requests for financial advice. Staff can see the impact of food poverty and are also commonly hearing stories of how growing costs are impacting learners’ families – courses with their peers may offer respite from these worries, but this is short-lived.

Some providers indicated that learners have been dropping courses because they can no longer afford to pay for transport, course materials, or internet access. Moreover:

During the cost of living crisis the priority shifts, and young people in certain situations are struggling to focus on their education and their future plans as they are constantly faced with daily struggles as a result of less money in homes and a strain on being able to provide adequate meals etc. Often when appointments are set up they are cancelled just before because something had c[o]me up that has taken priority, cancelled payments, no electricity, no money for food. The level of need has increased while the input at a government level is decreasing and in turn is putting strain on community.

Where possible, centres are trying to support learners through their individual difficulties and fears and, indeed, are working to do all they can to give additional advice to their learners. As one survey respondent noted, “we have always worked within areas of social deprivation and our programmes address issues.” Many are offering courses on financial awareness, budget cooking and growing your own, accessing shopping vouchers, and supplying information and referrals to benefits and supports provided by others. Providers report increased demand “for free lessons and classes with a bigger impact on those longer term unemployed.”

Most centres do not report cancelling classes because of increased costs, but worry that this might occur if they continue to face “higher overheads and costs [combined with a] lack of [sufficient] funding”.

Lingering Impact of COVID-19

The pandemic might officially be over, but many centres are still experiencing its impact in various ways. Yet 66% of survey respondents (n=39) indicated that their numbers have in fact recovered since COVID-19. Most centres have returned to live delivery, but many are retaining some online provision as they have found that it had advantages for some learners e.g. those unable to access travel to centres, or those finding social settings difficult. Offering online courses has also meant that learners can join in from a wide geographic catchment and, in some instances, this has boosted course numbers.

As shown in **Figure 18** below, centres report seeing an increase in demand for non-accredited learning options in particular (43%, n=25), while many have also seen a notable increase in learners seeking accredited learning (36%, n=21) and hybrid learning (31%, n=18). Many providers have noted an increase in numbers overall, when compared with pre-COVID-19 numbers, while others are “getting there slowly.”

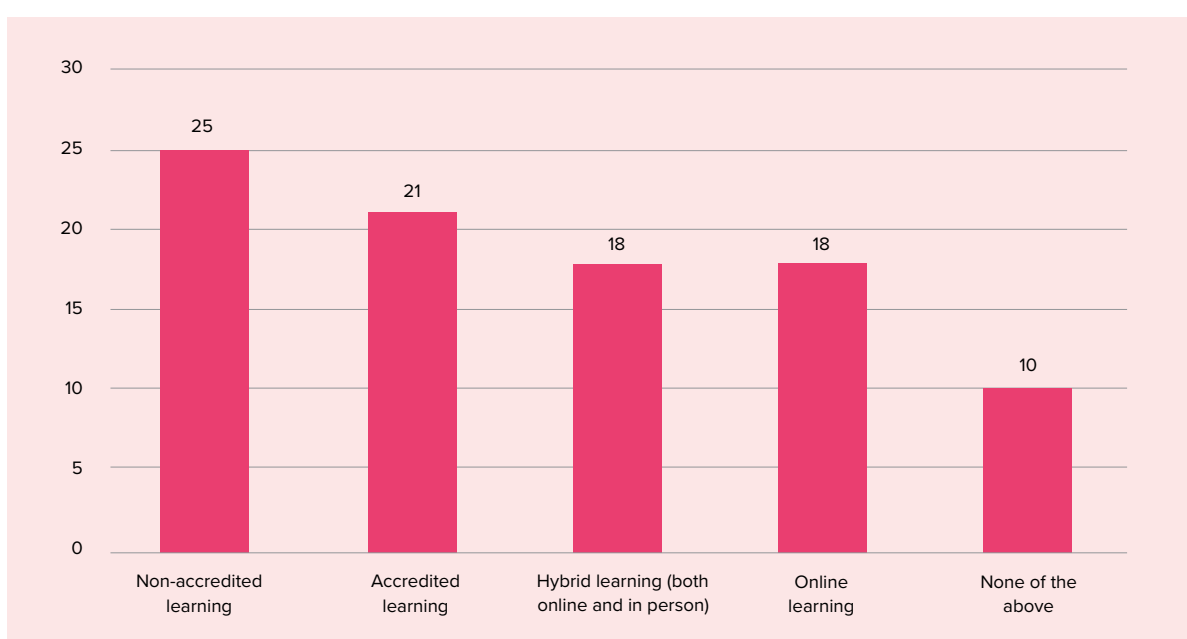


Figure 18: Increase in engagement with learning since COVID-19

Meanwhile, some learners or potential learners remain anxious about unprotected social mixing and some are still reporting catching COVID-19. As one practitioner noted:

I think COVID has had a big impact on mental health and motivation, especially in deprived areas. Specifically engagement from elderly people has become more sporadic as they seem to have got used to being in the house all the time and from talking to them they are still wary of infections. A lot of elderly people in our communities' general health deteriorated during and after COVID.

Funding will be required to meet the needs of learners in the wake of COVID-19 around mental health and wellbeing and for particular target groups engaging in community education, especially considering the compounding impact of the cost of living crisis for those learners experiencing the most disadvantage.

“We prove until we’re blue in the face about the impact we achieve, we do this more than any public sector organisation. And we are still seen as the lowest hanging fruit when it comes to cuts”

– Community Education Practitioner





Relations with Statutory Providers and Policymakers

Respondents to the survey were asked to indicate whether they had existing relationships with providers of Further and Higher Education. The figure below shows that a large proportion of community groups were already linked in with their local Further Educational College (62%, n=37), while almost half were linked in with a University.

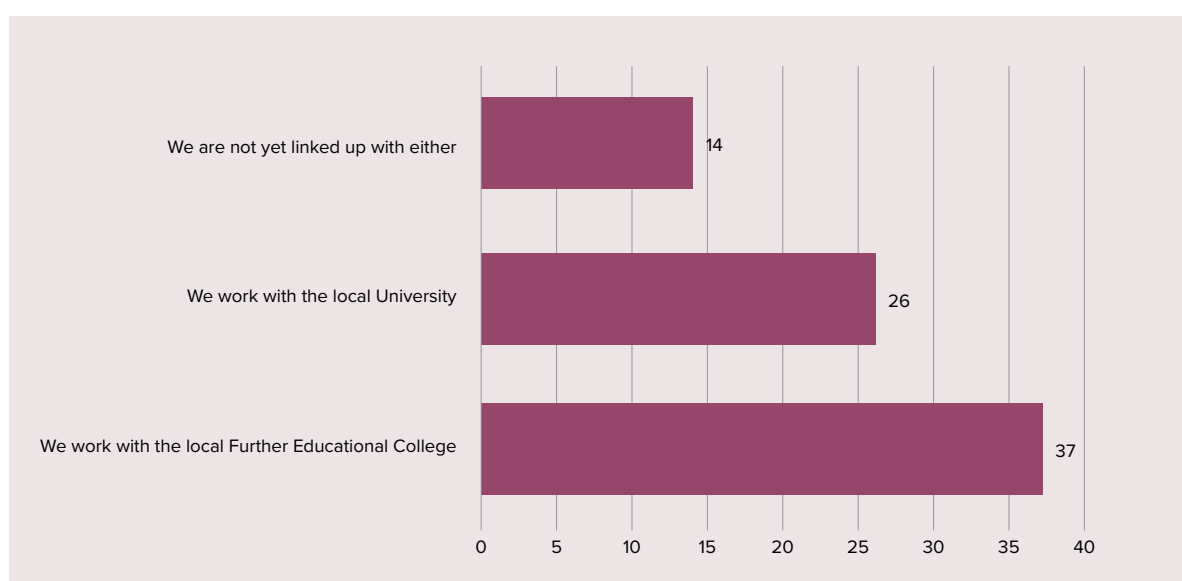


Figure 19: Responses to “Do you have links with your local Further Educational College or University?”

Most commonly, surveyed groups described accessing tutors through links with Further Education colleges, especially for courses like Essential Skills, while others were able to use space on campus (generally at a cost). In terms of relationships with universities, some groups were able to deliver accredited courses in partnership with a university. Importantly, partnerships could go both ways, with community groups providing “work placements”, “immersive training” or “volunteering opportunities” for Further Education and/or Higher Education students. In focus group discussions, a number also supported “research projects” and one organisation had a regular

arrangement where university students assisted with impact assessment. One practitioner described the partnerships they had fostered with both Further and Higher Education institutions as “providing collaborative learning [allowing for the] sharing of ideas and practical work experience.”

As highlighted in **Figure 20** below, more than half of respondents to the question on satisfaction regarding current relationships with their local Further Educational Colleges were either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with this relationship (n=22), demonstrating that this partnership is working well in many cases. Yet a notable 10 respondents were either “very unsatisfied” or “unsatisfied”.

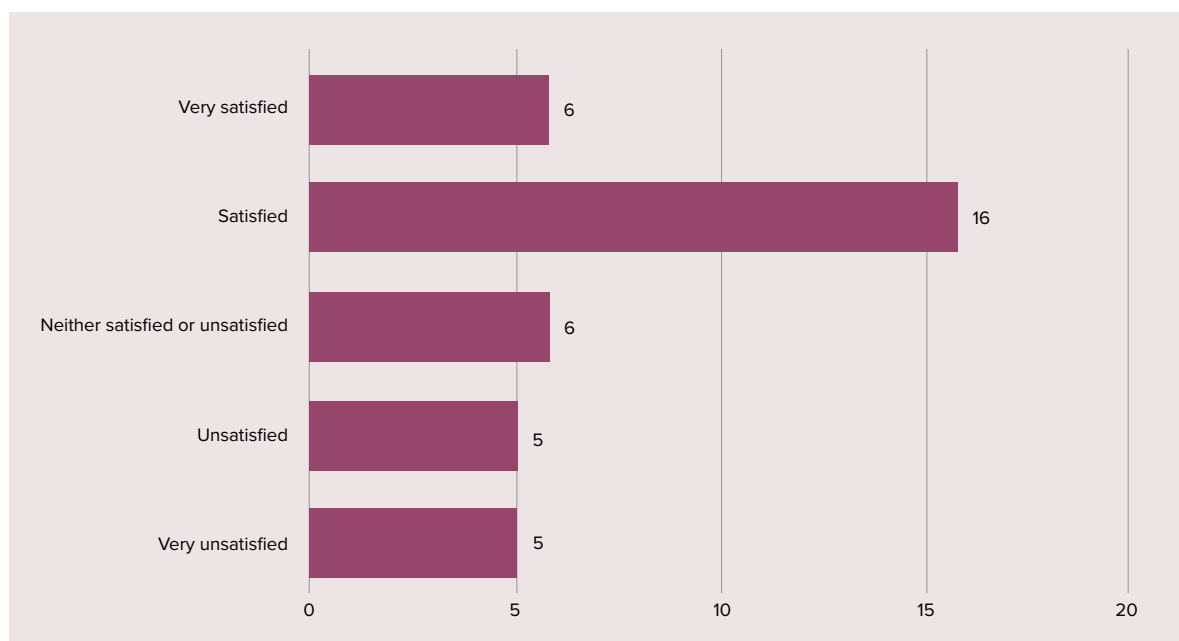


Figure 20: Level of satisfaction with Further Educational College

In relation to partnerships with the local university, highlighted in **Figure 21**, responses were also mixed, with 17 respondents reporting satisfaction (either “very satisfied” or “satisfied”) and nine reporting dissatisfaction (either “very unsatisfied” or “unsatisfied”).

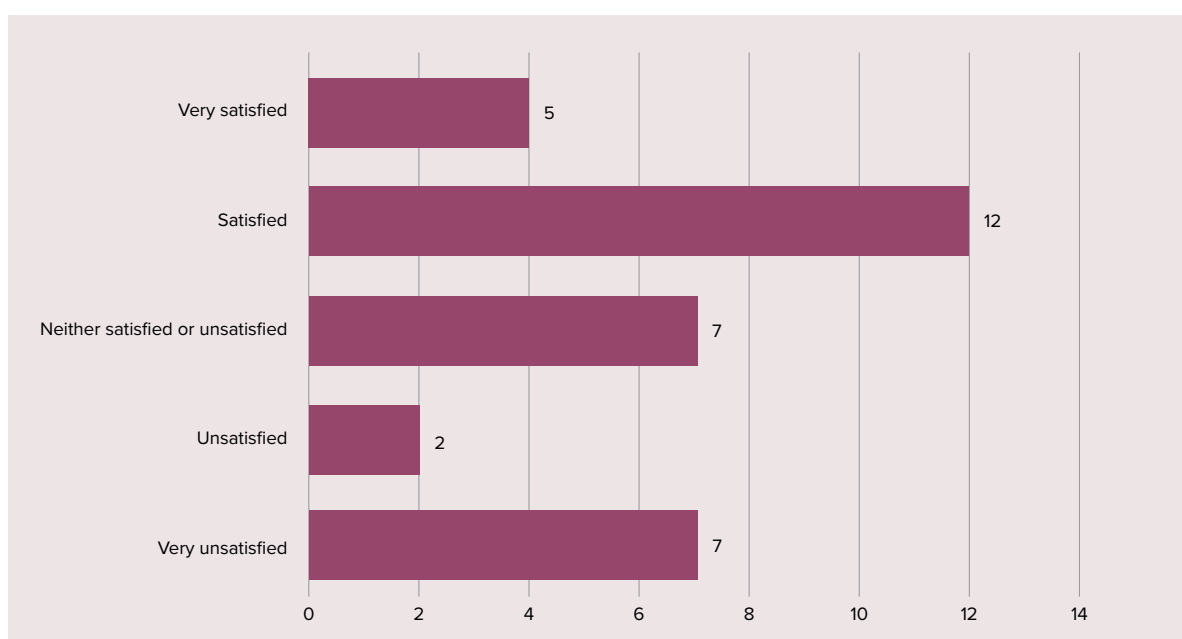


Figure 21: Level of satisfaction with University

In focus groups and interviews, it was generally agreed that relationships between community providers and Further Education (FE) providers in particular could/should be improved, particularly to facilitate learners to transition into new learning pathways with confidence. Practitioners explained that a number of community centres were used by FE colleges as outreach centres. While all community providers agreed that this worked well in terms of addressing learner needs, for example, bringing Essential Skills provision, not all felt the relationship to be mutual. Frustration was voiced by some that colleges did not recognise the costs involved for the centres in recruiting and supporting learners, and did not offer any contribution towards rent and venue costs. This was echoed by a number of survey respondents. Centres voicing this frustration felt colleges would gain credit and recompense for delivering the courses, while they were left financially out-of-pocket. Interestingly, similar complaints were voiced regarding contracts from local councils, where full costs of course delivery were not met.

These frustrations are symptomatic of a wider feeling amongst the sector that statutory providers and policy-makers seem to have little understanding of the circumstances in which their learning provision operates, particularly the constant financial insecurity. One practitioner suggested an approach that might ameliorate this situation:

Perhaps they need to know more about what we do and how we do it. So instead of just perceptions they could come out and see how we work and see the quality of the courses we run.

Voices from the sector felt they were seen as less professional, that their contributions were under-valued and under-rewarded and that they are often excluded from the policy table. As such, the sector wants to see its contribution recognised as complementary – not as competition. As one practitioner described:

“Let us be the conduit to FE. We need community partnerships with our colleges.” Another noted the new learning pathways that those who started out in their centre have gone on to access:

We have stats, we have testimonials, we have evidence of people going on to Masters and PhD levels who started out in our centre.

In focus groups and interviews, all were agreed that relationships needed to improve and there was acknowledgement that many in the VCSE sector did not really understand the constraints under which FE operates (FE was the main focus of conversation as it is the most common progression route for learners from the community and, overall, has more extensive outreach than the universities). Opportunities to learn from one another are few, yet these are critical to building improved relations and trust – events by organisations such as FALNI (Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland) provide such opportunities, but these are currently limited. Ideas from practitioners for improving working relationships to the benefit of learners included mutual referrals, community use of FE classrooms and facilities, classes split between community and FE venues and shared promotional activities.

“We need a body to represent the sector, to be a sounding board, to create a space for necessary conversations between all providers”

– Community Education Practitioner





Magnifying Impact; Moving Forward

Those working in the sector are highly dedicated and very focussed on how provision might be improved (and made sustainable) for their learners. There is frustration that so many of the issues and the ideas for improvement have been talked about for years, but still remain. This closing section of the report offers some observations on the current needs of the sector, in light of research findings.

Increased Stability

Unsurprisingly, given the context of this research, increased security for community providers is a top consideration. The financial instability of the sector has already been discussed, and it clearly has a detrimental impact not just on the organisations and their staff, but ultimately on learners too. If more funders were to change their relationships with community organisations from the current model to one of ongoing partnership, and if they were to consider moving from restricted short-term project funds to more flexible and unrestricted support¹², then community learning providers could offer continuity not just to staff, but to their learners as well. Community providers are addressing long-term needs, but their impact is restricted by variable and short-term funding coming from a plethora of sources. As one practitioner explained:

We need to have a multitude of funders because we don't have statutory support.

The sector is also impacted by the insecurity of government in NI. Stormont has not been sitting since February 2022 and this is the third long-term suspension since 2000. This results in a creeping instability across all aspects of society, impacting providers and learners alike, as no-one is able or willing to make the decisions that are urgently needed. Increased stability is crucial to ensuring that the sector can continue to support those learners who it is best positioned to engage, with its person-centred approach and range of wrap-around supports. As one learner in the focus group noted: “The need (for the centre) is not changing, in fact it's growing.”

¹² Institute of Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) has produced the reports Making the Case for Unrestricted Funding (May 2023) and Charities in the Driving Seat: findings from the first Open and Trusting Grant-making accountability process (June 2023).

Recognition

Indeed, community provision offers local, uniquely supportive access to learning that is preferred by many re-starting their learning journey. The scale of its impact is perhaps not fully recognised because it is delivered by a multitude of organisations. It is hoped that this census begins to offer a better understanding of community education's contributions.

We prove until we're blue in the face about the impact we achieve, we do this more than any public sector organisation. And we are still seen as the lowest hanging fruit when it comes to cuts.

Community providers seek greater recognition for the contribution they make not just to the fields of education and the economy, but also to health and wellbeing, social cohesion, community development and peacebuilding.

Recognition is desired not just in terms of financial support, but also in terms of inclusion in policy and policy-making at local and regional levels. This would bring the needs of community learners to the centre of decision making.

We need a body to represent the sector, to be a sounding board, to create a space for necessary conversations between all providers.

Investment in Impact Measurement

This research offers the first overview of the impact of community education in NI, but much more could be done to support individual groups in improving their own impact measurement. This requires resources, and funders should consider building these costs into their support – after all, they will be beneficiaries of the results too. More training in impact measurement could lead to greater uniformity of practice, so that when impact-focussed research such as this comes to be carried out in the future, collating data will prove easier and lead to even stronger results.

Improved Relationships

Uniformly, organisations expressed a desire to build stronger relations with statutory providers and policy-makers. There is a need for greater mutual understanding and trust building. This relationship building should centre on learner needs, with creating improved provision and progression as common concerns. There needs to be a mechanism to facilitate this relationship building, as effective collaboration requires support, structure and purpose.

Structures aren't well connected so a lot of people still fall through the cracks.

As this report illustrates, there is great variation in size, geographical location and interests amongst community education providers. This means that many operate in relative isolation and there is not a strong sense of cohesion. There is a need to facilitate more networking between community providers to enable a communal voice to evolve, that could advocate for all and act as a point of liaison for Government. Such networking would build relationships, stimulate collaboration and enable sharing of experiences and resources.

Unifying Strategy

A single strategy for adult learning that unites all the providing sectors would help address the above concerns. Within this context, the contribution of community learning would gain much fuller recognition and community providers would come to share common goals with their peers in statutory institutions. Relationships would be improved through working together, which should ultimately lead to better learning and progression opportunities for learners.

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