

# Enhancing informal adult learning for older people in care settings

Interim report and  
consultation  
document

Fiona Aldridge



**BIS** | Department for Business  
Innovation & Skills

THE LEARNING  
REVOLUTION

**niace**  
promoting adult learning

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NIACE, the national organisation for adult learning, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties and disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

You can find NIACE online at [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)

Cover images from Paul Hickinbotham and Socialstock.

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## About NIACE

NIACE is the national organisation for adult learning in England and Wales. We exist to promote excellent practice in the delivery of learning and to encourage more and different learners to engage in all kinds of learning activities. NIACE's activities include dedicated research, development and consultancy; advocacy to inform and influence public policy; the provision of information and dissemination services and publications and conferences. We are also actively involved in campaigning to promote and celebrate the achievements of adult learners. NIACE is an independent non-governmental organisation, a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee.

## About the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) is building a dynamic and competitive UK economy by creating the conditions for business success; promoting innovation, enterprise and science; and giving everyone the skills and opportunities to succeed. To achieve this it will foster world-class universities and promote an open global economy. **BIS – Investing in our future.**

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## Acknowledgements

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This publication also draws on a number of previous pieces of work commissioned by DIUS and its predecessors, undertaken by NIACE, through Jim Soulsby.

Images were supplied by Care Images, NIACE, Richard Olivier, Socialstock, Stuart Hollis and Paul Hickinbotham.



Stuart Hollis

## The Learning Revolution

In early 2009, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) published its White Paper on Informal Adult Learning, *The Learning Revolution*,<sup>1</sup> in recognition of the role that informal learning can play in transforming the lives of individuals and in boosting our nation's well-being.

*The Learning Revolution* is about opening up more opportunities for people of all ages to learn for pleasure. It embraces the whole spectrum of lifelong learning, from websites and art classes to book clubs and rambling. The aim of *The Learning Revolution* is to raise awareness of the mental and physical benefits that continuing to learn brings people. It will bring together organisations, clubs, communities and individuals to create more ways to learn, with more resources for those who provide them. The Government has committed £210 million to support adult learning, with an additional £20 million Transformation Fund to open up learning to more people, in more ways and in more places. As part of *The Learning Revolution*, organisations and businesses are being

asked to sign up to a Pledge<sup>2</sup> to show their commitment to bringing the movement to life within their communities.

### Enhancing informal learning opportunities for older people in care

As part of a wider commitment to enhance informal adult learning opportunities for older people within *The Learning Revolution*, the Government made a specific commitment to take action to improve informal learning opportunities for older people in a range of care settings – residential care, day care, care in the home, and in supported housing – in England.

NIACE, working with BUPA, First Taste and the Association for Education and Ageing, and in partnership with the Department of Health (DH), Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and other sector bodies, has since been commissioned to undertake a programme of work to take forward this commitment.

### What is informal learning?

*The Learning Revolution* describes informal adult learning as that which is taken up for its own intrinsic value; while recognising that it can for some also be a stepping stone to further learning and qualifications. "It encompasses a huge variety of activities: it could be a dance class at a church hall, a book group at a local library, cookery skills learnt in a community centre, a guided visit to a nature reserve or stately home, researching the National Gallery collection online, writing a Wikipedia entry or taking part in a volunteer project to record the living history of a particular community... This movement is made up of a kaleidoscope of part-time, non-vocational learning where the primary purpose isn't to gain a qualification. People participate for enjoyment and are driven by their desire for personal fulfilment or intellectual, creative and physical stimulation.

Such activity also contributes to the health and well-being of communities by building the confidence and resilience of the individuals involved. The social relationships that develop as a result of informal learning can provide networks of support and solidarity."

DIUS (2009) *The Learning Revolution*, p.10

1. Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2009) *The Learning Revolution*. TSO.  
2. See [www.dius.gov.uk/skills/engaging\\_learners/informal\\_adult\\_learning/pledge](http://www.dius.gov.uk/skills/engaging_learners/informal_adult_learning/pledge)

**An online discussion group has also been set up to debate ideas and issues around this work. Join us in this debate at [www.thelearningrevolution.ning.com/group/olderpeople](http://www.thelearningrevolution.ning.com/group/olderpeople)**

*"We know that informal learning enhances both the health and quality of life of people in both day care and residential settings, but too often it's missing. It's often especially important for the most vulnerable older people, including people with hearing or sight problems and in the more advanced stages of dementia.*

*We want to help day care and residential staff to develop the confidence and skills to encourage and support learning activity. We will promote the important role of informal learning in improving the well-being of older people, especially people who are frail. We will publish guidance to support public, private and voluntary sector care providers to open up learning opportunities for people in care settings based on the best of current practice."*

*(The Learning Revolution,  
Paragraphs 2.10-2.11)*

### **Progress to date**

This interim report, published on 1 October 2009 to coincide with the International Day of Older Persons, provides an account of our progress to date. This includes:

- establishing a virtual stakeholder group of key agencies and individuals across England with an interest and a role to play in enhancing learning opportunities for older people in care;
- launching the project with a press release to raise the profile of the work;
- identifying a range of current practices in offering learning opportunities for older people across care settings; and
- drawing out the challenges and opportunities for policy and practice from existing practice.

The next stage of the work will involve the development of practical guidance to support public, private and voluntary sector care providers to extend and enhance learning opportunities for people in care settings. In the New Year we will be aiming to promote, disseminate and embed these practices.

Organisations and individuals that have agreed to join the stakeholder group so far include:

- Age Concern Kensington and Chelsea
- Age Concern Northamptonshire
- Anchor Retirement Housing
- Becta
- Beth Johnson Foundation
- Bingo and Beyond
- Birmingham Adult Education Service
- Blackpool and the Fylde College
- Bromley AE Service
- Centre for Policy on Ageing
- Christian Council on Ageing and Methodist Homes
- Cornwall College, Camborne
- Dark Horse Venture
- Derbyshire County Council – Social Services
- Digital Unite
- English Community Care Association (ECCA)
- Global Digital Broadcast
- Gloucestershire County Council

- Ideal Care Homes
- Learning for the Fourth Age
- Life Academy
- Museums, Libraries and Archives (MLA) Council
- My Home Life programme, City University
- National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People (NAPA)
- Open Age
- Open University
- Residents and Relatives Association
- Senior Studies Institute – University of Strathclyde
- Skills for Care
- The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) Older People’s Network
- The Essential Role of Sheltered Housing (EROSH)
- U3A Online
- United Kingdom Homecare Association Ltd (UKHCA)
- Westmead Residential Care Home.

**We are keen to work closely with key organisations and individuals across the health, education and care sectors. Who else do you think should be invited to join the stakeholder group?**

“As a national charity supporting activity providers we are very conscious of the lack of learning opportunities currently available to care home residents and sheltered housing tenants. We would like to be able to support activity organisers with advice and guidance on how to access adult learning for the people they work with.”

*NAPA, the National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People*

“EROSH wholeheartedly supports this important project, as we believe expanding the opportunities for learning in sheltered housing improves the quality of life for residents. It’s not only residents who gain, staff also learn and benefit from the experience. All types of learning projects also present a great opportunity for our members to open up sheltered housing to all older people in the local community.”

*Joe McTavish, The Essential Role of Sheltered Housing (EROSH)*

“Learning in care settings means working with people who are often perceived as being beyond education. For them it can be so affirming that they are seen as still having much to offer society. For those who care for them in any way it can change their mindsets and attitudes about those they care for. Learning needs to be an integral part of care, but many of our care systems and management, care training and professional development programmes fail to acknowledge or work to this end.”

*Jim Soulsby, Association for Education and Ageing*

“Learning in care settings is one of the most effective quality-of-life sustaining ‘vaccinations’ against socio-health deterioration in care settings. It is a means for people to remain in the mainstream of everyday life and its challenges.”

*Rosemary Hurlley, Consultant Occupational Therapist*

## Background and context

### Older people

People in the UK are living longer than ever before. Over the last century, average life expectancy has increased by thirty years and this trend is set to continue. By 2026, population estimates show that the number of people aged 85 and over will double and that the number of people aged over 100 will quadruple.<sup>3</sup> Adults aged 80 and over, who currently constitute 4.5 per cent of the total population, are the fastest growing age group, with an increase of over 1.1 million already seen between 1981 and 2007.

Increased longevity is primarily a result of improvements in health over a sustained period, and while there are some suggestions that the trend might be slowed or reversed as a result of changes in diet or lifestyle, it is unlikely to affect mortality rates for several decades. It is therefore reasonable to expect that the total number of older people will continue to rise.

“We must make the most of the opportunities that demographic change is bringing and change alongside it... Healthier, more active later lives could result in significant savings in the costs of health care, social care, pensions and benefits. It has recently been estimated that improving healthy life expectancy by just one year each decade could generate a 14 per cent saving in spending on healthcare and an 11 per cent saving in spending on benefits between 2007 and 2025.”

DWP (2009) *Building a Society for All Ages*, p.15

### Older people and care

While life expectancy is increasing, health life expectancy is not increasing at the same rate. People are spending longer living with conditions that seriously reduce their quality of life and current trends in lifestyle-related diseases will also increase the need for care. In 20 years' time therefore, it is expected that over 1.7 million more adults will have a need for some form of care or support.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst acknowledging this, it is also important not to view older adults as a homogeneous group, nor to make assumptions about their need for, or use of, care services. The Audit Commission recently reported<sup>5</sup> that at present:

- only 15 per cent of people over 65 receive social care;
- only three per cent of people over 65, 18 per cent of people over 80 and 28 per cent of people over 90 live in residential care; and
- only 20 per cent of people over 80 have dementia.

“Recreation, social and community activities and personal development are essential to quality of life for people of all ages and the benefits to the health and well-being among older people, even in advanced frailty, have been demonstrated. However, studies suggest that almost 50 per cent of care home residents' time is spent asleep, socially withdrawn or inactive, with only three per cent spent on constructive activity.”

Help the Aged (2006) *My Home Life: Quality of life in care home*, p.43

3. Government Actuary's Department, 2007

4. HM Government (2009) *Shaping the Future of Care Together*. TSO

5. Audit Commission (2008) *Don't Stop Me Now*. TSO

## Older people and lifelong learning

Although engagement in many activities including sports, leisure or learning, tends to decline with age, for many older people participation in learning is an essential social activity. A 2005 study into *What older people learn*<sup>6</sup> found that a passion for the subject, pleasure in the act of learning, a concern to strengthen self-confidence and to meet people are all powerful incentives for older people to engage in learning. Analysis of the evidence on the benefits of learning also confirmed the success of their studies in meeting their aspirations, increasing confidence, developing new contacts and improving communication skills.

However, the absence of large numbers of older people from adult learning provision does not necessarily mean that they are not interested in learning. Older learners, like those of any other age, move in and out of formally organised learning activities according to personal needs and circumstances. Evidence shows that learning at home grows in importance with age and that older learners are eclectic in the tools they use – from informal contact, to reading a book, or following a correspondence course, using a computer, learning using a CD-ROM, or through the Internet.

*“It is a basic human right that all older people should have the opportunity to engage in stimulating mental activity; it is integral to a good quality of life and promotes health and well-being.”*

Dutton *et al.* (2006) *Adult education in care settings*. NIACE, p.19

## Benefits of learning in care settings

Although many care settings offer activities for older people that are designed for enjoyment and occupation, much of this provision lacks a learning or personal development structure to it. As a result, older adults in care settings are even less

likely to be engaged in learning than other adults of the same age.

While there are short-term benefits to engaging in activities, research and practice have shown that participation in learning has longer-term benefits that can help increase people’s quality of life and reduce health and social care costs.

“Depression is not an inevitable feature of growing old; rather it is often a predictable response to the range of known factors commonly experienced by older people, not least of which are increased social isolation, increasing disability and physical health, lack of opportunities for meaningful activity and reduced independence... Older people in residential and nursing care are in many ways society’s most excluded group. Up to 50 per cent have clinically severe depression.”

Department of Health (2009) *New Horizons: Towards a Shared Vision for Mental Health*, p.88–89

Benefits to older people can include:

- improved confidence, self esteem and sense of well-being;
- better physical and mental health;
- increased mobility;
- improvements in motor skills;
- lower levels of depression;
- lessening of incontinence;
- less dependence on medication;
- faster recovery rates;
- better ability to manage pain and illness;
- increased levels of resilience and ability to cope;
- changes in behaviour;
- maintenance, and for some, improvement of attention, communication and memory skills;

6. Aldridge and Tuckett (2007) *What Older People Learn*. Leicester: NIACE



Paul Hickinbotham

- reduced dependency on others;
- reduced isolation;
- development of stronger relationships between carers and those being cared for;
- increased sociability with other older people being cared for;
- greater levels of engagement, by providing opinion, speaking up and communicating with others;
- development of new skills;
- improved levels of motivation to participate in day-to-day activities; and
- greater enjoyment of life – something to look forward to and to talk to others about.

With government policy now demonstrating a much stronger focus on prevention and on services to improve the health, well-being and independence of older people, it is evident that the provision of learning opportunities for older people should play a central role in achieving this objective.

“My introduction to computers came just two years after I’d lost my wife. I was feeling very low, everything had become an effort; my body ached, I was depressed and lonely. When the trainer came to the sheltered house where I live and said in the introduction session that after seven weeks I would be able to get on the Internet, send email and do this all on my own, I was very sceptical. But it was all true. Pretty soon, I’d go down to the market and not feel any aches and pains, because I was just thinking what I was going to do on the computer when I got back. The experience started to put back into my life then enthusiasm and interest that I always had for living”.

Len Kitson, 81, Genesis, East London  
(taken from CSHS Good Practice Guide  
No. 5: Digital Inclusion and Older  
People); also quoted in DWP (2009)  
*Building a Society for All Ages*

In addition to the range of benefits experienced by the older learners themselves, other benefits can include the following.

For family and friends:

- eases worry about friends and relatives in care;
- makes caring easier (if at home);
- improves communication; and
- raises expectation of what the older person can do.

“Learning in a group means the excitement spins off. Residents are happier, more alert, sleep better at night, need less medication, feel less isolated and more at home.”

*Manager, Tansley House Care Home,  
Matlock*

For care staff/givers:

- increases self-confidence and commitment;
- greater job satisfaction and reduced turnover;
- better communication with and understanding of residents; and
- skills development.

“The provision of learning activities in our homes is absolutely critical to the holistic care of our residents.”

*James Clegg, Head of Organisation  
Development & Talent, BUPA Care  
Services*

For organisations:

- improves well-being of those older people for whom they provide care;
- brings visible health and behavioural improvements in older people;

- improves communication and dialogue;
- lessens need for medication;
- reduces medication and other care costs;
- improves atmosphere in care settings;
- enhances opportunities for staff development;
- improves workforce morale; and
- helps partnership working and interagency co-operation.

“An ageing population means, almost inevitably, more people arriving at a point where for one reason or another they can no longer look after themselves. The average cost of providing residential care for older people is around £465 per week. What kind of assumption can we make about the potential impact of higher participation in lifelong learning? We have strong evidence from many individuals of how taking part in learning reinforced their independence and capacity to look after themselves. Let’s assume that the date of entry into residential care is postponed by just one month as a result of the person’s participation in some form of learning. The net saving is not the full £2,015 – they still have expenses of living at home. Let’s assume a range of saving between 15 and 30 per cent – quite modest. This frees up £302–604 – in principle, it seems reasonable to say, a potential modest sum for investment in learning opportunities per person. With 60,168 adults aged 65 and over permanently admitted to registered care homes in 2007–08, this could release between £18.2 and £36.3 million per annum. In the same year, over 150,000 temporary admissions of older adults to registered care homes were also made, with the potential to further increase savings that could be made as a result of investing in learning.”

Schuller, T. and Watson, D. (2009) *Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*. Leicester: NIACE

## Inspirations

The following ten case studies provide a range of examples of work that is currently taking place to support learning for older people in care settings.

This collection of examples is not exhaustive – no doubt there are many other examples taking place up and down the country. Neither are we holding up these examples as being best practice to be replicated exactly elsewhere – however, we have sought to draw out where we think aspects of the work are particularly interesting or where it is underpinned by key principles.

We do hope that these examples will provide you with some inspiration as to what can be done, and we would consider our efforts a success if we have stimulated you to think how you can take this work forward.

Drawn from our examples of existing practice, as well as from the literature, we believe that the following key principles reflect best practice in the provision of learning opportunities for older people in care settings:

- irrespective of disabilities and differences in ability, older people in care settings should have the opportunity to engage in stimulating mental activity, acquire new skills and share existing ones. It is integral to a good quality of life and promotes health and well-being;
- older people should be fully involved in the maintenance of their existing skills and interests, and in developing new ones, of their choice. They should be involved in the creation of care packages and support plans. Action to achieve learning goals should be recorded and targets agreed and set;
- older people should always be able to choose whether or not to participate in learning;
- older people should be at the centre of, and involved from the outset in, the planning of teaching and learning which is to be provided for them;
- people learn best when there is something relevant to be learned and when it is something they really want to learn;
- learning should be delivered using real-life contexts and adult learning materials;
- learning achievements, however small, should be recognised, valued and made visible;
- learning should build on a person's existing strengths;
- learning should help to increase a person's quality of life. It can contribute to improved choices and decision making, and to greater autonomy and independence;
- learning should make a positive difference to people's lives;
- learning should always be interesting and enjoyable.

**We are continuing to look for inspirational examples of work to support the provision of learning for older people in care settings, especially in relation to activities or settings that are different to those presented in the case studies below. We would like to hear from older people in care settings, their relatives and friends, managers, staff or volunteers and other organisations who can tell us more about existing opportunities.**

## 1. Westmead residential care home and Music for Life

Westmead is a local authority run residential care home catering for up to 42 residents. The home, in the Westbourne Park area of London, is owned and run by Westminster City Council. While the home does not have a dedicated activities room, it does have a caring, enthusiastic and hands-on activity coordinator, and a dedicated team of knowledgeable carers, supported by a manager with a clear sense of purpose and a strong commitment to moving the home forward.

The home has a regular weekly activities programme with a range of activities, including exercise, gardening, reminiscence work, quizzes, puzzles and games and discussions, and supplemented by occasional entertainments, outings and trips and a monthly church service. While the majority of this activity is not perceived as learning, the home has also been involved in a number of major projects with external partners that are more likely to be recognised as informal adult learning.

In partnership with Wigmore Hall, Westmead has been able to offer residents in the advanced stage of dementia, a series of interactive music workshops. The project entitled, *Music for Life*, aims to enhance the quality of life of its participants while also demonstrating to carers the emotional, social and physical potential of people in their care. As part of this work, a group of professional musicians visited the home weekly for nine weeks to lead workshops with a group of eight residents. Each session included the eight residents, one to two people from For Dementia, three musicians, the activity coordinator and five care staff who consistently attended each session. The sessions, which were primarily focused around communicating and expressing oneself through sounds and music, sought to identify and build on parts of the brain that are still functioning. By drawing out participants' personalities through the work, carers within the team were then also able

to re-evaluate their care of individuals in the light of their experience and observations. The project culminated in a launch event, the production of a memory book with photos of the residents and a DVD to watch to remind them of the activity. As a result of their engagement in this work, one resident who only used to make sounds now communicates with words, while another, who used to want to stay in bed all day, now gets up and wants to know what is happening.

The manager of Westmead, who has been in post for around one year, is keen to open the home up to every opportunity that will be of benefit to the residents and will help the staff take a wider view of their role. In her view, the provision of activities and learning are about making the home more person-centred and bringing in variety and stimulation. There is a commitment to 'play' as a stimulus to learning and development, as well as to supporting residents to live their lives the way they would like to.

For more information contact:  
**[vedmonds@westminster.gov.uk](mailto:vedmonds@westminster.gov.uk)**



Richard Olivier

## 2. The 'Signatures Project



Care Images

Bengali residents of Mosque Tower Sheltered Housing Scheme and members of Toynbee Hall's Deesha Literacy Project have been engaged in an eight-week pilot project to assist residents in developing their written signatures and learning to print their names. With guidance from an English Teaching volunteer, younger women from the Deesha Literacy Project share their own experiences of informal literacy learning, provide emotional and physical support to older learners and directly assist their learning. Deesha members have developed, not only their English language skills, but have also gained confidence and become more active in the community, with many volunteering for the first time. A number of members have also met with a worker from a Home Care Agency as part

of the project, and are now confident about applying for work in home care. For the older women, who have been isolated socially and educationally, the opportunity to learn with support and inspiration from other women who have taken part in informal literacy learning, has been of great value. Looking to the future, the 'Signatures' project has allowed relationships between Deesha members and Mosque Tower residents to develop, with the two organisations planning to continue working in partnership to widen the learning and volunteering opportunities on offer.

For more information contact  
**[siraj.salekin@gatewayhousing.org.uk](mailto:siraj.salekin@gatewayhousing.org.uk)**

### 3. Hammerson House

Hammerson House is a care home for older Jewish people in North London. It offers sheltered housing, residential care and nursing care for up to 96 residents. The activities programme – an overarching programme for learning, stimulation pleasure and entertainment – has always been a central element of its offer and is viewed as a significant factor in people choosing to live there. Regular activities include art and design, music, exercise, bridge, drama, quizzes, gardening, 'bake and take', a monthly book club and trips out to places of interest. In addition:

- Hammerson House hosts regular visits from the Wallace Collection and the V&A where museum staff bring in a painting or artefact through which to engage people in discussion;
- the local authority's mobile library service visits once a month and refreshes books in a small library;
- the home has two PCs set up in the library for the use of residents. Short courses in using a PC have been run for small groups and individuals, although subsequent independent usage of the PCs has not been as widespread as anticipated;
- there are regular speakers from all walks of life, including local MPs, the local Mayor and other public figures, people who run charities and entertainers;



- links have been made with two schools to facilitate exchange visits between the home and school;
- some activities are led by residents in the home or involve residents taking turns to present something; for example, a Desert Island Discs session where an individual presents recordings of their choice and explains why they have chosen them; and
- volunteer and care staff training is provided in relation to delivering activities. For example, this can include participating in 'music therapy' sessions to understand what is involved and to ensure residents who are invited to the session gain something from it. Sessions on 'the importance of activities in a residential setting' are also run to explore matching residents to activity and understanding the social, sensory and intellectual skills required to enhance the experience.

While many of these activities can be encompassed within our definition of informal learning, even committed participants can be dismissive about the concept of learning. This ambivalence is captured in comments from three active residents who explained that they "haven't the zest to learn anymore" while also insisting that these activities are essential "if

it weren't for the activities, what would I do here? Everything else is done for us", and "you need challenges when all other challenges... have been removed from your life."

As with many residential homes, the activities programme is funded from within the home's core budget. However, in order to offer a wider range of activities than would be otherwise possible, this core funding is also supplemented by:

- significant time contributions by volunteers and Friends of Hammerson House who lead or support sessions in their own areas of expertise;
- the identification (often through personal networks) of opportunities and partnerships which result in additional activities without additional cost; and
- grants received as the result of successful funding applications made to foundations and charities. Applications are made by one of the Activity Coordinators who is paid additional hours to engage in fundraising.

The organisational commitment to this work, combined with strategies for ensuring the ongoing resourcing of activities, ensures that the work is sustainable.

For more information contact [activities@hammersonhouse.org.uk](mailto:activities@hammersonhouse.org.uk)

## 4. Learning for the Fourth Age (L4A)

Learning for the Fourth Age (L4A) is a not-for-profit social enterprise that provides educational and learning services to residents of care homes through one-to-one teaching sessions, complemented by some group learning activities.

L4A offers residents personal learning mentors who spend time with them each week sharing ideas, information, materials and audio visual resources and stimulating their minds. Activities are designed to suit the individual's interests and needs, and one-to-one sessions are backed up with materials to enjoy between sessions. By working with learners on a one-to-one basis, L4A is able to work around the support needs of individual learners. For example, if somebody has had a stroke and has minimal use of the right-hand side of their body and has poor hearing, the learning mentor will devise activities that suit the person's abilities, and give support, such as adapting use of a mouse for the left hand or speaking so lip reading is easier.

Another benefit of the personalised service is that learners are able to explore interests they may have felt too shy to express in a group setting. They are able to learn at their own pace and are able to focus on particular areas of a topic. Learners are given ownership of their individual learning. By working closely with care staff, L4A draws on their knowledge of the support they can give and this enables L4A to focus on tailored learning matched to the individual's abilities and support needs.

To date, learning activities have included ancient roman history, theology, piano, knitting, watercolours, watching and discussing ballet, learning Russian, singing, IT and intergenerational learning with elderly residents passing on their skills to younger learning mentors. In order to complement their wider activities provision, L4A fits into the time frame and routine of the care

homes that contract the services.

In independent inspection reports from the Care Quality Commission, L4A has been rated very positively and distinctly from other activities that are provided. Some larger organisations also have internal inspections and L4A has been nominated for best practices awards through these.

In order to provide an affordable and sustainable offer, L4A services are delivered through a network of trained volunteers. Ongoing support is also provided for volunteers through monthly social and training meetings to discuss the work, to share tips, ideas and experiences and to find solutions to shared problems, and by providing access to a volunteer coordinator. All travel expenses are reimbursed and L4A also pays for training, CRB checks and insurance for volunteers.

Established in April 2008, L4A aims to achieve sustainability and significant growth over the coming five years. A ratio of 20 homes covers the costs of one full-time coordinator and also provides enough funds to cover materials and resources costs, and recruiting, training and supporting volunteers. While the costs vary depending on the particular needs of the care home and the residents involved, charges to care homes start from £3 per week per resident for an initial 12-week trial period.

*"I like it that I am in charge of which interests we follow." (L4A learner)*

*"I used to think that my days of learning were over 30 years ago!" (L4A learner)*

*"[My learning mentor] encourages me to learn more than I could by myself." (L4A learner)*

For more information contact [enquiries@l4a.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@l4a.org.uk)

## 5. East Dunbartonshire reading groups

This learning takes place in Scotland; although the commitment being taken forward is for England, this is another example that may provide inspiration.

East Dunbartonshire is a small Scottish council to the north-west of Glasgow – an area which has one of the fastest-growing populations aged over 60, and which has showed a marked increase in those aged over 75. This will provide major challenges in the coming years in terms of service provision for older people. Following consultation with visually impaired older adults as to what sort of learning services they would be interested in, feedback was received that in addition to the current programme of craft activities on offer, they would also be interested in participating in something more intellectually stimulating.

As a result, social services funding has been made available to set up a series of reading groups. Groups meet weekly for a minimum of eight weeks in a range of residential and day care settings to hear and discuss short stories. Groups are run by members of the library service who select the material, read the stories and facilitate discussion. Sessions begin with participants introducing themselves, followed by a

recap of what was discussed in the previous session. The readings are interspersed with breaks to allow for discussion, enabling participants to share their opinions and experiences related to what is being read. Each session finishes with the reading of a piece of poetry, a copy of which is then left with participants to reflect on between sessions. Other resources such as large print texts and audio books can also be provided.

As well as providing stimulating intellectual activity for older people and legitimate opportunities to talk about a range of issues, the reading groups also support older people and their carers to get to know each other better and to learn from one another. For many, the reading groups provide a unique opportunity to engage or re-engage with literature, without being restricted by their visual impairment. Although current funding for the work is coming to an end, the council is hoping to develop the work further by supporting and training care staff to lead the reading groups themselves.

For more information contact  
**[Anne.Kennedy@eastdunbarton.gov.uk](mailto:Anne.Kennedy@eastdunbarton.gov.uk)**



## 6. Open Age – focus on Link-Up workers for isolated older people receiving care in the home

Open Age is a user-led charity, operating across Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster, enabling older retired people to sustain their physical and mental fitness, maintain active lifestyles and develop new and stimulating interests. Every week, Open Age provides over 160 physical, creative and mentally stimulating activities across 50 sites including community centres, sheltered housing, church halls and libraries. As well as occasionally offering provision in residential accommodation, residents are also supported to attend community sessions. Open Age also runs three multi-activity centres for older people.

In order to support isolated older people, including those receiving care in the home, to engage with the learning opportunities on offer, Open Age has recently embarked on a Link Up project, funded by the NHS, to offer:

- a friendly person to chat about the opportunities for learning and leisure available through Open Age and help in identifying suitable activities;
- one-to-one confidence building support and encouragement;
- accompaniment to initial sessions until the older person is established in a group and comfortable attending on their own;
- contact suited to the needs of the individual, including home visits, phone calls and meeting in the community;
- advice regarding transport options and schemes for people unable to

walk long distances or for whom public transport is inadequate; and

- recruitment of volunteer champions over 50 years of age to provide ongoing support.

Older adults, like those within any other age range, have different interests and aspirations, and the project therefore aims to provide a choice of a wide range of learning opportunities. The project has been particularly successful in providing opportunities for one-to-one contact for those who have lost confidence and the ability to do things on their own, giving them time and encouragement to reconnect with and explore their interests.

*“The Open Age Link-Up project is a necessity to those older people who through the ageing process of circumstances have become isolated. When time is spent with an older person to help build their self-esteem, create a routine and an introduction into an activity, the person is more likely to continue to engage and improve their general well-being.”* (Referring organisation)

*“You get to go out and not sit at home, and as a result my mental well-being has improved tremendously.”* (Open Age learner)

*“My confidence and self-worth has been restored.”* (Open Age learner)

For more information contact  
**hleech@openage.org.uk**

## 7. Pennine Housing – learning to use a computer in extra care housing

Following discussions with a local high school about intergenerational learning opportunities, a project was established for sixth formers to come into one of Pennine Housing's extra care housing schemes to help older tenants use computers. A room had originally been set aside to develop an IT facility when the scheme was first built in 2004, although this intention had never been realised.

Housing Scheme staff worked with teachers to set up the project, which involved two sixth-form pupils working with older tenants every Wednesday afternoon. Many of the tenants were initially fearful of using computers and thought that they were too old to learn. With a little persuasion, however, four of them decided to give it a try.

Working with just two computers and a small printer, the four tenants thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Word soon spread and more tenants wanted to attend. In response to growing demand, three more computers were installed, including one with a large lettered keyboard, better printers and extended Internet access.

Tenants learned how to send, receive and read emails, to write letters, to use the Internet, to order shopping online and access information on subjects of interest. One of the tenants served in the Navy during the Second World War and wanted to access information on the ship on which he served. The sixth formers showed him how to do this and how to print off an A3 coloured picture of the ship. Another tenant's daughter, herself in her 60s, also wanted to learn computers, so she joined in with her mother. She has enjoyed it so much that she has now bought a laptop computer to bring with her and uses it in the lessons.

Shortly after the lessons started, the scheme manager received a phone call from a retired lady to ask if her elderly aunt, who lived in the community but was very isolated, could possibly attend the lessons if she brought her to the scheme (the lady had lost her husband about five months previously, didn't want to go out and felt life was not worth living). As well as learning how to use a computer, it helped her rebuild her confidence to start going out and socialising with people. She is now attending a local day centre where she is continuing her studies.

The original two sixth formers have now left school, but sessions are continuing as other sixth formers have stepped into their place in order that the project can continue.

For more information contact [sue.lewis@ph2k.org.uk](mailto:sue.lewis@ph2k.org.uk)



Stuart Hollis

## 8. Gloucestershire County Council – Activity Coordinator Facilitator

“The importance of being able to continue learning for older people has many personal benefits: to have the knowledge from learning and the wisdom of years can only enrich the lives of these individuals and our society in general.”

*Anita Miles Activity Coordinator  
Facilitator, Gloucestershire  
County Council*

In order to address issues of isolation experienced by activity co-ordinators in care homes, Gloucestershire County Council has recently begun funding the post of an Activity Coordinator Facilitator.

The post includes providing one-to-one support to activity coordinators across all 176 care homes across the county, identifying needs and sourcing training, as well as working with the Care Quality Commission to support improvements to failing homes with poor ratings. The current post holder is also seeking to implement a range of community outreach projects with isolated older adults to allay fears of moving into care in later life. The website, [www.gcpaactivitynetwork.co.uk](http://www.gcpaactivitynetwork.co.uk), currently in its infancy, is also being used to collate local skills and knowledge provided by the county’s activity coordinators, and is seen as a useful tool in resourcing activity coordinators in their work, while also addressing issues of isolation. In addition to this virtual support, regular events are organised to encourage networking and sharing of good practice.

The current post holder has a background of teaching basic skills, people with learning difficulties and care staff, and has previously developed and delivered a Level 2

distance learning course for activity coordinators, which has now been delivered to nearly 120 activity coordinators across Gloucestershire.

This unique post has faced many challenges, but is beginning to have an invaluable impact on activity provision across the county. Some of the following feedback has been received from coordinators:

*“[The Activity Coordinator Facilitator] provides a unique service which enables the activities network within Gloucestershire to thrive. She provides support to individuals and to care staff alike in this important aspect within the provision of care. On a personal level, she has provided me with useful ideas and support in my role. Building the website has been a great source of contact and information and this will grow to be an invaluable tool. Her efforts to get people together are always appreciated. For most of us it is a lonely job with only one person in post, so sharing ideas and supporting each other is crucial.”*

In turn, this additional support is also having a beneficial impact upon the lives of those being cared for:

*“A lady is speaking, putting sentences together who we thought could not.”*

*“Many people are moving around more now, rather than waiting to be pushed in a wheelchair, they are trying it for themselves. Others who used to be sat in their rooms are no longer isolated – they join in!”*

For more information contact:

**Anita.Miles@gloucestershire.gov.uk**

## 9. Healthcare TV

“Years ago it was quite a struggle to change the mindset that still persists in some nursing homes in the UK that residents should be left exclusively to their own devices. Today most homes have realised that communication with residents about their preferences for a rewarding life in the twilight years is paramount.”

*Jim Deans, Healthcare TV*

While those over the age of 50 generally spend more time watching television than younger adults, we often hear that terrestrial and satellite TV doesn't show the type of programmes that they want to see. Healthcare TV (currently under

development) aims to provide an exclusive daily schedule of programming ranging from residents' own choice of films, entertainment shows and educational and learning programmes, as well as those dealing with health, financial and retirement issues. An interactive facility will also provide opportunities to view live events and to submit your own content. As well as scheduled programming, the channel offers on-demand programming with viewers able to participate in group activities or access content at a time that suits them. Staff training films will also be available covering various aspects of nursing and care work.

For more information contact:  
**[charly.cogger@gdbtv.com](mailto:charly.cogger@gdbtv.com)**



Paul Hickenbotham

## 10. First Taste

First Taste is a registered charity that provides interactive educational arts activities for older people in care and nursing homes and day centres in the Derbyshire Dales. First Taste is currently working with 14 care homes and an Age Concern day centre to deliver its Tutoring Older People in Care (TOPIC) project, funded by the Esmée Fairburn Foundation and East Midlands Arts Council.

The TOPIC project has four key aims:

- to provide care staff with the confidence and ideas to support older residents to engage in learning;
- to strengthen the mental and physical health of residents and to support the development of new skills;
- to provide residents and care staff with the opportunity to re-engage with learning; and
- to introduce new technologies to excluded adults.

These aims are achieved through the delivery of a programme of educational arts workshops such as gardening, digital photography, metal work, pottery, textile



crafts, paper crafts, painting, armchair exercises, music and reminiscence. Each participating home is offered twenty-one 1½ hour workshops per year that are led by professional tutors with relevant subject expertise. Each programme of workshops is supported by a handbook and work folders detailing the learning requirements of each programme. Care staff students are also provided with individual folders to record their own work and achievement.

Homes demonstrate their commitment to the work through a financial contribution of £20 per workshop and through releasing care staff to attend sessions in support of residents, as well as for their own development. While it is expected that at least two members of staff remain in the workshop for health and safety reasons, in many homes this has evolved into a number of regular and interested carers registering and attending all workshops, enabling them to gain a Certificate of Achievement.

An independent evaluation of the TOPIC programme has identified a range of benefits for residents, care staff and managers. Care workers reflect that they have a newfound respect for residents, knowing more about them and having more to talk to them about. One care home manager talked about the programme building greater levels of trust between staff and residents. However, a particularly important measure of success and impact is that, in one home, an approximate reduction of a third in medication such as antidepressants and sleeping tablets was indicated.

*“It makes you want to live”* (First Taste learner)

For more information contact  
[firsttaste@btinternet.com](mailto:firsttaste@btinternet.com)

## Challenges ahead

Drawing on the examples of practice described above, as well as on some of the literature that has already been produced on this issue, we have identified a number of challenges that are important to address if we are to be successful in our goal of enhancing learning opportunities for older people in care settings.

As the project progresses further, we will be exploring many of these in more detail with a view to seeing how we can work through these challenges. However, it will not be possible to do this alone. Only by working together, with key policy-makers and sector organisations, learning providers and voluntary organisations, as well as with managers and staff working on the ground, can we move forwards.

“Social workers have an important role to play in facilitating learning opportunities within their relationships with older people. These can be used to promote more inclusive strategies and approaches within practice to engage older service users in taking up direct payments and individualised budgets. Informal learning opportunities are ideal vehicles for improving the autonomy of older people by offering freedom from more conventional approaches to delivering services. Working with older people to build up their confidence and competence to deal with their changing situation again in the future is equally as important as any intervention to resolve their current crisis.”

*Trish Hafford-Letchfield, Senior Lecturer  
Social Work, Middlesex University and  
Chair of Age Concern Greenwich*

### Scope

While the remit of this project covers a range of care settings – residential care, day care, care in the home and sheltered accommodation – most of the examples of practice brought to our attention were based in residential care settings. In contrast, we were able to find far fewer examples of where learning is being undertaken with older adults receiving care in the home.

### Research

Organisations and individuals involved in the provision of learning opportunities in care settings are able to cite many examples of the impact that learning has had on the health and well-being of older adults. However, there is a paucity of research evidence to support these claims. The notion that active and engaged older learners brings savings in medical and care costs requires a more robust evidence base to help make its acceptance more universal.

### Learning through activity

Activity programmes in care settings are predominantly viewed as leisure activities, therapy or entertainment, rather than as opportunities for mental stimulation and learning. Low expectations of older learners in care settings therefore mean that opportunities for personal development, sustained engagement and progression are minimal. The benefits of such activity are often not sought, recorded or acknowledged, and thus activity is perceived as an ‘added extra’ rather than as being an integral part of a holistic package of care. Within many care settings, the concept that learning can be

**We will be continuing to explore these issues in more detail over the coming year and are keen to hear from organisations and individuals who are willing to work with us in taking this agenda forward.**

encouraged by day-to-day contact and through everyday tasks is not developed.

### Curriculum

Where specific learning opportunities are incorporated into a wider programme of care, the range of opportunities on offer are often narrow, influenced more by funding, availability of tutors and available space, rather than revealed need or ability. There is little evidence of examples where older people own the curriculum, or where it is developed through research or consultation, although some care settings do attempt to incorporate a learning element into individual assessment forms and care plans. Subjects most commonly found were arts and crafts-based activities, gardening, IT, reminiscence, exercise, literature and music appreciation. The examples cited above of personalised learning services were, however, able to offer a much more varied and individually tailored curriculum.

### Personalised learning

In keeping with the personalisation agenda, one of the key principles underpinning good practice is that the concept of learning in care settings should be focused on the individual older person. In this way, learning strategies should take into account an individual's life experiences, expectations, fears, dreams and aspirations, as well as their age, learning ability and physical and sensory impairments. While learning opportunities developed as a consequence may benefit several people at the same time, programmes should be designed around individual needs.

The examples featured in the previous section include a range of individual and group learning activities, and a care setting with a good programme of learning opportunities is likely to include both. The increasing frailty of older people in residential and day care settings inevitably has limitations on what they are able to achieve, and it is important that staff are available to provide assistance to older learners; however, this does not mean that



Paul Hickinbotham

activities always need to be highly structured or take place in a group context. One-to-one learning can be more appropriate and beneficial.

## Technology

“Four out of five over 65s have never used the Internet and we are seeing limited progress in changing this picture. Unless we do make progress to tackle the digital divide, many older people will face a future of more rather than less exclusion.”

David Sinclair, Help the Aged (taken from CSHS Good Practice Guide No. 5: Digital Inclusion and Older People)

“In one of our early studies, 18 frail elderly people aged from 58 to 92, who were confined to their homes by illness or incapacity, showed measurable improvements in their quality of life over the course of an eight week educational programme delivered by teleconferences which were run by volunteer U3A tutors. Today the Internet is a far cheaper and more flexible medium than the phone for delivering informal adult learning for older people in care settings. The U3A Online virtual learning environment provides opportunities for isolated older people, such as those in formal and informal care settings, to engage with life and other people in personally meaningful ways.”

*Rick Swindell: Co-founder of U3A Online, a virtual U3A open to all older people*

While a growing volume of basic IT provision is offered to older learners in care settings, most of the wider learning opportunities identified through our work have not involved the use of technology. While

assumptions are often made that older people in care are not interested in using new technologies, this will not be true for all older adults. However, it is important that learning opportunities offered through new media are appropriately stimulated and supported.

A few examples were found of computers being placed in communal areas, although these were not widely used when support for learners was not available. This may change as a more computer literate generation enters care settings in greater numbers.

## The physical environment

Careful consideration needs to be given to the learning environment in which learning takes place in terms of lighting, seating, heating, accessibility, comfort, sounds and lack of distractions. A number of care settings identified that a specialist activities room would make it easier to deliver learning opportunities; architectural design should therefore be a key consideration in the building or development of new care homes and centres.

The visual display of learners' achievement was found to encourage other older adults to participate in learning. This can include the framing and mounting of paintings and drawings, beds and tubs planted and cared for by residents, and work in progress and completed work kept on shelves and surfaces.

## Funding and resources

While general activity programmes are usually funded from within the core budget of the care settings, many of the more significant learning activities identified through this exercise have been funded on a project basis, with the home providing only the venue, access to residents and care staff to support the learning taking place. As a result, much of the good work taking place is funded on a short-term basis



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and will cease to be provided if further funding or a more sustainable approach cannot be identified.

Possible approaches to addressing this issue might involve: finding effective ways of joint working between education, health and social care in order to identify appropriate funding and other resources; making greater use of volunteers and in-kind contributions; or the creation of a learning fund from donations, small surpluses and external funding applications. In addition, there is a need to think more creatively about how general activity programmes can be adapted to include more mentally stimulating activities and learning opportunities.

### **The Activity Co-ordinator**

A growing number of residential care homes are appointing Activity Coordinators. While our research has found many examples of good quality work being undertaken by committed and energetic Coordinators there was also a degree of tokenism to be found. In some care homes, Coordinators are employed in dedicated posts for a substantial number of hours per

week, in others Coordinators also have full time caring roles or are only allowed to dedicate a very small number of hours to this work. In the large group homes in particular, dedicated Activity Coordinators are a key element of the staff in each home and are charged with alleviating boredom, keeping people happy, and keeping each day challenging and fun.

As well as the challenges around time restrictions, Activity Coordinators can often be isolated from others working in the same role elsewhere. Some have no dedicated budget for the work and struggle with a lack of support from managers and a lack of understanding and appreciation of their role by other staff. Ironically, in some care settings with a good Activity Coordinator, other care staff are even less likely to see engagement in activities as part of their role.

To overcome some of these issues, there is a small but growing number of resources targeted at Activity Coordinators, including those provided by NAPA.<sup>7</sup> Our research suggests that little support is currently available, however, to support Coordinators to think specifically about the role of mental stimulation and learning as part of a wider programme of activities.

7. The National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People – see [www.napa-activities.co.uk](http://www.napa-activities.co.uk)

### Leadership and management

While the operational leadership for activities within a care setting may rest with an Activity Coordinator, the strategic leadership of the care setting, including its commitment to working in partnership with external agencies, is more likely to be the responsibility of the manager. A commitment to the value of learning is therefore a crucial requirement if learning is to flourish in care settings.

### The role of care staff

Apart from the specific role of Activity Coordinator, it is acknowledged that general care staff also have a role to play in supporting learning by leading, encouraging and supporting older learners during activities, and in ensuring that the benefits of learning are carried through into the wider package of care. Where this does not happen, pressures on time may mean that carers are not present during learning

activities or that even when present they may consider that their role is solely to meet the practical needs of older people in their care.

Where we do see this happening, we know that carers can also enjoy a range of benefits from supporting older people in their learning in terms of developing stronger relationships with older people in their care by learning about and from them. While there may be workload implications, most staff enjoy the interaction with residents and thereby experience greater levels of job satisfaction.

In examples of where this works well, care staff see their role as one of providing a service to residents as individuals, each with different needs, likes and interests and enabling them to live their lives in the home the way they want to. This will have considerable implications for the design and delivery of training and qualifications for care staff. Management support is also crucial in making this a reality.



“By empowering older people to continue to learn, we also empower the people who support them to learn too. Learning at all ages is an essential part of our well-being – whether it’s formal learning and qualifications through the Qualifications and Credit Framework or informal learning through community education. Enabling people to learn and continue to learn throughout their lives is fundamental and contributes to supporting new ways of working and improved quality of support across all care settings.”

*Jim Thomas, Programme Head, Skills for Care*

### **The role of educators and volunteers**

While general activity programmes are usually organised by staff working within the care setting, many of the examples identified above are dependent upon a range of external organisations wishing to work with the care providers in delivering learning opportunities.

Where learning is delivered by external agencies, provision is often viewed as an add-on activity, with learning outcomes not shared with staff or residents families. Care managers are able to benefit most from these opportunities when they are able to think about how they can maximise the value of bringing in external agencies rather than just using them for the discrete sessions being offered.

As well as using paid educators, a number of examples identified above have made effective use of volunteers to support or lead sessions in areas of expertise. Where volunteers are used well, this can be extremely beneficial in terms of contributing time and skills not easily available elsewhere in the home; they are new faces and bring fresh perspectives; residents may get more meaning and enjoyment out of

life and feel less lonely and isolated when engaging with volunteers; volunteers can work one-to-one or as part of a group; they are often well motivated and dedicated; they can often be flexible in when they visit; they build and maintain links with the local community and help improve reputation; and they make a non-paid-for contribution, thus bringing economic benefits. The effective use of volunteers, however, does need planning and coordination, which would need to be done either in-house or through an external agency such as L4A or a volunteer bureau.

### **The role of relatives and friends**

Relatives and friends can be a valuable resource in creating a demand for learning opportunities and other mentally stimulating activity, as well as in the delivery of such opportunities. A number of checklists already exist to support relatives and friends in the choice of care setting which could be extended to include a learning dimension. Care contracts could also be reviewed to include a commitment to supporting the cultural element of home life. In addition, guidance could be provided to care settings, as well as to relatives and friends, to support them in making better use of this potential resource to deliver learning opportunities around their own areas of interest and expertise.

### **Engaging with the wider community**

Developing good relations with the wider community is a critical success factor among existing examples of good practice. This might include developing relationships with local community organisations; supporting residents to access opportunities outside of the immediate care setting; harnessing local community members as a resource to support learning activities; or even opening up learning opportunities to non-residents.

## Inspection

Inspection reports are available for public scrutiny and are a key driver of improving and maintaining standards in the care sector. Regular inspection of homes tends to concentrate on standards of care, medical treatment, food standards and cleanliness etc, and it would appear from evidence seen to date that little attention is given in inspection reports to the availability and quality of learning and other activities.

While the 2000 Care Standards Act suggests that care settings for older people should “demonstrate a commitment to lifelong learning and development for each service user, linked to implementation of his/her individual care plan”, this can often be overlooked. It is clear that many inspectors and care settings alike find it difficult to identify what such a commitment would look like in practice.

## Local leadership and partnership

Local authorities have responsibility for the welfare and well-being of their communities and there is a growing body of evidence as to the role of lifelong learning in contributing to this agenda. Local authorities also have a key role to play in making sure that appropriate learning opportunities exist at local level, as part of their broader strategies for responding to their ageing populations, and it is important that these should relate to older adults in care settings as well as those living independently. In order to ensure that an appropriate range of provision is available and accessible in every area, local government will need to build partnerships with a wide range of agencies and organisations.



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## What next?

The aim of this work is to take action to improve informal learning opportunities for older people in care settings, and the publication of this report is just one of the steps along the way. I hope that you will join us as we continue this journey.

The report contains a number of questions on which we would like to receive your feedback. Your response to these questions or any other comments should be sent to **[fiona.aldridge@niace.org.uk](mailto:fiona.aldridge@niace.org.uk)**

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