

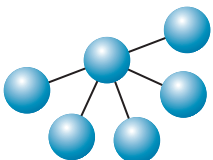
**Evaluation of
Learning Challenge Fund
Final Mini Evaluation Report**

Oaks Project

Blaenau Gwent Borough Council



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Powys Basic Skills Project

Background and aims

1.1.1. The Oaks Project was funded by LCF between January 2004 and March 2006. It was an outreach project to encourage adults to re-engage with learning. When it was established, from a working age population of 33,000 in Blaenau Gwent, some 23,000 (70%) were not qualified to NVQ3 or equivalent and 10,000 of these (30%) were thought to have basic skills deficiencies.

1.1.2. The project's aims were as follows:

- Through a partnership approach with other learning organisations, to increase flexible learning opportunities for a wide range of clients.
- To offer guidance, advice and support to enable beneficiaries to embrace lifelong learning.
- To feed into – and be complementary with – other major learning initiatives in Blaenau Gwent.
- To work with the Communities First (CF) Partnerships to establish 4 community pilot computer centres in CF wards.

1.1.3. The objectives were:

- To provide access to informal, structured learning opportunities throughout Blaenau Gwent with four centres established in Communities First wards.
- To support and encourage non-participants to re-engage in learning.
- To engage all CF Partnerships Partnership Boards in designing and implementing learning programmes.
- To provide four community computer centres in collaboration with Partnerships Boards.
- To establish the tutor support systems within Open Learning Centres.
- To develop suitable material for the community computer centres.
- To establish closer links between the essential skills team and community groups.

Project structure and funding

1.1.4. The Oaks project was established in December 2003 until 2006. It was funded with £392,000 of LCF resources plus £48,000 of match funding.

1.1.5. The Oaks Team Meetings took place every month and every six weeks reports were received by the overseeing Partnership (the Adult Learners' Sub-Group). Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Community Education Department oversaw the project and the senior officer was the Head of Community Education. The Oaks project employed a Project Coordinator (Ceri Waters), a Community Development Officer (Karen Bennett), a Schools Development Officer (Sue Thorne) and a Project Administrator (Sue Gray).

1.2. LCF evaluation methodology

- 1.2.1. Shared Intelligence has been commissioned by ELWa to evaluate the Learning Challenge Fund on an ongoing basis. This comprises a Mini-Evaluation of each of the LCF projects, as well as an assessment of the LCF's progress as a scheme. The Mini-Evaluations are not intended to duplicate the projects' own evaluations which are a requirement of their LCF contracts with ELWa.
- 1.2.2. The LCF evaluation programme began in 2003. The first stage of the evaluation reviewed the process of setting up and administering the Learning Challenge Fund. The evaluation programme was extended out to individual projects in summer 2004. The Oaks Project was funded for just over two years from January 2004 until March 2006. This mini evaluation is based on:
 - Two meetings in Blaenau Gwent with the project manager and colleagues, which were also attended by the ELWa contract manager
 - Regular telephone and e-mail contact with the project manager
 - Comments from the Contract Manager
 - A review of project documentation, regular monitoring reports and the self-evaluation report produced in February 2006.
- 1.2.3. It is believed that such a spread of consultation and research has provided the basis for a comprehensive assessment of activities, outputs and strategic impacts from the perspective of ELWa, stakeholders and the project manager.

2. PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

2.1. Target project outputs

2.1.1. The deliverables were to:

- Engage 600 beneficiaries.
- Enrol 400 students on a variety of courses.
- Support 250 beneficiaries to progress to further learning opportunities.
- Provide 4 community computer centres.
- Provide on-line tutor support for these centres.
- Develop a learning programme with each CF area.
- Provide learning opportunities in 80% of local schools.

2.2. Project activities

Learning Opportunities and Progression

2.2.1. The project engaged with 741 learners and enrolled 608 on a variety of learning opportunities at different levels, from non-accredited taster courses to Level 1 New Clait and Open College Network modules.

2.2.2. In January 2004 the Oaks project established its own targets for age and gender targets. The over-55s were over-represented in both sexes while the lowest take-up came from males in the 25-44 age brackets. Females made up 72% of learners. This reflects national experience where males prove difficult to engage in learning opportunities. Some 82% of learners had engaged in no learning in the previous six months and 50% were unemployed.

2.2.3. Over the life of the project 291 learners progressed from their initial informal learning opportunities. The project set up a system where they contacted beneficiaries at six-monthly intervals to request information about their learning activities. Some 65% of the progressing learners were below the age of 40. Some learners progressed on to WEA or mainstream but the majority moved on from outreach locations to the community computer centres or from one non-accredited course (eg craft/beauty) to another (eg ICT/essential skills).

Community Computer Centres

2.2.4. The project actually provided five community computer centres with effective links to the learning network. All were operational by the end of the project and tutors had been trained in the online support system Digitalbrain. Four centres are satellites of the RISE Learning Network in Blaenau Gwent and two received financial support from their local CF Partnership Boards. They were all established in local community facilities and all were successful in creating learning opportunities for local people. Several of these learning opportunities were later transferred to the mainstream Community Education or WEA programmes to allow progression.

Communities First Areas

- 2.2.5. Learning opportunities were established in all CF areas. Close contact was maintained with the CF coordinators and all CF Partnership Boards received formal presentations at the start of the Oaks project. As the project developed, staff also attended CF Partnership Board sub-groups.

Opportunities in Schools

- 2.2.6. The project created learning opportunities in 76% of Blaenau Gwent schools (target 80%), ranging from workshops and non-accredited six-week sessions right up to 29-week accredited Level 1 courses. More than half the schools had more than one opportunity. Partnership working meant that ancillary staff, parents and other community members had the opportunity to participate. Where learner numbers fell away the Oaks project successfully merged opportunities in schools. The programme was evaluated and found to have been professional and respectful of the school environment. In addition all the schools reported that they would welcome the project returning to their school.

2.3. Project progress

- 2.3.1. The project was implemented very effectively and efficiently and had an excellent reporting and monitoring process with a range of complementary reports and regular analysis. The management of the project within the Blaenau Gwent Community Education Department was a clear benefit as it allowed the project to benefit from professionalism and strong management reporting and administration systems. The ELWa Contract Manager has been a regular participant in the management of the project.
- 2.3.2. Monitoring and evaluation were carried out professionally. Learners were asked to complete course evaluations which allowed Oaks to evaluate, review and adapt strategies. Tutors also completed evaluations and the findings of these were used to support the tutors and help develop the modules.

2.4. Project outputs

- 2.4.1. The data shows that the Oaks project achieved or exceeded virtually all of its quantified targets (just narrowly missing the target of learning opportunities in 80% of schools). However the performance of the project was particularly effective because of the added value it achieved in terms of advice and guidance provided for beneficiaries and because of its outreach approach in deprived communities.
- 2.4.2. Throughout the duration of a learning opportunity, development officers visited the course for 50% of the sessions to build relationships with learners and to provide advice, guidance and support beyond what the tutor could provide. This was particularly important in outreach locations. From a position of trust and respect, learners were then encouraged to participate and progress to learning in more formal settings.
- 2.4.3. The Oaks project developed a clear Approach to Outreach Work which set out their policies and commitment to building relationships with individuals and groups.

3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

3.1. Outcomes and benefits

- 3.1.1. The ELWa Contract Manager believes that the Oaks project has been effective in achieving its outputs and wider impacts. In particular she points to the success of the project in working with employers and delivering some courses to employed people at the workplace. She refers to the fact that it has been notoriously difficult to get employer involvement and she believes the project's approach is worthy of rolling out to other areas – perhaps through the RISE programme.
- 3.1.2. She also believes that one of the reasons for the project's success is the relationship and liaison that all four staff built up with learners and the community. Progression rates amongst previously non-participating learners, along with the increased delivery of learning provision throughout the community, in areas and schools not normally receptive to participation, was entirely due to the persistence of project staff, which paid off. This message, along with the communication methods adopted by the project team, are also important lessons that could be picked up in future projects of this nature.
- 3.1.3. The project used the "Rickter Scale" to complement the end of course forms and to assess the softer transferable skills associated with non-accredited learning. The common themes that emerged were that:
- Learners felt that confidence in their chosen subject had increased.
 - They felt more able to assist children and grandchildren in areas such as ICT.
 - It had provided an opportunity to communicate with their peers, counteracting the social exclusion felt by many in the local area.
- 3.1.3. The ELWa closure report concluded that "The project has been effective in bringing basic skills to an area where it has never been prioritised before. It has brought partners to the table."
- 3.1.4. The Oaks project has been able to integrate effectively with RISE. Individuals benefiting from Oaks can also access information from RISE through a flexible system that is adapted to suit learners' needs. RISE development officers visit Oaks courses to disseminate information, there is an explanation of RISE in the Oaks learners' handbook and people can access RISE Learning Action Stations and Satellites through the Oaks project or speak to Oaks development staff who are designated as RISE Community Champions.
- 3.1.5. The collaboration and engagement with other agencies, providers and communities has been impressive and will be regarded as evidence of good practice and will be incorporated into future programmes in Blaenau Gwent and beyond.

4. CONTRIBUTION TO LCF OBJECTIVES

4.1. Aims of the Learning Challenge Fund

4.1.1. This section looks at the extent to which the Oaks Project contributed to the aims and objectives of the Learning Challenge Fund. In summary, the key objectives and success criteria for the LCF, are as follows:

- innovation and new approaches in learning provision;
- a strategic approach at national, regional and local levels;
- collaboration between learning providers leading to improved learning networks;
- improving access and widening participation;
- delivering more and high-quality learning outcomes from existing resources (value for money); and
- effective mainstreaming of successful projects.

4.1.2. The contribution of each project towards the aims of the LCF is being assessed, partly to see whether the projects that were funded 'fitted' with the LCF's aims, and partly to see whether the LCF as a whole achieved its aims. Therefore, this section summarises both the intentions of the project ('fit'), and the achievements of the project in terms of the LCF aims.

Innovation

4.1.3. The Oaks project was innovative in a number of ways, most particularly in the level and methods of outreach, taking learning opportunities out into deprived communities and to places where there was no previous experience of adult learning such as community centres, village halls and local schools. The creation of the five pilot community computer centres was perhaps the most innovative aspect of the physical outreach activity. Linking adult and child learning proved particularly valuable and the views of schools regarding that programme are evidence of its success.

4.1.4. The degree of advice, guidance and support built into the Oaks programmes was also innovative. Development officers attending half the sessions and proactively engaging the learners was testament to the learner-centred approach and evidence that the project was not just about numbers.

Strategic approach

4.1.5. The Oaks project was strategic in that it contributed strongly to national strategies for basic skills and access and participation in deprived communities. It also was strategic in the pilot nature of some of its work – the network of community computer centres and the level of outreach which have been endorsed as best practice and which have been incorporated into larger and more mainstream programmes, some of these beyond Blaenau Gwent.

Collaboration

- 4.1.6. The project had collaboration at its heart, with clear objectives of collaborating and getting actively involved with both CF Partnership Boards and local schools. The project team carried these requirements out with considerable energy and commitment that went beyond just a statistical target. The project also linked closely with the local communities in identifying venues and the appropriate learning opportunities. It created service agreements with Career Wales and Jobmatch. The ELWa Contract Manager also found that the level of collaboration with local employers was a particular success and was largely due to the energy and persistence of the Oaks team.
- 4.1.7. Oaks also collaborated with other providers such as Community Education and WEA, with success stories in transferring groups over to these more formal providers. The Oaks Internal Evaluation Report states that one of their own highlights was “working in partnership with a wide variety of agencies to jointly deliver learning opportunities; ensuring these opportunities were created in response to learner demand. The collaboration between providers leads to improved learning networks which benefits the learner”.

Improving access and widening participation

- 4.1.8. This is exactly what the Oaks project was all about. That fact that 82% of participants had not engaged with learning at all in the last six months is evidence of widening participation. The strategy of taking learning out to communities and identifying non-threatening venues and appropriately pitched course content – from tasters through to full 29-week courses – shows the focus on access and participation. Childcare was also provided where appropriate to improve access.

Delivering more and high-quality learning outcomes

- 4.1.9. The project delivered 608 outcomes of some kind throughout Blaenau Gwent and in a number of the most deprived communities in South East Wales. The fact that over four-fifths had no recent learning experience suggests that the vast majority of these outcomes were “additional” – they would not have taken place were it not for the Oaks project and the learning opportunities that it created. The progression of 291 people on to some further learning or on to more formal or accredited learning is also evidence of the quality of the learning outcomes. The links with Community Education and with WEA also show the project valued its quality.
- 4.1.10. The Estyn Youth inspection of Blaenau Gwent referred to the Oaks project as an example of best practice in learning.

4.2. Sustainability and mainstreaming

- 4.2.1. The Oaks project itself was the continuation of a smaller learning project in Blaenau Gwent – Acorn. The Oaks has secured Objective 1 funding to allow it to keep delivering learning opportunities until August 2007. The award of £731,000 to create the Big Learning Community will include the extension of the Oaks project for an additional 16 months and will help employ additional staff to extend the project and develop the Big Learning Community. Funding will also allow learners to have access to a training allowance, supporting and encouraging

them to improve their basic skills. The funding will also build on the work of the RISE network in Blaenau Gwent which has been collaborating with Oaks. It is anticipated that the funding will benefit another 1,000 local people.

- 4.2.2. The Oaks must be regarded as a very successful example of sustainability and mainstreaming and a model of good practice within the LCF scheme.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND LEARNING POINTS

5.1. Conclusions

- 5.1.1. An earlier Si LCF report (First Round Evaluation Report, 2005) stated that “The Oaks has performed well and has been a well-managed project with professional standards and effective procedures. It has created real demand and interest amongst non-learners and has even begun to raise its game in terms of progression”. The performance and management of the project continued to impress right to the end of the LCF funding period and the success in generating further funding until 2007 is evidence that the performance of the project and its local impacts had been recognised by the Borough Council and WEFO. We already know it has been endorsed by the ELWa Contract Manager and Estyn.
- 5.1.2. The only issues that have been raised relate to the challenges in meeting some of the targets set for the project and set by the project itself – relating to collaboration with schools and to age and gender targets. The project was set a target of getting learning opportunities within 80% of local schools, but achieved 76% despite strenuous efforts. We believe this was an issue with particular schools and their local management. The success in the three-quarters of schools where they did collaborate was impressive and fully supported by the communities and schools. The Schools Development officer played a significant role. The project set themselves a challenging target to attract younger people and males into learning – in the face of national statistics showing these were harder-to-reach groups. The fact that they were not able to get at the young males was not for want of trying or for a lack of ideas. It is obviously an issue to be taken forward by subsequent projects and in other areas.

5.2. Learning points

- 5.2.1. From the experience of the project itself, key learning points would be that:
- The professionalism and sound administrative systems put in place from the outset provided a solid foundation for delivery and development of the project – the range of regular reports and monitoring and evaluation procedures allowed actions to be taken to meet challenges as they arose.
 - The collaboration achieved with agencies, local partnerships, providers, schools and communities should be seen as an exemplar for future projects locally and throughout South East Wales in particular. This undoubtedly helped with the bidding process for the continuation and mainstream funding. The team of four staff was very effective.
 - The strong commitment to supporting the learners through the daunting process of re-engaging with learning was also a stand-out. This assisted with the major challenge of reaching the progression objectives and was further evidence of the way the project collaborated with other agencies to develop the advice and guidance required.
- 5.2.2. It is considered that ELWa managed the project effectively both in terms of monitoring and managing the contract on the one hand and in supporting the strategic activities of the Oaks project. The Contract Manager was seen by the project as supportive but challenging and her participation in both Si evaluation visits was evidence of her engagement.