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Hope in ‘catastrophic’ times: participants’ stories of nurture and transformation from an innovative community learning initiative

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the implementation of an innovative three-year (2017 to 2020) community learning initiative led by a partnership of third sector organisations in a district in the north of England. It explores the initiative’s arrangements for the design and delivery of a varied curriculum and assesses its impact on the lives of participants in a range of community learning activities delivered in diverse settings throughout the district. Around forty formal interviews were conducted with commissioners, providers and participants; informal discussions were held with more participants during thirty observations of community learning activities. The findings demonstrate how a person-centred approach engaged marginalised and vulnerable individuals (many of whom had struggled previously to engage in formal learning programmes) in learning activities. Examples illustrate the transformational potential of community learning in addressing the needs and interests of individuals, contributing to their progression towards higher level learning opportunities and the workplace as well as to enhanced social and emotional outcomes. As society emerges from the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic, the paper foregrounds this kind of sympathetic community learning provision as a means of supporting the continued engagement and development of individuals likely to be further marginalised by the impacts of the crisis.

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Introduction

Over the past two years, Community Learning providers have had to innovate to sustain the delivery of learning opportunities to participants, as a necessary response to the limitations of the global Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. OECD 2020). Much can be learnt from this diverse range of approaches, and it is to be hoped that the emerging landscape of community learning provision will benefit from lessons learnt from adversity as providers respond to the call to ‘build back better’ to ameliorate the impact of interrupted learning for the most vulnerable learners (HM Treasury 2021).

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In responding to this hollow rallying call, it is important to acknowledge that the challenges facing community learning provision pre-date the Covid-19 pandemic, and to ensure that plans for recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction of the sector do not simply rely on outmoded notions about remediation (Darling-Hammond and Edgerton 2021), but also draw inspiration from initiatives that pre-date the crisis.

Given this wider context, I explore here *Community Wise*,¹ an innovative community learning initiative run in a district in the north of England for the three years immediately prior to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Here, the local authority transferred responsibility for its adult and community learning (ACL) budget for the three years (totalling £500,000⁺) to a partnership of formal and informal third sector organisations. *Community Wise* sought to pilot alternative approaches to engaging the most marginalised² people in the district in a range of community courses, volunteering opportunities and local activities in their communities, as well as seeking to make provision of information, advice and guidance more accessible. The aim of the initiative was to help people to overcome barriers to ‘finding their future’ by helping community groups deliver creative and engaging activities in local neighbourhoods, designed to encourage people to try a new activity or learn a new skill (“Community Wise” n. d.). My focus in this paper is to assess the initiative’s impact on the lives of people who took part in a range of community learning activities delivered in diverse settings throughout the district.

In privileging the participants’ stories, I address the extent to which *Community Wise* benefitted them in their own terms. I demonstrate how community learning that takes as its focus the needs, concerns and interests of participants can both meet those needs, and help providers contribute towards the attainment of wider social and political goals. In so doing, I foreground the elements of the *Community Wise* initiative that could be harnessed as part of endeavours to shape future provision, particularly in the post-Covid-19 landscape.

Policy context

Political conceptualisations of education have been shaped for the past forty years by the prevalent neo-liberal conviction that the market should be the organising principle for all political, social, and economic decisions, with economic relations and competitiveness given priority, and the state taking a minimal role in the social realm (Giroux 2005). Hence, a shift towards instrumentalism and consumerism has become increasingly evident in post compulsory education policy, inasmuch as assumptions underpinning policy suggest that: individuals should pay for their own education; and any government support should serve primarily economic

ends, focussing on functional or ‘employability’ skills (Bowl 2017). This arguably fails to incorporate the wider benefits of learning, which also: enhances life skills for individuals (who consequently live more fulfilling and healthier lifestyles); supports more active citizenship, democracy and participation; and contributes to social cohesion, equity and equality (EAEA 2015).

There has been a dearth of policy on lifelong, vocational and further education under successive Conservative-led governments since 2010. What policy and guidance there is tends to focus on vocational qualifications (with an emphasis on apprenticeships and ‘T-levels’) and College-based further education. Nevertheless, a series of policies and funding decisions adopted immediately prior to the launch of *Community Wise* are considered here, as they provide a context within which the initiative was shaped and run.

The ‘austerity’ policies implemented by governments in response to the 2008–09 banking crisis limited the provision of state-funded learning opportunities to those with economic value (Duckworth and Smith 2019). This reduction occurred in spite of a government commitment to supporting a ‘universal community learning offer’, with funding to be allocated in support of ‘access, and progression in its widest sense, for people who are disadvantaged and who are furthest from learning and therefore least likely to participate’ (BIS 2011, 13). The government characterised community learning as a means of promoting social renewal, with fees collected from people who can afford to pay used to extend provision to those who cannot; and emphasised their commitment to maximising value for money, using a ‘pound-plus’ approach (i.e. as well as utilising fees to cross-subsidise provision, identifying other cash and *in-kind* contributions). A model of delivery was advocated in which local partnerships would bring together key providers and relevant local agencies and services, devolving planning and accountability to neighbourhood level, with local people involved in decisions about the learning offer; at the same time minimising overheads, bureaucracy & administration (*ibid*).

The government’s approach to community learning underwent further reform in the 2016–17 Skills Funding letter (BIS 2015), which outlined changes to funding arrangements for adult further education, with the introduction of the new Adult Education Budget (AEB). The AEB emphasised learning that engages adults and helps them move towards work, apprenticeships, further learning, or otherwise helps those who are furthest from learning or the workplace. Planners and providers were encouraged to use the detailed data available about individuals’ outcomes to help learners to make ‘good’ choices and help providers to understand their strengths and weaknesses, and respond accordingly. Linked to this was a requirement for commissioners to link their planning to priorities

identified at a sub-regional level, and to ensure that non-traditional providers were able to take account of the emerging priorities of the localities they serve.

Community learning

Community learning is a contested term, and it is difficult to generate a single term that captures the full range of aspects covered by ‘community learning’, especially when concerns about curriculum and efficiency are brought to bear (LWI 2016). One attempt to frame this form of practice proposes a ‘citizen’s curriculum’, an innovative model for language, literacy and numeracy provision, which places the needs of learners and communities at its core (NIACE 2015), offering learning to engage adult learners to improve their English, maths and other ‘life skills’ as part of a process of encouraging progression into work, in learning and in personal, family and community life. At the same time, a new and diverse discourse has evolved, framing community learning as (among others): learning for work (neighbourhood learning in deprived communities); learning for wellbeing (personal and community development learning); learning for life (family English, maths and language); and supporting communities (LGA 2020). However characterised, the key element that distinguishes community learning from other forms of provision is its focus on wider social and economic outcomes than more ‘mainstream’, curriculum-driven and employment-focussed provision. One conceptualisation of this (Fujiwara 2012) identifies four ‘domains’ against which adult or community learning can make a positive impact: *health, employment, social relations and volunteering*.

An alternative conceptualisation of community learning as ‘social purpose education’ offers a helpful means of framing its full potentiality, emphasising the importance of collaborative working, focusing on individuals developing personal learning agency (Mycroft 2018). It dismantles assumptions underpinning traditional ACL delivery, such as standardised curricula and delivery by ‘colleges’ with a traditional physical base; foregrounds community facilitation and confidence; and offers personal coaching as a means of enabling participants to achieve their goals. This reflects findings from previous research exploring the impact of community learning (including NIACE 2014), which has identified areas on which community learning can be shown to make an impact on the lives of participants and in the communities where they live, including: agency (capacity to act independently and make personal choices); employability; family relationships; mental and physical health; social relationships; progression and volunteering.

Community learning has the potential to empower individuals and communities to break their reliance on ameliorative interventions, offering instead the opportunity to rebuild community and to enact transformative

processes in their own lives and those of the wider community (Mezirow and Taylor 2009). This foregrounds the potential for a more radical ‘pedagogy of precarity’ (Carfagna 2017), which challenges the ways in which status, jobs, and life chances are conferred based on someone’s accumulation of qualifications. Here, individuals determine whether or not/how to engage in learning opportunities, determined by their own measures of value and contributing to a positive and empowering process of engaging with them.

Data released during *Community Wise*’s inception phase indicated a dramatic reduction in the numbers of people participating in post compulsory learning in England (SFA/BIS 2016). Government policy and funding priorities – with increased emphasis on employability and locating responsibility for the causes of and solutions to their ‘predicament’ on marginalised and vulnerable individuals – contributed to this, as did the fact that an individual’s decision to participate in community learning is shaped by a complex interaction between themselves and a range of different players, including government agencies and learning providers (Boeren 2017). The restrictions on service provision and social mixing in response to the Covid-19 pandemic have compounded this downward trajectory, with participation in informal learning estimated to have fallen by 25% over the past twelve months (OECD 2021). The impact of these restrictions has been found to be more significant on people with low digital skills or lacking adequate digital tools or connectivity; meaning that already excluded people are becoming more marginalised (*ibid*).

Research design & ethics

My aim in undertaking this research was to identify any added value brought to the process of commissioning and delivering community learning by *Community Wise*’s partnership arrangements. This included evaluating the overall impact of the approach to designing and delivering community learning on both the commissioning process and the learning outcomes of participants in the *Community Wise* programme. I focussed on identifying: how *Community Wise* impacted on the levels of skills, competence and confidence among participants in community learning activities in the district; the wider benefits attributable to the *Community Wise* programme; and the value attached by all stakeholders to the *Community Wise* model of commissioning and delivery. I was particularly interested to explore the effectiveness of local interventions included in the *Community Wise* programme in identifying and addressing the learning needs of the most marginalised groups and individuals in the district.

I addressed these themes using a hermeneutical-constructivist approach (Peck and Mummery 2018) to elicit the views of over forty commissioners, practitioners and participants delivering and accessing community learning

activities in a variety of settings throughout the district. This approach revealed and allowed my perspective on the enquiry to shape the dialogue with respondents, thereby helping to determine the adequacy of my prejudice as a means of understanding the phenomenon under investigation (*op cit*, 394). I developed my own perspective on their work through observations of over thirty sessions over the duration of the *Community Wise* initiative, always introduced as someone seeking to assess what *Community Wise* was doing and its impact on participants' lives, to help improve the programme. During sessions, I would participate in activities, or/and chat informally with staff, volunteers and participants. Through individual and group interviews, with participants identified and approached during these observations, I honed in on the lived experience of respondents to afford their experiences and perspectives greater prominence than might otherwise have been the case, and to explore the extent to which the learning opportunities provided and the approach to their delivery corresponded with models of community transformational discussed above.

As an experienced researcher, I recognised the need to comply with the ethical procedures of my employer (submitting my proposals to peer scrutiny/approval), and the BERA (2018) guidelines (providing participants with information on which to make informed decisions about their preparedness to participate) to ensure the *bone fide* status of the research. Additionally, adhering to my own commitment to an ethic of care, I was keen to ensure that this research captured the authentic voices of the participants, at the same time ensuring their safety, respecting their status as 'marginal' or/and vulnerable (Noddings 2013). My ethical stance required me to acknowledge two key dynamics: respondents might not accept their marginal/vulnerable categorisation; and my intervention should avoid exacerbating any negative self-perceptions associated with their participation in the programme. Hence, all individuals were assured of their right to anonymity and to withdraw at any stage of the research; and I made follow-up contact to ensure they were not in any way upset by the process. This was particularly important, as *Community Wise* was conceived on the basis of a deficit model, and I wanted to respect the ethos of its delivery, which sought to challenge this way of perceiving participants; so, I encouraged respondents to reflect as much as possible on the positive impacts of their engagement with *Community Wise*.

Thematic analysis was used to draw meaning from the data, acknowledging its value as a means of identifying and making sense of commonalities in the respondents' stories (Clarke and Braun 2018). I acknowledge that themes did not 'emerge' fully formed from the data; rather, they can be conceived as 'active creations of the researcher [who] captures implicit meaning beneath the data surface' (*op cit*, 108). Nevertheless, I took care to ensure the data as presented reflects respondents' perspective within the selected themes.

While centring the stories of participants in my analysis,³ I recognise my professional and emotional situatedness in relation to respondents (both in relation to the ethic of care and my role as contractor to *Community Wise*), and how this impacted on my ability to ‘discover or construct’ the story that I drew from the data (Mauthner and Doucet 2003, 419–424). This required a reflexive approach to data analysis, with multiple readings of transcripts to identify occasions where my own subjectivities may have over-ridden the respondents’ intention, and an emphasis on respondent validation, achieved through sharing with respondents my analysis relating to their own contribution and the wider study (McKeganey and Bloor 1981). These interactions generated no contradictions or challenges about my findings.

Findings

Community Wise fostered a collaborative approach to the design and delivery of community learning opportunities across the district, committing to support whichever organisation was best placed to meet identified need (rather than dividing funding between the ‘usual suspects’). A Development Manager was employed with to facilitate the administration of the partnership and its funding allocations, and to engage organisations and individuals working outwith the existing networks in identifying need and delivering community learning opportunities.

Nature of provision

Community learning activities were provided by a panoply of third sector organisations, the majority of which were informal groups that had never previously been included in the commissioning process for ACL. Examples include ‘taster’ sessions in a multitude of subjects (including mindfulness, IT, community translating, arts and crafts, cycle repair, assertiveness, etc.); a community orchard group; a creative writing group; a men’s mental health group; various women’s groups; a community waste project; and multiple community food initiatives. More activities were delivered by formally constituted groups, including: residents groups; community centres; community learning providers; mental health charities; and community interest companies (concerned with environmental issues, food insecurity, youth work, etc.).

Activities were delivered in diverse settings throughout the district (village halls, community centres, school hubs, cafes, rooms above pubs or in places of worship, charity shops, communal areas in social housing, workshops, kitchens, outdoor settings, etc.), making them more accessible to people living in the most marginalised communities. Provision was

tailored to address the learning needs of very particular groups of people, allowing for variation in delivery of ostensibly similar sessions and courses, depending on where/to whom they were delivered. For example, one provider described how they ran ‘taster’ sessions in a range of settings, sharing information about courses onto which attendees could register. In response to feedback in one session in a community room in a low rise housing block, they agreed to run the longer course in the same venue, as well as in the advertised location, to make it easier for residents in the block to attend.

Several providers highlighted how their participation in *Community Wise* had helped their organisation to broaden the range of provision from their setting. One centre manager described how *Community Wise* had made it possible for them to increase use of their facility by the whole community, claiming it supported a programme of delivery ‘that we couldn’t have done otherwise . . . allowing us to be responsive to requests coming from members of our community’.

The target for engagement (500 participants) was exceeded dramatically, with over 2,200⁴ people participating in *Community Wise* activities. Support for activities was determined by analysis of need at both community and individual levels, conducted locally and mediated by the Development Manager, whose hands-on approach meant they had purposive relationships with providers and – crucially – learners across the district. Consequently, there was considerable variety in the range of provision made possible by often very small amounts of funding. For instance, attracting regular participation from over eighty people each week, a creative writing project utilised around UK£10-15 per 2⁺-hour session to fund refreshments as a means of welcoming individuals to their meetings, which were held in cafes in four different towns across the district. In contrast, an English conversation group secured multiple *Community Wise* grants for different activities, as their confidence and the scope of their activities evolved:

Easy access cooking workshops were offered to women who met regularly at an informal *Talk English* group in their local library, established initially to help people living in one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the district to overcome isolation. Several iterations later, after formal training and help to access external funding, the women produced a community cookbook based on family favourite recipes. The success of this initiative was based on the facilitator’s ability to establish and sustain relationships with these beneficiaries, to develop and deliver activities that resonated with them and address their interests and concerns. As in many other examples, this work started out by helping beneficiaries to overcome isolation, developing a basic skill (in this case conversational English), thereby – as the facilitator put it – ‘sparking an interest and letting people develop their own interests further’.

Tackling social isolation & mental health issues

Community Wise succeeded in reaching out to and promoting the participation in learning opportunities by some of the most socially isolated and marginalised individuals in the community (as described in footnote 2, above, and recorded as part of the registration process). Many of the participants I met were prepared to disclose to me that they had not been able previously to engage in work, learning or social activities because of chronic mental health problems (specifically social anxiety and depression). For these individuals, the way in which the learning opportunities were devised, promoted and delivered enabled them to overcome their inherent lack of confidence (in themselves or/ and the providers of other services).

The success in engaging these individuals reflects the fact that no-one was deemed to be too 'hard-to-reach'; and in particular the ability of local providers and the Development Manager to engender trust in the relationships they developed with potential participants. This was achieved by committed staff and volunteers meeting people in their communities (often in their own homes); seeking their views on what learning opportunities might be of interest/beneficial to them; coming back to them with details of initiatives developed in response to these conversations; and offering personalised support to help individuals overcome their unique barriers to participation.

I observed and met participants in community learning sessions being delivered in hyper-localised (and therefore very accessible) settings, many of which would not be characterised as 'traditional' formal learning venues (thereby helping to remove stigma from association with problematic former encounters with learning). Not only this, but *Community Wise* funding was used to support taster sessions and short 'courses', meaning that the scale of the initial commitment required of participants was more manageable than might otherwise be the case in more traditional delivery models. In all my observations of *Community Wise* funded sessions, staff and volunteers demonstrated emotional intelligence (in particular empathy) and cultural competence to ensure marginalised participants and those lacking the most in confidence or social skills felt comfortable engaging in activities. Attention to these environmental and cultural aspects of delivery (e.g. through mood matching, offering one-to-one support, mentoring and translating) were crucial in retaining the engagement of individuals who might otherwise not have returned. One respondent described the support they received as being 'totally different' to previous 'psychologically traumatising' occasions when they had been required to attend formal learning sessions in order to retain their entitlement to welfare benefits. They spoke of staff and volunteers who were prepared to sit alongside them during

group activities, take walks with them when they felt anxious, and ‘listen to me ramble on about my problems’ until – after a few weeks – ‘I felt able to join in under my own steam’.

The following *typical* example (related to me by a provider) demonstrates the transformational impact of *Community Wise*’s approach to supporting work with participants experiencing mental health problems.

A young (mid-20s) woman who had previously had a successful career and family found herself ‘adrift’: out of work, relying on benefits and medication having experienced serious mental health problems after finding she couldn’t cope with the stress of managing these different demands. Having picked up a leaflet promoting a *Community Wise* funded creative writing course while at her local GP, this woman found the two hours per week participation in activities with people in a similar situation to herself helped her to regain some kind of balance in her life. She is now back in work, advocating for the group and studying mindfulness and yoga.

I subsequently spoke to several participants, many of whom claim the project helped them with their mental health, in particular confidence and self-esteem.

Starting with participants’ interests

Community Wise was sufficiently flexible to be able to support proposals (from individuals, new groups and established providers) for the delivery of seemingly ‘random’ sessions and courses that successfully piqued the interest of otherwise disengaged individuals. Many respondents identified this as a key benefit of the *Community Wise* approach, contrasting its impact to that of the traditional model of delivery (offering accredited, curriculum-based courses in mainstream learning centres). Stakeholders see this as beneficial because (as one Commissioner observed) it ‘starts where participants are at’, building on their interests and concerns, drawing on the creativity of individuals and providers to map a unique route forwards, to an often unknown (at least at the outset) destination. As evidenced by the following examples, there was considerable variety in the range of initiative that emerged from interests expressed by participants, and the means of delivery of these.

The creative writing group mentioned above used prescriptive arts to promote people’s wellbeing, and was run by a volunteer with experience of trauma and committed to inclusion. Having met the *Community Wise* Development Manager at a networking event, they collated evidence of the need for this project to: tackle social isolation; help people to develop resilience and enhance their mental and emotional wellbeing; and build literacy and creativity skills. The project – delivered four times weekly out of social settings in different towns across the district – quickly attracted the

involvement of over eighty participants (aged 21–85, self-referring and self-identifying as experiencing mental health problems) from across the district. The project resonated with potential participants' needs and interests, namely isolation and creativity, with one respondent (who discovered the project from a leaflet at their Doctor's surgery) describing how they had been 'stuck in my flat for years before this, longing for human contact and fearful of it at the same time'. The project 'captured my imagination. I'm always scribbling down bits-and-bobs, and wondered what people would think of my creations'; the group being 'was for people like me also made it feel safe'.

Food is another example of a theme *Community Wise* used to generate interest in participation among people who might not otherwise have attended formal learning activities. Community food sessions – sometimes one-off, otherwise run as three to six session courses – were delivered at high profile events and in some of the most marginalised communities across the district; and proved successful in engaging first-time learners. This theme has been used to bring people together, providing a forum for them to learn new (food-related) skills and offering an opportunity for them to generate ideas for further activity in their community. So, while initial courses addressed recipes, saving food/money, etc., participants took their learning forward from these to address their own priorities (including English conversation groups for individuals for whom English is not their first language). Participants highlighted the impact of these sessions on their social isolation, self-confidence and agency to make changes in their own lives. One young woman, recently arrived from overseas as a new bride, found herself in a strange town, with unfamiliar cultural practices, and no support network to help her navigate the transition. She told me how she came across a tasting session at a stall in her local shopping centre, run by a group of women with similar backgrounds to her own, promoting sessions on cooking, something she enjoys and can do well. 'The connection with these wonderful women was instant, and I felt welcome straightaway. We connected immediately over our love of cooking, but I have learnt so much more from this group over the past year'.

The *Skills Swap* project also tapped directly into the interests of participants, allowing them to base the entire focus of their input to a session on an activity that they enjoyed or/and felt they had some degree of competence already. This strengths-based approach resulted in a diverse curriculum, ranging from knitting to PC construction, via furniture restoration and painting and many other topics. I witnessed individuals who – having only ten minutes previously detailed how social anxiety held them back in other situations – lead a group activity confidently and competently, their engagement reflecting their comfort with their subject material as much as the support described above.

Facilitating transitions & progression

The model of delivery described above – starting where each individual is at and facilitating their participation at a level suited to their current level of attainment – meant the programme was able to achieve high levels of engagement, and to take participants on ‘learning journeys’, even when they might not describe their involvement in *Community Wise* activities in this way.⁵ A few of the key statistics relating to progression are presented here to demonstrate the impact of the scheme in helping move participants towards positive outcomes:

- 60+ beneficiaries progressed into paid employment
- Over 50% of beneficiaries progressed onto other *Community Wise* courses
- Nearly 50% of beneficiaries progressed onto ‘mainstream’ courses

In order to better understand the mechanisms that have contributed to this success, and to capture the wider transitional impacts accruing to *Community Wise* participants, illustrative examples are presented below of the many and varied ways in which participants feel their engagement in *Community Wise* activities has helped them to move forward.

The *Community Wise* programme has been successful in helping large numbers of people to achieve their first crucial transition: from socially and economically inactive and isolated (so far from the labour market that discussions about training for job readiness would be meaningless) to active and interested in pursuing self-development goals, however limited in scope. Successful participation in and completion of the first session (where ‘success’ might be measured in having been able to stay in a room of strangers without succumbing to the desire to flee) has been followed by transition to the second and subsequent sessions, and ultimately completion of the ‘course’.

None of the participants I spoke to in my role as a consultant to *Community Wise* had limited their involvement in learning opportunities to a first activity or course. Many respondents told stories involving many transitions, within which progress was evident (to me, even if not always to themselves⁶). Returning to a repeat of the course that first drew them in was not unusual, using familiarity to take the opportunity to further develop confidence, foster new and emerging relationships (with other participants as well as providers), and cement the skills emerging from their first encounter. Many participants in taster sessions followed up this initial engagement by enrolling on related sessions and courses, most often in or near to their community.

All settings that I visited were able to provide me with examples of participants in their entry-level programmes who had transitioned to other activities, many of which remained unaccredited, but which helped

participants move closer to engagement in formal training or employment. For instance, one provider confirmed that fifteen students progressed from the entry level to the intermediate Community Interpreting course. The progression of one of these participants from student to tutor features as one of the case studies presented below (Joni).

Another key measure of the success of the programme was the fact that individuals were signposted to whatever course or activity was deemed most likely to be of benefit to them, regardless of the provider. This level of cooperation ensured that the *Community Wise* 'offer' was used to meet individual – as opposed to organisational – needs.

One typical story of someone undergoing several transitions, as retold by a provider, relates to a participant who – on first arriving at an IT taster session – expressed scepticism about using any devices. After completing the first session with intensive tutor input, they returned to subsequent sessions, developed enthusiasm for technology, and ultimately bought their own PC and installed Wi-Fi at home. This enabled them to access job information more easily, thereby accessing the jobs market independently. The provider does not believe that this individual could have received the support she needed on any initiative other than the *Community Wise* programme.

Not all participants in *Community Wise* fit the characterisation of socially isolated individual far removed from the labour market. There were many examples of individuals who made use of the opportunities afforded them by *Community Wise* funded courses to hone their skills and develop experience in readiness for engagement in more formal training or employment opportunities. As well as providing 'entry-level' opportunities for some of these individuals, the additional support available through *Community Wise* enabled local organisations (as well as some of the pre-existing providers) to provide personalised support and mentoring to individuals progressing from their starting point to more active engagement in the world of work.

One provider related how they supported an individual who had developed 'some mental health problems' as a result of having been unemployed for a long time to attend an Introductory IT course. They transitioned from this onto the local job club; and were subsequently mentored through an intensive job search, through which they secured a job. Through ongoing contact with their mentor, they managed to secure employment closer to home a year later, followed subsequently by a promotion.

Of the many other stories demonstrating *Community Wise's* impact on participants' progression, one highlights the many layered benefits accruing to the tailoring of provision to meet the needs of local organisations and individual clients.

A provider detailed how a young man who accessed one of their outdoor taster sessions continued as a volunteer, helping to maintain a community garden that had lost funding when *Sure Start* ended. He subsequently secured paid employment as a gardener, now providing one-to-one support to a child with anxiety-induced anger management 'issues'. *Community Wise* has not only impacted on this individual, but helped to re-ignite a community group (local people who now maintain the community garden) and transformed the life opportunities of a marginalised young person.

Individual stories

The stories presented here demonstrate the range of individuals⁷ *Community Wise* was able to engage in community learning opportunities, tailored to meet their unique needs and aspirations. While their starting points and the challenges they had to overcome differ significantly, these stories demonstrate how each one benefitted from a supportive and empathetic approach to developing personalised pathways to help transform their situation.

Tina

Unable to work for five years due to addictions, Tina felt she had 'been forgotten about' by the main agencies (such as the DWP), who seemed happy to leave her to live her life without much support. Her engagement with the services provided by a local recovery organisation, particularly *Community Wise* funded confidence-building course, helped Tina to take 'massive steps' back to being 'a productive member of society again'.

The course made new demands on Tina, which she found to be really helpful in shifting her perspective of her situation, and contributed to a significant improvement in her confidence. Tina valued the course so much that she volunteered to support in its delivery, helping other people in similar situations to get the most out of the course.

A Careers Advisor ran one of the sessions on the course, and Tina arranged a meeting with them. Tina was guided towards an EU-funded back-to-work programme, which (now completed) Tina feels will help her in accessing the administrative jobs she is looking for. Due to receive some further training in interview techniques, Tina hopes this will help her be back in a job in the next six months.

Tina told me that she thought she was 'stuck' prior to engaging with *Community Wise*, and that her progress is 'all down to this'. It seems improbable that Tina would have engaged in mainstream provision, besides which she asserts that she was not being encouraged to take part in anything like this prior to being referred to the confidence-building course. Tina says that her confidence has grown immeasurably throughout this process, and that – while the prospect of getting a job remains 'scary' – she's 'not as scared as I was'.

Keith, Charlie, Mick & William

I met Keith, Charlie, Mick and William several times at a weekly ‘skills swap’ session. Hosted by a community theatre company ordinarily running drama workshops, these sessions were provided on an informal basis. All participants were encouraged to see themselves as having a skill that they could share with others in the group; and to learn new skills from one another. Their ‘expertise’ ranged from knitting to electrical repairs, via furniture restoration, drawing and cookery.

- Keith worked for a number of years as a delivery driver prior to the economic crash of 2008–09, but has been unemployed since then. The lack of structure in his life resulted in Keith becoming very isolated, living by himself and watching daytime tv; he confessed to having lost all his confidence, saying ‘it was a major achievement for me to attend the first session’.
- Charlie had achieved a number of ‘GCSEs’ and ‘A’ levels at school and College, but he found the idea of further study or work intimidating due to his ‘crippling shyness’ and withdrew into social isolation. Charlie confessed that it would have been unlikely for him to speak to me – or anyone else he didn’t know – prior to attending the drop-in sessions; and suggested that the informality of the sessions has enabled him to develop communication skills and confidence ‘almost imperceptibly’.
- Mick has no qualifications or work experience, although he has may self-developed practical skills and an enthusiasm for hands-on learning. When he started attending the project, Mick had been ‘out of the system’ for a long time, and was lacking in motivation, direction and confidence; now, ‘I can see myself in a real job in a couple of years; something I never really believed before’.
- Of the four individuals here, William is now the closest to the jobs market, having been for a job interview the week before I last met him. However, he told me that there was ‘no way’ he could have considered putting himself forward for this job even a few months earlier. William was lacking in confidence and his aspirations were limited by his self-esteem, born of his perception that ‘no-one would want to take on someone like me’; whereas now, ‘for the first time ever, I have hope’.

All four talked enthusiastically about the way in which they had been made to feel welcome at the project, and appreciate that they are not put under pressure to attend or to attain qualifications. Having said this, they all acknowledged that – while it would have been inconceivable before – they might be prepared now to (re-)engage in some formal skills development. Their descriptions of their experience of attending the project highlighted how much they appreciated the individualised support they had received from the staff, both to help them settle into the group and to consider other developmental opportunities.

This example demonstrates how one initiative can meet the needs of a disparate group of individuals, and highlights the benefits of collective action in transforming individual circumstances. Keith, Charlie and Mick still have a long way to go in their own estimation, and they present still as extremely lacking in confidence; but taking part in this project has helped them recognise their limitations, and begin to develop the wherewithal to overcome them through a phased return to full engagement with either formal learning or work.

Joni

Having moved into the area in late 2017, Joni was ‘on quite a low’, looking for work, and working one afternoon a week in a precarious position. When this job stopped, Joni was dependent on benefits, something she described as ‘not a nice life. People tend to think you’re a scrounger, but that’s not the case’.

A friend signposted Joni to a *Community Wise* funded entry level course in community translation, as she had previously volunteered in this role. After completing this course (‘I loved the subject so much’), Joni completed more voluntary interpreting, a higher level course, and shadowed her tutor in different settings. Joni is now employed by the provider to run the entry level course.

Joni is ‘thrilled’ at the way in which her life has been turned around as a result of her engagement with *Community Wise*, saying that, until then, it had been ‘disheartening having all this experience and knowledge and not being able to use it’. Achieving the qualifications and securing paid work has been ‘a brilliant thing’, leaving Joni ‘feeling as though you’re still among the living’.

Community Wise’s impact in Joni’s life demonstrates how the delivery of courses addressing a specific issue in the community has the potential to match people with untapped and under-developed skills with a tangible community need. Joni intends to complete her level 3 qualification⁸ soon, which will open up further opportunities for her to work in other settings. Between this work and the tutoring, Joni has found a sense of purpose and is flourishing in her new role.

Sonny

Having completed level 3 studies in tourism when aged 16-18, Sonny was still having difficulty several years later accessing work or learning opportunities to develop his chances of working in the sector. A local charity worker referred Sonny to *Community Wise*, where he completed an initial assessment with the Development Manager. A two-month placement at the local Community TV was negotiated, where Sonny undertook a range of activities that he says developed his skills and – most importantly – his confidence.

With continuing support from the Development Manager, Sonny volunteered with a local organisation promoting the town's tourism and business interests, and established a group of volunteers to work on a project encouraging local people to make more use of a key local facility. He also volunteered with another local charity, again using his digital media skills to raise awareness of the organisation's achievements in the community.

Without *Community Wise*, Sonny is convinced that he would not have been able to access the opportunities that he says have contributed to his 'changed attitude' to the jobs market, from being 'helpless to optimistic'.

My estimation of Sonny is that he is a competent individual, who was severely lacking in self-confidence and lacking in direction; as a result of which, he was destined to find access to the jobs market problematic indefinitely. The kind of personalised support that he was able to access through *Community Wise* has had a transformational effect on his outlook. While further work is needed on his confidence, Sonny has developed a realistic goal, and has a chance of working towards developing the career of his choice when previously this would have been inconceivable.

Discussion & conclusions

For a variety of reasons, I doubt that many of the individuals whose stories are presented here would be immediately suited to taking part in formal learning opportunities in 'traditional' settings or groups. *Community Wise* made it possible for individuals who are unable to participate in mainstream ACL provision to engage in learning and development opportunities at a level suited to their personal circumstances and capabilities. This benefited each individual in person-specific ways that would not normally register on 'standard' measures of attainment or progression. The fact that motivation for engaging in activities sponsored by *Community Wise* was – for a large proportion of individuals – as much about finding a safe space in which to meet other people and overcome social isolation, as about participating in something that might be deemed 'learning' is, I think, significant. Nevertheless, the fact that several of these stories include progression onto and beyond further training towards entry-level qualifications demonstrates how the provision of informal services such as those described here can help to (re-)engage individuals who might otherwise have been 'frozen' out of these other types of provision.

These stories – and those of many other participants who I met – demonstrate the importance of a personalised approach to developing purposeful relationships with vulnerable individuals as foundational to effective community learning initiatives. Every participant in these conversations articulated the value they ascribe to the way in which they were treated by staff and volunteers involved with *Community Wise*. Crucially,

their experience of focussed, caring attention of people in a position to help them contrasted with their previous interactions with ACL practitioners, driven by the need to move people quickly 'through the system' and onto outputs-generating schemes that they are neither ready for nor interested in.

These stories foreground the value of a more nuanced approach to developing a rapport with participants, where practitioners are interested in and empathetic about their lives, support their participation in activities and gently mentor and guide them towards further developmental opportunities, as appropriate to their circumstances and capabilities. Invested with a commitment to this way of working, *Community Wise* has demonstrated the potential impact community learning can make on the agency of some of the most marginalised and vulnerable individuals. By moving away from provision designed to drive learners towards the jobs market through participation in large scale and impersonal accredited courses, *Community Wise* has been able to generate enthusiastic participation and progression (as defined and experienced in their own way) for them. This approach facilitates individuals' choices to engage in meaningful-to-them activities that can accommodate the mental and physical health challenges they face; and, through the development of genuine social relationships with practitioners and peers based on mutuality, care and respect, can go some way towards ameliorating the impact of these on their daily lives.

It is perhaps helpful to understand the approach detailed here as being consistent with the characteristic of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Thus, *Community Wise* may be conceived as the domain; the participants as the community (or multiple overlapping communities) of marginalised and vulnerable people coming together on a regular basis over an extended period of time; and the practices were the many – often innovative – activities utilised to facilitate transformation and personal growth. Although not always done in such a way that participants might recognise it, the actions reflected those of a typical community of practice inasmuch as they generated synergy through a variety of approaches based on discussion and visitation, including: mapping of individual and collective knowledge; information-seeking to fill identified gaps; problem solving; and sharing experiences and personal assets. Learning was achieved primarily through social participation, wherein participants: experienced their life as being more meaningful; were able to support one another's engagement; and recognised themselves as members of a social and learning community (Wenger 1998, 4–6).

As demonstrated in the participants' stories, they were able to appreciate and articulate their learning (which was sometimes incidental to the curriculum), and to embrace learning as a positive endeavour. Furthermore, they emphasised the extent to which their learning took

place in a social context, mediated (or ‘dialectically constituted’) by the different perspectives of the members of their learning communities, and led to transformation (Lave and Wenger 1991, 123). The way in which practitioners sought to moderate the use of power within their relations with participants contributed to the fostering of these communities of practice and to their transformational impact. The nuanced application of skills in relationship-building enabled participants to draw on power-from-within, downplaying the practitioners’ role as expert and allowing participants to draw on their own experiential knowledge and ‘acknowledge their own expertise’ (Tett 2016, 161).

This study gave me privileged access to a host of individuals who spoke with candour about their lives, aspirations and difficulties in engaging with the world; and inspirational staff and volunteers who worked sensitively with them to accommodate their unique needs and challenges, and to overcome their vulnerabilities. My ethical stance enabled me to focus on the positive impacts of *Community Wise* in my interactions with them.⁹ While *Community Wise* has now ended,¹⁰ their stories provide a glimmer of hope in a landscape where the nature of the ‘problem’ of worklessness is individualised, but the solutions are system-driven and often exacerbate individuals’ marginalisation. The testimonies of people related here provide a powerful evocation of the potential for community learning to foster a hopeful perspective in the outlook of people who had previously felt themselves to be ‘disposable’.

Although coming to an end at around the time that the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, it seems to me that the lessons to be learnt from *Community Wise* are particularly applicable now. As society continues to gradually emerge from the shadow of the Covid-19 crisis, the impact of which is likely to impact the most marginalised and vulnerable people for years to come, *Community Wise* exemplifies an impactful form of transformational practice that is likely to be needed more than ever to offer these people hope in such ‘catastrophic times’ (Morris 2012). Exemplified by William’s words, *Community Wise* has demonstrated how practice infused with a hopeful ethic for the amelioration of participants’ circumstances (Purcell 2020) offers the potential to release the transformative and liberating power of community learning (Thoilliez 2019): ‘for the first time ever, I have hope’.

Notes

1. A pseudonym has been used throughout, to protect the identity of participants.
2. *Community Wise* sought to work with people who might be described as experiencing ‘involuntary social marginality’ (Leonard 1984) due to membership of an already excluded group (e.g. based on ethnicity, nationality, citizenship status, etc.), or

through disablement or changes in social circumstances. These people are excluded from fulfilling full social lives at individual and societal levels, and consistently face ‘substantial challenges’ in making valued contribution to society and in overcoming barriers to opportunities and social resources (including education and health services, housing, and leisure activities).

3. Individuals’ stories inform the discussion of key themes throughout the paper, having been selected on the basis that they provide exemplars of the approach and impact of initiatives supported by *Community Wise*. These stories emerged either: through discussions with providers (relating individuals’ stories to demonstrate their work to me), and are summarised in the appropriate section, with no names ascribed; or directly from participants (through my interactions with them), in which case they are presented in a separate section and ascribed an alias.
4. These figures do not include people impacted by community-based activities in which the direct beneficiaries have been involved (such as the 230+ who volunteered after participating in *Community Wise*-funded activities).
5. This presents a dilemma for me in determining the extent to which I simply report on participants’ self-evaluation of the scheme’s impact on them, or bring my own judgment to bear in this assessment. Bearing in mind my ethical and epistemological stance, I think it is appropriate for this paper to reflect both perspectives.
6. This raises an interesting quandary: to what extent is ‘success’ to be determined by external assessments of an individual’s progress (i.e. by the provider or me); and how much should we expect participants to be able to reflect on / articulate their progress themselves?
7. Aliases have been used to maintain the intimacy of the stories being re-presented here, while protecting the identity of participants. The choice of names – drawing from sixties musical icons – deliberately masks social and cultural identifiers from the stories (although these clearly play a part in the lived realities of each individual).
8. The English level 3 qualification is equivalent to a level 4 qualification on the European Qualifications Framework; and AP / SAT II or High School Diploma level in the USA.
9. This is not to say that areas for improvement were not identified; such issues (relating particularly to the governance arrangements) were reported to the Programme Board throughout my involvement with the programme. I also acknowledge the limitations of the research design in not seeking out the views of ‘leavers’ and others deemed to have experienced negative outcomes.
10. While there are no formal plans to extend *Community Wise* (due to funding constraints), efforts continue to secure funding from other sources to extend provision; and it is encouraging to hear that the Development Officer, albeit employed on a different initiative, remains able to provide some support to partner organisations going forward.

Disclosure statement

In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and my ethical obligation as a researcher, I am reporting that I acted as a consultant to an organisation that may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed paper, inasmuch as I was paid a retainer to conduct a formal

evaluation of the initiative on which I report in the paper. I have disclosed those interests fully to Taylor & Francis, and I have in place an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from that involvement.

Notes on contributor

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Geolocation information

In order to safeguard the anonymity of respondents, the precise details of the area where the research on which this paper is based cannot be revealed. However, I am able to disclose that the initiative was based in a local authority area in the north of England (i.e. within one of the Northeast, Northwest or Yorkshire & the Humber regions).

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