Good Things Foundation – written evidence (CCE0206)

Summary:
1. This response focuses on three key areas:
   ● Good Things Foundation and the Online Centres Network as an example of an organisation which supports both civic engagement and social cohesion and integration
   ● Some of the barriers to active citizenship faced by adults, and our Theory of Change
   ● Our experience of delivering a major English language programme - English My Way - supported by the Department for Communities and Local Government, and its impact on community integration.
   We have also put forward recommendations for consideration by the committee.

Good Things Foundation and the Online Centres Network as an example of best practice

2. Working with a hyperlocal network of 5,000 community partners, Good Things has a significant reach and scale. Set up originally as a network to tackle digital exclusion by providing free or low cost support in using the internet, it has evolved to become a network which supports disadvantaged people in some of England’s poorest communities to come together in vibrant and positive ways, creating more socially cohesive and engaged communities. We believe we have a model for community cohesion and civic engagement which could be built on.

3. This is demonstrated through the range of outcomes we support individuals to achieve. In 2016-17, we supported 266,910 people, of whom we helped:
   ● 230,484 (86.35%) individuals to achieve digital outcomes, helping them to improve their basic digital skills and use the internet on a regular basis
   ● 216,245 (81.02%) individuals to achieve economic outcomes, helping them progress to further learning or better employment, and improving financial literacy
   ● 230,729 (86.44%) individuals to achieve health and social outcomes, helping them to improve their health, wellbeing, and social connections.

4. All of the 5,000 Online Centres are different to one another. There is no formula; it is not a franchise. Each one is separate from Good Things Foundation; they are all independently owned, managed and funded. The common bond is a shared vision of a 100% digitally skilled nation, a commitment to provide free or low cost support to help people learn how to use the internet, and a passion for social change within their local community.

5. All Online Centres do something else as well as digital skills support, such as run a community venue, host a youth club or older people’s club, offer other informal or formal learning, or loan books. There is no cost to join the network, and most Centres will not receive any funding or financial support from Good Things Foundation. It is not primarily a financial bond.
6. Online Centres are often found in community centres and public libraries, but they can also often be found in village halls, places of worship (churches, mosques, synagogues and temples), cafes, social housing, old people’s homes, on mobile buses, in pubs, clubs and bingo halls. One began as a fish and chip shop in Stockport, whose managers were determined to help local people find work. Many are local community organisations who also support people through other learning, for example learning to speak English as a second language, or learning other computer skills. The vast majority are open to the public, although some aren’t - for example those based in factories, or Women’s Hostels. The definition of a Centre is not fixed - it could be a computer in a village hall, four laptops or tablets taken into a pub on a Friday morning, or 50 computers in a school lab being used in the evening. Each Centre is based on the needs of the individual community it serves.

7. Simply put, we reach the parts of the UK that other organisations don’t or can’t reach, by creating a movement which small, hyperlocal and committed groups and organisations want to be part of.

8. We power a movement of public sector partners, corporates, community organisations, volunteers, and the Online Centres Network, and together we tackle some of society’s toughest problems. We make lasting social change happen through empowering and embedding new behaviours and relationships. Our local partners are very important; they are grassroots organisations who understand the experiences and needs of the people they support every day in their local communities, and who are passionate and motivated to make change. Our collective impact, across all our partners, is greater than any one would achieve alone. We provide the energy, the openness, and the drive to pull it all together to make it work.

9. We lead a movement for social change. We create a long-term, meaningful and sustainable relationship with everyone in this movement based on shared vision and social action. Bringing partners together with a common goal has succeeded for digital inclusion, now we want to achieve this success with social inclusion more broadly, solving some of society’s most intractable problems.

Barriers to active citizenship

10. Through our research, we’ve uncovered that a major barrier to achieving outcomes - including civic engagement - relates to poor mental and emotional wellbeing and lack of support. Our theory of change is about supporting resilient people and communities. Over the past two years we carried out a Longitudinal Learner Study which demonstrated that our centres deal in relationships with learners, often over a period of months or years - rather than shorter, more transactional services.

11. Recognising the importance of these relationships and emotional support as fundamental to learning, Good Things developed a theory of change based on people’s emotional willingness to
engage at different levels. We worked with centre managers and learners to develop a theory of change in participation with those people affected by the change. In general, people arrive at a centre distressed, and leave happier and more able to cope with the rest of their day:

12. We have pin-pointed the triggers that affect a person’s emotional state:
13. From this, we developed a theory of change based on engaging at three levels: an individual, community and societal level.

We think people come together to create powerful and resilient communities. Resilient communities start with resilient people. We want to support people to be active agents in changing their lives, communities and society, one step at a time.

14. In order for change to occur in the lives of individuals, Online Centres need to be able to respond to whoever comes through their door, whatever challenges they face. This is not an easy ask. In times of austerity, where funding streams continue to shrink, the divide between those who not only survive but flourish and those who struggle to exist, continues to grow. Online Centres have an open door policy. This means that they are seeing more people whose needs are desperate and complex.

15. Knowing and being able to negotiate the system, or the systems, in which the people have to operate is crucial. Individuals may have physical and mental health needs, face language barriers,
be at risk of losing their home and have no personal support networks to draw upon. They also rely on public services, but often struggle to meet the demands that these place on them. Many centres support individuals to navigate and resolve interlinked and complex problems.

16. They do this with very little resource, through persistence and personality. However this places them in a position of vulnerability. Their funding is often precarious and short-term, but they are being expected to to absorb more. Even if centres have fantastic staff and volunteers, it is often very difficult for them to sustain themselves as businesses.

17. But some Online Centres have found a way to not only meet the range of complex needs that people present with, but to flourish. This is the networked network. A network of Online Centres who work participatively with other centres and wider organisations in their local or regional area. These include centres who have relationships with other Online Centres, health professionals (including CCGs and GPs), job centres, social housing providers, CVS, other third sectors specialists, local businesses and national charities. Accessing funding together they are also able to treat the person as a whole. This means understanding that one area of need in a person’s life will impact another i.e. poor mental health due to housing worries will affect someone’s willingness and ability to engage in learning and apply for work. Being outward looking and participatory also means they demonstrate positive organisational behaviours, they’re keen to test new approaches, to draw learnings from others and to share ideas across a wider platform of activity, often online. We believe this approach is critical in order to support citizens to play a more active role in society.

English language skills as a gateway to social integration

18. The Casey Review, published on 5 December 2016, places a high priority on the acquisition of English language skills as one of the keys to better social integration and social mobility. In Newham, 11.1% of women are not proficient in English, with a similar proportion in other London boroughs including Tower Hamlets and Brent. As well as recommending greater government investment in community ESOL provision through central government and local authorities (via the adult skills budget), the review also noted that “greater digital awareness may also be a protective factor in improving knowledge, understanding and access to public services” and recommends investment in improving IT literacy for parents in segregated areas.

19. The most recent census data from 2011 shows that 863,000 people in England and Wales are ‘non-proficient’ in English - 726,000 can’t speak English well and 138,000 can’t speak English at all. People with low levels of English are more likely to report worse health and are three times more likely to have no educational qualifications. Of those who are employed, people with low levels of English are twice as likely to work in lower skilled jobs as those with high English proficiency.

20. Current demand for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision is far greater than supply. As a result, people who want to learn English are regularly being turned away, losing out on the skills that would help them integrate into their local community and improve their life prospects. We therefore need to look to low-cost, innovative and scalable solutions.
21. Good Things Foundation’s belief that everyone should have the opportunity to participate fully in society means that our work often focusses on those who face profound barriers. This includes people who have little or no English language skills, which can make it very difficult for them to navigate British society and integrate with their wider communities.

22. For the last three years, Good Things Foundation has led a community-based English language project, called English My Way, in partnership with the BBC and British Council, to support adults with no or low levels of English language skills.

23. Funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, the project provides pre-entry level ESOL skills through a structured 24-week blended learning programme, improving English language skills to help people better integrate with their local communities. This fresh, community-based approach to English language learning combines tutor-led sessions, rich multimedia online learning, and volunteer-supported ‘Learning Circles.’

24. English My Way has reached people with the lowest levels of English language skills, especially women, working in areas of England with high demand for English language support. The programme is currently delivered in 58 areas of the highest language within England, 23 of which are in London. During the first two years of the programme:
   - 9,172 learners benefited from ESOL learning
   - 70% of learners progressed to an Entry Level 1 ESOL course.

25. The English My Way website was developed as the online home of the ESOL learning programme, making flexible tutor resources and session plans available completely free. Learners in our English My Way programme reported improved self-confidence in using English with acquaintances (65%), in public (68%), and with doctors (61%), supporting greater social cohesion and community integration.

Recommendations

26. Online Centres provide opportunities for people of different faiths and cultures to come together in an informal community setting to learn new skills and build friendships. They are currently supported by around 20,000 volunteers, many of whom have started as learners within the Centres. We believe these Centres represent an untapped resource to build bridges within and between communities.

27. Our recommendation is that Government works with Good Things Foundation to consider how the Online Centres Network could be much more widely promoted to support people who are marginalised or excluded, and increase their levels of civic and community engagement. We already have a close referral relationship with Jobcentres - 36% of UK online centre users are referred by their local Jobcentre - and this referral model could be extended across other public services.
28. We also recommend that the Department for Communities and Local Government continues to invest in, and to expand, its English language programme - through which English My Way is funded - which has helped thousands of migrant women to develop the language skills they need to become more integrated within their local communities.

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