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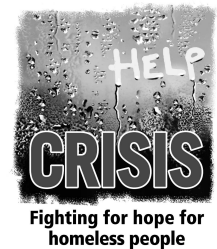
# Survival Skills

**Using life skills to tackle social exclusion**

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DEMOS

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Hannah Lownsbrough  
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October 2004





## 1. INTRODUCTION

Educators and employers alike pay ever-increasing attention to the acquisition and development of particular skills. Once, they would have taken a far keener interest in their knowledge: what they could be taught, and what they already knew. Learning activities centred on cramming people with facts that they could then deploy, either as technical knowledge in a workplace, or as proof of their intellect which would in turn secure them a job.

The value of this approach rests on the facts in question not becoming obsolete, however. The constantly changing technological and social situation of the last 50 years has shaken the foundation on which this approach to learning and training rests. Employers have had to adapt; rather than seeking employees who are already equipped with a particular body of knowledge, they look for the ability to learn and to adapt to ongoing change. How an employee might respond to a given situation has become more important than what s/he already knows. So, employers and educators have become much more concerned with specific skills. For years now education, training and employment have focused on defining and developing 'key skills', 'learning skills' and 'life skills'.

At the same time, debate over social inclusion and welfare reform has also focused more and more on the skills and personal behaviours needed for people to cope with the demands of modern society, to avoid persistent marginalisation from community life and from sources of fulfilment such as work, education and family life.

Yet life skills, now recognised as essential for individuals to thrive in society, have not yet been fully investigated in relation to the needs of people experiencing social exclusion. Life skills are those skills that are not related to a particular intellectual or vocational discipline, but rather describe the foundation skills for maintaining a fulfilling and independent lifestyle. Efforts to meet the skills needs of people in these most challenging of situations tend to rely on more traditional approaches to skills development.

As a result, interventions frequently target 'basic skills', such as literacy and numeracy, or tightly focused vocational learning programmes, such as those bringing parents of children with English as a second language into schools to support teachers working with other children with the same language barrier. Even policy innovations such as Connexions, the new integrated service for 13–19-year-olds, have embraced a very rigid conception of what work with their most excluded clients should entail, focusing on attaining particular grades at GCSE, or avoiding negative outcomes such as early pregnancy or incarceration.

However, social exclusion is by definition a problem of relationships, and concerns people's interactions with the wider society. These problems of interaction can only be effectively addressed if we

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### Chapter summary

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People now recognise that skills may be even more important than knowledge for getting a job and managing our lives.

Life skills are the foundation on which other skills learning is built. They are also vital for keeping a job, having good relationships with family and friends and finding constructive and enjoyable ways to spend leisure time.

address the life skills that would facilitate integration. Life skills are a critical part of breaking out of social exclusion.

*Survival Skills* argues that, if policies to support people at risk of social exclusion are to be successful, then life skills must assume a central place in the provision of support and services. But to do this effectively, government and service providers in all sectors must find better ways to support the development of those skills. The report discusses the correct definition of life skills and then examines in depth an innovative project – Skylight – which seeks to encourage learning and skills development – including life skills – among people with experience of homelessness.

Skylight demonstrates an approach to learning that can provide clients with a safe, engaging and well-structured environment while supporting the development of skills that can help people live their lives more fully, enjoyably and responsibly.

The key lessons from practice suggest principles that should guide any future development of policy and prompt new standards of practice for service providers:

- voluntary participation and users' ownership of projects
- purposeful activity through which life skills can be strengthened
- clearly and consistently applied boundaries, to create a 'safe' space for learning
- recognising achievement.

The report then goes on to examine the implications of taking life skills seriously and seeks to draw further lessons from a review of relevant literature and from a number of other projects and organisations. It concludes with recommendations for policy and practice including the following:

- Government should acknowledge the central role that life skills learning has for people escaping social exclusion and should invest in

supporting this type of intervention across the UK.

- Life skills development work should have sufficient flexibility to be able to adapt to the specific context in which it happens.
- Interventions should be delivered by a variety of providers, taking full advantage of the existing voluntary and community sector infrastructure in a given locality.
- Accountability measures for life skills work should be devised in partnership with the providers and users of life skills services.
- Research should be undertaken to establish the type of provision already offered, the level of demand for comparable provision to be offered to different groups/localities and the degree to which existing service providers (both statutory and voluntary) might be able to extend their capacity in this direction.
- Projects to develop life skills should develop and make use of the talents of their users and former users in developing and coproducing the services they offer.
- Life skills interventions should be designed in a way that takes account of users' needs, without being driven exclusively by those needs. There should be a recognition of the value of giving people a rich social and emotional life, regardless of their employment or educational status.

*Survival Skills* will argue that life skills must form a central plinth of our responses to social exclusions. If the collective successes of the last few years are to be built on, policy-makers and practitioners must actively engage with the process of supporting people to develop these vital skills, as well as the perceptions of self-efficacy that activate them.

## 2. THE CASE FOR LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

### What are life skills?

Life skills are those skills that are not related to a particular intellectual or vocational discipline, but rather describe the foundation skills for maintaining a fulfilling and independent lifestyle. Advocates of life skills training typically mean one or both of two things when they talk about life skills.<sup>1</sup> First, they refer to practical skills that facilitate independent living. Typically, these include keeping oneself fed and nourished, dealing with certain sorts of bureaucracy and budgeting. Others refer more to ‘softer’ skills – skills that enable people to interact with one another successfully and form good relationships, as well as to develop their self-awareness and understanding of themselves.

Central to both these analyses is the individual’s perception of their own self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the ability to change our own situation or circumstances. It is separate from notions of self-esteem or self-worth, although there is evidence that both those factors may impact on self-efficacy and vice versa. A key aspect of self-efficacy is that, in determining its relative importance to the individual, the most relevant is not an absolute ‘measure’ of that person’s capacity to deal with a range of situations. Rather, it relates to the beliefs that they hold about their own ability to reach their goals, or overcome certain hurdles. This perceived self-efficacy is one of the most important factors in developing a sense of personal agency; a sense of one’s own ability to shape the events and course of one’s own life.

Some would contend that one of these sets of skills takes precedence over the other; that it is more important, for example, for a person to be taught to cook than it is for them to learn to manage their emotions in a challenging situation. This reflects thinking about the concept of ‘hierarchy of need’, which contends that until a person’s most basic material needs are met, either by themselves or others, they will not be capable of engaging with other activities unrelated to those needs.

This interpretation of the relative importance of the two sets of skills is misleading, however, for two reasons. First, there is a body of evidence that indicates that people do not actually behave in this way. For example, refugees and displaced people frequently demonstrate a far greater concern about the welfare of loved ones that they do about their own material needs, however fundamental those needs might be. Second, an important distinction needs to be made between material provision and training in skills. While it is true that certain baseline needs must be met for people to live (such as having access to food and warmth), this does not equate to it being necessary for a person to learn to cook before being able to sustain other sorts of learning or

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### Chapter summary

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Life skills means both the practical skills that people need to live an independent life (like washing, cooking and budgeting) and the ‘soft’ skills that they need to relate to other people (like good communication skills and coping with difficult circumstances).

In paying attention to skills learning, it is vital that we remember the crucial role that life skills play and that we develop them in everyone.

People who have experienced social exclusion are particularly likely to need additional support in developing their life skills.

development. In fact, training in activities such as cooking, budgeting and dealing with bureaucracy presuppose the existence of other sorts of baseline skills. Teaching someone how to deal with a benefit claim will not help them if they are unable to control their temper when confronted with a challenge to a claim they are trying to make. Equally, teaching someone to budget presupposes that they are able to exercise sufficient self-management to delay gratification when saving for bigger items.

'Soft' life skills are the foundations on which more complex skills can be learnt. They are the first building blocks on which later learning rests. When learning to read, a child will learn much faster and more effectively if he or she is 'reading ready' when first taught, if she already knows about left to right eye movement across the text and can distinguish groups of letters as words. Rather than being 'optional extras', having 'soft' life skills is a primary indication of 'readiness' for other sorts of practical and emotional learning.

## 12 Why do life skills matter?

As the range and complexity of options open to each of us grows so does the pressure for people to use greater sophistication in their own ability to make good choices for themselves. This increased choice-making capability, however, is contingent on a person having the skills that allow a person to express, follow through and, at times, reverse the choices that they have made. But the greater pressure to exercise choice may also reduce the time and opportunities available to develop the baseline skills needed to equip themselves for everyday life. There is an ever-increasing pressure on both children and adults to become specialists in an area of some technical or academic skill, perhaps at the cost of developing and reinforcing those most basic skills for living.

Others would argue that as families and communities become increasingly fragmented and children spend less time

engaged in interaction with these familiar social groups, children are missing out on the opportunity to be socialised in the way that previous generations once were. Life skills have risen up the agenda, they claim, because children are growing up in ways that preclude them from learning these skills in the traditional way, among their families and communities, thus creating the need for interventions in schools and other organisations to allow them to develop the skills later in life.

### Social exclusion and life skills

Life skills and their development has become a particularly high-profile issue within organisations working with people experiencing social exclusion. Homelessness charities, youth organisations and prisoner rehabilitation schemes have all been vocal in emphasising their importance. The Labour government has also been vocal in supporting the need for skills development.

*Britain's future economic success depends critically on how well we use and unlock the talents and potential of our citizens. Schools must play the central role in preparing people for work and careers. But we must also help adults who have been failed by the education system. . . .*

Tony Blair, 2001<sup>2</sup>

*Skills can uniquely unlock both a fairer society and a more successful economy. . . . Skills also represent a key ideological dividing line in the future of public policy.*

Ivan Lewis MP, Department for Education and Skills, 2004<sup>3</sup>

The underlying assumption is that there is some relationship between having under-developed life skills, or life skills that have developed in a distorted way, and being part of a socially excluded group. It is hard to envisage what the causal relationship would

be between the two: do people become socially excluded because they have poor life skills? Or does the experience of social exclusion give rise to poor life skills – do people ‘forget’ their life skills as they are pulled further into exceptionally challenging circumstances? In either case, when interacting they can produce a vicious cycle of social exclusion that families can spend generations trying to escape.

Childhood experiences are consistently mentioned in association with both. Psychologists are able to draw conclusions about a person’s life skills partly by drawing on their recounted childhood experiences. Similarly, statisticians are able to make a whole series of predictions about the likelihood of a person experiencing social exclusion on the strength of data about his or her circumstances as a young child.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, factors that increase the likelihood of having poor life skills or becoming socially excluded tend to overlap. For example, there is a powerful correlation between being in local authority care as a child or young person and later receiving a prison sentence for a criminal offence – a strong indicator of social exclusion. Young people leaving care make up half a per cent of the overall population, but constitute 39 per cent of prisoners under 21 years of age.<sup>5</sup> Care leavers also frequently have under-developed life skills, recently acknowledged by the government’s move to extend the local authority duty of care to some of this group until they reach 21.

Even leaving aside the experiences that prompted a child’s removal to care (which are likely to have been extremely distressing), the care system itself is not conducive to producing well-developed life skills: children are looked after by a range of adults, in various settings, often on a far higher child-to-carer ratio than would be the case in a family home. In addition, the child’s peers in local authority care are likely to be challenging in some respects. The consistent and trusting relationships that are so important to the learning processes for life

skills are likely to be much rarer in this setting than in others.

Similar patterns emerge across a range of social exclusion indicators. According to youth charities such as Fairbridge and Weston Spirit, for example, truants and excluded school pupils manifest under-developed life skills. Equally, they are disproportionately likely to go on to offend, develop a serious drug addiction or become a teenage parent. Girls who truant or who are excluded from school have a relatively higher risk of becoming pregnant.<sup>6</sup> Children in care are ten times more likely to be excluded from school.<sup>7</sup>

According to traditional models of social and emotional development of children, the standard progression for children is to have increasingly challenging experiences as they become older and more competent at handling them. Children move from dealing with relationships within the immediate family, out to a wider circle of children and adults and then into school and eventually work, having had opportunities to learn necessary life skills in smaller and, one hopes, safer contexts beforehand. For children whose family life is under some sort of stress, or who have had difficult exper-

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### Key points

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Self-efficacy is the ability a person has to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. The perceptions people have of their own self-efficacy (whether accurate or not) affect their ability to be able to achieve their personal aims. It offers one way of understanding the connection between how people feel about themselves, and the choices they make about how to live their lives.

It is particularly important in relation to life skills, because life skills can alter people’s ideas about their own abilities. Life skills work can change a person’s perception of their own self-efficacy and can give them the confidence to change their own lives.



iences with wider groups, the 'safe' place they needed to learn life skills has not really existed, or has existed only in part, or intermittently. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of these children go on to develop life skills in an unconventional form.

The case for developing life skills goes beyond simply creating external measures of social acceptability. Developing these skills offers socially excluded people a far greater choice about how they wish to manage their own circumstances. Developing life skills does not imply a coercive strategy to return people to the mainstream, but simply represents leverage for people wishing to make active and constructive choices for themselves. But if greater recognition of their importance is to create genuinely effective policies, they must be informed by a careful analysis of how people acquire them. For this to occur, evidence from research and the lessons of innovative practice must be applied.

The benefits of life skills interventions for people experiencing social exclusion can be divided into four categories:

- meeting basic needs.
- coping with more complex forms of engagement.
- building social capital.
- transforming identities and raising aspirations.

### ***Meeting basic needs***

Life skills are important because they create the basis on which people can then draw to access other forms of assistance. There is no question that organisations experienced in delivering services to vulnerable people are very used to dealing with individuals who are not in a position to exert the influence of mainstream, well-developed life skills in their own interest. Someone with a chronic drug addiction and a history of mental health difficulties is unlikely to access services in a strategic or planned way.

For a service to be so entirely accommodating and responsive to the needs of a

particular group, however, there has to be an acceptance that the services it offers will not be relevant to a much wider client base. At day centres for vulnerable homeless people or drug users, for instance, there are not large numbers of children. There is a high staff to member ratio and staff and volunteers have been well trained in handling challenging situations if and when they arise. Many other services do not have such a specifically defined client-group. An inner-city doctors' surgery, for example, will also be trying to deal with families with young children and people with chronic health conditions, as well as homeless people and others. The practice cannot be as closely tailored to the needs of one part of their user base. But, in addressing social exclusion, medical care is still a frontline service; it is a necessary first step for large numbers of people who are marginalised, not least because physical and mental health problems can typically be both a cause and an effect of long periods of exclusion.

Life skills are essential for accessing health services and using them appropriately. Making and keeping appointments, clearly explaining problems and maintaining a steady commitment to any prescribed treatment are all things that make demands on a person's fundamental life skills; they are also key to making it possible to accommodate the person as a patient in a busy and overstretched inner-city medical practice. Similar demands would be made on life skills for people hoping to liaise successfully with Legal Aid lawyers to organise a defence for themselves in a criminal trial, avoid being unfairly sectioned under the Mental Health Act or to generate a response to a problematic immigration or asylum claim.

Ensuring socially excluded people have sufficiently well-developed life skills to access these frontline services should also be of interest to policy-makers. The social costs of social exclusion overall are incredibly high. For example, homeless people are more likely to commit offences and to suffer from drug problems; they are

also more likely to manifest severe physical and mental health problems than others, and less likely to seek treatment for those problems.

A case could be made for providing a dedicated service for these most vulnerable people. But resources are limited and until such a service emerges, the best chance of guaranteeing access to vital services is to equip socially excluded people with the skills they need to opt in to services appropriately. This creates the possibility of wider transformation in their lives.

### ***Coping with more complex forms of engagement***

Frequently, initiatives aiming to address social exclusion have focused on overcoming the factor perceived to have caused the social exclusion. On the NHS, drug users tend to be given detox treatments in a hospital and offered the chance to take part in a twelve-step programme. Local authorities and social services educate teenage parents about family planning and sexual health. Some may be given a council flat, or a place in a mother and baby unit, if they are fortunate. But these initiatives often have limited success. People repeatedly return to the patterns that had caused them to become socially excluded in the first place, despite the opportunity to escape those circumstances permanently.

The further away a person moves from services specifically dedicated to their particular area of need, the more important their life skills become. There will be fewer and fewer 'allowances' made for their particular situation, and their personal history. The professionals they are working with will no longer be specialists in dealing with their particular set of needs, but will be expert in a different field. While Jobcentre Plus, for instance, has some excellent examples of proactive outreach to homeless people in hostel and shelters, once a person has made a first step into employment those specialist staff are more likely to be deployed on a new, more needy caseload.

A homeless person who is moving on, to a tenancy, a longer-term training course or a sustained place in a volunteering role or a job, will need to be confident about their own competence to handle those situations before moving away from specialised provision. They will need to have the life skills that make them competent in articulating specific difficulties to support staff in a way that ensures their needs will be met. Individuals also need to be prepared to identify areas where they are struggling and be able to ask the right person for assistance.

Life skills development activities are also very much about helping people to identify coping strategies for themselves in difficult situations, and to develop emotional resilience. For example, specific initiatives addressing anger management, as well as programmes designed to encourage articulating emotion (as opposed to getting into a fight), have been operating in young offenders' institutions and secure training centres for some time. Not only do these enable people to commit to challenging experiences, they facilitate people trying again after an initial failure or setback. Some people undergoing a major lifestyle change of returning to mainstream provision may not be successful in their first attempt. Being able to persevere against various difficulties

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### **Key points**

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For people experiencing social exclusion, developing life skills has a number of benefits.

People find it easier to access basic services, like hospitals and advice from lawyers, if they have good life skills.

People are also more likely to be able to move on from specialist to mainstream provision of services and training, which means they will have the opportunity to learn the skills they need to get a job, or to look after their own home.

may well become as important as coping with the 'moving on' activity itself.

For policy-makers, the gains made from introducing services that enable people to access frontline services are considerable, but they become far more meaningful if they enable people to start making wider changes over the long term. Life skills development is about equipping people with a clear perception of their own ability to handle a whole range of challenging situations and, as a result, they enable people not just to meet their own day-to-day needs in terms of accessing services, but to take a more strategic approach to changing their lives over the longer term. These longer-term gains, which are about moving on from social exclusion, are vitally important if people are to be able to reintegrate fully with society.

### ***Building social capital***

Social capital is a concept used to describe the value that individuals and communities derive from social links between their members. It incorporates ideas about basic 'neighbourliness', such as having a friend watch over your house when you are away, for instance, through to much more sophisticated forms of social organisation, such as political parties and civic institutions. It stems from relationships between people, both close family and friendship links, as well as the more casual ties people acquire through membership of organisations or the workplace.

The links between individuals and communities with high social capital and other positive outcomes, such as good health and sustained employment, are well documented.<sup>8</sup> The chaotic lifestyles associated with social exclusion are not conducive to building social capital and therefore further disadvantage people caught up in the cycle of deprivation.<sup>9</sup>

Robert Putnam conceives of four different levels at which social capital operates: bonding (within homogenous groups of people), bridging (between diverse

groups and individuals), coping (which describes groups of people coming together to achieve a certain aim or goal) and leverage (which describes groups' abilities to effect the change they aim to bring about).<sup>10</sup> Life skills work develops individuals' capacity to place trust in others, which is a foundation for developing stable relationships that can form a support network as a person moves on from social exclusion.

It is through these new, reciprocal relationships that people experiencing social exclusion can begin to develop a store of social capital. This is vital, for several reasons. First, social capital tends to increase the likelihood of an individual experiencing a reasonable quality of life in terms of health, employment and education.<sup>11</sup> Second, it can also help to mitigate the effects of distressing experiences.<sup>12</sup> If a person is surrounded by a secure social network and they are made redundant, for example, there is a good chance that people within the network will know of other job possibilities for them to explore. Equally, these social networks give people a range of purposeful activities even when they aren't working, and thus provide a counterbalance to the apathy and depression that can accompany losing a job, or experiencing other traumatic experiences. Projects such as 42nd Street in Manchester, a youth mental health charity, have been recognising the importance of this model for years, creating a new and accepting community for young people who have frequently experienced stigma and exclusion as a result of their illnesses.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, however, research has also shown that acquiring social capital can make the biggest difference to people experiencing disadvantage – in other words, socially excluded people derive the greatest benefit from developing a store of social capital.<sup>14</sup> Skidmore and Harkin suggest that, in fact, as trust in public institutions diminishes, informal networks of trusted individuals (your neighbour, your



colleagues) will become increasingly important in terms of people's wider engagement with society.<sup>15</sup> This is likely to place socially excluded individuals at an even greater level of risk.

Social networks are at their most powerful when they include a diverse range of people within them. Socially excluded people frequently have good networks, but they largely consist of other people in the same position as themselves. For networks to provide the means to escape their circumstances, they also need to incorporate people from a wider social circle. Some initiatives can be instrumental in this process.

There is powerful evidence that social capital can be built up through effective intervention – it does not have to be 'naturally occurring' to be valuable to the individual.<sup>16</sup> The role of life skills work in relation to developing social capital is threefold:

1. Through creating a space in which people are engaged in a communal activity, life skills training fosters 'bonding' capital between the individuals using the service, many of whom have had similar life experiences. It includes the broader network of people accessing an initiative who might have more casual contact with one another, but are still fundamentally brought together at least partly through common experiences.
2. In addition to this, users develop 'bridging' capital with those different from themselves, both through relationships with workers delivering training and also through their new connections with other organisations and agencies.<sup>17</sup>
3. Skills training also helps to diminish the power of 'negative' social capital – effectively the 'brotherhood of thieves' situation whereby strong ties

of loyalty and dependency exist as a result of criminal or destructive behaviour.<sup>18</sup>

High social capital is associated with a host of positive outcomes and is more instrumental in helping to attain those outcomes when the person striving for them is low on other forms of capital. For policy-makers, social capital can offset a whole host of other, less effective forms of direct intervention in people's lives. Policy initiatives such as the New Deal for Communities have sought to draw on those positive outcomes, by fostering the very social networks at issue. For the socially excluded, social capital enables them to derive the same social and emotional benefits from a strong network of friends and associates that is taken for granted by their non-socially excluded peers.

### ***Transforming identities and raising aspirations***

Often, when a person becomes marginalised by a particular problem that they have, that issue consumes the rest of their identity as a person, and they become entirely swallowed up by their difficulty. Their problem is their 'primary' characteristic; in many cases it can

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### **Key points**

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Many policies helping to overcome social exclusion and low skills, such as Skills for Life and other basic skills work, have been effective in starting to bridge the gap between people's existing skills and those they need for a job. Others have been important for helping people to escape the most extreme forms of deprivation, such as the recent policy initiatives supporting rough sleepers and homeless families.

But for these policies to make a long-term difference, policy-makers must now invest in life skills work to ensure that people have the tools they need to make lasting changes in their own lives.

seem like the only thing that defines them in the wider world.

This, in turn, characterises the services they receive and the opportunities with which they are presented, which broadly fall into two categories. First, there are services that mitigate the effects of being excluded as a result of their particular set of issues. Projects providing basic services, such as washing facilities, clothing and food fall into this category, as would those offering a needle exchange. Second, there are those services that are highly focused on enabling people to overcome their exclusion, by providing opportunities to work or train, or by offering places in sheltered communities.

These services represent a lifeline to people experiencing social exclusion. Both kinds offer excellent models of services led by the needs of their users. Life skills work is important because it can help to fill the gap left between these two services: they provide for those people who are ready to move on, but are not yet in a position to be able to do so. Importantly, however, they also interact with socially excluded people not on the basis of their particular problem, but in a different way altogether.

Many initiatives working with offenders (both inside and outside prisons) and drug abusers now draw on creative activities such as drama and art, to draw people away from their negative behaviour cycle. Equally, the 'bite size' or 'taster' adult learning initiatives prominent within many Learning and Skills Councils take in a range of activities outside the basic skills remit which was once almost the exclusive focus for bringing in new learners at entry level. By offering people the chance to learn skills that they enjoy, FE colleges have realised they stand a far better chance of bringing in the most excluded and reluctant learners.

Because life skills activities are only secondarily concerned with addressing a person's practical needs and are far more concerned with aspects of their personal development, the focus inevitably shifts away from their socially excluded status.

While workers in other organisations might not define their users exclusively by their presenting issue, the nature of activities in which they are engaged guarantees that both users and workers will not be given an opportunity to move away from thinking about these associated problems.

When activities have a much broader focus, however, they offer a temporary release from thinking about the constant demands of life when one is excluded. People have reported a number of positive outcomes during these breaks. First, they alleviate the boredom and monotony of life on a low income. Second, they provide a new peer group with different things in common. Finally, from these changes in circumstances a sense of widening perspectives has emerged: people were able to look beyond their immediate circumstances and aspire to different achievements in the future.

As members develop a much clearer sense of what they are capable of, and develop those skills, they create space for themselves to consider long-term aims and aspirations. Rather than focusing exclusively on their immediate wants and needs, people can invest in reaching much more complex personal goals by increasing their awareness of what they are already able to do, and developing the life skills that allow those existing skills to be developed.

In fact, this experience is far from being unique to socially excluded people. Many people with far fewer demands placed on them report a new 'lease of life' that comes from taking up new activities, or mixing with a new peer group. Perhaps what this aspect of life skills work reflects most strongly is the fact that a socially excluded person, like any other, needs the chance to learn and develop, to do activities that they enjoy and do well and to develop a new peer group when they choose. Low income and socially excluded lifestyles make all these things difficult to achieve unaided, not least because of the emphasis on solving housing, health and employment problems first and

foremost, before engaging with people's other needs. A possible lesson from these findings is that this approach may be limited in its scope. Sometimes doing something completely different can be the catalyst people need to bring about change in the areas of their lives that are in crisis.

### **Bringing life skills onto the agenda**

As the policy dialogue around creating lasting solutions to social exclusion continues to deepen, life skills will inevitably rise up the agenda as one of the necessary elements of a considered response to people's long-term problems. As it does, however, we will face twin pitfalls in its development.

First, there is the risk that emerges from the failure of services to relate past experiences of socially excluded people to the new experiences that they will have once they re-enter mainstream provision. In other words, our interventions will rest on a premise that socially excluded experience is fundamentally irrelevant to other life experience and therefore irrelevant for possible progress towards new things. In so doing, we not only risk diminishing the strength of will that people show when they try to step away from difficult and damaging circumstances, we also significantly reduce the likelihood that that person will really be able to move on. Unless we equip people to build on their difficult past experiences as a foundation from which to move into a more stable lifestyle, successes in overcoming exclusion will only ever be short-lived.

A second danger emerges from the way in which we 'teach' life skills to socially excluded people. Leaving aside the more general debates about the ways that people learn best, there is a more specific point that relates to the learning of these life skills. These skills are among the least conducive to being taught in an 'empty vessel' model. Progress will only come as a result of acknowledging people's particular starting points and actively engaging with them at

that stage to create an individual strategy for them to move on.

For life skills interventions to have the impact on policy and services that they must have if those services are to make substantive progress in reducing homelessness, offending and poverty, then strategies for avoiding these possible pitfalls must be central to policy changes. The alternative understanding of life skills offered in *Survival Skills* places an emphasis not only on tangible development of new and more advanced skills, but also on changing people's own perceptions of the extent to which they are able to change outcomes in their own lives.

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### **Key point**

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Social capital describes the value we get from the social connections we have with other people, both in our close circle of friends and the wider community. It can have an impact on our health, our jobs and our general well-being.

Importantly, social capital can also make a big difference during times of crisis. People with high social capital are likely to cope better with difficult circumstances.

Building people's life skills also enables them to equip themselves with social capital and to benefit from strong networks that can support them in times of difficulty or crisis.

Life skills projects also give them the chance to take a break from their difficult circumstances and to take part in activities that they enjoy. A rest from the challenges of life in socially excluded situations can give people more energy to tackle their problems.

### 3. LIFE SKILLS IN PRACTICE: THE CRISIS SKYLIGHT MODEL

Crisis, the homelessness charity, has been running its Christmas outreach programme, Crisis Open Christmas for 33 years. For eight days, over Christmas and New Year, Crisis opens special centres across London, where rough sleepers and other vulnerably housed people can access services during the Christmas period. People are given the opportunity to engage with a whole range of activities: take drawing or painting classes, have a haircut, or spend time talking with workers and volunteers. The Open Christmas has a good track record of reaching the capital's most vulnerable people. Crisis wanted to take a next step and offer services all year round that would engage some of the Open Christmas members.

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There are various popular options for responding to homelessness that Crisis could have explored, perhaps aiming to achieve better 'moving on' rates than other organisations. They could have opened 'wet' or 'dry' hostels, or created a day centre, with washing facilities, access to food and warmth and the option of housing advice. They could have engaged with a particular sector of the homeless community, such as substance addicts or sex workers. But, when they consulted their existing membership, they found that people were less interested in having more of those services. What they wanted instead was the chance to engage in other types of work, unrelated to their homelessness. They wanted to take part in activities that enabled them to build up the skills they need for coping with life beyond

homelessness, rather than simply catering to their material needs.

As a result, Crisis Skylight was developed, a centre based in East London that opens each day to offer a range of different activities to homeless people. Members can take part in art courses, IT classes, exercise classes, drama and circus skills training, among others. Rather than looking only for hard measures of 'moving on', such as gaining an independent tenancy, centre staff focus on the personal development of the users and the extent to which they themselves feel that they have progressed. By emphasising life skills, Skylight staff believe they are offering their members an improved chance to escape the cycle of social exclusion in which they are trapped.

The Crisis Skylight centre successfully integrates a sophisticated understanding of the nature of life skills development work with a highly successful practical approach to delivery. Aspects of work are highly specific to the context in which the centre operates. It is based in an inner-city location, with a large homeless population, and the organisation behind the project is one already trusted by both homeless and non-homeless people. The surrounding area already hosts a range of highly successful organisations, both profit- and non-profit-making, giving the centre a strong support network to draw on.

There was, however, little ambiguity about the fact that Skylight was an overwhelmingly positive experience for most of the members who used it regularly. Equally, there was very little doubt about the initial signs of its success. Apart from the high and regular attendance and positive feedback of members, there are also indications that Skylight members have been gradually becoming more comfortable with accessing other services, with around 30 per cent of members saying they were more likely to engage with other services as a result of being with Skylight.

Skylight, however, is open about the fact that it does not intend its work to be relevant

to every individual experiencing homelessness – those with problems above a certain level of severity would find many of the activities hard to engage with. Individuals with low motivation, who struggle to focus on single activities, would also gain limited benefit from the centre. But the premise of the life skills work delivered by Skylight and other organisations is that as wide a range of different approaches is needed for homeless service provision as in other parts of the public sector.

Despite some of the context-specific factors aiding Skylight's success, several features of their service delivery were found to be principles that emerged consistently from other examples of best practice and also from the literature. Although interpreted differently in different contexts, these features were common to many examples of life skills learning in a range of different settings.

### Skylight principles

The four main principles which emerged were:

- voluntarism and ownership
- recognition
- 'safe' boundaries
- purposeful activity.

#### *Voluntarism and ownership*

Skylight gives participants as much freedom as possible in deciding what activities they engage in, at what level of intensity and for how long a period of time. A drop-in, drop-out culture exists, with workers apparently understanding that, for many of the users, there may be times of crisis where attending any kind of provision is ruled out. Projects are based around an understanding of the realities of chaotic lifestyles.

*If I don't want to come in for a few days, there won't be a problem with that when I go back.*

Member, Crisis Skylight

This sense of freedom contributes overwhelmingly to achieving success. It is a tangible commitment to the underlying belief that homeless people are able to make good choices for themselves given the opportunity. By not starting conversations about what people 'should' or 'shouldn't' be doing, project workers give homeless people the liberty to make meaningful choices about how to direct their energy, with consequences of those choices contained within a 'safe' environment, in which choices can easily be reversed and do not have lasting consequences. The life skills needed for making choices for oneself are transferred to a mainstream context, giving an individual a wholly different sense of their own ability to be self-directed in achieving personal goals.

*At Skylight, it's not being taught, it's more like being guided.*

Member, Crisis Skylight

Not only does the voluntary nature of the activities at Skylight facilitate the development of life skills, it also engenders a culture shift, away from the pervading mixture of isolation and dependency that characterises homeless experience, towards a growing

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### Chapter summary

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Crisis is an organisation that works with people who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless.

Crisis has recently started a new project, called 'Skylight', that offers an opportunity for members to learn life skills through taking part in various activities, such as art, bike repairs, yoga and drama, among others.

Skylight is an important and interesting example of how life skills training can be delivered, because it has found a model that integrates people with a wide range of different starting points and needs, as well as recognising the skills that members already have.



sense of personal agency, within the context of a supportive peer group.

This flexibility also inspires a willingness to try new things. Because members are free to withdraw from activities if they don't enjoy them, they are able to sample things that they're less sure about. This is important not only from the perspective of acquiring a broader range of practical skills, but also because it delineates the Skylight experience from the monotony of the rest of members' lives.

*Art is not my type of activity usually but I do use it [the art room] because you got some funky people in there.*

*You can have a chat with people, you can see, you can learn something.*

Member, Crisis Skylight

Minimising compulsion also places the service on an equal footing with non-homeless services. When non-homeless adults engage in leisure pastimes such as art, drama or dance they are not usually under any obligation to commit to attending every session. By adopting a similar model within the homeless sector, Skylight signals that it believes participants deserve comparable treatment.

### **Recognition**

Members frequently spoke about the importance of the recognition of achievements that they received at Skylight. This links in closely with the response-consequence learning pattern that children demonstrate when they are learning life skills. People become committed to the process of learning, or behaving in a particular way, because it is rewarded with a form of recognition that they value.

People mentioned the importance of having a fully qualified teacher, who would be equally able and qualified to teach in a mainstream setting.

*I learnt that when teachers come to teach, like acting teachers, they teach*

*you to the full extent, they don't teach you rubbish. They sweat.*

Member, Crisis Skylight

Classes were also frequently mixed, with homeless and non-homeless people doing tai chi and other fitness classes alongside one another. Often, workers from big city firms nearby would come and join classes as paying participants, while Skylight guests would go for free. Equally, volunteers send a different form of recognition: that the activities and people at Skylight are sufficiently valuable and interesting to warrant using their free time to participate.

Creative achievements were celebrated through art exhibitions both inside and outside the centre; equally, opportunities were sought for dance, drama and music groups to perform for an audience. Frequently, when this happened, Skylight would perform alongside non-homeless groups as well. Equally, art is recognised in an integrated context.

*You've got galleries set up like down the road in Whitechapel.*

Member, Crisis Skylight

The mentoring schemes in the centre offer a form of acknowledgement of the personal contribution made by people who use the centre, in supporting other users. People with a particular ability in offering support to others also experiencing homelessness are invited to become mentors and receive training to assist them in the role. Effectively, by embracing this mutual aid model of volunteering, Skylight is finding a way to acknowledge a 'qualification' in the very life skills they are trying to develop, without being drawn into trying to produce a formalised qualification structure for skills which do not easily fit that format.

When explaining why such recognition was important, members again talked about the parity between the way their achievements were acknowledged through Skylight and the way the achievements of non-

homeless people were acknowledged. Some participants were ambivalent about certificates, believing that the standard at which they would receive recognition was meaningless – that such a qualification didn't 'qualify' them for anything. Whatever the truth of this point of view, finding additional ways to recognise success (as well as giving certificates when appropriate) is an important part of letting people see the ways in which their life skills do equip them for re-engaging with the mainstream and providing the impetus for developing them further to that end.

Peer recognition is also an important part of the centre's atmosphere – members are encouraged to comment and enquire about each other's work. Visitors being shown round the art room are frequently shown others' work by their guide. Members are knowledgeable about the design of one another's work, or the long-term plans of their peers. Not only is receiving approval from peers a vital part of developing an identity as being skilful in a particular area, the giving of praise and constructive criticism is a highly sophisticated social skill – a mainstream version of the sort of diplomacy many homeless people will employ daily when dealing with the people they encounter on the street.

Involving members in the delivery of services in this way also reflects a commitment to 'coproducing' services. By involving some users in delivering services, the organisation is explicitly making members part of the process of service design and delivery. Developing models of coproduction for people who are extremely marginalised is, however, much more difficult to do. Because of the issues associated with chaotic lifestyles, creating the necessary continuity in service delivery and access can be hard to achieve. By attempting to create a model in which a degree of coproduction is possible, however, both for users and former users, participants are more involved in the programme than might otherwise be the case.

### ***'Safe' boundaries***

Safety is an important feature of the Skylight project. Staff and volunteers are valued highly and staff take their safety seriously. A critical feature of the pervasive culture at Skylight is the fact that the care taken of staff and volunteers at the centre is extended to members as well. There is little sense of 'us and them' about the way in which safety precautions are administered; rather, everyone participating in the centre's activity at a given time will work together to maintain a safe and inclusive atmosphere.

Generally, expectations of members are high at Skylight. The standard assumption is that people will behave in a reasonable and sociable way and that staff will not have to intervene to arbitrate when arguments do arise. Equally, the centre's and members' property is to be respected; there have been very few cases of theft at Skylight compared with many other day centres.<sup>19</sup> Having high expectations of how members will behave gives them the chance to break the cycle of behaving badly because that is what they might 'typically' do.

Rules are minimal and are clearly understood:

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### **Key points**

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Skylight operates according to certain principles for delivering good life skills work:

- Members should be able to choose how and when they are involved in the work.
- Skills should be delivered through purposeful activity.
- The centre should have safe boundaries.
- People should be recognised for their achievements.

You can find out more about Skylight at [www.crisis.org.uk](http://www.crisis.org.uk)

*There's no drink, no drugs and they will not tolerate any violence. Those rules are OK . . .*

Member, Crisis Skylight

Most members saw the rules as reasonable and well within the bounds of what could be expected of people, even those who were under particular stress:

*It's just manners, really.*

Member, Crisis Skylight

The rules are also interpreted consistently, with members knowing what to expect if they are broken:

*There aren't many rules, but they stick to the ones they have . . .*

Member, Crisis Skylight

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Members also know they have the right to criticise or question those rules, or the way they have been interpreted, if they wish to. Staff usually abide by the same rules as members. Here, again, modelling as a route to learning life skills becomes important; because everyone who is part of the centre behaves, broadly speaking, in a similar way and adheres to a shared set of rules, it becomes easier to sustain a minimum level of 'good' behaviour.

Perhaps most importantly, there is a culture of enduring care and commitment to members, which means that even if a rule is broken and a sanction follows, such action does not represent the end of the relationship between the centre and the individual. Other members were often very happy to see people return to the centre after a ban and, although some of them did resent bad behaviour in the centre, they were also prepared to acknowledge that part of Skylight's job was to reach those who were struggling the most.

*Everyone should be given a chance until such time as they transgress . . .*

Member, Crisis Skylight

Rules were also important to users because they made the centre separate from life in hostels and on the street. Staff were able to intervene to stop tense situations escalating and, unlike residential projects where it is entirely appropriate that members should have privacy and therefore not every area is staffed at all times, Skylight usually has staff in each room. The skills of staff and volunteers are such that there is no sense of the centre being 'policed'. Staff are seen more as a resource, by members, even over matters of rule-keeping.

### ***Purposeful activity***

The centre has an extremely busy atmosphere, which a number of members commented on during the course of their conversations.

There was a clear expectation that members would be engaged with a purposeful activity of some sort if they were in the centre; members felt to be dawdling were asked to leave, and those who were hanging about with no particular reason were encouraged to go and work in a focused way or to leave the centre until they were ready to take part in an activity.

*You can't just hang around here . . .*

Member, Crisis Skylight

Although this sometimes irritated members, they also recognised the unique contribution this expectation made to the general culture of Skylight and frequently mentioned it as part of the reason for Skylight being distinct from other day centres (although they were also clear about the need for space to be less activity-focused sometimes and were rarely critical of other centres).

*It's not just playing or walking the streets . . . it's trying things out that are constructive. . . . It is better to do something.*

Member, Crisis Skylight

There was also a diversionary value in the



activities that were offered:

*People who might rob, or take drugs,  
it means that they are occupied,  
doing something they like.*

Member, Crisis Skylight

This expectation of engagement and action seems to contribute to the life skills development work in two key ways. First, there is a basic understanding that homeless people using the centre are as equally capable of conforming to mainstream norms of behaviour as any other person; a training centre for non-homeless adults would not tolerate people loitering around with nothing to do, so neither does Skylight. As a result, members' expectations about their own capacity to deal with a mainstream training situation tend to become more positive; their growing understanding of their own life skills and their relevance to a wider context facilitates people starting to move on. Second, the focused nature of the activities facilitates the 'learning by stealth' model to which many workers referred:

*For a lot of people accessing the  
programme, being told they were  
'learning' would be threatening,*

*especially because of the sort of  
learning that happens here, where a  
lot of it is about things which can be  
hard to talk about, like how you  
communicate with other people, for  
example. Life skills learning happens  
quietly, alongside other sorts of  
learning or activity that people feel  
more comfortable with, and find fun.*

Staff member, Crisis Skylight

So, effectively, purposeful activities become a vehicle not only for learning the skills in question, but also a means of developing life skills and teaching other foundation skills (such as literacy and numeracy) in an unobtrusive way.

Skylight's approach embodies an effective alternative to the 'empty vessel' model of life skills learning that has dominated in the past. Examining good practice across a range of organisations working with socially excluded people in various situations reveals that common themes emerge in understanding what aspects of their work are particularly effective. Adapted to specific different areas of need, the same principles emerge repeatedly as being central to delivering good life skills development work.

#### 4. LEARNING FROM WIDER PRACTICE

Life skills development work is significant not only for people experiencing homelessness or chaotic housing arrangements; it forms a central part of the work of many projects engaging with individuals confronting a host of complex problems: offending behaviour, drug addiction and mental health issues, among others. Staffed by professionals who are well practised in negotiating the complicated terrain of converting theories about the nature and perceptions of life skills into meaningful work which changes the direction of people's lives, common lessons emerge from across the social exclusion sector.

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Four projects were highlighted as good examples of excellent practice in life skills development. They work across a range of areas, with different client groups, and in different settings. Their approaches were often surprisingly consistent with one another, however, and examining all four offers a coherent picture of how life skills delivery can be transferred to different contexts.

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#### **NACRO, Drake Hall Prison, UK**

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Drake Hall is a semi-open 'resettlement' prison just north of Birmingham for women who are reaching the end of their sentences and preparing to re-enter the community. As part of the prison's rehabilitation programme, NACRO, a crime reduction charity, runs an 'unlocking life skills' programme there with young adult

offenders aged 18–21. Participation in the project is voluntary; on arrival at the prison, women can choose between a range of activities including gardening, formal education and the NACRO programme. Project members explained that they chose NACRO's life skills course because of what they had heard by word of mouth from other inmates. Members of the scheme work towards Youth Achievement Awards. For NACRO project workers, the outcomes of the intervention are clear. Officers have reported better behaviour in the young adult offenders' house and project members talk to and support each other. Many want to find out about and pursue college courses or job opportunities. In the prison as a whole, there is less bullying and fewer 'F2052s' (inmates on suicide watch), compared with other women's prisons that can have between 40 and 50 F2052s at any one time.

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#### **Fairbridge**

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Fairbridge supports 13–25-year-olds who are not in education, training or employment or who have been identified as being at risk of dropping out. Programmes cover four main areas: recreation and community skills, work-based skills, independent living skills, and personal and social skills; these courses are a 'rehearsal for life'. Learning to cook does not just mean discovering which ingredients to use and how to use them – it includes buying the food, cooking the meal, serving it to friends and eating together. This communal aspect is perhaps the most important for Fairbridge where the emphasis is on personal and social education as the foundation for young people's development. Learning is experiential and holistic, which matters because the young people are then not 'set up for failure'.

When young people come to Fairbridge, they take part in a week-long access course of outdoor pursuits. Following this, development coordinators work with the

young people to identify their needs, and help them to develop an 'action plan' of activities they will undertake during their time there. Even when participating at Fairbridge does not result in 'hard' employment outcomes, as here, Charities Evaluation Service research found that after a period at the organisation young people were more likely to 'move on successfully'. Perhaps even more significant was the finding that young people consistently rate Fairbridge in the top four most important things in their lives.

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### **Toynbee Hall**

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Toynbee Hall is a settlement project in East London, which for the last 120 years has worked to improve the lives of local people through voluntary work. Its buildings accommodate over 40 different charities as well as a meeting hall, library, theatre and café. The organisation has recently returned to its roots, launching a residential volunteer scheme, aimed at people in their early 20s. The befriending scheme is run by Toynbee's Services for Children and Families department, which specialises in working with disaffected young people who have had negative experiences of school or home. The scheme pairs volunteer mentors with children for whom it receives referrals. Befrienders are recruited from across Toynbee's volunteers and receive two days' training before they begin. As well as covering essential issues relating to child protection, the training emphasises building an empathetic relationship with the young person.

The majority of these referrals come from social services, hospitals and educational psychologists. However, the organisation does not receive statutory funding for the project, and raises money through charitable donations. Eligibility for befriending spans the borough of Tower Hamlets, which includes areas of some of the most severe deprivation in the UK. The choice of befriending often suggests a sense that a young person's lack of self-

confidence and support networks are preventing them from developing their life skills as they might.

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### **Kaleidoscope**

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Life skills at Kaleidoscope can mean a variety of things. At one level, they are about having the ability to relate to others – interacting with and being part of a social group. Building confidence and self-belief are central to this. They are also about survival – for example, sexual health and drug education form a large part of their 'Streetwise' project. Finally, life skills are also practical – the structured morning programme runs a course on 'cooking within a budget' and the learning centre offers IT skills and other courses.

Kaleidoscope was established in 1968 to support the growing number of hallucinogenic drug users. Today it has grown in size and scope, serving 350 clients a day on its methadone programme and welcoming between 50 and 100 people to its daily drop-in centre. Facilities include a learning centre, clinic, structured activity programmes on weekday mornings, counselling, needle exchange and residential services. As this breadth demonstrates, Kaleidoscope aims to reach a wide range of people and provide extensive support to them all.

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### **Chapter summary**

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Every individual has a different starting point for learning and developing their skills. Life skills development projects need to have a good understanding about each person they work with.

A central part of this is starting with the assumption that socially excluded people have a range of skills, but need the opportunity to realise the relevance of those skills in different circumstances.

### **Life skills theory into practice**

Organisations working in this area need a model for interpreting life skills development that is consonant with their own discoveries about the impact of social exclusion on individuals. Debbie Rourke, a project worker with NACRO, explained that it is hard to define life skills in isolation from their delivery. For her, life skills are about building up people's confidence, autonomy, self-belief and motivation. Delivery must therefore be based on flexibility, choice and trust.

It is easy to understand the under-developed life skills of the socially excluded in terms of a shortfall compared with what people in less marginalised circumstances have. Many socially excluded people do not show signs of having skills that would enable them to be successful in getting a job, sustain a tenancy or become a regular volunteer. One interpretation of project work that enables people to progress from chronic exclusion through to gaining a degree of stability would be that it has 'taught' them those skills, which they can then go on to use elsewhere.

A more in-depth experience of the sector, however, challenges this relatively simple model, on the grounds that it fails to account fully for the variety that exists within the socially excluded sector. Believing this sector to be internally homogenous is an easy trap to fall into. In fact, the very nature of how organisations are developed to help them, and research conducted to find out more about them, suggests that, broadly speaking, socially excluded people are seen to fall into one of several categories. The reality of the situation is, however, that their diversity extends far beyond the type of social exclusion individuals have experienced and external factors such as sex and ethnicity.

The assumption that skills that people acquire during periods of social exclusion are fairly irrelevant once a person has become more integrated is a mistaken one. First, there are obvious examples of skills

that are more or less directly transferable, if a person is supported in seeing their relevance. For example, a person might be in a caring situation, looking after someone in similar circumstances to themselves who is coping much less well. Relationships in which people are required to listen, or be supportive of people during periods of crisis, are a preparation for a whole range of demanding relationships in non-excluded settings. This is borne out not least in the effectiveness of former-client staff in many projects working with social exclusion. In part, their effectiveness can be explained in terms of empathising with the person and their situation. In addition, people experiencing social exclusion are frequently placed in a position where there are only people in a similar position to themselves to call on for support. Sometimes this leads to the development of high-level support skills in people who have been, or are in, those situations.

Second, there are distinct skills that are manifested differently during periods of exclusion but which, with the right support and development, are relevant to more integrated situations. For many with a serious drug addiction, for example, most days include buying at least one, and usually more than one, illegal substance from a dealer. Dealers will often have a substance problem themselves, or are at least using drugs sufficiently frequently to jeopardise their emotional stability. It is important for the person buying drugs that what they buy is of a reliable level of purity and not cut with other substances that are either dangerous or diminish the effect of the drug. Negotiations in this context are much more demanding than in an ordinary day-to-day context. But people who negotiate with their dealers daily often struggle to make the necessary adjustments to negotiate with benefits officers, for example. Here, as well, life skills development work has a role to play.

An 'empty vessel' model of why life skills development is necessary with homeless

people is not a sufficiently good explanation of why life skills work matters to them. A more sophisticated understanding is necessary, which goes some way towards explaining the disconnection between socially excluded and non-socially excluded experience and explains why life skills development work should help to re-establish the link.

The psychologist Albert Bandura explains that,

*perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments.*<sup>20</sup>

There are countless examples to support this. People who have been in a car accident, whether their fault or not, frequently lose their sense of themselves as being a 'good' driver, and some refuse to drive again for some time as a result. Equally, gender roles in families often define people's perceived self-efficacy: some women who have worked and been competent in jobs for years before having children no longer see themselves as competent to return to work after their children start school.

Understanding the importance of perceptions of self-efficacy offers a slightly different picture of what happens to people's life skills during periods of exclusion. It is accepted that some of these people will almost entirely lack life skills, due to extremely difficult circumstances in childhood, or because of traumatic events that have followed. But many others do have life skills, which they seem to use only in relation to their own challenging circumstances. They do not perceive their skills to be useful in a broader context.

In this situation, life skills development work is not simply building life skills on a previously empty slate, it is doing two other important things:

- raising people's awareness of the life skills they already have

- showing them how those skills can be used in a mainstream context.

Life skills development work is not only about giving people skills they did not previously have, but also aims to equip them with an awareness of their existing abilities, showing how these can be useful in the mainstream. It is these activities which should form the basis of life skills development work with socially excluded people.

Many initiatives fail to grasp the necessity for this more subtle analysis of life skills. Governmental pressure for people to gain very basic qualifications, for instance, may create a perceived need for external signs of success in working with people, rather than being about a meaningful measure of success for the learner themselves.<sup>21</sup> However, life skills development activities do not exactly fit with a policy agenda emphasising outward signs of success. Life skills learning generally equips people with the self-awareness and the tools for exercising personal agency and increases the range of choices at their disposal; it does not tell them what those choices should be.

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### Key points

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Fairbridge is a youth organisation supporting young people aged 13–25 in disadvantaged areas around the UK: [www.fairbridge.org.uk](http://www.fairbridge.org.uk)

Kaleidoscope works with drug addicts and people coming off drugs to develop their skills: [www.kaleidoscopeproject.org.uk](http://www.kaleidoscopeproject.org.uk)

Toynbee Hall runs a number of projects in the east end of London. It runs a befriending scheme which pairs young people having difficulties at home and at school with volunteer mentors: [www.toynbeehall.org.uk](http://www.toynbeehall.org.uk)

The NACRO project at Drake Hall prison works with young female offenders approaching their release date to develop their life skills: [www.nacro.org.uk](http://www.nacro.org.uk)



Policies that do not start from this premise will not necessarily help to meet people's needs.

Connexions, the government's 'one-stop shop', was intended to provide a single point of integration for services to young people, especially those at risk. Young people were heavily involved in the policy design process and evaluated pilots of the new service as it was initially rolled out across the UK. Young people have continued to be active at the management level of most Connexions partnerships across the country. Connexions has also recognised that young people's involvement in wider activities such as youth work or volunteering is vital for young people's development, rather than a diversion for when they are not in school. Connexions actively encourages young people in their wider pursuits and was instrumental in promoting voluntary activity, especially among young people from marginalised backgrounds.

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Like many other similar policies, however, Connexions fails to recognise fully the ways in which these activities are valuable for the young people who take part in them. Connexions primarily emphasises young people's engagement with these activities and their involvement with other services as being a means to an end: young people should take part in the activities because they are necessary or desirable on the way to gaining future employment, rather than because of the broader value that emerges from taking part in this type of work.

Connexions also adopts a deficit model of the young people with whom it works. Rather than teaching young people to adapt their existing abilities to different contexts, they are encouraged to accept a standardised model of level of engagement with employment and training. This limits the extent to which young people themselves are able to define their own needs, coproduce the services they receive or provide for other young people.

Similar shortfalls occur within basic skills education for adults. The Skills for Life

strategy was the government's response to the shortage of literacy and numeracy skills among adults, both unemployed and those working in full- or part-time jobs. Problems arise because the strategy fails to explore the connection between these two factors in more detail; rather than considering the implication of the cause and effect relationship between disadvantage and low skills, the strategy addresses it only by committing to particularly target people in those situations. The problem is that until the practitioners delivering this type of training understand the reason for the link between disadvantage and low skills and aim to address it specifically, rather than by simply offering training for people to 'make up' the gap, the difficulties of the most excluded people will continue not to be addressed.

In practice, good life skills work reflects this model of understanding much more clearly. Naomi Dunn, a project worker at Fairbridge, describes life skills as the 'foundation for a happy professional and personal life'. Her colleague, Tim Smith, Training and Development Manager, explained that life skills contribute to a platform from which people can make more informed choices in their lives, for themselves.

### **Flexible starting points**

A practical interpretation of this understanding of life skills requires project workers to be adept at accepting the widely differing starting points of their members. Perhaps most important is recognising that people are in challenging circumstances for a variety of reasons. For some, it is due to a single traumatic event in their lives: a divorce, for instance, or being thrown out of their family home by parents or carers. Others are in a difficult situation because of a steady deterioration in their circumstances: increasingly overwhelming mental health problems, for instance.<sup>22</sup> These differing contributing causes of social

exclusion also affect the experience of exclusion itself and mean that life skills needs will differ widely within any one project.

Consequently, at Fairbridge, the programme is codesigned by the young people themselves – the content, structure and duration of any course is flexible, responsive and tailored to their individual needs. For example, if a young person needs to learn how to cook, but only has a microwave at home, the cooking course will work within these constraints.

Kaleidoscope staff explained that, from day one, goals and activities are shaped to the client – every life is different, so the skills required to make it a happy and fulfilled one vary hugely. Each client is assigned a key-worker who helps them to develop a ‘care plan’ outlining their aims and the activities they will take part in. This is an important relationship, so if a client feels uncomfortable with their key-worker, changes are made and a new worker is assigned until the client is comfortable. Also, the content and actual pace of activities is determined in consultation with the client. In the learning centre, clients first come in to have a cup of tea with Chris Jelley, the ‘Learning Team’ leader, in a shared kitchen. This eases new members into the environment and together they begin to identify the client’s interests.

### **Voluntarism**

Voluntary engagement was identified as one of the most important principles of delivery at Skylight. It has also been borne out as an extremely valuable aspect of many other programmes seeking to create transformation in participants’ lives. Among the most vocal advocates are those working with alcohol- and drug-dependent individuals. The ‘Twelve Step’ approach that informs the work of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and other related organisations is extremely clear that the decision to stop using the addictive

substance should be made by the addict. People, they argue, will only change their lives when it is their choice to do so, not when others feel that they should.<sup>23</sup>

Choice is a central part of Fairbridge’s ethos. ‘If the young people don’t get anything from the project, they vote with their feet’, says Fran Harrison, manager of Fairbridge West. Young people are referred to Fairbridge, but attendance is voluntary. If they stay, it is because they are getting something from the experience. Coercing people into staying would make the project ‘disintegrate’ according to Fran – not just because of the impact on the individual, but because of their impact on the rest of the group, and their perceptions of Fairbridge. Voluntary participation is also a cornerstone for the success of Kaleidoscope. If a project is successful, clients will stay; the knowledge that they can leave if they wish often helps to persuade them to return. Attendance levels tell project leaders if the course is successful. For adult learners in particular, the chance to exercise their own agency in relation to learning can be an essential part of encouraging them to commit fully to the experience.

Equally, at Toynbee Hall, the first important principle of the befriending scheme is voluntarism, at every stage of the relationship. For the young person, this means that, unlike with other forms of learning, they have to decide whether it represents time well spent. They negotiate with their befriender the kinds of activities they might pursue, and decide whether or not to trust them. In terms of administering the scheme, the costs of voluntarism include time wasted waiting for young people who don’t keep appointments, or who end time with their befriender abruptly to meet with their friends. For Dave Sullivan who helps to manage the scheme, however, this unreliability is simply part of working with disaffected young people, so that it helps to acknowledge and negotiate it explicitly, rather than seek to impose schedules and arrangements. In fact, one of the key things

young people learn from befriending is the ability to manage and nurture a one-to-one relationship.

One possible problem with voluntarism, however, is that it may automatically exclude those in greatest need. If people have to make a proactive decision to engage with an activity or scheme, as opposed to being placed under substantial pressure or even compelled to do so, it requires participants already to be at a particular stage in their own personal development – one at which they are sufficiently confident, self-aware and well informed to be able to make a deliberate choice about their own involvement. This inevitably excludes those in the most entrenched socially excluded circumstances, acclimatised to their present situation and therefore least able to create a change. Coercion, some argue, is the only way to address the needs of this group.

The fact that a scheme has no expectation of compulsory involvement does not, however, necessarily mean that those who are not self-motivated to attend, or who drop out, are not placed under some pressure to return. The difference in these cases is that the pressure comes not from professionals, or legal obligations, but from their peers within the centre itself. This peer pressure can be a much more powerful tool for transformation than initiatives carried out under compulsion.

In addition, certain organisations, even those operating within environments such as prisons, have been able to develop schemes containing elements of self-direction and choice within them.<sup>24</sup> Equally, in some models participants sanction a degree of compulsory involvement. For example, in some organisations that work in partnership with the probation service members permit the project staff to report back to their probation officer about their attendance.<sup>25</sup> Coercive arrangements can be renegotiated to fit with an organisation's preference for voluntary attendance.

## Learning through activities

Life skills development organisations use a methodology of creating opportunities for developing one set of skills (ie life skills) through the process of learning a separate set of skills (ie the various activities taking place in the centre). At Fairbridge, personal and social skills are learnt through a range of courses, including outdoor activities, cooking, visual arts and web design. At Toynbee Hall, the relationships between young people and befrienders are developed through a range of outings and activities that the young people select for themselves. Through these, befrienders seek to help them to take part in regular group activities, helping to expand their networks of support further and create habits of constructive activity that will be sustained after the year of befriending. Similarly, at Drake Hall, the young women work on a project that interests them, with much of the life skills learning mediated through the research, development and sharing of that work.

This approach is also upheld by experts on non-formal learning. Early youth movements, such as the Scouts and Guides, were very concerned with developing young people's life skills, although their conception of what these might include was certainly very different from today. Their organisational philosophy reflected a commitment to using other activities for achieving this aim. This approach is still favoured by a large proportion of youth organisations. Equally, this 'learning by stealth' approach has been adopted by other sectors to different ends: literacy skills are taught through football clubs and IT skills are taught through a whole variety of different access points.<sup>26</sup>

Developing life skills requires a very particular sort of learning and does not resemble any conventional idea of a typical learning process: there is no meaningful way to offer a formalised test of competency, and knowledge takes the form of 'know-how' rather than 'know-what'. The delivery method is likely to be very different from



formal learning environments. At Kaleidoscope, the Learning Centre's core work of 'basic and IT skills' is funded by the Learning and Skills Council. This formal learning is often off-putting to clients, so Kaleidoscope staff use the learning centre 'shell' of art, music, video and business to draw clients in and start to build the self-worth and confidence on which a commitment to more formal learning must be based.

In the Toynbee Hall scheme, while activities are significant in their own right, perhaps even more importantly they keep disaffected young people sufficiently interested and entertained to engage in conversation about their lives and how they live them. Befrienders can help them to reflect on better ways of handling different . Equally, befrienders are able to demonstrate for the young person the ways in which they handle conflict or difficulty, providing the positive role models that many lack.

### Setting boundaries

Boundaries or rules are another common feature in life skills development programmes. At Toynbee Hall, testing boundaries with a befriender represents another important way in which life skills learning happens. Befriending relationships function as safe spaces where young people can experience the conflict or frustration they may find so difficult in the rest of their lives. By behaving in ways that are consistent and clear, showing that they really value their relationship with the young person, and through the amount of time they spend with them, befrienders can help young people to develop strategies for dealing with these challenges. Befrienders receive training to ensure they do this in a way that is empathetic to the young person. Befrienders are asked to remember difficulties in their own childhood, helping them to recall that questions such as 'how was school?' can actually prevent them from forging the kinds of positive relationships capable of helping the young person.

Similarly, the relationship between staff and clients at Kaleidoscope was un-animously described as having 'boundaries, not barriers' by the people we spoke to. Boundaries are those of respectful behaviour, and no artificial barriers are erected – both staff and clients dress casually and it is not always obvious who is who. There is a real sense of community and more than one person referred to the 'Kaleidoscope family'. Clients' interactions and expectations about these boundaries also help to give an indication of their progress in relation to using Kaleidoscope. One worker, Lauren, explained that she knows that when clients 'pencil in' video club for a Thursday morning, and get indignant if it doesn't happen, they have made a significant step.

Solidarity among the groups of young people is important in enforcing the 'rules' of Fairbridge. They are very simple and are solely to ensure that Fairbridge remains a safe environment, without some of the factors that makes life outside so complex for Fairbridge's young people. These rules are no drugs and alcohol, no exclusive relationships, no violence and no offensive behaviour. Responses to rule-breaking are always in proportion and are discussed with the person involved first. The sense that the guidelines are reasonable and fair leads to

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### Key points

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Connexions is a policy designed to support young people aged 13–19, as they make decisions about jobs, training and education. It also aims to help them with other difficulties they might experience relating to their personal lives.

Its approach sometimes falls short, however, in recognising the importance of the skills that young people may already have. It also focuses on education and employment outcomes, sometimes at the expense of developing the important life skills that lie beneath such achievements.

real acceptance by the young people; Naomi stressed that members often do the enforcing, for example, telling their peers that verbal abuse is 'not right'.

## **Staff**

Staff are consistently mentioned by both users and the wider literature as a critical factor behind the success of life skills development work. A three-year study carried out by the Charities Evaluation Service into personal and social education at Fairbridge identified the staff as the 'key factor' in the organisation's effectiveness. The way in which staff operate is central to the structure of the organisation's activities as a whole, with their approach driving the overall ethos of the work that is done. Staff are almost constantly available to young people while they are enrolled in Fairbridge, and have relaxed and informal relationships with them.

Similarly, in NACRO's Drake Hall project, members go to NACRO staff to talk through worries about their past, present or future. They approach NACRO staff for help with practical difficulties such as sorting out compassionate leave or a doctor's appointments and continue to talk to staff after being released for support and to share successes and worries. Debbie pointed out that letting young women come to them, as opposed to the staff imposing themselves on the young women, is central to making this work – staff are a resource that project members can choose to approach if they wish.

Staff working in life skills projects need to have an ability to innovate and respond effectively if they are to meet the needs of very different individuals at any point in the day, in any context. At Fairbridge, managers explained that staff must also be able to deal with a significant amount of responsibility – designing, delivering and reviewing programmes with young people requires a variety of skills, and can have a major impact on the members' lives. The staff–young

person ratio necessarily stands at one to four.

At Kaleidoscope, the staff's understanding of members' behaviour is one of the main ways to measure early progression. One worker, Uschi, explained how she knows that when clients start complaining about the murkiness of the centre's kitchen, they have taken a step forward – to begin with, the shadows and 'womb-like qualities' of the room allow people to hide and begin to feel comfortable in their surroundings.

## **User involvement in shaping and delivering services**

Good life skills development work also tends to draw heavily on members to help shape and deliver services. First, members' opinions are often sought on improving or changing the service offered. NACRO project members shape collective provision as well as the content of individual projects. In 2003 NACRO delivered a successful first-aid course within the programme, and re-focused it on babies and children when participants suggested this might be the most relevant area. The group discussed it together, and agreed on what would best serve them all.

Feedback occurs in casual conversation with NACRO workers but also happens in a more structured way. Carole Burgess, project worker at NACRO, recently sent out a questionnaire to prisoners, past and present, to establish what activities had been successful during people's sentences, and in serving them after their release. This serves both informational and emotional purposes: information determines the appropriateness of services; listening and responding to inmates' concerns ensures take-up of courses, as well as helping to persuade them that their voice is important and that participating in feedback is meaningful. Fairbridge and Kaleidoscope both use a model of informal and formal feedback, with casual conversations between staff and members (or between established and new

members) running alongside a more structured forum for opinion sharing.

The programmes also tended to use former or existing users as volunteers and staff for delivering the programme itself. This mutual aid model is mentioned in a range of different contexts as being a particularly valuable way to improve the quality of services being offered, while also maintaining credibility and providing a meaningful recognition for the people involved. It also offers a role model for other members to look to when experiencing setbacks or disillusionment with the process.

Literature on good practice from homeless and other sectors mentions mutual aid as an important facet of an organisation.<sup>27</sup> Other voluntary organisations often favour it as an approach: some recruit (at least in part) through a mutual aid model in the sense that they search for people with experiences similar to those of their members. Others have gone further still; Fairbridge, for instance, has a formalised career progression programme through which some former members can go on to become trained staff. Around one in four of the operational staff are ex-Fairbridge clients.

At Drake Hall, as well, more experienced members of the project are also trusted to help deliver courses, such as 'Communication', which most of the young women take. This contribution to and participation in other people's successes is a rewarding experience in itself, but also reflects back to the young women how much they have achieved personally, thus reinforcing their own sense of accomplishment.

### **Recognising achievement**

As at Skylight, other life skills development projects have found that recognition of achievement is essential to maintaining people's momentum for learning. But for recognition of achievement to have a genuinely significant impact, projects need

to consider carefully the forms of reward or acknowledgement they use. For many projects, for instance, it is important to consider the relevance of the form of acknowledgement for the particular type of achievement made. So success in an art project will be signalled by an invitation to display work publicly, as opposed to simply giving a certificate. Equally, rewards and recognition work best when they resemble the way that such achievement would be acknowledged in a non-socially excluded context. A growing ability to deal well with people in difficult situations is recognised through asking someone to become a mentor, rather than by giving a certificate, while gains in literacy or numeracy would be shown through giving a qualification. This is borne out in practice at Fairbridge, where young people who have been in the project for a longer time are gradually brought more and more into the process of supporting and inducting young people who are newer to the organisation.

At Toynbee Hall, the befriending scheme is not accredited at all. While this may limit the young people's ability to make public what they have learnt, and as a result to internalise it and sustain their progress, this is one of the functions of the summer camp (discussed below). Equally, while it might at times be helpful for befrienders to have a clear picture from teachers or parents of the impact of their relationship in the rest of their lives, the scheme believes that their ignorance of this is actually even more beneficial. The befriending relationship represents a blank canvas, on which young people are free to experiment with different kinds of behaviour, and to leave behind the negativity or anxiety that may affect other parts of their lives. The scheme suggests that, in terms of learning life skills, access to this kind of space can be an invaluable part of a young person's development.

For many, more familiar forms of acknowledging achievement still resonate powerfully, after a lifetime of failure in learning environments. Members of the

NACRO project really value the certificates they gain, whether or not they are externally recognised by an awarding body. For project member Rachel, who was expelled from school at 14, these were the first qualifications she had ever received. Project workers have begun publishing a list of achievements and selected creative writing in the Drake Hall prison newsletter. Kaleidoscope reports similar stories from their members, who receive a range of certificates for their various achievements during their time with the project.

### **Supporting transitions**

Good quality life skills development work does not stop abruptly when a person leaves the centre at which they first accessed the project, even though developing strategies for people leaving an organisation can be hard to manage alongside the activities programme. The mutual aid model of volunteering is one such strategy. Equally, some projects have a broadly defined client group that incorporates people who are moving on from social exclusion but are still in a transition stage.

Others have close working relationships with 'next step' organisations that facilitate moving on in a supported and structured way. At Fairbridge, some teams work closely with outreach workers at local FE colleges, to smooth the transition into other training opportunities. This may even include initial lectures and induction activities taking place at Fairbridge centres, as opposed to the more intimidating buildings housing the colleges themselves.

The NACRO project finds transition one of the greatest challenges of their work. Often, ex-inmates find it impossible to break the patterns of their previous life when they are released – the prison service as a whole is working on improving follow-up work. But some people are enabled to make a fresh start, often in close proximity to the prison. They are safer and more successful knowing that among other things they can cook within a budget, complete successful projects and engage confidently in conversation with others.

Equally, continuing relationships are important to young people when they leave Fairbridge. Staff don't sever the links with a young person once they move on. The nature of this continued contact depends on the person in question and staff need the freedom to respond flexibly. Some people continue to 'pop in' to Fairbridge frequently after starting at school or in a job; others come during a crisis. The vast majority, however, opt to remain within the Fairbridge 'family' for a period of time after leaving.

At Toynbee Hall, the summer camp is a critical part of sustaining the value of the work into the future. The befriending scheme culminates in a week-long summer camp for those on the scheme. Possible befrienders also attend for the week, or visit for one or two days, to share the experiences of the young person with whom they have worked. For many of the young people the camp is not only an opportunity they have never had before, it is a chance to reflect on and celebrate the progress they have made during the year, and perhaps to build friendships with others in similar positions.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

**Government should acknowledge the central role that life skills development plays in facilitating people's escape from long-term deprivation. It should make a commitment to provide resources for the creation and maintenance of high-quality life skills work across the UK.**

This government has transformed the skills sector in the UK and invested heavily in developing the talents, abilities and opportunities of the most vulnerable groups in society.

Labour's social policy agenda since 1997 has recognised the link between low skills, high unemployment and associated high social costs in areas such as health care and criminal justice. This has included investing heavily in training and information campaigns to promote skills acquisition and build employability among those people left behind by the rapid pace of change in technology and industry.

This investment has yielded good returns. But for the pace of change to be maintained and the full value of investment in training to be recovered, the government must now invest in the softer skills that enable people to translate their learning into a social context, whether that be the job market, parenting or taking part in community life.

Life skills can affect stay-on rates in education, entry into employment and relationships with family and community. The potential benefits of effective life skills provision in socially excluded communities are far reaching. Government investment in such work should reflect the central role that it plays in achieving a significant proportion of the government's key targets in other areas.

**Life skills development work should be tailored to the specific contexts in which it happens. There should not be a 'one size fits all' approach to project design; rather, existing projects should be encouraged and new ones developed if necessary.** Experts on education are usually keen to highlight the importance of context and individual preferences for achieving effective learning. For life skills development with socially excluded people, it is a basic minimum; without attending to the personal needs and situation of each person accessing a particular programme, there is no chance that meaningful and lasting progress will be made.

Understandably, in policy terms, the success of one project in one area tends to create an impetus to recreate similar or identical work in different locations, with the intention of recreating the success. But for life skills work, such an approach would be potentially disastrous. Of course, there are key points about delivery that are

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### Chapter summary

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Government must respond to the life skills agenda if its existing investment in developing skills is to be effective. It must invest in life skills development across the UK.

Life skills development projects should be free to adapt to the different places and people with which they work.

Voluntary and community sector organisations, as well as the government, should be involved in delivering life skills work.

People who use and deliver life skills work should help to decide how to judge projects' success.

Researchers should find out what life skills provision is already available, and identify the 'gaps'.

Users and former users should help to deliver life skills training.

Projects should also be valued by the contribution they make to users' social and emotional lives.



significant for people working to deliver life skills training in a range of different settings. But if life skills training is to have system-wide impact, then policy-makers and professionals must be prepared to allow the freedom for the various models to be adapted to different contexts. Rather than imposing a single model, or limited range of models, projects must be judged on the success of their work for the individuals that they serve, leaving them with the freedom to shape the nature of delivery to suit the needs of each distinct client group.

**Interventions should be delivered by a variety of providers, taking full advantage of the existing voluntary and community infrastructure in a given locality, as well as the trust built up by some organisations through long-term involvement with communities.** In particular, delivery of services should be based in organisations and institutions that members and potential members trust. In many areas the voluntary and community sector has had a long-term relationship with a group of people experiencing exclusion, and will be treated with less scepticism than a seemingly 'new' initiative coming from an unfamiliar source.

There is less suspicion about what will happen to information that participants give to the organisation, and more informal structures of engagement make it easier to build up trust over time. In other areas a particular part of the statutory sector will have carved out a similar niche within a specific client group. Trust is central to delivering life skills work.

Identifying and working with these trusted organisations (whether or not they are already doing life skills work) will be essential if a broader group of people is to be engaged in this sort of learning. Tempting as it may be to select a small number of delivery agents and concentrate efforts on them, it is only through navigating the complexity of institutions and organisations within a given locality that supporting life skills work will generate real progress.

**Accountability measures for life skills work should be devised in partnership with the deliverers and users of life skills services. They should take into account the potential for new and innovative approaches to measurement, and be based on the expectation that socially excluded people, like many others, are capable of reporting on their own personal progress in relation to particular goals.** Equally, it should take into account the value of the professional judgement of people working within the sector for many years.

Life skills work is notoriously difficult to measure; this can make accountability and evaluation for funding and other forms of support a difficult problem to solve. At the moment, the attempts to find a solution are time-consuming, demanding detailed data collection about individuals attending a scheme and often asking for proof of learning outcomes, which are extremely difficult to define in concrete terms.

A recognition from policy-makers of the vital work that life skills projects do, however, would also necessitate a commitment to addressing new methods for measurement, which would alleviate some of the pressure (especially on extremely small organisations) to collect and produce large quantities of data, while also delivering high-quality work.

Involving people actively delivering and using life skills development work in the process would help to guarantee a more effective approach. Methods should be considered that draw on members' own judgements of their progress, including peer-to-peer and self-assessment. This approach has the additional benefit of recognising an excluded person to be a qualified judge of his or her own performance, instead of constantly requiring their decisions to be confirmed or mediated by a person in a position of authority. Similarly, a new system of measurement should seize the opportunity to place faith in the judgement of those providing life skills development

work, many of whom are qualified to make judgements about progression as a result of years of experience in the sector.

Taking advantage of both these possible avenues for assessment is likely to give rise to a system that is more willingly embraced by providers. It would also be fairer in assessing success over longer periods of time and recognise many of the smaller incremental steps towards changing lives that more cumbersome accountability frameworks fail to take into account.

**Research should be undertaken to establish the type of provision already offered, the level of demand for comparable provision to be offered to different groups or localities and the degree to which existing service providers (both statutory and voluntary) might be able to extend their capacity in this direction.** A critical first step for rolling out more extensive life skills provision will be identifying the areas of need, and the existing services in those locations. Every effort should be made to engage organisations already delivering life skills work in the process of designing, undertaking and guiding this process.

**Life skills projects should develop and make use of the talents of their users and former users in delivering and coproducing the services they offer.** Users and former users are among the people best qualified to make judgements about the effectiveness of particular approaches to delivering development activities. Equally, they are also an essential part of any staff team in a project aiming to reach the most vulnerable and excluded people. They offer both a specialised knowledge of the issues and a degree of empathy that is hard to find elsewhere.

Some services have adopted a model in which most development and delivery is orchestrated by users and former users. For other types of initiative, especially where particular expertise is needed that requires lengthy professional experience (for instance, the art classes at Skylight), users and ex-

users are likely to form only part of the staff. Both of these models can be highly effective. The vital role played by users in both, however, should form a central consideration for service delivery for all user groups.

**Life skills interventions should be designed in a way that takes account of users' particular needs, without being driven exclusively by those needs. There should be recognition of the value of giving people a rich social and emotional life, regardless of their employment or educational status.**

Policy initiatives designed to respond to a particular identified type of social exclusion understandably place the nature of that particular need at the centre of service design. Examining examples of successful life skills development shows, however, that bridging the gap between users' present situations and the more desirable mainstream scenario will not always be enough to create meaningful and sustained transformation in people's lives.

Offering people the opportunity to develop life skills that they have not previously had the chance to explore is an important step towards making services accessible. An additional strength of many life skills training environments, however, is that by virtue of the sort of activities through which life skills are transferred, the situations themselves represent a break from the monotony that frequently characterises socially excluded life experience.

Because life skills development activities are not so much about the source of a person's exclusion, but are in fact far more about stepping away from that exclusion, the development work itself offers a break. As important as it is to create services that are tailored to meet a particular set of needs, it is equally essential that the service does not become so centred on these needs that it ceases to offer alternative models for engagement that may become a person's route out of the cycle of exclusion.

- 1 For example, organisations such as Crisis, Centrepoint, Fairbridge, Prince's Trust and others.
- 2 Response to the launch of the Performance and Innovation Unit report, *In Demand: adult skills in the 21st century*, November 2001.
- 3 Speech at 'Public Services under Labour: a symposium and mid-term review', at IPEG (Institute for Political & Economic Governance; www.ipeg.org.uk), University of Manchester; 22–23 January 2003.
- 4 See, for instance, the findings of the *Youth Cohort Study: the activities and experiences of 19 year olds* (DfES, 2003).
- 5 See *Guardian*, 20 Oct 2000.
- 6 Social Exclusion Unit, *Teenage Pregnancy*, Cm 4342 (London: The Stationery Office, 1999).
- 7 Factfile 2000, NCH Action for Children, 2000.
- 8 See R Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
- 9 See Paul Haezewindt's article, 'Investing in each other and the community: the role of social capital', published with the *British Social Trends Survey 33* (Office of National Statistics, 2003), and also the Friends of Boston's Homeless article, 'The homeless need solutions' (www.fobh.org./lifeskills.htm).
- 10 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. Also, John Bell's presentation, 'Social Capital – a theory with relevance to practice?', made at the NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations) national conference, 2002.
- 11 See Haezewindt, 'Investing in each other and the community'.
- 12 See Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.
- 13 You can find out more about 42nd Street's work with young people in Manchester by visiting their website (www.fortysecondstreet.org.uk).
- 14 DJ Pevalin and D Rose make this point in their text, *Social Capital for Health: investigating the links between social capital and health using the British Household Panel Survey* (London: Health Development Agency, 2000).
- 15 See the short report by P Skidmore and J Harkin, *Grown-up Trust*, a scene-setting paper for the Demos/Nationwide series on trust (London: Demos, 2003).
- 16 For example, see paper by E Sullivan, 'Social exclusion, social identity and social capital: reuniting the global, the local and the personal', presented at the Conference de l'Association Internationale des Ecoles de Travail Social; published by De Montfort University, Milton Keynes, 2002.
- 17 See 'Hope for a better life for care leavers', *Guardian*, 1 Dec 2001.
- 18 See R Sampson, 'Networks and neighbourhoods' in H McCarthy, P Miller and P Skidmore (eds) *Network Logic* (London: Demos, 2004) and also John Bell, 'Social Capital'.
- 19 During several visits to the centre and discussions with Crisis Skylight and non-Skylight staff, repeated anecdotal evidence was gathered indicating that theft rates in the centre were low.
- 20 A Bandura, *Self Efficacy: the exercise of control* (New York: WH Freeman, 1997).
- 21 Some basic skills delivery, for instance, was felt to place too much emphasis on gaining qualifications such as Wordpower, or Numberpower. This said, a large number of people gaining those qualifications did report a sense of achievement about attaining a first qualification, or certificate. The fact remains, however, that framing such provision in an assessment framework will inevitably exclude some of the most marginalised adults. Moreover, it is possible that people would respond equally positively to other forms of acknowledgement; a certificate or qualification may not be the only way to give people recognition.
- 22 For a detailed discussion of the different circumstances by which people become homeless, see 'Routes into Homelessness: a study by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion of the paths into homelessness of homeless clients of the London Borough of Camden's Homeless Person's Unit', (CASE, 2000).
- 23 See the Alcoholics Anonymous website for more details (www.alcoholicsanonymous.org.uk).
- 24 Various projects delivered in prisons and young offenders' institutions reflect this model. See, for example, Drake Hall Women's Project described elsewhere in the pamphlet.
- 25 Numerous youth organisations have adopted this model when necessary, to allow them to continue to deliver services to young people who have been sentenced for offences.
- 26 Football clubs engaged in delivering education initiatives for their local area include Mansfield Town and Everton. At Ashton Community Centre in Belfast, for instance, IT skills are taught through work-finding programmes, with members becoming increasingly confident and independent with technology over the course of time.
- 27 See Abigail Cooper's *All in a Day's Work: a guide to good practice in day centres working with homeless people* (CHAR, 1997) ISBN 0906951798.