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Ongoing evaluation of the Life Skills Project - Competitiveness

Final Phase Report (2015)

A report for the Big Lottery Fund

June 2015

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List of abbreviations

ESF	European Social Fund
WEFO	Welsh European Funding Office
PQQ	Pre-Qualification Questionnaire
NHS	National Health Service
WCVA	Wales Council for Voluntary Action
JSA	Jobseekers Allowance
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JCP	Jobcentre Plus
PBR	Payment by results
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely
OJEU	Official Journal of the European Union
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
A4e	Action for Employment
CBSA	Centre for Business and Social Action
Comp	Competitiveness
Conv	Convergence
PCC	Pembrokeshire County Council
NEET	Not in Education Employment or Training

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Executive Summary

The Big Lottery Fund commissioned Wavehill to undertake an on-going evaluation of the Life Skills Project. The evaluation comprised of five phases, commencing in 2011 with subsequent phases taking place on an annual basis. This report represents the final of the five phases providing an overview of findings from throughout the project evaluation.

The Project

The Life Skills project was funded via two separate European programmes; the European Commission's Convergence programme and the European Commission's Regional Competitiveness and Employment programme. The financial value of Life Skills within each programme is set out below:

- Convergence Programme - £7.8m (of which £4.5m was derived from European Social Fund (ESF) funding and £3.3m from the Big Lottery Fund);
- Competitiveness and Employment Programme - £5.7m (of which 2.3m is derived from ESF funding and £3.4m from the Big Lottery Fund).

The project provided resources for the delivery of services throughout Wales that supported targeted groups of economically inactive or unemployed people. The aim was to encourage them to engage or re-engage with education, learning, volunteering and employment. It was a focused project which targeted the following specific participant groups:

- Care Leavers;
- Carers and Former Carers Returning to Work;
- Economically Inactive Families; and
- Older People (50+).

The overall aims of the Life Skills project were to:

- Enable participants from the target groups to develop their life skills, increase their confidence and re-engage and continue to access education, learning, volunteering or employment; and
- In collaboration with other agencies develop individual long-term support plans to enable beneficiaries to continue to access and remain in education, learning or employment opportunities.

The project, in accordance with WEFO guidelines, was delivered through a series of procured suppliers (service providers) appointed through eight separate procurement rounds. Each round was targeted at a specific participant type and was delivered either within the Convergence or Competitiveness areas of Wales. Successful tenderers were then contracted to deliver a series of outputs and outcomes to participants (and were paid upon the achievement of these), including:

- Number of participants engaged
- Number of participants gaining a qualification
- Number of participants volunteering or gaining work experience
- Number of participants entering further learning/training
- Number of participants into employment
- Number of participants in sustained employment for six months and for one year

The Evaluation

The overarching aims of the evaluation of the Life Skills project were to:

- Assess the overall impact of the Life Skills project: this included an assessment of whether, and how, the impact and outcomes of the project have been achieved; and
- Share learning from the Life Skills project: learning from the evaluation was shared with, as well as across, service providers during the lifespan of the project. The Fund also wants the final impact study, produced as part of the evaluation, to inform the wider evidence base of what works in engaging specific hard-to-reach groups in learning, training, volunteering and employment.¹

Over the five phases, the evaluation has involved the application of the following methodologies:

- **Desk Based Review** – regular reviews of the latest policy interventions to test the extent to which Life Skills remained aligned to policy. In addition, the review considered the impact that policy changes have had on the delivery of the service. The desk based review has also involved an analysis of relevant socio-economic data.
- **Stakeholder Perspectives** – from interviews with senior representatives within The Big Lottery Fund and representatives of key external partner organisations. Focus groups have also been undertaken with Life Skills Contract Managers to capture a management perspective on contract performance and progress.
- **Delivery Perspectives: Service Provider Leads** - the leads of each of the service providers have been engaged as part of the evaluation to capture their perspectives on service delivery and the role that the Big Lottery Fund has played in managing their contract.

¹ Life Skills Evaluation Invitation to Tender, the Big Lottery Fund (April 2010)

- **Delivery Staff** – the evaluation team have visited all 18 service providers at least once enabling them to observe service delivery, engage with service providers on a face to face basis and also engage with participants.
- **Participants' Perspective** – In addition to the face to face interviews with participants, the study team also sought to engage them through a telephone survey. The telephone survey ultimately engaged with:
 - 1,049 participants who at the time of survey, had recently (within the preceding six months) been entered onto the Life Skills participant database
 - 409 of the above participants were then re-interviewed approximately one year after the initial engagement by the evaluation team.
- **Knowledge Sharing Events** – two events were held with service providers as part of the evaluation to help disseminate and discuss the findings and recommendations arising from the research.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Performance Overview

The Life Skills project enabled the sustained delivery of support to a range of target groups that had typically been underrepresented as beneficiaries of mainstream employability provision. The rationale for supporting these groups was reinforced during the development of the project when the country fell into deep recession. However despite being delivered in the midst of a very challenging economic period, the support provided met the aims of the project by increasing participant confidence and enabling many to access education, volunteering or employment.

By matching European funding at source, the project enabled a number of third sector organisations to deliver the service provision. In doing so it has built knowledge and capacity amongst this sector of delivering contractual services of this nature, thereby strengthening the third sector support infrastructure in Wales.

Project Management and Contractual Model

The contractual approach to delivering services was largely (and increasingly) welcomed by service providers as it offered them significant flexibility in the approach they adopted to deliver the outcomes that they were targeted against.

Providers were able to tweak and tailor provision depending on the needs of participants and had the scope to engage with services for long periods of time if needed. In three of the four target groups over 50% of participants re-interviewed for the evaluation had been supported for over 12 months. This ability to support individuals over lengthy periods was evidentially beneficial, however it did create challenges for the provider who needed to secure financial compensation through some form of 'outcome/result' in return for the significant level of resource invested in them.

From a contract management perspective, procuring contracts (with competitive grants the preferred route of service delivery in the past) enabled the Big Lottery Fund to pass on much of the risk in the delivery of the project to service providers (as it should be). It also enabled them to gain much greater insight, through monitoring requirements for contract, into what was being delivered than would have been gained from the delivery of services through competitive grants. In this regard, the twin-tracked role of a contract manager in scrutinising delivery (which could ultimately lead to a reduction in contract value) whilst offering support and advice to a service provider was a difficult relationship to balance. However service providers were largely positive about the role of the contract managers and therefore they appear to have met this challenge effectively.

Similarly, whilst there has been a steep learning curve amongst service providers most welcomed the experience of contractual delivery and some built on this experience to look to secure further contracts through procurement exercises. Others found the experience helpful in tightening their approach to service provision, welcoming the influence the contract has had on moving them towards a culture of operation that is more target and results driven.

With regards to payment by results, many concerns associated with the payment structure related to the lack of a management fee which the Big Lottery Fund subsequently introduced for the contracts delivered to the Older People target group. The fee's introduction was a welcome change for service providers and gave them sufficient resources to plan and develop the provision by lessening the initial pressure for securing payments for outputs and results. Furthermore, service providers have become increasingly positive about the payment by results model as the evaluation has progressed with many reflecting on the positive behavioural change it had brought about in service delivery in their organisation.

Whilst there was flexibility in the provision that could be offered through the contractual approach, the sheer number and deliverability of the targets curtailed that flexibility from both a delivery and contract management perspective. In hindsight the Big Lottery Fund is conscious that it may have stipulated too many targets within the application to WEFO, which clearly had to then be reflected in service provider contracts.

Certain targets were particularly challenging as the demand for (for example) respite care was far lower than expected, whilst the need for basic/essential skills was also lower than anticipated. The significance of this misjudgement was enhanced by the fact that contract values and therefore payments were reliant upon the delivery of these targets.

Recommendations

That contractual approaches adopted for future employability schemes include a management fee and are built around a thorough understanding of need and/or demand for specific outputs and results.

For future programmes, funders should review the appropriateness of some output indicators, particularly where they are wholly reliant on client needs and almost entirely devoid of any reflection on the effectiveness of the service on offer.

Communication

The project suffered from a lack of clarity in some instances with regards to eligibility, as have all projects delivered through the ESF programmes in Wales. This has proved a particular challenge for the Big Lottery Fund as the Contract Managers had to field enquiries and queries from 18 different service providers whilst waiting for an often delayed response from WEFO.

Further challenges emerged in relation to the dissemination of implications surrounding policy, most notably with the introduction and potential impact of the Work Programme. The mixed messages that were shared in regarding this issue were something of a frustration for service providers and reflect a need to consider the relevance and clarity of policy prior to its dissemination.

Recommendation

For any future programmes, project teams should vet any elements of clarification / response from funders of future programmes in relation to new initiatives or policy changes prior to their release to service providers. Any concerns raised through the vetting process should be addressed with the funder as a matter of urgency.

Despite all its successes, the Life Skills project suffered somewhat from a low profile. Several service providers and the majority of stakeholders referred to the fact that the project remained somewhat unknown even amongst those organisations involved in delivering similar support. For service providers (although they did acknowledge useful promotion in a recent press release) they felt it to be a missed opportunity for the promotion of what they had achieved.

Recommendation

For any future programmes, the project team should consider options that would promote and disseminate more widely an overview of schemes of this nature in future to provide greater awareness amongst policy makers, strategic representatives and other key organisations to build understanding of what is being delivered and by whom.

Delivery Models

In considering the models of service delivery it was notable when reviewing the approved contracts that much of North West Wales did not benefit from Life Skills services, whilst some authority areas had multiple service providers looking to support the same target group. This reportedly created challenges in terms of service delivery in at least one location.

Recommendation

Aspirations for service delivery (in terms of target group and location) should be captured at PQQ stage so that partnership and collaboration can be encouraged at full tender stage to avoid providers competing for beneficiaries.

Across the majority of service providers outreach was seen as a popular approach to engagement, particularly for client groups considered to be furthest from the labour market with models of support primarily focussed on the delivery of one-to-one services. However, the nature of support delivered was very much provider specific with a high degree of flexibility to deliver to a participants needs.

Geography and Rurality

Geographical variances in delivery were reported by service providers as rural areas in particular required significantly more resources than urban areas. Furthermore, contractual challenges existed for some service providers who were operating sub-regionally, over several authority areas yet with little resources (in several instances one staff member operated over multiple local authority areas). Service providers raised concerns that this meant resources were spread too thinly to be effective in all areas.

Challenges were also encountered where service providers had little experience or exposure of delivering services of that nature in a particular geographical area. This led, in some instances, to service providers focusing on the geographical areas they were most familiar with. Based on these findings it would appear that the upper limit of £1m for a service contract of this nature would appear entirely appropriate as any delivery of a greater scale may dilute the local presence that some of the smaller, more targeted contracts benefit from.

Recommendations

For consideration to be given to additional weighting (in terms of scale of payment) to those results achieved in locations considered most rural or most marginal and/or to those clients considered to be hardest to reach.

For the appraisal of tenders to include a specific focus on the ability and experience of tenderers to deliver support in the identified geographical areas for service delivery.

Service Provider Partnerships

The extent to which service providers collaborated was rather limited. Most described the setting up of their projects as something of a rush particularly where no management fee was in place and they had limited opportunity to engage with other providers. A partnership event for service providers earlier in the project may have helped with collaboration particularly at project set up stage and was something that several service providers reflected on as something of a missed opportunity.

Recommendation

For service provider events to commence far earlier in a project to encourage sharing of practice, to explore collaboration opportunities and to encourage informal networking.

Project Performance

A number of targets associated with the Life Skills project were revised downwards, some significantly so. Several of these were due to a misjudgement on the level of need for the services, specifically the respite care and the basic / essential skills or the misinterpretation of reportedly unclear eligibility criteria (the entering further learning as an exit outcome for example). More widely other indicators were influenced by the emergence of the Work Programme and the temporary hiatus this created led to a pause in delivery and a need to revisit targets due to the impact it would create.

Following the reductions the project performed well against its targets; particularly so against the number of participants engaged (which surpassed the original target) and the number gaining employment which more than doubled the original target estimate. Interesting patterns have emerged when analysed by target group with Care Leavers performing particularly well against learning outcomes and the Older People target group performing particularly well against the employment outcomes.

Participant Perspectives

The analysis of participant perspectives provides an insight into the diversity between each of the target groups with Older People far more likely to engage with the Life Skills project to find work than the other groups. However they were least likely to have had their expectations met through the support, although their judgements may have been influenced by whether they had gained employment.

Economically Inactive Families had a similar focus to the Older People target group and secured a similar proportion of employment outcomes as a result. However, they were typically more positive about the impact the support has provided them, despite receiving the least amount of support on average (in terms of duration).

For Care Leavers there was far less clarity as to why they were engaging with Life Skills, and this group were the most likely to engage with Life Skills with no expectations from the support. However they were typically the most satisfied with the support they had received and were most likely to have entered some form of training provision following the receipt of Life Skills support.

Carers and Former Carers engaged with the support for the widest variety of reasons but typically were most likely to refer to issues of isolation prior to their engagement. However they have ultimately been the least successful group to secure employment outcomes (when the re-interviews were analysed) but this may reflect the fact that employment of less than 16 hours, an option which some carers may look to secure if they are still caring for someone, is ineligible for being counted as an employment outcome.

In terms of impact, when asked to describe themselves prior to receiving support, participants most commonly referred to feelings of low or no self-confidence/self-esteem. Conversely when asked how “they felt now”, the most common reference related to the feeling of being confident and happier in themselves. This illustrates the wider impact support of this nature has on the well-being of those participants supported.

In terms of ‘hard’ outcomes, at the re-interview stage it was welcome to see an increase in the proportion of participants in employment across all target groups. At first sight this may seem to be contradicted by the fall in the proportion perceiving that their job prospects have improved, as a positive correlation between a rise in employment and a rise in perceived job prospects would seem likely. However it is probable that the majority who haven’t found employment feel far less positive about their prospects than they initially did due to their continued lack of success in securing employment.

Of further interest regarding job prospects is the noticeable difference between those participants residing in rural areas and those in urban areas. The data suggests a more positive perspective for urban areas which would appear to reinforce the anecdotal evidence that suggests obtaining employment and other hard outcomes for people in rural areas are more of a challenge to achieve.

Soft Outcomes

For projects of this nature, where the focus is on the provision of holistic support to improve life skills, the capture of soft outcomes is particularly important. However the diversity of client groups and service delivery models meant that a consistent approach to the capture of outcomes has not been adopted with the template created by the evaluation team only deemed suitable by some service providers. Whilst all providers captured soft outcomes, the models applied and the perceived usefulness of this data varied significantly from one service provider to the next. This lack of available evidence represents a missed opportunity for service providers and evaluators to gain some considerable insight into the wider benefits gained through support.

Recommendation

For future interventions to consider the application of broad parameters with regards to the capture of soft outcomes and distance travelled including, as a minimum, that information is captured at more than one interval and is then held electronically for analysis by both service providers and, if appropriate, the evaluator.

Summary

The evaluation has highlighted the significant benefit that participants have derived from the Life Skills support, particularly in relation to the well-being of those engaged but also in relation to some of the hard outcomes achieved. The contract length offered through the Life Skills project was of critical importance to groups of this nature and should be repeated in future whilst retaining the payment by results approach to ensure that a results focussed approach remains.

The model of matching at source has proved successful in encouraging the service providers from across the public, private and third sectors to come forward to deliver these services. The flexibility of the funding model enabled service providers to tailor and tweak their model of support to best reflect the needs of each group. In doing so it has built their capacity and strengthened their ability to continue the delivery of support of this nature and provided them with an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the specific needs and challenges that each of the participant groups face.

1 Introduction and Background

The Big Lottery Fund commissioned Wavehill to undertake an on-going evaluation of the Life Skills Project. The evaluation comprised of five phases, commencing in 2011 with subsequent phases taking place on an annual basis. This report represents the final of the five phases providing an overview of findings from throughout the project evaluation.

1.1 The Life Skills Project

The Life Skills project was funded via two separate European programmes; the European Commission's Convergence programme and the European Commission's Regional Competitiveness and Employment programme. The financial value of Life Skills within each programme is set out below:

- Convergence Programme - £7.8m (of which £4.5m was derived from European Social Fund (ESF) funding and £3.3m from the Big Lottery Fund);
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- Carers and Former Carers Returning to Work;
- Economically Inactive Families; and
- Older People (50+).

The overall aims of the Life Skills project were to:

- Enable participants from the target groups to develop their life skills, increase their confidence and re-engage and continue to access education, learning, volunteering or employment; and
- In collaboration with other agencies, develop individual long-term support plans to enable beneficiaries to continue to access and remain in education, learning or employment opportunities.

The project was funded in the West of Wales and the Valleys area by the European Commission’s *Convergence* programme (the area shaded yellow on the map to the right). In the remainder of Wales it was funded by the Commission’s *Regional Competitiveness and Employment* programme (the areas in white on the map).² Life Skills was therefore two projects, although it was managed as a single scheme. This was the first time that National Lottery money was matched with European Social Fund (ESF) at source.

The project was delivered via a number of service providers who were awarded contracts of between £190,000 and £1m to deliver services to one or more of the target groups.



² Further details of the Convergence and Competitiveness and Employment Programme in Wales are available on the WEFO website: <http://wefo.wales.gov.uk/>

The case study below provides an example of the experience and impact of the Life Skills project on a project participant.

Participant Case Study (Crossroads Care - Round 3)

Sophie³ is a carer for her son who has autism, epilepsy, bi-polar, severe learning difficulties and challenging behaviour. Before she had her son, she was in full-time employment working for the NHS as a clinical coding officer in a hospital but she subsequently had to give up work to care for her son and found that very distressing, *“I had no self-esteem, no confidence and I felt worthless”*.

Sophie joined the Life Skills project as she wanted to regain her *“mental motivation”*, which she felt she had lost as a result of not doing anything for herself and always putting her son’s care needs first. She said; *“I had forgotten about myself and my needs”*. Sophie also wanted help to find employment which would work around her sons care needs. Although the type of work that she could do was quite limited, she worked with Life Skills and came up with a solution that she could work during school hours; she said *“being a teacher’s assistant for special needs children would be an ideal job as I was experienced in this area from looking after my son”*. Life Skills then arranged the training that she needed, they found the job for her and they organised the job interview.

During her time with Life Skills, Sophie was able to meet other carers who were in the same position as her which she said made her *“feel valued”*. Sophie had no motivation before she joined but describes her time with Life Skills as *“a break from the constant fight I had to deal with”*. It gave her something to aim for and showed her how to get there and now she says *“I reached my goals and now feel like I have a purpose”*. As a result of the *“reassurance and support”* that she has received, Sophie now says she *“feels worthy again”*.

Overall, Sophie describes the support that she has received over the last two years from Life Skills as *“very rewarding”*. She is *“far more confident”*, her *“self-esteem has improved”* and she said that it has led to her *“realising that I am a person as well as a carer”*. If Sophie hadn’t received the support, she believes that she wouldn’t be doing a lot of things that she is now and says *“I would still be at home unemployed”*.

³ Names have been changed to protect confidentiality

2 Methodological Approach

2.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the methodological approach applied across the evaluation and summarises the findings from previous phases of the research. In many instances these findings have informed our approach to this specific phase of the evaluation, the detail of which is also presented below.

2.2 The Evaluation

2.2.1 Aims and Objectives

The objectives of the evaluation of the Life Skills project are to:

- Assess the overall impact of the Life Skills project: this will include an assessment of whether, and how, the impact and outcomes of the project have been achieved; and
- Share learning from the Life Skills project: learning from the evaluation will be shared with and across service providers during the lifespan of the project. The Fund also wants the final impact study, produced as part of the evaluation, to inform the wider evidence base of what works in engaging specific hard-to-reach groups in learning, training, volunteering and employment.

2.2.2 Overview of the Methodology

As previously noted, the evaluation has been undertaken over five phases with this being the fifth and final phase.

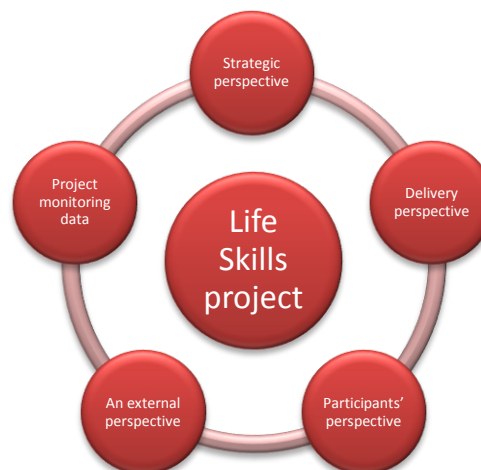
Figure 2.1: Evaluation Phases



Our methodology has been structured to capture perceptions of the project and its associated impact from a wide range of perspectives. It is hoped that in structuring our methodology in this way we will have drawn on a diversity of viewpoints to offer an informed and rounded evidence based report on progress to date. As outlined in figure 2.2, our research has drawn on:

Figure 2.2: Methodological approach

- **A strategic perspective:** those who are involved with the project on a strategic level (senior management, funding organisations, etc.).
- **A delivery perspective:** those who deliver the project and work with participants on a day-to-day basis.
- **A participants' perspective:** input from participants themselves.
- **An external perspective:** how do those organisations and individuals who are not directly involved in the project perceive it?
- **Project monitoring data:** analysis of the data that is gathered to monitor the outputs and outcomes of projects on their participants.



Over the five phases, this structure of approach has resulted in the application of the following methodologies:

- **Desk Based Review** – a regular review and refresh of the latest policy interventions to test the extent to which Life Skills remains aligned to latest policy and the impact that policy changes may have and have had on the delivery of the service. The desk based review has also involved an analysis of relevant socio-economic data associated with the key target groups to identify and assess any trends in their prevalence and the challenges that they face.
- **Stakeholder Perspectives** – throughout the evaluation, interviews have been undertaken with senior representatives within Big Lottery Fund and representatives of key external partner organisations (for example, the WCVA, Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus). A focus group has also been undertaken with Life Skills Contract Management staff for each of the latter three phases of the evaluation to capture a management perspective on contract performance and progress.
- **Delivery Perspectives: Service Provider Leads** - the leads of each of the service providers have been engaged as part of the evaluation to capture their perspectives on service delivery and the role that the Big Lottery Fund have played in managing their contract.

- **Delivery Staff** – the evaluation team have visited all 18 service providers at least once as part of the evaluation whilst 90% of the service providers have been visited on more than one occasion. The on-site engagement has enabled the evaluation team to observe service delivery, engage with service providers on a face to face basis and also engage with participants with a more qualitative emphasis in the delivery of the research.
- **Participants’ Perspective** – In addition to the face to face interviews with participants, the study team also sought to engage with participants through a telephone survey. The telephone survey ultimately engaged with:
 - 1,049 participants who at the time of consultation, had recently (within the preceding six months) been entered onto the Life Skills participant database
 - 409 of the above participants who were then re-interviewed approximately one year after the initial engagement by the evaluation team.

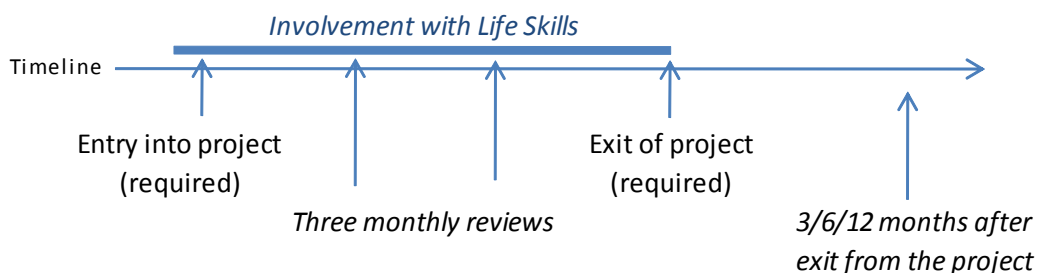
The telephone survey focussed on a participant’s background, their experience of the support and their perception of impact arising from the support. The re-interview offered something of a longitudinal perspective on these and provided an insight into the persistence of the impacts arising from the support.

- **Knowledge Sharing Events** – two events have been held with service providers as part of the evaluation to help disseminate and discuss the findings and recommendations arising from the research.

Participant Self-Completions – during the scoping phase of the research it emerged that there was no consistent approach to service providers capturing soft outcomes and distance travelled amongst service users. A participant self-completion tool was designed to collect some of the information on ‘soft outcomes’ and ‘distance travelled’ from participants, specifically information about four dimensions; well-being and attitude to work, training and education. The tool was shared with service providers for their views and comments before being finalised.

The questionnaire was to be used at least twice as a baseline and exit measure of change, and, if possible, the same information should have been collected 6 and 12 months *after* the participant stopped being supported by the project in order to fully understand the nature and sustainability of outcomes derived from the support provided (see figure 2.3 below).

Figure 2.3: Proposed Process for Capturing Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled



It was evident within the earlier phases of the evaluation that, despite agreement to the content and approach within the tool, the amount of self-completions collected were far fewer than hoped.

Further analysis of approaches to capture soft outcomes ensued and analysis of the findings suggested that, given the diversity of the client groups engaged, the application of a consistent distance travelled tool looks to be complex and challenging to deliver. The findings were shared with Life Skills providers at the celebration / knowledge sharing event in September 2013 where it was agreed that providers would only continue to use the tool if it was of use to them.

Ultimately, the tool was completed by 388 participants on one occasion whilst only 46 participants completed it on more than one occasion (with multiple completions required to enable progress to be assessed).

Service providers (where it was of use to them) used the data captured for their own benefit and at a project-wide level. As such a small number of participants have completed the form on multiple occasions, the evidence generated from this method is insufficiently robust for inclusion in this report.

3 The Project

3.1 Introduction

This section considers the rationale for intervening with target groups of this nature and the impact of socio-economic and policy based influences on the Life Skills project during its delivery.

Summary:

- The Life Skills project was developed in the midst of the biggest recession in living memory and sharp rises in unemployment that were sustained for many months (and indeed years) after the recession.
- There is ample evidence to justify interventions with the four target groups as each was overrepresented amongst unemployment or economic inactivity data or had far fewer qualifications than the wider population.
- Welfare reform and in particular the introduction of the Work Programme impacted on the delivery of the Life Skills project
- The transition to online service provision via the Government Gateway led to some support providers tailoring their services to ensure participants had the necessary IT skills to utilise the new approaches.

3.2 Rationale for Intervention

The Life Skills project was established to support target groups that were typically under-represented amongst employability projects or who, at the time of the business application, were not the beneficiaries of specific, targeted support of this nature.

The Life Skills project emerged as a result of a review of a previous Big Lottery Fund initiative, the Stepping Stones programme in December 2007. The review identified that whilst the programme had been a success, targeting support at specific groups would help to maximise impact. Further research was then undertaken to identify the target groups who were in greatest need and would benefit most from intensive community-based support tailored to individual needs. This led to the targeting of three groups; Care Leavers, Carers and Former Carers and Economically Inactive Families. Underspend on the procurement rounds to commission services for these target groups enabled the Big Lottery Fund to commission further services to an additional target group; Older People (Over 50s).⁴

The section below explores the rationale for intervening with these groups.

⁴ Adapted from: Life Skills Revised Business Plan – Big Lottery Fund Convergence (September 2012 version)

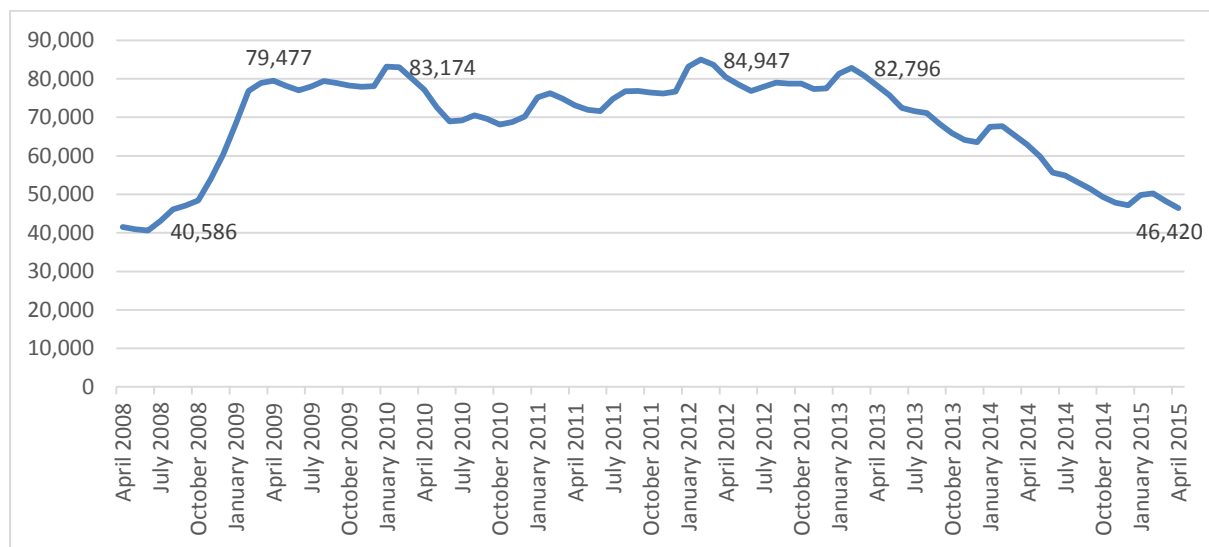
3.2.1 Socio-economic Trends

The business plans (one for the Convergence programme and one for the Competitiveness programme) were developed in 2008 with approval gained in spring 2009. The planning and approval process therefore took place in the midst of the deepest recession in living memory and the socio-economic context within which the project sat changed significantly.

With regards to unemployment, the impact of the economic recession on the number of people claiming jobseekers allowance (JSA) is evident in figure 3.1 below which shows a near doubling in the number of people claiming JSA between June 2008 and April 2009. What followed the recession was a prolonged period of economic stagnation which meant that the claimant count rate did not peak until almost three years later in February 2012 with a sustained reduction only commencing in the summer of 2013, more than four years after the sharp increase in unemployment.

The claimant count figure has continued to steadily fall and is nearing the lows achieved prior to the recession. However it should be noted that welfare reform is likely to have influenced the rate of fall encountered. This will be discussed in more detail within this section.

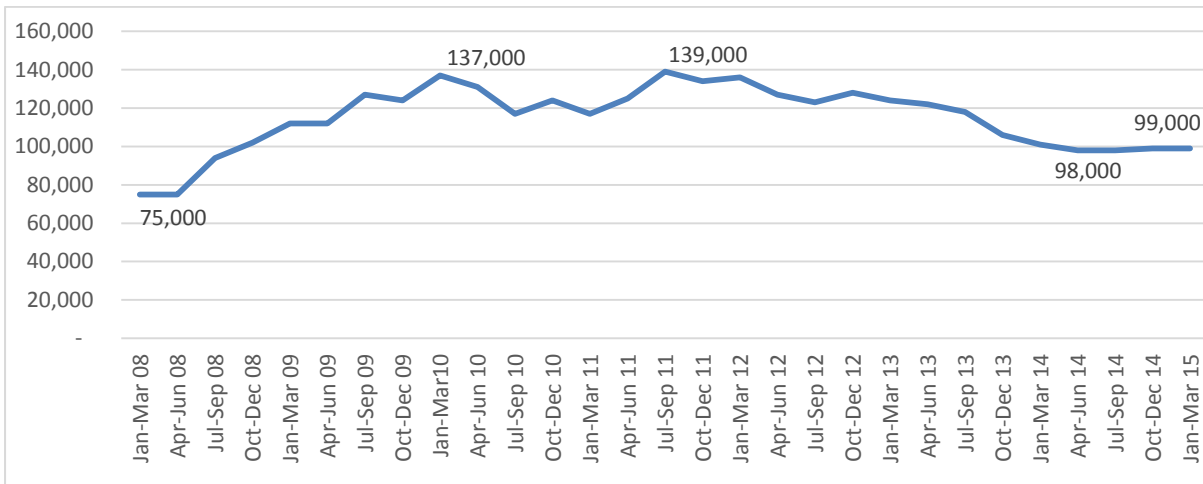
Figure 3.1: Claimant Count – Wales



Unemployment can also be measured using the International Labour Organisation (ILO) method. The ILO method covers those who are out of work and want a job, those who have actively sought work in the last four weeks and are available to start work in the next two weeks; plus those who are out of work, have found a job and are waiting to start in the next two weeks, and is a more encompassing measure of unemployment than the claimant count.

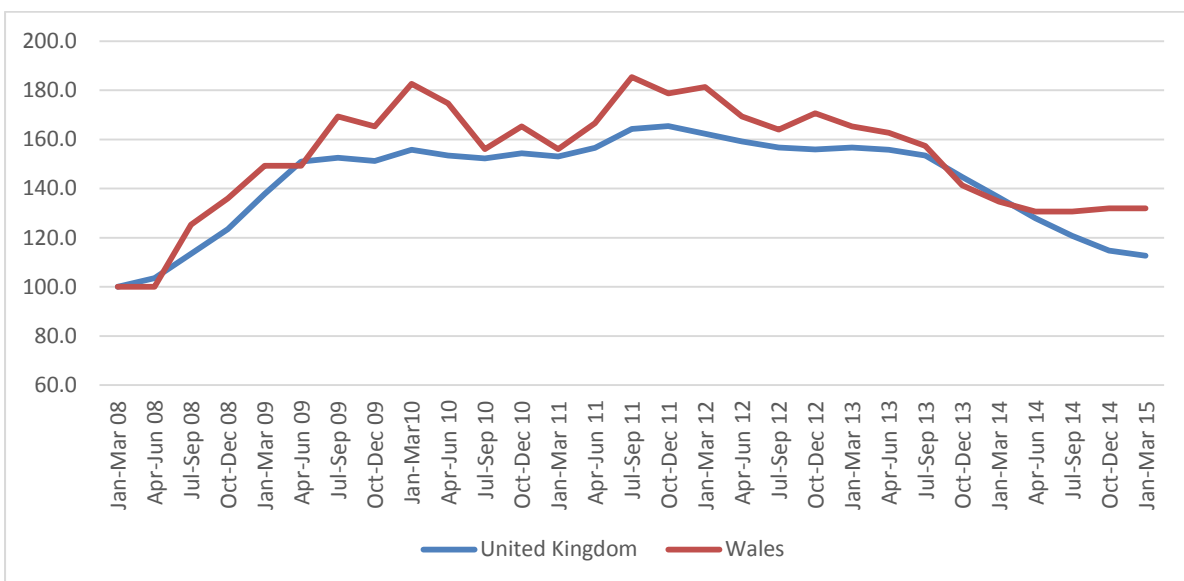
Figure 3.2 below illustrates, once again, the impact arising from the recession with ILO Unemployment rising from 75,000 in January-March 2008 quarter to 137,000 two years later. Once again the levels of unemployment remained stagnant for a couple of years and the reduction in numbers has been far less substantial than those evident within the claimant count analysis. Furthermore, for the last 12 months the number not in employment by this measure has remained steady which raises questions as to whether or not the economy is continuing to strengthen and grow in Wales.

Figure 3.2: ILO Unemployment – Wales



The subsequent figure compares ILO unemployment performance of Wales with the rest of the UK. The figure illustrates that Wales suffered greater than most areas in terms of unemployment increases associated with recession and, whilst there was a period of convergence in Spring 2014, the rest of the UK as an average has sustained a fallen trend in unemployment numbers since then whilst Wales has stagnated.

Figure 3.3: ILO Unemployed Indexed – Jan-Mar 2008 = 100



3.2.2 Trends amongst Target Groups

Care Leavers

The number of looked after children in Wales rose steadily throughout the lifetime of the project. In 2008, there were 4,635 looked after children in Wales, in 2014 the figure had risen by over 24% to 5,755 children.⁵

In terms of those who are 16 and leaving care (and therefore were a key target group for Life Skills) educational attainment is a significant issue. In 2008, just 8% of those in care at age 15/16 gained 5 GCSEs A*-C or equivalent, this compared to 58% of pupils across Wales. In 2014, whilst there has been an improvement in the proportion meeting this threshold (12%), the gap with the Welsh average has widened significantly as 82% of all pupils met this threshold in the 2013/14 academic year.⁶

Carers and Former Carers

In Wales alone there are over 370,000 carers.⁷ Data suggests an 8% increase in carer numbers between 2001 and 2011⁸, whilst estimates suggest that at least 70% of community care in Wales is provided by unpaid carers and that the cost of replacing this free care is estimated at £7.72 billion.⁹ Furthermore, nearly half of the UK's 6.5 million carers are juggling work with caring.¹⁰

Economically Inactive Families

The proportion of households considered to be economically inactive has fallen in Wales since a peak of almost one in four households (22.9%) was achieved in 2010. This equated to over 220,000 households that were considered to be entirely workless.

Slight fluctuations have failed to belie a wider falling trend which has led to the rate falling below 20% or one in five households with an estimated 187,000 households across Wales now deemed to be workless.

⁵ Children Looked After by Local Authorities, Welsh Government (2015)

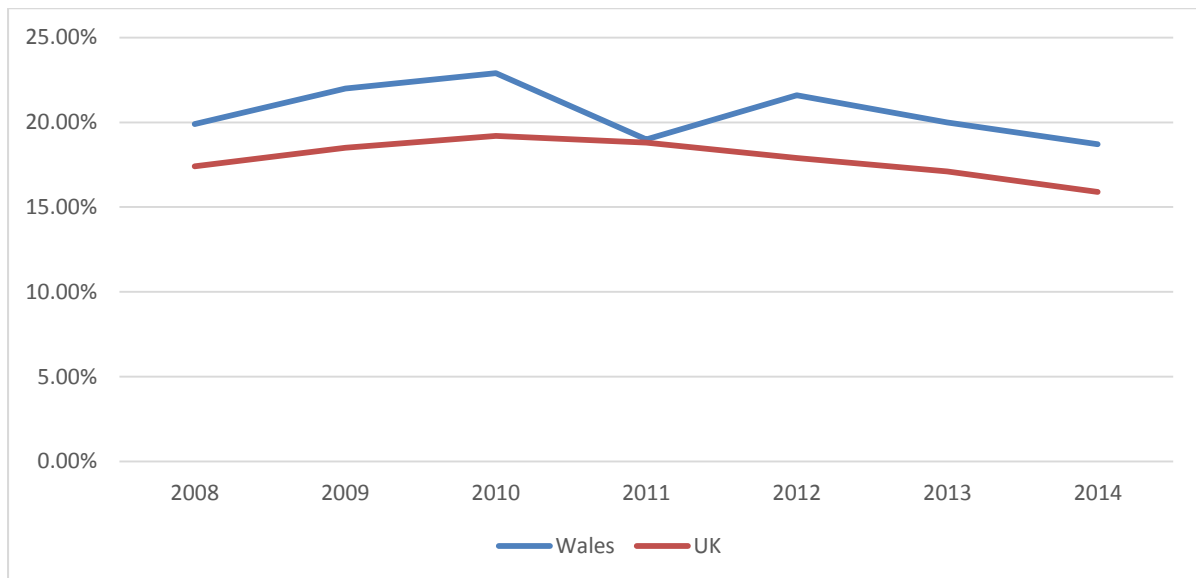
⁶ Children looked after by Local Authorities, Welsh Government (2015)

⁷ Welsh Government

⁸ Buckner and Yeandle (2011), *Valuing Carers 2011*, University of Leeds and Carers UK

⁹ *Carers Strategies (Wales) Measure 2010*, Carers Wales Policy Briefing

¹⁰ Carers UK, *State of Caring* (2014)

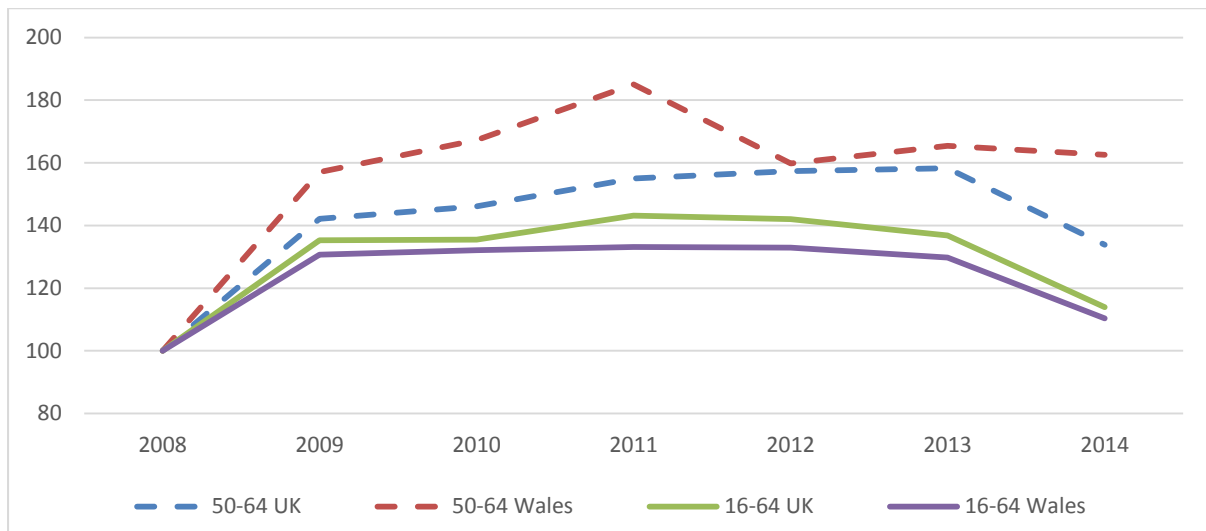
Figure 3.4: Percentage of Households that are Workless

Older People (Over 50s)

An additional target group of Older People (Over 50s) was added to the three original target groups part-way through the Life Skills project. This reflected a perception that this cohort were under-served by emerging and existing provision, particularly provision funded through ESF monies, and that they were being disproportionately affected by the wider socio-economic trends. Figure 3.5 below confirms this to be the case as it shows that rates of increase in economic inactivity were far greater for the 50-64 age cohort than they were across the entire working age population in both Wales and the UK.

The rate of disparity in performance is particularly stark in Wales where across the working age population an increase of 33% in the numbers of economically inactive is evident (between 2008-09) with that rate of increase falling back in 2014 to around 10% higher than the 'baseline' year of 2008. This compares to trends in economic inactivity amongst the 50 to 64 age cohort where numbers increased by 85% when they peaked in 2011 and even now remain in excess of 60% higher than the proportion who were economically inactive in the 2008 baseline year.

Figure 3.5: Economic Inactivity amongst 16-64 and 50-64 Year Olds



3.3 Policy Changes

3.3.1 Welfare Reform

The Life Skills project also operated within a rapidly evolving policy environment of welfare reform. The scale of reform was wide ranging and complex and only those elements perceived as most pertinent to the delivery of the Life Skills project have been summarised in this report.

The Work Programme

Central to the reform of welfare is the Work Programme which works alongside changes to welfare benefits.¹¹ The Work Programme has replaced much of the previous mainstream (government) support activity for unemployed people and is a ‘black box approach’ to interventions, although disabled people may get support from the Work Choice programme.¹² This method allows providers to have the flexibility to deliver whatever services they feel will be most effective in getting participants into work.

The influence of the Work Programme on the Life Skills project arose as ESF support (such as that provided through the Life Skills project) could not be used for people eligible for mandatory entry to the Work Programme as it would substitute expenditure which the Member State would make from its own resources. The Work Programme targets those individuals that have been unemployed for nine months or more with individuals being mandated onto the programme at any time, this has led in some instances to individuals being taken off Life Skills provision to participate in the Work Programme.

¹¹ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/the-work-programme/>

¹² http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/Employmentsupport/WorkSchemesAndProgrammes/DG_187696

The Work Programme supports individuals for up to two years and in September 2013 (taking effect on 28th April 2014) the government announced the Help to Work schemes for those who after two years had not secured employment via the Work Programme. To continue claiming Jobseekers Allowance, claimants have three options: to accept a community work placement, visit their Jobcentre daily or take part in further support. Those that looked to accept a community work placement remained ineligible for ESF projects and therefore the Life Skills project, however those that pursued one of the other choices became eligible for support through the Life Skills project once again.

Therefore whilst the economic downturn is likely to have boosted the potential size of the target groups that the service providers could deliver to, through increasing the numbers within each target group that were out of work and therefore eligible for Life Skills, the Work Programme redressed that expansion through the introduction of eligibility restrictions (with those mandated on to the Work Programme being ineligible for Life Skills).

Government Gateway

More widely, the UK government has sought to increase the proportion of services delivered online with the majority of these accessed via the Government Gateway website. The approach is described as being part of the its strategy of delivering joined up government enabling people to communicate and make transactions with government from a single point of entry.

Furthermore, from April 2014 those who have been made redundant and are seeking to commence claiming JSA benefits are now required to take part in a Day 1 Conditionality process. The process requires all new JSA claimants to have an email address, an appropriate CV and a Universal Jobmatch account to be deemed as meeting conditionality. Claimants are also required to demonstrate 'positive job seeking behaviours' from day one of their claim to benefit.

These reforms increased the need and the demand for IT skills amongst Life Skills participants and the provision of support for the development of a CV to meet the emerging requirements of Jobcentre Plus (JCP).

Universal Credit

A further reform of relevance to the Life Skills project is the move to Universal Credit. Universal Credit is the means-tested benefit that will replace many other benefit payments to help reduce the level of complexity in the benefits system. The benefits are provided on a monthly basis, however the roll-out of Universal Credit has been far slower than anticipated and ultimately the revised timetable for Universal Credit made little impact within the timescale of the Life Skills Project. However some service providers increased the provision of financial management skills as part of the Life Skills offer in recognition that payment is on a monthly basis (compared to the weekly pay that is offered through JSA).

4 Project Set-Up

4.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the initial implementation of the Life Skills project including the procurement process and the appointment of service providers.

Summary:

- The Big Lottery Fund commissioned service providers to deliver Life Skills services through eight procurement rounds, with each round focussed on a target group and a programme area.
- Funding was matched at source by the Big Lottery Fund thereby providing 100% of funding for the commissioned service provider to deliver Life Skills services and encouraging smaller-scale third sector providers to come forward to deliver the services.
- The procurement exercise was two staged (PQQ and full tender).
- The procurement approach was a first for the Big Lottery Fund and in hindsight could have been undertaken more efficiently with too much rigidity in some elements of the approach.
- The contractual model was based around payments by results although an additional management fee was included for procurement rounds 8 and 9 after research had found that 100% payment by results (PBR) had dissuaded some shortlisted suppliers from submitting a full tender.
- Concerns were raised that some third sector organisations had struggled with the procurement process and in hindsight it was felt that more could have been done to explore social benefits associated with Service Provider applications.

4.2 The Life Skills Project

The Life Skills Project intended to:

“Support targeted groups of economically inactive people in Wales to engage or re-engage with education, learning, volunteering and employment....This will include intensive support and mentoring where needed and enable the participants to acquire basic life-skills and adopt a stable life pattern that will help them to progress through learning, education, volunteering and employment.”¹³

As identified within the project business plan, the Life Skills project aimed to:

- Enable target participants to access and remain in employment;
- Enable target participants to re-engage with or continue to access learning, training or volunteering;

¹³ The Big Lottery Fund Life Skills – Convergence Business Plan (December 2010 Version) and Competitiveness Business Plan

- Enable participants from the target groups to develop their life skills, increase their confidence and re-engage and continue to access education, learning, volunteering or employment.

A series of SMART¹⁴ objectives were also identified for the project, for delivery by 2015, namely:

- Increase the capacity of the 18 delivery partners (10 in Convergence Areas and 8 in Competitiveness Areas) to work with economically inactive adults;
- Engage 10-18% of participants in employment;
- Engage 15% of participants in further learning;
- Reduce the number of participants who are NEET by 33%;
- Provide 58-76% of participants with the basic life skills needed to adopt a more stable life pattern;
- Provide long-term development support plans for 100% of participants;
- Engage 14% of participants in volunteering and work experience opportunities; and
- To inform the evidence base of what works in engaging specific hard to reach groups in learning, training, volunteering and employment.¹⁵

The Big Lottery Fund received the grant offer letters from the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) to enable the commencement of the Life Skills project in April 2009. The project, in accordance with WEFO guidelines, was delivered through a series of procured suppliers appointed through eight separate procurement rounds with each round targeted at a specific participant type and either within the Convergence or Competitiveness areas of Wales as set out in table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1: Procurement Rounds

Procurement	Target Group	Target Area
Round 1	Care Leavers	Convergence
Round 2	Care Leavers	Competitiveness
Round 3	Carers and Former Carers	Convergence
Round 4	Carers and Former Carers	Competitiveness
Round 5	Economically Inactive Families	Convergence
Round 6	Economically Inactive Families	Competitiveness
Round 7	Procurement of the Evaluators	N/A
Round 8	Older People (50+)	Convergence
Round 9	Older People (50+)	Competitiveness

¹⁴ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely

¹⁵ Adapted from Convergence and Competitiveness Business Plans (December 2010 Versions)

The receipt of grant offer letters was followed by an extensive procurement exercise to secure the service providers to deliver to each of the target groups. The procurement process adopted was two-staged for each procurement round (with the use of a pre-qualification questionnaire (PQQ) and a shortlist of providers then invited to full tender) and, given the scale of the contracts being awarded, necessitated advertising on the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) website.

The Big Lottery Fund decided that they would match the European funding at source, “*thus ensuring the funding package is kept simple*”.¹⁶ This was the first time that Big Lottery Fund had adopted this approach which effectively meant that 100% of funding for service delivery could be secured. It was hoped that this would therefore encourage smaller third sector organisations to bid for the services.

For the PQQ exercise there were a series of criteria for which the prospective service provider was scored against. The criteria sought to strike a balance between being inclusive and thereby encourage third sector organisations to apply, whilst ensuring that all who were successful at the PQQ stage could show experience of delivering services of this nature to this cohort of participants.

Criteria included evidence of:

- Compliance with EU / UK procurement legislation.
- The economic and financial position of bidders.
- The bidder having sufficient policies and procedures in place for an organisation of their size and nature, and the Quality Mark requirement.
- Area of business - suitability of bidder, based on information provided by bidder relating to organisational background and primary activity.
- Relevant staff, along with their professional qualifications & skills based on information provided by bidder.
- Staff experience of delivering similar contracts / project.
- Demonstrable experience of working with other organisations.
- Demonstrable experience of working with the participant group.
- Demonstrable experience in delivering a service of this type i.e. one-to-one and tailored packages of support for participants.
- Demonstrable experience in the use of monitoring / tracking and evaluation systems.

¹⁶ Ibid.

4.3 Procurement

The structure of the Life Skills project and more specifically, the introduction of procurement rounds, was a first for the Big Lottery Fund and clearly represented a steep learning curve for the project team. The system within the Big Lottery Fund was not set up to run a procurement process or contracts (with competitive grants the preferred route of service delivery in the past). In hindsight it was felt amongst senior staff that the approach could be undertaken more efficiently on future occasions. Contractual documentation and requirements were said to have been rigid which in turn offered too little flexibility.

Commissioning providers through a series of procurement rounds was however felt to be beneficial in a number of ways including allowing the contract team to fully allocate resource following a deadline (blocking out a week for example to assess tenders) which, whilst new to the team when compared to the typical on-going process of assess grant applications, was considered an effective way of working.

The Big Lottery Fund also welcomed the ability to have a tighter control on contractor performance which the procurement process gave them; service providers knew for example if they reduced targets, this would reduce their budget.

In terms of service delivery, as a minimum, service providers were to set out in their tender submissions:

- Approaches to identifying participant needs including a skills assessment and an agreed personal development plan
- Provision of one-to-one support for participants
- The delivery of personal development skills training
- Organisational skills training such as time management / prioritising tasks, presentation skills and problem solving
- Provision of job search techniques - CV writing, volunteering and learning opportunities, work experience and taster sessions
- Participant / progression route tracking
- The ability to deliver NVQ L1/2+ or recognised equivalent or refer to another external organisation
- The ability to provide on-going support / assistance for 6-12 months after a participant has entered employment.

The full tender then requested a series of cost speculations to assess the cost effectiveness¹⁷ of delivering the service which included a unit cost judgement required per:

- Participant engaged
- Participant gaining a qualification
- Participant volunteering or gaining work experience
- Participant entering further learning / training
- Participant into employment
- Participant in sustained employment for six months and for one year

4.3.1 Payment by Results

The contracts were also structured such that they would be paid on the delivery of agreed outcomes / results associated with the project ('payment by results'). For procurement rounds 1-6 the entire contract value was assigned to this structure. The level of payment associated with the results was guided by the unit costs that an applicant had stipulated against each of the output / result indicators described above.

4.3.2 Procurement Underspend

On the commencement of the procurement exercise a series of briefing events were held across Wales for prospective bidders. Each procurement round was allocated a budget, although for Rounds 1 and 2 there was an underspend against this budget. For Rounds 3 and 4, the quantity and quality of tenders meant that the project team were unable to commit the entire budget allocated to each of these rounds. Collectively (Competitiveness and Convergence areas), the Rounds 1 and 2, targeted at Care Leavers were under-committed by a little over £0.5m. In Rounds 3 and 4 (Carers and Former Carers) the level of under-commitment was far greater at £4.2m.

The procurement process for Rounds 3 and 4, where the largest under-commitment took place was investigated further by the Big Lottery Fund's Life Skills team as it became apparent that there was a significant drop off in terms of the number progressing beyond PQQ and invited to full tender, and those who then subsequently completed a tender. The project team contacted those applicants who, after being invited to full tender, failed to respond. The following reasons behind non-submission were made:

- Concerns about the financial risk associated with a payment by results structure
- That delivering the servicing with stringent employment targets would move a provider away from delivering services that are carer led to those that are target led
- Concerns from two organisations that the basic skills targets were inappropriate for Carers and Former Carers

¹⁷ Cost per outcome / result achieved

In response to the shortfall in committed funds, an additional priority group was identified (the Over 50s) and two additional procurement rounds. Furthermore, for these rounds, the Big Lottery Fund adapted the procurement approach to provide a management fee proportional to the budget 'up-front' (with the Big Lottery Fund carrying this risk for these resources) whilst the majority is retained and linked to payment by results.

4.4 Appointment of Service Providers

The procurement approach led to contracts being awarded to organisations from the public, private and third sectors. However, there was a suggestion from discussions with those involved in the procurement process that it may have been "*more difficult*" for third sector organisations. One of the main reasons for this was the payments by results system discussed above; many third sector organisations did not have the capacity (or cash flow) to cope with such a process.

It is interesting that those involved in the procurement process also perceived that some third sector organisations had struggled with the procurement process itself and even went as far as to say that they were disappointed by the quality of the tenders submitted. They believed that one of the main reasons for this was a lack of relevant skills and experience within the third sector; as one interviewee put it: "*they need to learn to put themselves into the mind of funders a bit more*". It was felt that the 'lack of capacity' may have restricted the third sector's ability to win contracts of this nature that are procured competitively.

The need to ensure that a procurement process can take into account the 'social benefits' that delivery by a third sector provider can provide was also acknowledged. The general view was that, potentially, the Big Lottery Fund could put a greater emphasis on social benefit within future procurement exercises. This could include additional scoring criteria associated with the wider social return (and not purely that associated with contractual delivery) derived from appointing an organisation being factored in to the assessment process.

5 Management and Governance

5.1 Introduction

This section considers the management and governance approach to the project including the structures in place and the roles and responsibilities associated with those in post. It also considers the perspectives of the Life Skills project from those in senior posts within the Big Lottery Fund and within key partner organisations

Summary:

- Contract Managers welcomed the move to contracts from a financial management perspective however it is a more resource intensive process than the competitive grants approach
- Service providers were very positive about the role played by Contract Managers and welcomed the support they gained through this relationship
- Contract Managers sometimes found it difficult to manage their relationship with service providers where in some instances they played a supportive role in others they would need to play a compliance orientated.
- The payment by results model was seen as a particular challenge where no management fee was included however service providers became increasingly positive about the approach as their contracts progressed.
- Concerns were raised about the continued lack of clarity regarding eligibility throughout much of the project.
- From a management and delivery perspective the introduction of the Work Programme had a big impact on the Life Skills project. A lack of clarity of the implication of its introduction hindered progress with procurement of rounds 8 and 9.
- In delivery the Work Programme impacted upon service providers in the rather stringent approach adopted where participants were mandated onto the Work Programme and taken away from service providers.
- Strategic stakeholders were widely positive about the Life Skills project which it was felt served underserved target groups and operated as a niche in terms of contract duration and focus.
- Strategic stakeholder universally held the view however that more could have been done to promote the Life Skills project and raise awareness of the services being delivered.

5.2 Management and Governance Structure

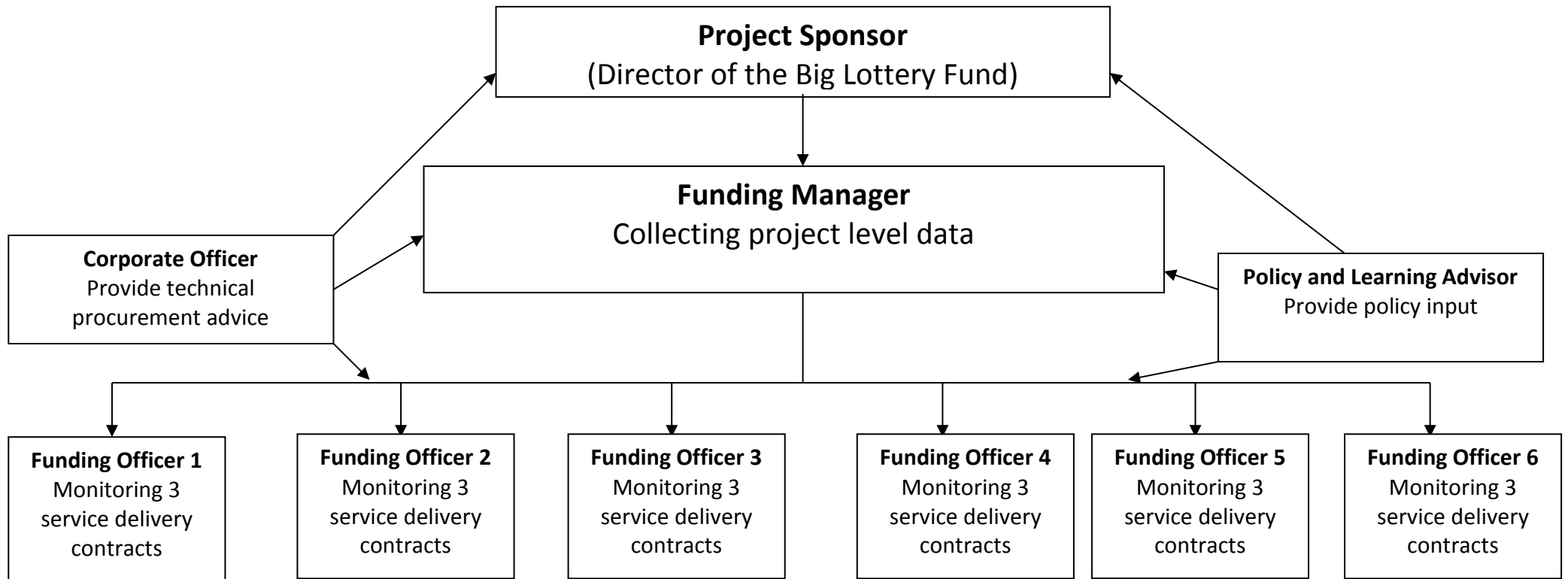
The staffing structure associated with the Life Skills project is presented in figure 5.1 overleaf which illustrates that the project had a dedicated Funding Manager within the Big Lottery fund whose role included the aggregation of individual service provider information for reporting to WEFO. The Programme Manager was the point of liaison with WEFO and also oversaw a team of Contract Managers (the number of which fluctuated during the project but was typically around five staff).

The Contract Managers acted as the dedicated point of contact for service providers by holding regular meetings (at least quarterly) with each service provider throughout the delivery of their contract. They were responsible for administering funds, providing support and monitoring progress.

From a Service Provider perspective the structure of project management within the Big Lottery Fund for the Life Skills project was welcomed and they specifically cited the support offered through the contract manager as being of real benefit. There was a feeling that the contract manager role offered a personal touch and providers valued the face to face meetings that were held.

There was also a perception of flexibility in the support offered by Contract Managers with service providers viewing the Contract Managers as solution-orientated where any shortfall in delivery was evident.

Figure 5.1: Organisational Structure¹⁸



¹⁸ Life Skills Revised Business Plan: Big Lottery Fund Convergence, Version September 2012

5.2.1 Contractual Structure

The move to the procurement of contracts was welcomed from a financial management perspective, as it shifted much of the financial risk associated with potential under delivery from the Big Lottery Fund to those contracted providers delivering services. The movement to contracts also enabled the Big Lottery Fund to gain a much greater insight into the delivery of services than they typically had with grants because of the more stringent contractual management and reporting requirements.

It is perceived amongst some members of the project management team that the structure was less trusting compared to the competitive grants approach given the lower level of scrutiny required with the grants model. From a management and accountability perspective this additional scrutiny was welcome however it did have implications for the management of relationships between Contract Managers and service providers. Contract Managers' collectively highlighted the difficulty of managing their 'dual relationship' role with service providers; on the one hand supporting them to successfully deliver their contract whilst on the other reducing their contract value or their repayment due to failure to deliver or issues of ineligibility for outputs and results claimed.

In addition, the procurement and subsequent monitoring of contracts was a lot more resource intensive than anticipated and warranted the recruitment of an additional member of staff to assist in this process given that all contracts were in the midst of delivery. The Contract Managers reportedly sampled a proportion of the participants on each contract as part of their quarterly monitoring meetings, however as the number of participants increased so did the sample size and therefore the scale of work demanded.

Further resource demands were placed on Contract Managers through the need to capture information on two separate systems (on spreadsheets and within a dedicated database for the project). This led to the recruitment of additional staff to meet the administrative demands of the project (increasing the team of Contract Managers from four to six).

5.2.2 Relationship

The management structure and the close communication with providers meant that a number of providers perceived, whilst in the midst of delivering their contracts, that the Big Lottery Fund management team was part of their delivery team as they worked with or even for providers to assist them in delivering the targets.

Furthermore, whilst a strong relationship was established with contract managers, there was a perception that there was a far greater degree of inflexibility in approach at a more senior level.

“On an individual level with the Big Lottery Fund the relationship is good but on a higher level there is a lack of flexibility within the programme.”

“All they’re interested in is hitting targets – no understanding of the client group – we go to the end of the earth with clients but feel that everything we do is never good enough – they don’t grasp the difficulties in getting evidence and all this for £1000 a placement. The one size fits all approach doesn’t work, the scheme needs more flexibility.”

Again though this is perhaps a reflection of European funding rather than of the role of the Big Lottery Fund.

5.2.3 Payment by Results Structure

The challenges and opportunities of the payment by results structure were explored with service providers in several phases of the evaluation.

Challenges

For those initially contracted to deliver services (and who therefore did not carry a management fee as part of the contractual structure) there was some degree of negativity and several providers suggested that the level of funding secured was insufficient to be viable. This is an interesting judgement, however given the unit costs assigned to results were derived from the financial details included within a service provider’s tender.

Another provider described the challenge of financial planning, more specifically in relation to drawing down funds for the completion of an NVQ where the time-lapse between commencement of support and achievement of the outcome could be fairly lengthy. There were also concerns when considering those target areas that were particularly challenging to deliver (the Essential Skills Qualification for example). Furthermore, some providers admitted that the approach had led to the delivery of specific courses in the short term to aid cash flow, *“...you have to reassess the way we deliver training to service users to get the numbers that we needed, – this took me away from the ‘give people what they want’ mind-set and veered into the ticking the box mind-set”*.

Those who were involved in the initial rounds where contractual finance was solely based on the delivery of outcomes largely felt that an additional management fee would have been of significant benefit. *“We could have done with some upfront costs but we never had that or therefore the start-up time”*. It was therefore widely welcomed that this model of contract was introduced for the last two procurement rounds with one of the recipients of fund from the later rounds stating *“our programme management payment once a quarter keeps the programme ticking over”*.

Positive influences of Payment by Results structure

Others were more positive about the approach with one reiterating the flexibility the approach offered, whilst several referred to how the payment approach brought about a more target-orientated and outcome focussed model:

“We are used to this way of working and we are paid predominantly on job outcomes and I think this way of working keeps you focused.”

“[We...] worked hard and are now overachieving – good motivation and has helped us focus but is a great pressure.”

It is also interesting to note that the extent of positivity associated with the payment by results model increased as the project progressed with the only remaining concerns about the approach being that it could perhaps have been a little more flexible in order to try and reflect some of the softer outcomes achieved and to (once again) include some form of management fee. Some of the comments on the completion of the contracts included the following:

“It keeps you focused – you know you have to achieve to be able to draw down any money. Actually, in retrospect I think it worked well because I think if we had not achieved so well under Life Skills may have resulted in us not getting this new contract.”

“At the start the trustees were pulling their hair out but to be fair this worked better for us and we did well because we over achieved on the outputs and success breeds success! This model keeps you focussed because you make sure you achieve but there is a risk in terms of cash flow...it does not lull you into a false sense of security – with other programmes the money comes in every quarter but with this one you engage more with the staff showing them how important it was to convert a contact into an outcome. Once they got the hang of it, competition came into it and staff were competing for numbers – always good to have healthy competition.”

5.3 Guidance and Eligibility

A continued frustration throughout the programme was the lack of clarity over eligibility and evidence requirements for monitoring purposes and some providers explained that they only received eligibility guidelines six months into project delivery. In hindsight it was felt by some of the management team at the Big Lottery Fund that there may have been an opportunity to tweak guidance, or clarify some of the issues being made prior to its distribution to secure greater clarity for service providers.

Furthermore where points of clarification were raised by service providers there was concern over the delays in responding to the points made. A lack of clarity and a shifting of goalposts with regards to eligibility were very concerning for service providers who would inadvertently find themselves exposed given the nature of their contract whilst creating an additional administrative burden between them and their Contract Managers. However the issue largely lay outside the control of the Big Lottery Fund and was more of a reflection of delays within WEFO.

5.4 Policy Changes

The importance of clarity over guidance was enhanced by the scale of change in policy associated with welfare reform. The emergence of the Work Programme and the guidance associated with the impact this would have on providers was recognised by all as a long and drawn out process. Again there were delays from WEFO as to the implications for Life Skills service providers. Whilst a lack of clarity remained, delays were incurred in terms of contract negotiations which ultimately led re-contracting taking far longer than anticipated.

Mixed messages were received by service providers associated with the potential for unit cost increases arising as a result of the Work Programme, which temporarily hindered progress in commissioning the round 8 and 9 providers. Furthermore, the challenges which emerged as a result of the introduction of the Work Programme unfortunately led to a reduction in targets for a number of service providers which has a resultant reduction in contract size.

Frustrations were also evident in relation to the largely stringent approach adopted when an individual is mandated onto the Work Programme. This particularly related to the abruptness of the ending of the support that the individual received regardless of the relationship, support and confidence that had been built up during their time on the Life Skills Project. Whilst it was hoped that there would be greater flexibility on how this was adopted (with for instance a period of 'grace' given to projects such as Life Skills to secure an outcome for an individual prior to them being moved onto the Work Programme) initially, flexibility hadn't been implemented to the hoped extent. As the project progressed it was increasingly apparent that levels of flexibility in relation to those individuals mandated to the programme were relationship dependent with some jobcentre plus representatives operating a more stringent procedure than others.

5.5 Strategic Perspectives

A number of strategic stakeholders were engaged at various times through the evaluation to gain their perspectives on the success of the Life Skills project.

Amongst stakeholders it was recognised the model of the programme, delivered through a series of procurement rounds, provided a level of flexibility to target specific groups at the outset who it was felt were under-served by provision of this nature.

Largely positive feedback has been received on the Life Skills project from strategic stakeholders throughout the evaluation with a perception that, from their perspective (where they were aware), the project was operating effectively and was delivering to the key client groups that were in need of additional support. However some felt unable to provide a judgement on performance as they had not encountered any publicity or received any details on the performance of the Life Skills project.

It was also felt that the contracts, which were primarily secured by third sector service providers, represented something of a niche as there was little to rival contracts of this nature, both in terms of contract value and length over which the contract was operational.

Furthermore, the targeting of specific groups that appeared underserved by employability support was maintained as the project progressed and this was specifically the case with the introduction of provision targeted at the Over 50s where there was a recognised gap in targeted services.

However, there was a universal view from both internal and external stakeholders that the Life Skills project suffered from a low profile amongst key strategic and partner organisations and several respondents cited key representatives within partner organisations as having no knowledge that a project such as Life Skills existed. This was despite the fact that the Life Skills Project was promoted more widely than similar projects undertaken by the Big Lottery Fund in the past. In hindsight it was felt by some that the lower profiles may reflect the fact that some service providers did not typically refer to their service provision as Life Skills but instead provided an alternative brand for the service, whilst others referred to a lack of clear identity for the project as a whole.

6 Project Delivery – Performance and Models

6.1 Introduction

This section provides an insight into the delivery models adopted by service providers in the delivery of services to target groups. It considers the patterns of approach adopted, areas of good practice and lessons learnt in service delivery.

Summary:

- Much of north west Wales did not benefit from Life Skills services whilst some authority areas had more than one service provider delivering to the same target group
- Contracts were widely varied in terms of total cost and service provider estimates of unit cost per participant engaged.
- Some outcome areas for the project were revised significantly, usually in response to misinterpretation of the target or an overestimate of the likely demand against a particular outcome area.
- Outreach was popular as an approach to engagement with participants and, once engaged, all service providers welcomed the flexibility they were afforded to deliver the outcomes required.
- Most adopted a one-to-one model as the primary route to support
- In terms of challenges, securing a sufficient level of demand to enable the delivery of course and tracking employment outcomes were two key elements as well as some of the challenging targets around essential skills and respite care in particular.
- Where contracts were delivered over multiple authority areas it was important that sufficient delivery staff were in place and that the organisation had a previous experience of delivering in that location, without these elements they gained limited success.
- Rurality created a significant challenge for service delivery leading to more resource intensive services and less opportunities in relation to employment.
- Service providers used a variety of means for capturing soft outcomes with some viewing it as vital to informing their service delivery whilst others merely viewing their capture as a tick box exercise.

6.2 Service Delivery

For the four identified participant groups, the following service providers were appointed through a competitive tendering process:

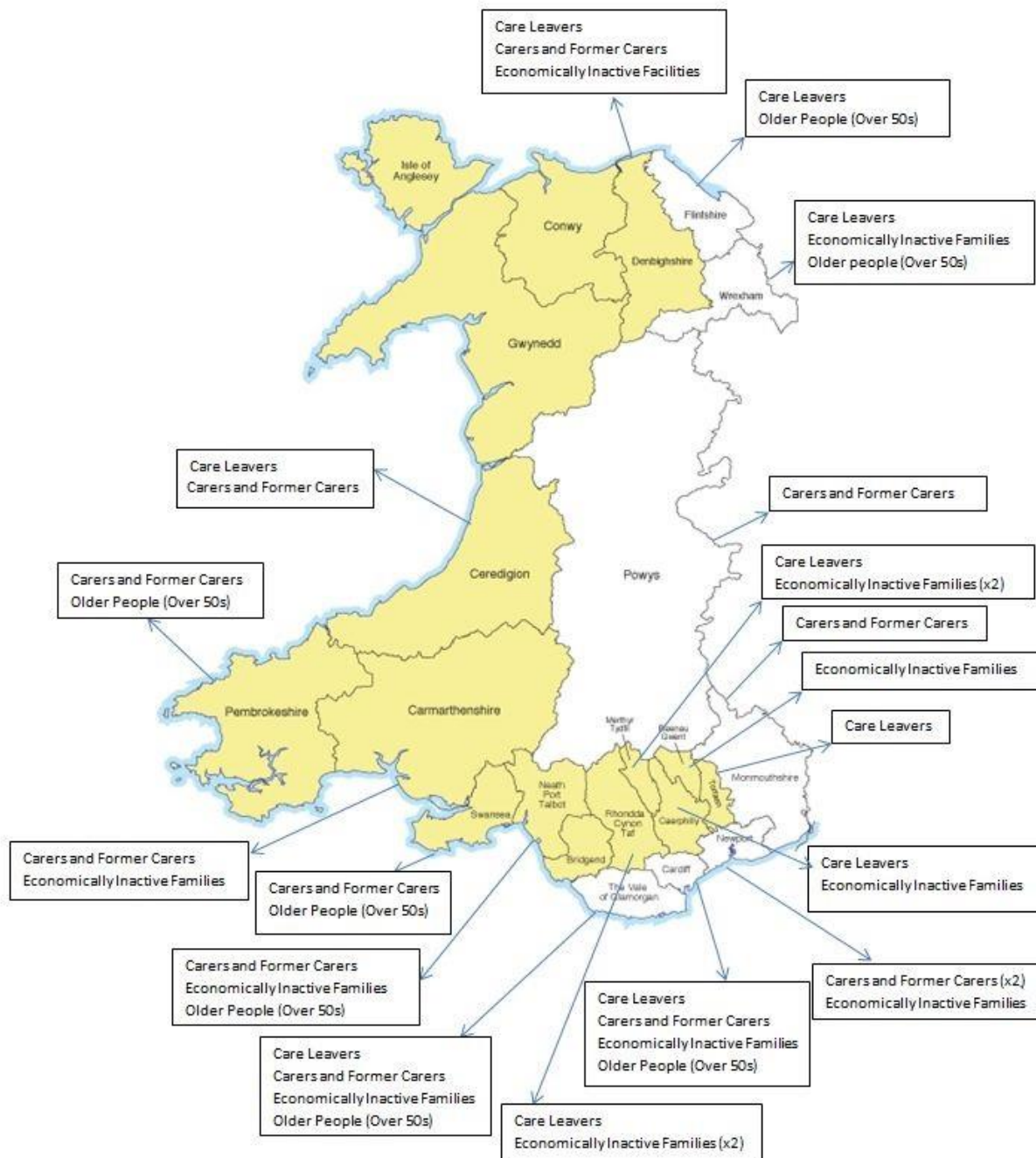
Table 6.1: Service Providers by Target Group

<p>Care Leavers - Convergence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cyfle Barnardo's Cymru • Llamau Ltd • Ceredigion County Council • Torfaen County Borough Council <p>Care Leavers – Competitiveness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barnardo's Compass - Cymru • Llamau Ltd 	<p>Carers and Former Carers Returning to Work – Convergence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swansea Neath Port Talbot Crossroads Care Attendant Scheme • Centre for Business and Social Action (CBSA) (Wales) Limited • NEWVOL <p>Carers and Former Carers Returning to Work – Competitiveness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Disability Advice Project • Newport City Council • CBSA (Wales) Limited
<p>Economically Inactive Families – Convergence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A4e Limited • Gingerbread / National Council for One Parent Families • CBSA (Wales) Limited • Valleys Kids <p>Economically Inactive Families – Competitiveness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Shaw Trust Limited • A4e Limited 	<p>Older People (50+) – Convergence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Shaw Trust Limited • Pembrokeshire County Council <p>Older People (50+) – Competitiveness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shaw Trust • Prime Cymru

Contracts were diverse in scale and ranged from approximately £190,000, through to £1m with contractual targets for participants ranging from 36 to 750 participants. Equally, the unit cost per participant engaged was also widely varied (ranging from £1,000 per participant to £11,000 per participant). The scale of variation was particularly great across different target groups but there remained some significant variance within some target groups, particularly within the Care Leavers and Carers and Former Carers.

In terms of the geographical locations in which services were being delivered map 6.1 below provides an overview of which target groups were being served by the Life Skills project in each local authority in Wales. The map illustrates geographical gaps in service delivery (most significantly in the north west of Wales) and also local authority areas where multiple contracts were issued to service providers that were seeking to engage with the same target groups. Reportedly this created challenges for those delivering services to Carers and Former Carers in Newport in terms of competing for target groups but no other anecdotal evidence was forthcoming on this being an issue elsewhere.

Figure 6.1: Life Skills Service Provision by Local Authority Area by Target Group



6.3 Project Performance

6.3.1 Overall Performance

Table 6.2 below summarises the aggregated performance of service providers within the Competitiveness areas of Wales. It also includes the original targets approved for the project to provide the full context in relation to performance.

The table illustrates that service providers have collectively surpassed targets against half of the headline indicators and particularly so for the number of participants entering employment with nearly two times the target achieved. However, in most instances there was a reduction in the target numbers, some of these have been only minor (in relation to engagement and employment) however others have been more substantial reductions.

The reductions in the target numbers generally reflected concerns that arose in response to the introduction of the Work Programme and the impact that this may have on service delivery. This also led to a temporary halt in the progression of contracting for Rounds 8 and 9 which shortened the delivery window for these contracts.

The more substantial reduction in relation to qualifications reflected a far lower than anticipated need for basic / essential skills amongst the target groups – particularly so amongst Carers and Former Carers. For further learning the reduction reflected a misinterpretation of the criteria as it was originally perceived that this outcome could be fulfilled whilst remaining on the project however it could only in fact be claimed as an exit outcome. This was typically a less desired outcome of the participants of Life Skills (who were more often looking to enter some form of employment) and also more challenging to capture thereby necessitating a review of the target.

Finally the most significant reduction compared to the original target related to support with caring responsibilities, this reflected a lack of demand for this service with Carers and Former Carers looking to a trusted source to provide this care rather than an unknown organisation. Despite the significant reduction this still fell short of its revised target and represented just 24% of the original target agreed at business planning stage.

Table 6.2: Headline Performance Figures as at 31st March 2015¹⁹

Overall performance – Number of Participants...	Original target ²⁰	Revised Target ²¹	Change	Actual	Performance against revised target
Engaged	2,191	1,893	-14%	2,263	120%
Gaining qualifications	1,577	902	-43%	906	100%
Entering Further Learning	329	125	-62%	88	70%
Gaining other positive outcomes	1,271	1,271	0%	833	66%
Entering employment	219	187	-15%	327	175%
Receiving support with caring responsibilities	876	295	-66%	206	70%

6.3.2 Performance by Target Group

Further analysis of performance by target group based on data capture by the end of March 2015 and is presented in figures 6.2 and 6.3 overleaf.

Learning and Skills Related Outcomes

Figure 6.2 focuses on performance against learning and skills related outcomes. The data illustrates the challenge encountered in terms of delivering essential / basic skills qualifications across all target groups. The original basic skills targets were devised in the business plan as a proportion of total participants and would appear to have been a significant over-estimate that was confounded by a continual (reportedly) stigma associated with participating in provision of this nature.

In terms of the number of participants entering learning as an exit outcome it is evident that service provision to Care Leavers was far more successful in delivering this target than other groups. This reflects the nature of this cohort with the contextual evidence in section 3 for example highlighting the lack of qualifications amongst Care Leavers and the fact that they could still benefit from funded education in FE institutions.

¹⁹ Provided as an addendum to the evaluation advisory group meeting held in April 2015

²⁰ Original target figures taken from Revised Business Plan: Big Lottery Fund Competitiveness Version July 2012

²¹ Revised target figures taken from Revised Business Plan: Big Lottery Fund Competitiveness Version July 2012 or, where these have been updated since those revisions, from an addendum to the evaluation advisory group meeting held in April 2015

Employment Related Outcomes

The employment related outcomes present much healthier achievements compared to contractual targets. The greatest shortfalls appear against Care Leavers (where the previous figure illustrates a greater propensity to seek further learning as an exit outcome as opposed to employment) and Carers and Former Carers. For the latter it is understood that some inflexibility around the capturing of outcomes influenced the extent to which these targets could be achieved with, for example, those securing a part time job of less than 16 hours not eligible to be counted as an employment outcome. This scenario may be likely for those who remain as carers and therefore are having to juggle their time.

Figure 6.2: Performance against learning / skills related outcomes (March 2015)

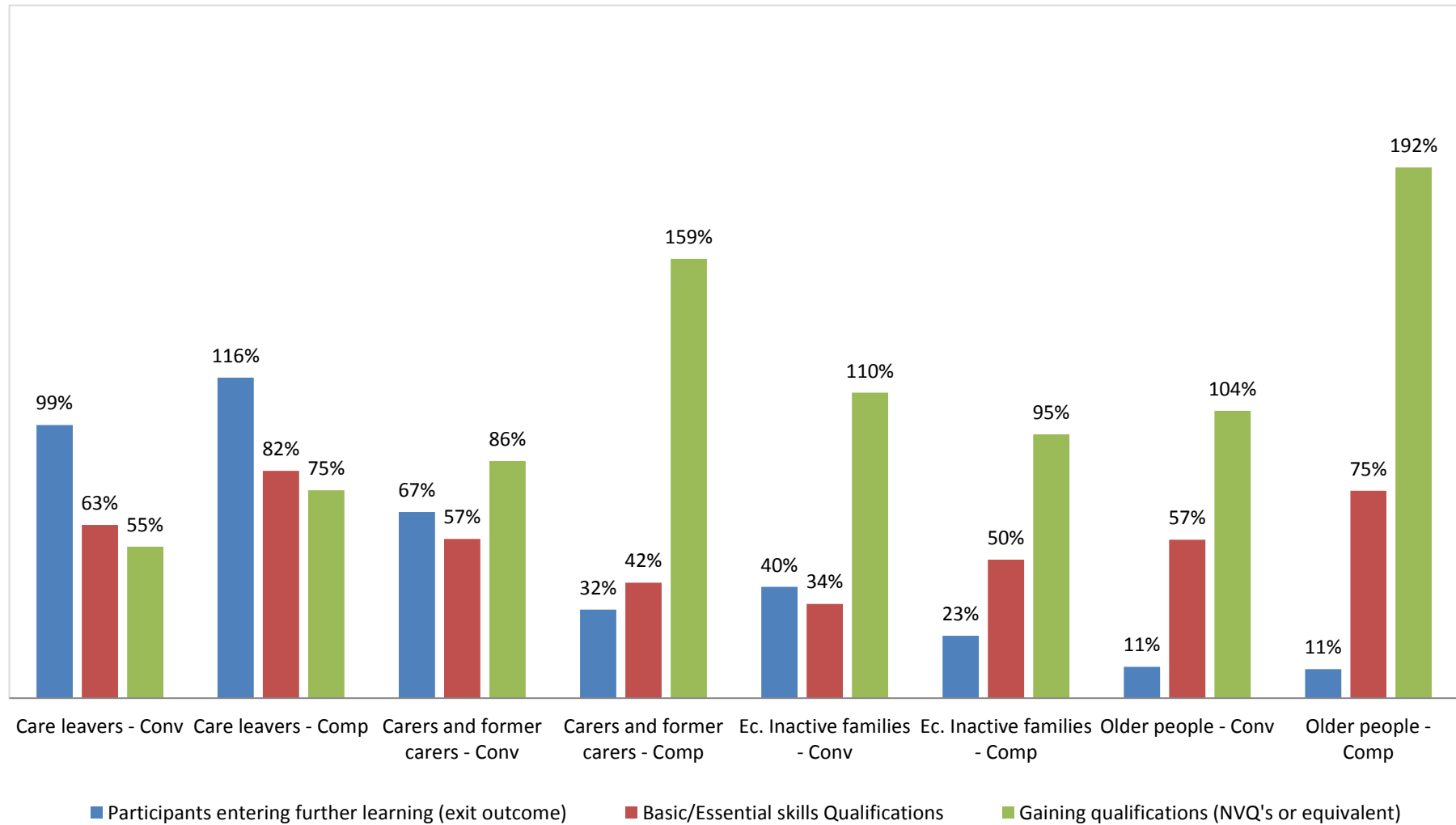
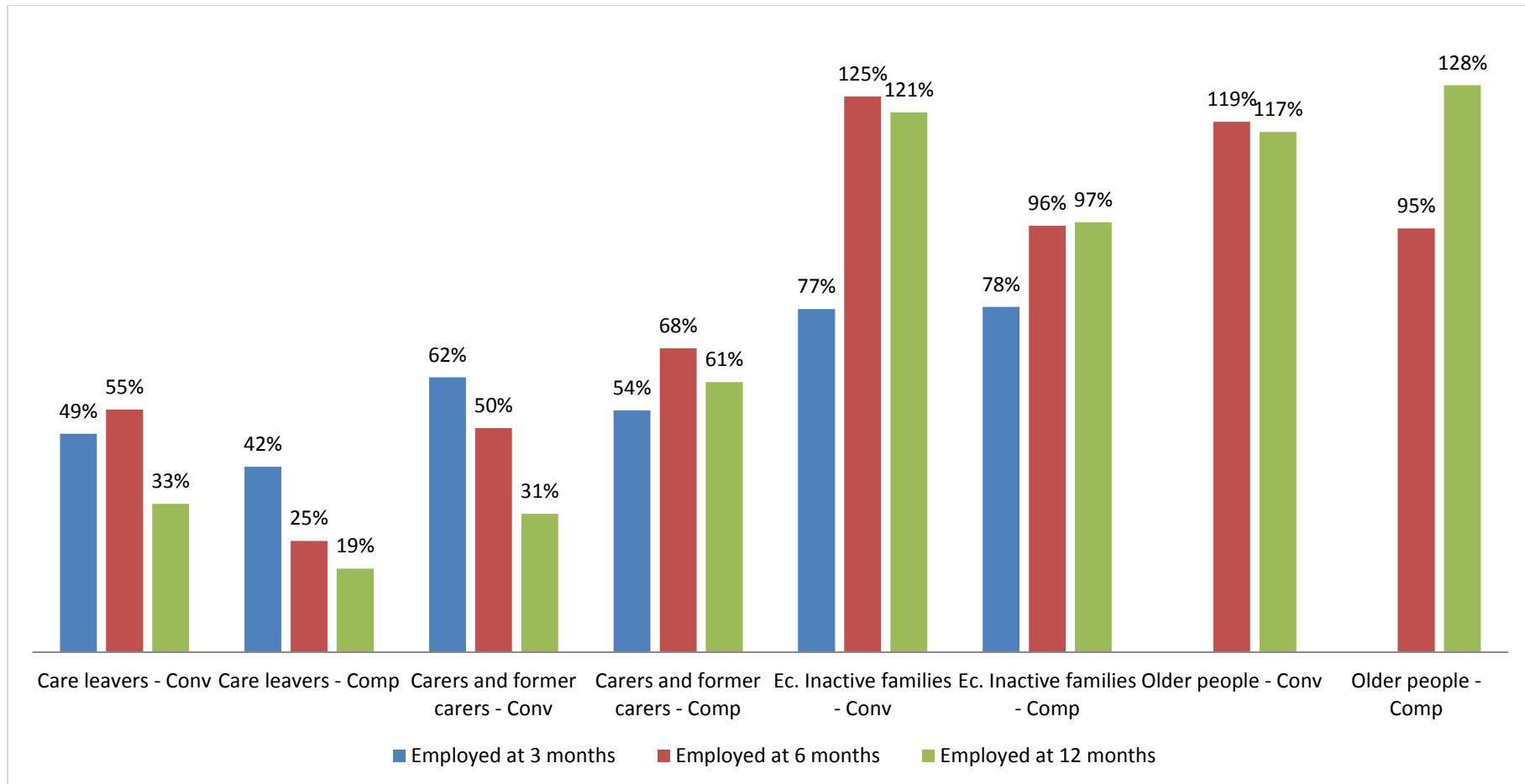


Figure 6.3: Performance against employment related outcomes (March 2015)



6.4 Models of Delivery

A focussed review of delivery models was undertaken by the evaluation team to identify the typical approaches to service delivery adopted by providers.

6.4.1 Engagement

The majority of Life Skills service providers sought to engage with participants through a community outreach approach, going out to community halls, libraries and in some instances out to family homes.

Several of the providers (particularly those engaging the Economically Inactive Families and Older People target groups) referred to strengthening partnerships with Jobcentre Plus and these relationships led to a significant number of referrals to their project, particularly so after the introduction of the Work Skills Programme. Some welcomed these referrals, others were less positive particularly where an 'uninformed' referral took place. An uninformed referral from JCP would typically be where individuals perceived they were being forced onto the Life Skills service (to avoid sanctioning for example) and were therefore coming to the service somewhat reluctantly with oftentimes a negative perspective on what it may offer.

6.4.2 Flexibility of Approach

Many mentioned that the Life Skills Project had provided them with a lot of flexibility as they were not dictated to on the nature of services to deliver, just the outcomes that needed to be achieved. This had enabled them to tailor bespoke services reflecting those particular needs.

The flexibility of approach was also of importance to some service providers when considering the length of time over which an individual was supported. However in this regard there was a need to strike a balance between the length of time that a participant benefited from the support on offer and the need to secure some financial return through the achievement of outcomes for that participant. In some instances service providers needed to refer participants to other support, however this could be a real challenge particularly (but not solely) for third sector clients who sought to support all clients by adopting the 'no wrong door' approach.

Others referred to the ability to work with clients informally and in a holistic nature which enabled discussion around an individual's situation, and to provide support for a broad range of issues and needs whilst acknowledging the ultimate goal of mainstream employment or education for the participants.

6.4.3 Proactive Support

A number of service providers cited the fact that Life Skills resources had enabled them to be more proactive in their provision of services. In the past they had been reactive offering drop-in provision or delivering services to groups, however the support helped to finance the marketing and promotion of the service.

“There was nothing else before Life Skills that was specifically for Care Leavers, our service through Life Skills is more bespoke, we help to break down barriers to get them ready for training or employment. We are led by the young people.”

6.4.4 Nature of Service Delivery

The majority of service providers referred to the importance of one-to-one support for their Life Skills participants with variable levels of engagement on a group basis from one service provider to the next.

The scale of alignment to other support also varied from one provider to the next, however some patterns did exist when exploring responses on a client by client basis. A number of the providers of services to Care Leavers for example referred to the importance of aligning with existing mainstream Social Service provision (primarily where the service provider is a local authority, using the departmental links with the Social Service division).

Securing a sufficient level of demand for course delivery

Some providers mentioned difficulties in referring participants to relevant training provision. In some instances the training provision was not simply available in an area accessible to the participants, whilst in others the provision would only be offered once a sufficient number of participants had been recruited. This was particularly challenging where the support on offer from a service provider was tailored to the individual.

Gaining and sustaining employment

In relation to securing an employment outcome, several providers referred to the importance of building strong links with employers which reportedly helped in identifying employment opportunities that may not be advertised publicly. Others referred to their links to Careers Services and to community organisations as a route to potential employment opportunities.

Several providers mentioned the use of CV writing, mock interviews and the use of job searching systems as important elements in order to help participants to gain employment. Work placements and volunteering were also cited as key elements in supporting individuals into employment, although for some participants encouraging them to participate in volunteering proved challenging as some were desperate to earn money immediately. Other providers also mentioned that they provided small-scale financial support to overcome barriers, for example reimbursing travel costs for an interview or providing low budget, suitable clothing for an interview.

Gaining and sustaining employment - participant tracking

Once in employment, several providers referred to the challenge of tracking participants. Various measures were applied by providers to overcome this challenge including: incentivising participants, pre-empting participants to remind them that the service provider would engage with employers at 3, 6 and 12 months, or assigning an individual who was dedicated to working with employers to secure the evidence for a sustainable employment outcome.

Challenging targets

A recurrent challenge for providers related to achievement of both childcare and respite care targets and to the achievement of targets in relation to basic / essential skills. Several general points were raised through provider consultations:

Basic / essential skills

- Little need amongst client groups for essential skills
- Courses providing essential skills being too long
- Essential skills provision can be hard to access (relatively few learning providers appear to offer the service)
- The stigma associated with participating in essential skills provision (despite the shift in branding from basic skills to essential skills)

Participants who receive support with Caring responsibilities – including respite care

- A general reluctance to use childcare or respite care made available by a service provider with a desire instead to leave their dependent with other family members or a more trusted source that the participant was more familiar with.

Valleys Kids were more successful than other service providers in gaining usage of their childcare, a summary of the approach is set out below.

Thematic Case Study: Support with Caring Responsibilities – Valleys Kids

Childcare is typically found to be the biggest barrier to participants on the Valleys Kids project due to its inflexibility. If a morning session ran late then they may have to pay for the whole day of childcare support. Valleys Kids, as a child focussed organisation, is able to provide childcare in the same building as the parents that are receiving support. Valleys Kids believe that encouraging participants to utilise this support is a lot about building trust and trying to make things as easy as possible for the parents. Valleys Kids are also able to offer a child-minding service or can pay someone some of the fees if the parent already has a child-minder that they use who they feel most comfortable leaving their child with.

By offering this service it has enabled some of the parents to actually take part which is a great opportunity for them. There is a big focus on the wellbeing of the parents. In considering elements to replicate in future schemes, the child care environment needs to be in a clean location where there is basic engagement and a warm welcome

Networking

The extent to which providers were actively networking with other providers (either within Life Skills or beyond) was varied. Many were so focused on delivering their targets that they felt they had little opportunity to network. All had welcomed the opportunity to share experiences and practice at Life Skills knowledge sharing events however most had wished that these would have commenced far earlier within the Life Skills project during the initial phases of service delivery.

6.4.5 Target Group Trends - Care Leavers

Participant Case Study: Care Leaver

James²²: (a 17 year old male) Care Leaver who now lives in a nearby hostel. He was kicked out of school in year 10 but did manage to do his GCSEs with the help of a tutor. At the time of the research he was doing a part time college course in carpentry. Before coming to Life Skills he was extremely shy and lonely and had been taking anti-depressants since the age of 13.

He heard about Life Skills through his support worker and started coming along in December 2012, hoping to get some help with maths. They helped him to plan out his goals for the future and he has now completed the maths course. They also helped with confidence building, independent living, CV and job search.

With the help of Life Skills he found a temporary job over Christmas and he has three days' work experience in a factory coming up. He will imminently be gaining his CSCS card. This will all look good on his CV.

He will soon be starting an apprenticeship with a building firm and this has all been achieved through the help of the Life Skills Project.

He said, *"I know I can change my life now, I feel like I have grown up. I am very happy with what I am learning now and excited about what the future will hold"*.

He is no longer taking anti-depressants and is much happier, more positive and motivated. He added *"it's never too late to change. Life Skills has done so much more than I expected. I am more skilled and more confident now. It has been amazing"*.

Those providing support to Care Leavers tended to rely upon local authority Social Services teams for referrals, particularly where the provider was the local authority. Provision, as with most Life Skills services, was typically very adaptable to the needs of the individual.

The non-local authority based providers tended to have a wide range of facilities on site for developing life skills including kitchens, washing machines in addition to private rooms for quiet study. On average, each support worker typically worked with up to five young people (although one provider had support workers who had a caseload of up to 20) with participants gaining a high intensity of support in recognition of the scale and range of needs typified by this group.

There was considerable variability in the length of service offered to Care Leavers, some engaged with the programme and gained a successful outcome within thirteen weeks whilst others stayed with the service for up to two years.

²² Names have been changed to protect participant confidentiality

Most cited the biggest challenge as being retaining the interest of young people and then tracking them once they had left the service.

Thematic Case Study: Approach to Delivering Basic / Essential Skills Services – Llamau

Llamau who deliver services to Care Leavers have been particularly successful in the delivery of basic / essential skills services. However they encountered barriers in relation to participants accessing this support as they felt the provision of basic skills does not really exist for their cohort, with colleges incorporating it as part of the first year of engagement on a college course. There is not much young people orientated provision that just offers basic skills. Some young people don't see the point, quite a few will say *"I'll sign up to JSA and do that for the rest of my life"*. However, a lot of the time it is lack of confidence that prevents young people from increasing their skills, they are frightened to give it a go.

Llamau as a result delivered essential skills in-house and expected everyone who engaged with them to address essential skills. Young people who felt they didn't need essential skills support were taken to work tasters (the funding of which have played a very important role in realising the need for these skills and taking small steps towards employment) to expose them to where these skills would be necessary. Llamau worked to build their confidence by encouraging participants try the lower entry level which boosts their confidence quite quickly and then move on to the next level.

Another barrier is when young people arrive from other providers with Level 1 qualifications²³ and are assessed as Entry Level it is hard to address. It is perceived that some providers out there are putting young people through just to achieve targets, which results in Llamau (or indeed other service providers who encounter a similar issue) having to step on a young person's confidence which is a challenge and very frustrating.

Overcoming these barriers has involved getting them to realise it is not like it is at school, putting it into a context they will engage with for example the accredited qualification that relates to tenancy which brings in ICT, reading meters etc. Since Llamau started doing this, making them aware of the relevance to other aspects of their daily lives a lot of them find their comfort zone and will readily engage and if participants are not happy with the offer they will bring forward suggestions for Llamau who would then address these issues through refinements in their approach.

6.4.6 Carers and Former Carers

Like the majority of other providers, Life Skills services delivered to Carers and Former Carers were typically offered on a one-to-one basis. However, there was perhaps more of an emphasis on group work and the impact this had on increasing the ability of individuals to socially interact as there was a greater prevalence of isolation or social exclusion amongst this group compared to the other target groups (further evidence of this can be found within the analysis of primary research in Section 7).

²³ Level 1 qualifications equates to one GCSE at grade D-G.

Again, the services on offer were extremely flexible and the duration of participation could be anything from eight weeks through to two years, whilst caseloads for service providers could be up to 25 per person. A recurrent challenge for services providers with this client group was the lack of demand for respite care. Most had a close friend or family member who they turned to more readily and were reluctant to utilise respite care from someone who was unknown to them. Furthermore, whilst Basic Skills (and subsequently Essential Skills) targets were challenging to achieve across the project, it appears to have been particularly challenging for this client group where there was a greater range of qualifications amongst participants; many were highly qualified and therefore saw little need to engage in that form of service.

Some providers also reported challenges in supporting this client group to commit to an employment outcome. Whilst the clients did engage with the service, the extent to which they ultimately desired employment was reported to vary substantially amongst participants (again further evidence of this issue is considered in the analysis of primary research in section 7).

6.4.7 Economically Inactive Families

Participant Case Study: Economically Inactive Families

Michael²⁴: (a male aged 38 years) had been living on the streets for three years and had an alcohol and drug problem which he has managed to keep under control. He has been supported by Life Skills for just over a year. Of the support received he said, *“it has totally changed my life, they’ve helped me with my reading and writing, sent me on a food management course, an IT course and have helped me to set up an email address on my computer. They have been outstanding and I’m really glad that I was referred to them, they are out of this world”*.

Describing himself before joining the project he said, *“I was living on the street, drinking and doing drugs. I had nothing; I was a down and out”*.

Describing himself today he said, *“I’m getting there, I’m reading and writing better thanks to the courses and that has changed my life, I’m bettering myself. I feel happier and not alone, I’ve got a roof over my head and someone to speak to at the project to give me advice. My life would have been a total mess without their support”*.

There is perhaps the greatest emphasis of outreach and community engagement activities amongst service providers who engaged with Economically Inactive Families. A variety of methods were used; some service providers targeted single parents whilst others adopted a whole family approach and subsequently identified a lead participant from the family who they worked closely with.

²⁴ Names have been changed to protect participant confidentiality

Provision for this client group was primarily delivered on a one-to-one basis although some group activity was delivered, particularly when they engaged in learning provision. The providers to this group again found it challenging to maintain enthusiasm and commitment amongst participants, similarly maintaining engagement with some of these participants after they have left the service was also cited as a challenge.

Thematic Case Study: Approach to Delivering Basic / Essential Skills Services – CBSA Wales

CBSA Wales have also been particularly successful at delivering services of this nature however they do recognise the barriers of engaging participants in provision, with some participants having preconceived ideas of basic / essential skills believing it to be there for poorly skilled people only. CBSA Wales have found that the transition to the term “essential skills” has helped in explaining in detail what is involved and in encouraging people to come around to the idea of taking up the training. CBSA Wales have found that focusing on I.T as being the main part of essential skills training has helped significantly as it attracts more people than Maths or English. Furthermore, whilst people are learning more about I.T. they are also improving their English and Maths at the same time.

One representative of CBSA Wales does believe however that more time should be given to describing essential skills in leaflets or when talking face-to-face. Equally issues have been encountered regarding claiming funding for the provision of essential skills if, on paper, the participant is well qualified. There are circumstances where provision of essential skills is required for those with intermediate level qualifications and it is felt that importantly, the flexibility is there to provide funding for a participant to undertake this training if a need for essential skills provision is identified.

6.4.8 Older People

Those providers who engaged with the over 50 client group appear to have utilised their local Job Centres as a referral route into their services although this was not solely relied upon with a combination of community engagement and the use of other organisations cited by service providers. However the increased propensity to use the local jobcentres suggests that support to this target group was focussed on those that were closer to the labour market and on achieving employment as an outcome.

Again the model of service was very flexible to the needs of the individual with an emphasis on one-to-one support, particularly in the early stages of engagement with clients with subsequent group work was part of the course provision that clients were referred to / engaged with.

All providers delivering services to this cohort referred to the challenges of delivering basic skills / essential skills services as their clients had either already secured that level of skill set, or if they hadn't, were unwilling to participate in that form of service provision. Again the challenge of respite care was referred to with this client group on the similar basis as the carers and former carers.

Thematic Case Study: Methods for Capturing Information on Sustained Employment – Pembrokeshire County Council

Pembrokeshire County Council (PCC) has been particularly successful in capturing information on sustained employment. They contact the participant the first two weeks after they have left for employment and then once a month for a year to provide in-work support. PCC use a form that the participant sign giving permission to share information. If the participant has any problems with the job they have secured PCC works with them to find alternative employment. The information on individuals is kept up to date and held centrally to ensure that they remain contactable post support.

PCC believe that in-work support is a big part of their contract and is important for securing sustainable employment outcomes. If PCC struggle to retain regular contact they will instead engage with the employer directly. PCC also offer volunteering and because none of these are mandatory it works well for participants.

6.5 Challenges in the Delivery of Services

A range of challenges have been reflected on by service providers throughout the delivery of the Life Skills project.

6.5.1 Geographical Scale of Delivery

Service providers were operating on a range of geographical scales, some were operating at a local level in one local authority area per contract whilst others operated at a sub-regional level across several local authority areas per contract. In addition, the geographical scale of operation did not typically reflect the value assigned to a contract and this resulted in large variances in the geographical concentration of Life Skills resources.

Where service providers were operating across multiple areas some stakeholders felt that this had an impact on their ability to deliver the intensity of support necessary, particularly where outreach provision was prominent in their offer and particularly where one member of the service provider's delivery staff was tasked with covering multiple areas. This challenge was accentuated where that service provider lacked a presence or indeed previous experience in delivering at that particular location.

In this regard it is difficult to identify an optimum size of contract for delivering Life Skills services as it is more dependent on the ability of the service provider to deliver as opposed to an appropriate scale of delivery. However, the importance associated with outreach provision and the need for a strong presence in a location would suggest that it would be difficult to deliver services much beyond a contract of £1m to these specific target groups as any greater scale of delivery may dilute the local presence that some of the smaller, more targeted contracts benefit from.

Some service providers expressed a desire to widen the geographical area that they serve citing their capability to do this albeit with additional staffing (and therefore financial) resource.

6.5.2 Issues of Rurality

Service providers were also asked about their perceptions regarding any geographical issues that affected their ability to deliver services. In the majority of cases, service providers referred to the challenge of delivering services in rural areas and how much more resource intensive the provision of services in rural areas was compared to their equivalent in urban areas. Delivery staff referred to frustrations regarding journey times and their ability when offering outreach provision to only visit one client in a day in some instances, others referred to the inability to engage and recruit participants who face transportation barriers. Whilst the cost of transportation to a course could be reimbursed a participant would still need to initially incur that spend and to tackle what could typically be a rather arduous journey that could involve multiple methods of transportation.

Others referred to the comparative lack of available job opportunities in rural areas (and in the more economically marginal urban areas) which acted as an additional barrier to securing employment outcomes for Life Skills participants. Conversely urban areas, particularly where there is a presence of large employers, were seen as more fruitful locations for identifying and securing employment outcomes for participants.

6.5.3 Policy – Welfare Reform

Service providers continued to cite frustrations associated with the Work Programme throughout the evaluation with the most common issue being participants getting mandated onto the programme after being in receipt of significant support from an alternative service provider.

Towards the end of the evaluation, service providers also referred to an increasing number of participants returning to the Life Skills project following an unsuccessful two year participation on the Work Programme. In some instances service providers were picking up with participants where they left off two years previously when they were initially mandated on to the programme.

6.5.4 Soft Outcomes

Service providers used a variety of ways to capture the distance travelled and the soft outcomes gained by project participants. The approaches applied have been explored in greater depth with service providers as part of the evaluation to identify the extent of variance in approach.

Table 6.3 below summarises the approaches used by each of the service providers. The table provides an insight in the variety of data tools and processes applied in order to capture this information and illustrates that comparative analysis of achievement would be impossible to assess.

Table 6.3: Service Provider Approaches to Measuring Distance Travelled and Soft Outcomes

Provider	Soft Outcomes Measurement	Frequency of usage	Completed Collaboratively / independently	Data held in Paper/ Electronic
Llamau Ltd.	Questionnaire	Four weeks	Collaborative	Both
Pembs County Council	Richter Scale	After six months and on completion	Collaborative	Both
Valleys Kids	Outcomes Star	At commencement and on completion of support	Independently (support offered if requested)	Both
Gingerbread	Soft skills sheet and catching confidence sheet	On commencement then after period of time (undefined)	Independently	Both
Prime Cymru	Work Star	Monthly	Collaboratively	N/A
Barnardo's	Personal development plan	Every two months	Collaboratively	Both
Shaw Trust	Client progression matrix	Monthly	Collaboratively	Both
Disability Advice Project	Wheel of Life	After every session	Collaboratively	Both
Newport City Council	Participant assessment questionnaire	When first meet, after three months, then 12 months or on leaving	Either	Both
Crossroads Care / Swansea Carers	Outcomes Star and Wavehill Survey	Outcomes Star – initially and at a later date, Wavehill survey at end of support in client feedback role	Collaboratively	Both
CBSA	Questionnaire	No specific timescale	Collaboratively	Paper
Torfaen CBC	Weather Vane	Three months	Collaboratively	Both
NEWVOL	Outcomes Star	Typically quarterly	Collaboratively	Both

When asked about the role of the tool, some simply saw it as a data capture mechanism for claiming against targets for the contract. Others however referred to its role in tracking a participant's journey whilst several described how the method they applied could influence the approach to service delivery depending on how a participants had (or indeed) had not progressed.

6.6 Cross-cutting Themes

6.6.1 Environmental Sustainability

All providers referred to consideration of environmental sustainability in the way they delivered their Life Skills services, this included the use of recycled paper, the promotion and utilisation of public transport where possible and appropriate, and the encouragement of car sharing (where there was no alternative to private transport). In addition, several of the service providers secured the Green Dragon award.

Service providers also referred to specific activities that they had undertaken in relation to the promotion of environmental sustainability, this included:

- One provider (Barnardo's) worked with Groundwork and referred participants there for a 10 week course where the young people got involved in community gardens, recycling, making things with sustainable products amongst other activities. In addition they set up a food cooperative which a number of the young people helped to deliver and in doing so learnt about the importance of environmental sustainability.
- Another provider referred to the delivery of workshops to young people with a distinct environmental theme. This included a 'Trash to Treasure' workshop where young people were tasked with making artwork out of recycled materials and they held an exhibition of their work.
- Another scheme undertaken by the service providers was 'Cycle Recycle' – where old bikes were donated and every Tuesday evening young people participated in fixing the bikes up. In return they got to keep the bike themselves.
- Other providers mentioned volunteering work that they undertook in partnership with Keep Wales Tidy by doing a series of litter picks.
- Other providers integrated modules around environmental sustainability into their basic skills courses and they promoted the Eco code to all employers who they engaged when signing up a placement. One provider also mentioned taking a group to the local recycling centre as part of this module where they learnt about the recycling process as a whole which gained really good feedback from the participants.
- A further service provider for Care Leavers (Llamau) described how all the young people helped on an allotment that had been donated at St. Melons. The allotment work was undertaken in partnership with Dimensions (who support children with autism), the young people were also involved in making bird boxes and bat boxes and received a delivery of food from Fair Share to avoid it going into land fill. Another service provider (Barnardo's) also referred to the use of allotments with their young people to promote environmental sustainability.
- In addition Pembrokeshire County Council referred to their use of a market stall in Pembroke Dock as part of their Life Skills service where they sold recycled clothes and other second-hand goods. All profits from the stall were donated to charities.

6.6.2 Equal Opportunities

In relation to equal opportunities all providers offered their services to any eligible individual within their cohort. All providers were able to offer services bilingually and many referred to the fact that they had never turned away potential participants within their cohort. Some providers referred to the provision of transport to enable participants who were rurally isolated to engage with the services. Others referred to the provision of childcare, particularly for single parents to enable them to participate in the project. Other providers referred to the provision of workshops on the subject of equality including workshops on how females are viewed and on domestic violence.

With regards to the promotion of equal opportunities, service providers all referred to the provision of bilingual materials and the 'no wrong door policy' (albeit within the parameters of eligibility associated with each of the various client groups). Service providers highlighted the provision of transport to enable those who have accessibility issues or are remotely located to attend courses / service provision.

Service providers were then specifically asked about the engagement of females on the Life Skills project and whether any additional barriers had been identified in the engagement of this client group. Amongst the majority of service providers, there was a perception that there were no gender based differences that had emerged and several providers suggested that male participants were perhaps more of a challenge to engage. Some service providers referred to issues regarding childcare and referred to the importance of providing this as a trusted service for potential project participants.

6.7 Organisational Impacts

Service providers were asked to consider the impact that delivering Life Skills services had on their organisation. Most referred to the additional resource which enabled them to increase the capacity of their individual organisations. Those organisations that are smaller in scale (typically below 50 employees) and primarily of third sector origin referred to more significant organisational impact arising as a result of securing a Life Skills contract. Other impacts arising from delivering the support included providing a service provider with greater leverage to more closely partner with key referral organisations.

Some described the service as having encouraged them to evaluate the way they operate and specifically in terms of the efficacy of their model of delivery. Several referred to the fact that securing the contract had made them more competitive for other contractual opportunities whilst one organisation felt that they had managed to secure two subsequent contracts of a similar nature as a direct result of delivering the Life Skills contract.

Several also referred to the provision offered through Life Skills becoming more mainstream within their organisation as a result of securing the resource and for one provider, that by securing the contract they had been able to highlight the need for this type of service which has led to amendments in that providers business plan to better reflect the servicing of that identified need.

Also of importance is that fact that, several mentioned how delivering a contract (as opposed to a grant) had influenced the culture and practice within their organisation.

“Having a contract has driven us into different areas and made us even more creative than we would otherwise have been.”

One further respondent concluded:

“I think that these projects are the best and most effective I have ever worked on. Previously I worked on DWP funded projects and the mandatory and stringent delivery models they demand do not get the best out of people. Having the autonomy to flex how we have worked with Life Skills and get the best from people has probably been a big contributor to the success of the project. I remain hopeful that these projects will be funded again in the future because the target group remains there, the need for support remains there and the Big Lottery Fund have done an excellent job of putting together a proper contract, a contract that has enabled us to go out and support that target group.”

6.8 Key Learning Points

Finally when asked for key learning points, several service providers mentioned the need for better planning as part of setting up their projects whilst others referred to the need to have clear understanding of what the key deliverables for a project are. Others referred to the need to not get driven too much (behaviourally) by the targets within the contract and that patience is needed in order to achieve the targets in question.

Others felt that in hindsight, it would have been helpful to have the opportunity to review outcomes early within the project or to consider re-profiling the delivery of outcomes following initial experience of delivery.

From an evidence perspective, there was a consistent desire for systems to be in place from the outset with many referring to the payments by results approach moving them into direct delivery which rendered them little opportunity to establish key systems (including effective monitoring systems). Others referred to the need for clarity on eligibility and on the evidence requirements for participants from an early stage in the project.

It was felt by some that if the Payment By Results (PBR) is to be continued, there is a need for much greater research on targets, *“in terms of the Big Lottery Fund, it is really critical that the specification is properly researched and that we are delivering targets that are needed and necessary”* and for greater flexibility as to how this is applied, *“much greater care needs to be put into the remuneration model i.e. different targets for different types of people. We should be getting paid for achieving targets for people that actually need it”*.

Another area where there was felt to be a missed opportunity reflects feedback from strategic stakeholders and is the perception that there was insufficient promotion of the success of the project. Finally, several mentioned a wish that a joint event could have been held much earlier within the project to enable service providers to share ideas and to encourage collaborative working at the development stage of the services.

6.9 Forward Strategies

Throughout the latter phases of the evaluation, service providers were asked what plans they had for delivering services to clients once their Life Skills contract comes to an end. Some providers had already secured contracts to support their participants going forward, others specifically cited the fact that securing the Life Skills contract had enabled them to secure subsequent contracts as a result of meeting their targets or had placed them in a strong position for procurement rounds that are now in process for the continuation of delivery of services of this nature.

In other examples service providers looked to source more funding to continue to support their participants with several being hopeful that a suitable project may come forward within the next round of European Funding to enable them to deliver a similar contract in the future. However, it is recognised that within the European programme there is a timescale gap concerning the availability of provision which can be used to deliver services. Welsh Government projects are primarily first to receive approval and have only recently been confirmed by the programme, projects delivered by other providers will begin to emerge in the coming months.

Others had submitted bids to the Big Lottery Fund's People and Places programme to deliver schemes of a broadly similar nature but that are more reflective of that programme's parameters, whilst one provider had secured funding through the Dormant Accounts Programme delivered by the Big Lottery Fund, Getting Ahead, which has enabled them to continue to work with young people focussed on 16-18 year olds.

For most service providers however there was a significant reduction in the level of service that they were able to offer following the completion of their Life Skills contract. However, in these instances service providers highlighted the fact that they are far more integrated with other provision that exists and have strengthened relationships with other service providers as a result of delivering the Life Skills project. In these instances some referred to a change in role for the service provider with them becoming a broker, or a service which signposts or handholds participants through to other support of relevance that they are familiar with as a result of delivering Life Skills.

7 Participant Perspectives and Impact

7.1 Introduction

This section explores the feedback from Life Skills participants. A total of 1,049 participants across the Life Skills project were interviewed once by the research team, typically within six months of being recorded as a participant by the Big Lottery Fund. Of these participants, 401 were then re-interviewed approximately 12 months after the initial interview to explore any changes in outcomes or in the perspectives regarding the support they'd received.

Summary:

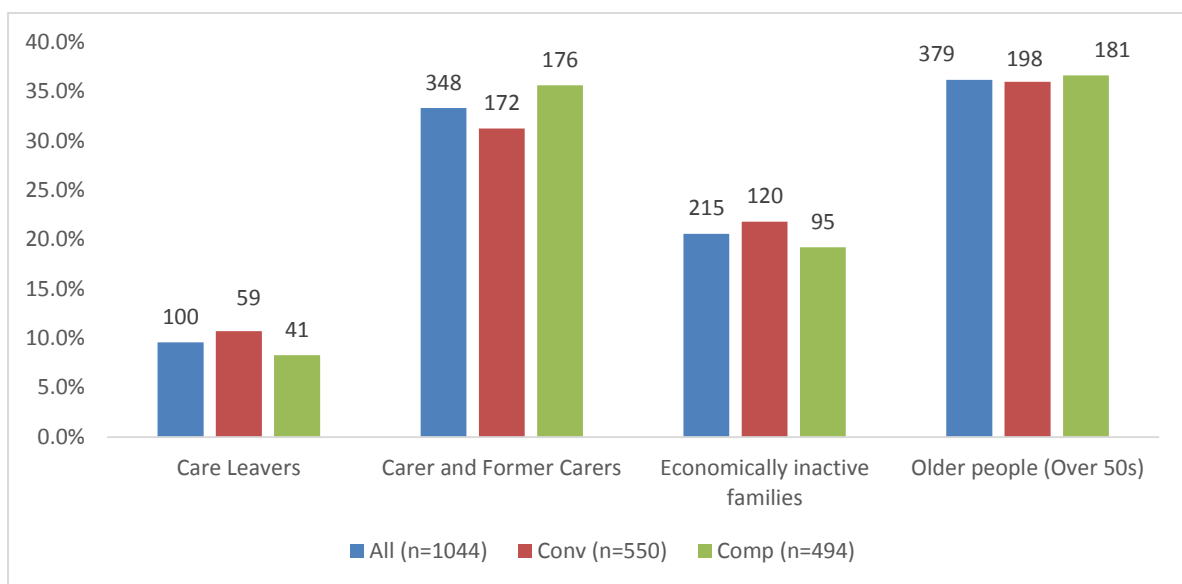
- There was no tangible difference in perspectives and impacts for participants when those residing in convergence areas and those residing in competitiveness areas were compared.
- The Older People target group were far more likely to engage with the Life Skills project to find work than the other target groups, however this target group were less likely to have had their expectations met although this judgement may have been based on whether or not they had secured an employment outcome.
- The Carers and Former Carers target group were far more likely to refer to feelings of isolation when asked to describe themselves prior to engaging with the project. However the most common responses across target groups as a whole were ones of low confidence and low self-esteem.
- Conversely when asked to describe themselves after receiving support, “*confident*” was by far the most common response.
- Participants from the Economically Inactive and Older People target groups were more than twice as likely than the other target groups to have, at the time of the first interview, gained employment.
- However when asked if their job prospects had improved as a result of the support, Care Leavers were most likely to say they had whilst Older People were least likely to say that this was the case. It would also appear more likely that the perception of job prospects would have improved if a participant resided in an urban area.
- For re-interviews Care Leavers proved very difficult to track down resulting in a low proportion engaged as part of the repeat process – an issue which was also encountered by service providers.
- When participants were asked for how long they had received support at re-interview over half of all Care Leavers, Carers and Former Carers and the Older People participant groups had received support for at least 12 months.
- Perceptions of the benefits of support along with job prospects had fallen as a proportion across all target groups at re-interview which may reflect the continued challenges of securing employment and also the tailing off of perceived benefit derived from the support they received.
- At re-interview there had been an increase in the proportion in employment across all target groups.

7.2 Participant Perspectives from Initial Interviews

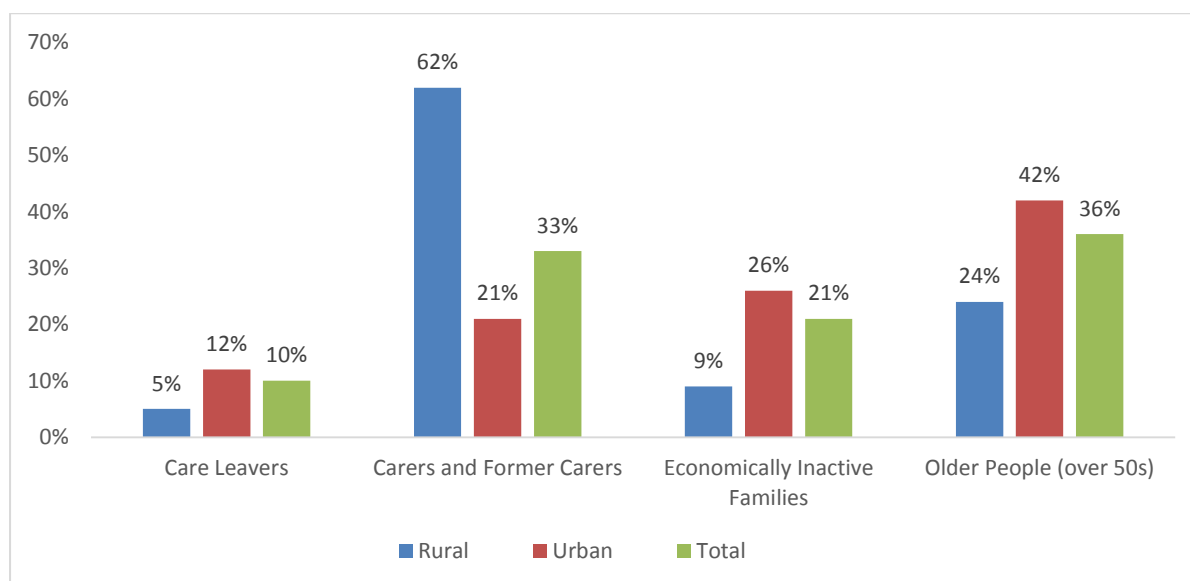
Of the 1,049 participants surveyed, 550 were based in Convergence areas whilst 494 resided in Competitiveness areas. The team aimed to engage a cross-section of participants from each target group with the proportions engaged broadly commensurate with the number of participants of each target group on the project as a whole. The breakdown of participants by target group (by proportion and number) is set out within figure 7.1 below.

7.2.1 Participant Background

Figure 7.1: The number and proportion of participants surveyed by target group and programme area



In the latest phase of the evaluation stakeholders requested additional analysis of trends amongst participants by rural and urban areas. Consultations did not capture the postcode of the participants engaged and therefore the classification of rural or urban areas has been based on local authority area classifications. As this request for analysis emerged after the survey was undertaken, no allowance had been made within the sampling frame to ensure a suitable balance across these geographies. Consequently, as set out in figure 7.2 below, there is significant variance in the target group make-up of the rural and urban areas.

Figure 7.2: Interviewees by Target Group by Urban / Rural²⁵ location

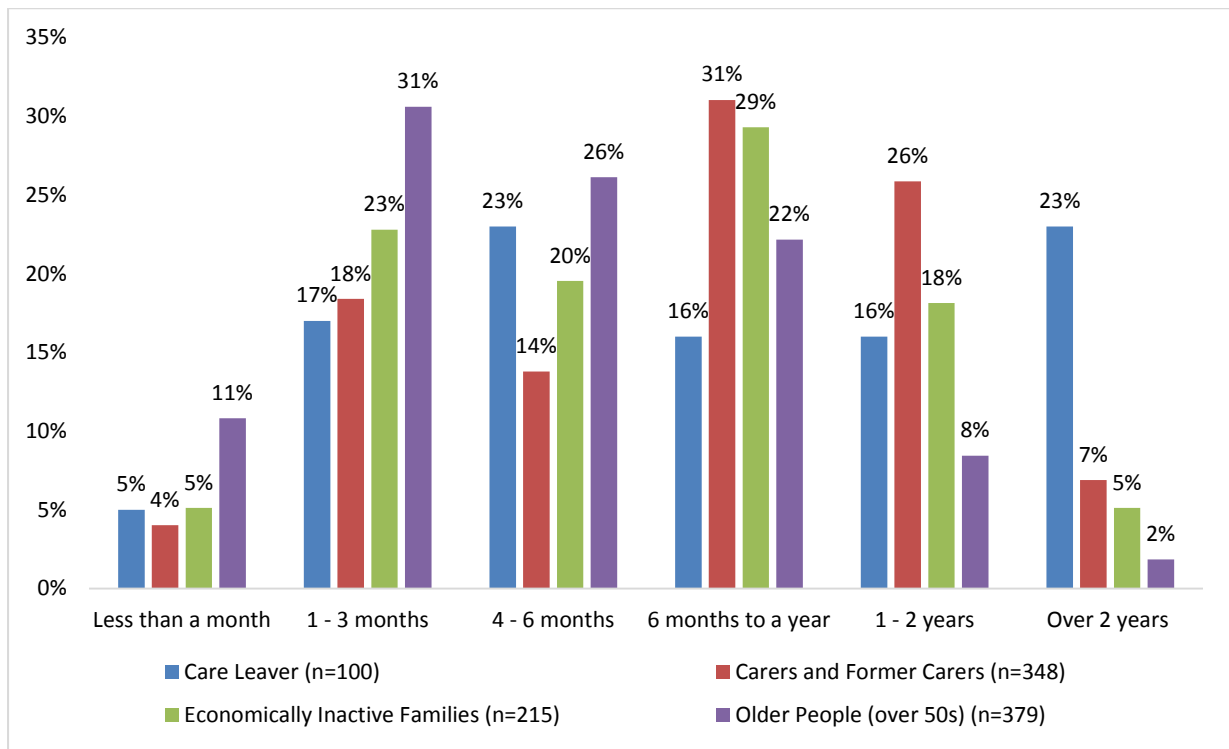
7.2.2 Nature of Support Received

Participants were asked how long they had been supported by the project. Figure 7.3 below illustrates that Carers and Former Carers and Care Leavers are more likely to have benefitted from support over the longer term with 64% of Carers and Former Carers benefitting from at least six months of support. This finding confirms some of the challenges flagged up by service providers to this target group who were most likely to highlight the difficulty of getting a participant through the support to an employment or learning outcome. This typically reflects the fact that carers may have to balance their caring needs with learning with their participation within the programme and suggests that some of the barriers that they encounter may take longer to overcome.

For Care Leavers, 55% of respondents reported being supported by the project for six months or more. However the variance between Care Leavers and the other target groups is most stark for those supported for two years or more. This is likely to reflect the fact that several service providers for the Care Leavers target group were local authorities and participants may not have distinguished between the support they received from the local authority up until the age of 16 and the support they subsequently received through the Life Skills project. It should be noted that when the analysis was undertaken by programme area (i.e. Convergence and Competitiveness areas) there was no discernible difference in the findings.

²⁵ WG uses the following as rural LAs, Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire, Powys, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Monmouthshire, Carmarthenshire

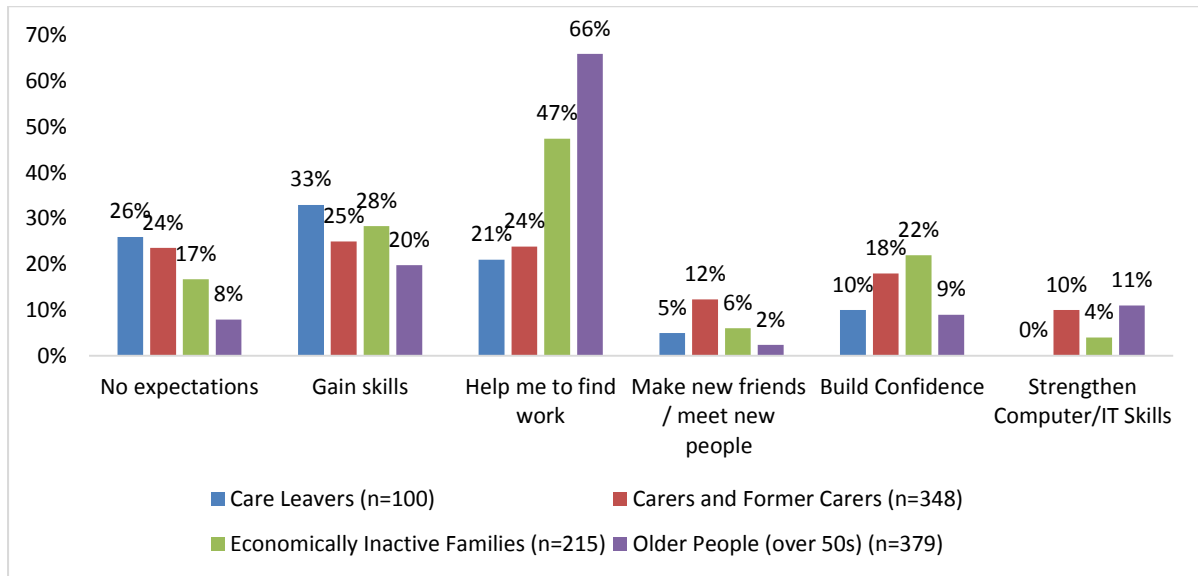
Figure 7.3: For how long have you been supported by the project? By target group



The survey included a question on what participants hoped to achieve from participating in the project. The findings in figure 7.4 below illustrate that those amongst the Older People target group were most likely to be engaging with the project to find work (66%), with those participants from the Economically Inactive Families also typically participated in the project to find work (47%). The proportion engaging with the project to find work amongst Care Leavers and Carers and Former Carers was far lower with Care Leavers most commonly (33%) citing the desire to gain skills, this perhaps illustrates why contracts serving this target group performed well against the learning related outcomes.

Once again, when the respondents were analysed by programme area, the data showed little tangible difference between those residing in Convergence areas and those in Competitiveness areas.

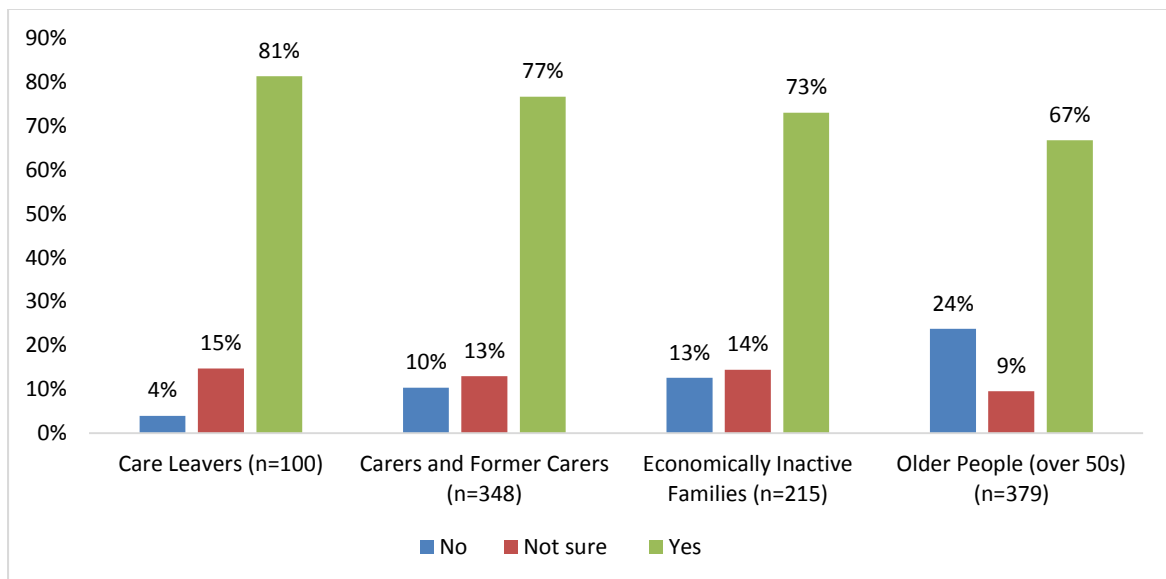
Figure 7.4: When you first joined the project, how did you hope the project could help you?



7.2.3 Perceptions of the Support Received

Reflecting on the expectations and hopes of participants on engagement with the support, participants were then asked whether the project had ultimately helped them in the way that they had hoped. Figure 7.5 below illustrates that Care Leavers were most likely to perceive that the support had helped them in the way that they hoped with the Older People target group the least likely. The fact that Care Leavers were the target group with the greatest proportion of participants that had no expectations at the outset of the project may have influenced the high proportion. For Older People the lower proportion that had their expectations met may be a reflection of the clear desire amongst the majority of this target group to gain work out of the support that they had received.

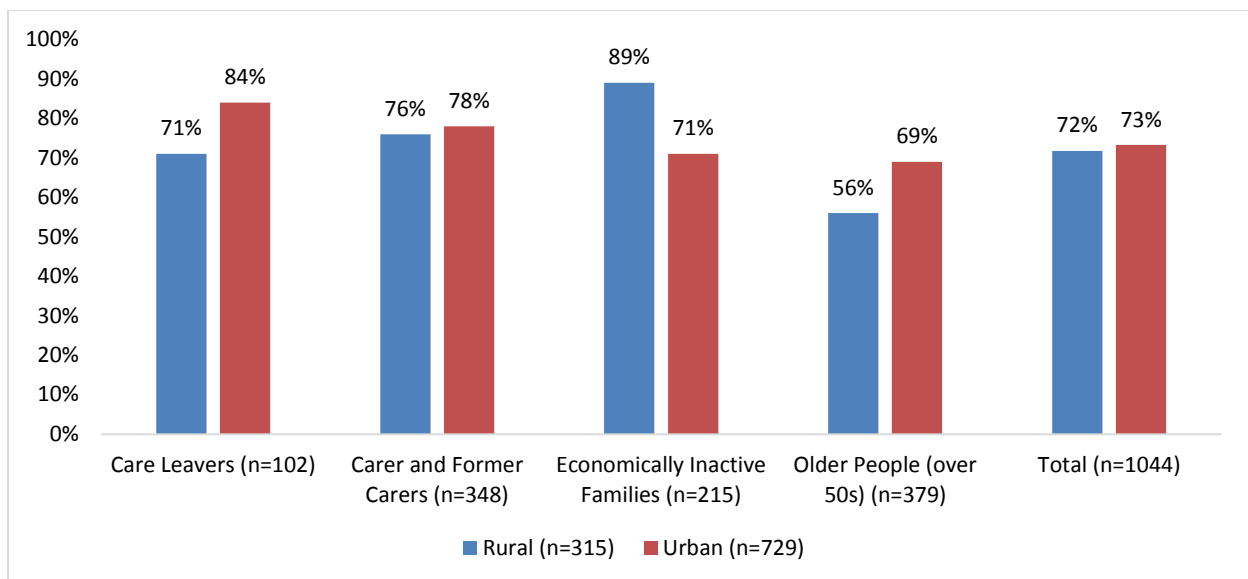
Figure 7.5: Has the project been able to help you in the way you hoped?



A slightly greater proportion of those in Convergence areas felt that the support had helped them in the way that they had hoped (75%; 410/550) than in competitiveness areas (71%; 86/350) although the difference is not statistically significant.

Comparisons were also made between those participants who resided in local authorities designated as rural and those as urban and whilst differences are evident between the two geographies the patterns are inconsistent (some target groups in urban areas were more positive than those in rural areas however with Economically Inactive Families target group, the reverse is the case).

Figure 7.6: Whether the project was able to help you in the way that you hoped rural vs. urban authority areas

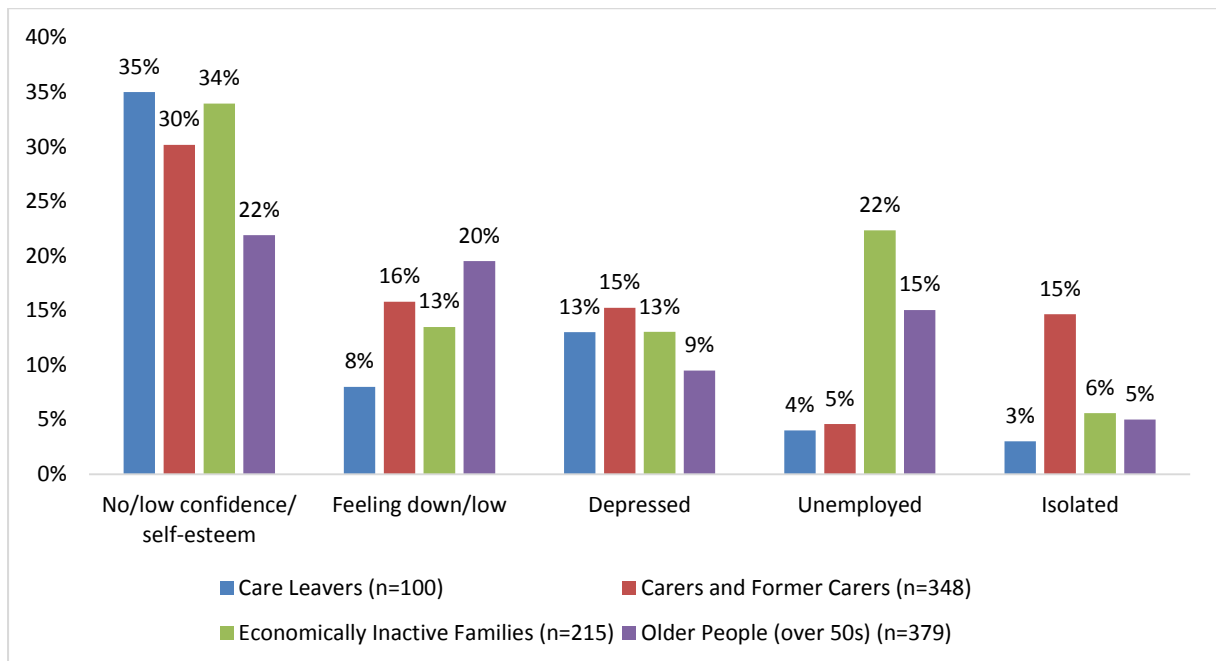


7.2.4 Impact of the Support

To capture perspectives on the less tangible impacts arising from the support, survey respondents were asked to describe themselves prior to joining the project. Figure 7.7 below illustrates that respondents most commonly referred to a lack of confidence or low self-esteem and also that they felt low or depressed.

Those participants from the Economically Inactive Families or the Older People target groups were the far more likely groups or respondents to make reference to the fact that they were unemployed prior to engaging with the support. This reinforces the assertion that these groups were engaging with the support with one of their main goals being to secure employment. It is also interesting to note that those from the Carers and Former Carers target group were far more likely than the other target groups to make reference to social exclusion and a feeling of isolation, likely brought on by their situation in terms of having to dedicate themselves to caring for someone.

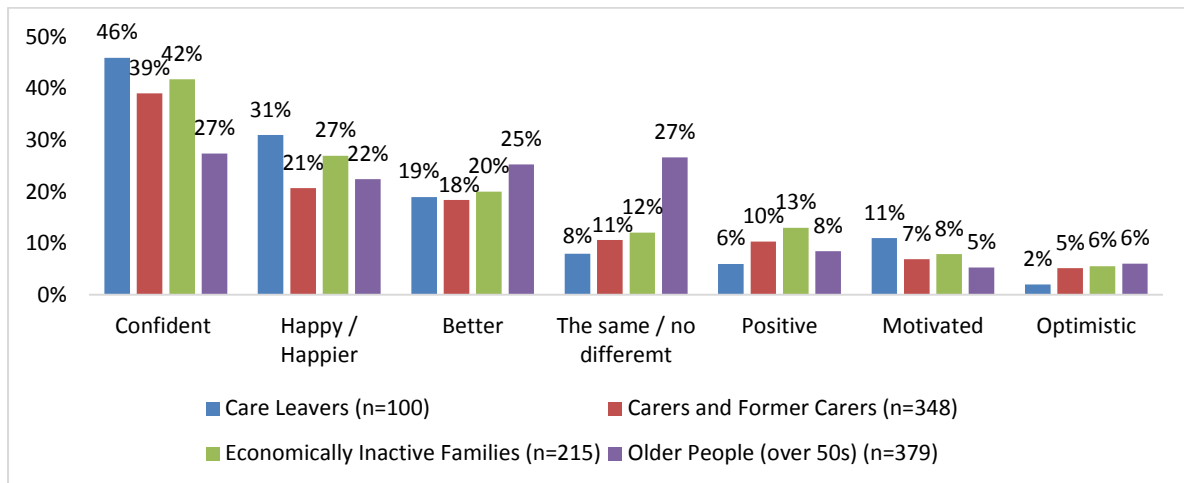
Figure 7.7: How would you describe yourself before you joined the project?



To test change in perspectives, survey respondents were then asked how they would describe themselves today. Figure 7.8 below illustrates that once again, the level of confidence remains a key aspect and positively this was the most popular area that participants referred to. Similarly the popularity of being happy / happier or better is likely a reflection of the change to those who were describing themselves as depressed or low prior to engaging with the support.

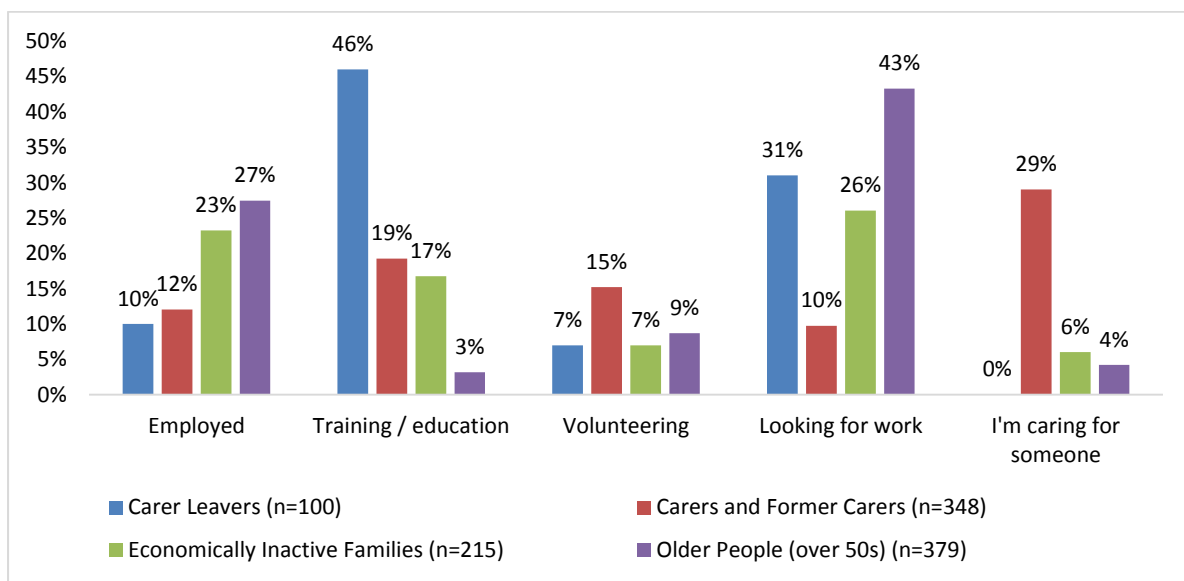
A substantial variance between target groups is evident amongst those who described themselves as feeling the same / no different to how they felt before they engaged with the support. Over a quarter (27%) of responses from the Older People target group referred to themselves in this way whereas only around 10% of respondents amongst the other target groups described themselves as feeling like this.

Figure 7.8: How would you describe yourself today? (Categorised with at least 5% of responses)



Respondents were then asked what they are currently doing. Figure 7.9 below highlights that within this initial interview, the pattern in relation to target groups continues, with those from Economically Inactive Families or the Older People target groups more likely to be in employment or if not employment, looking for work. Furthermore, the data highlights that Care Leavers are far more likely to have entered training / education, again this reflects the output data discussion in section 6.

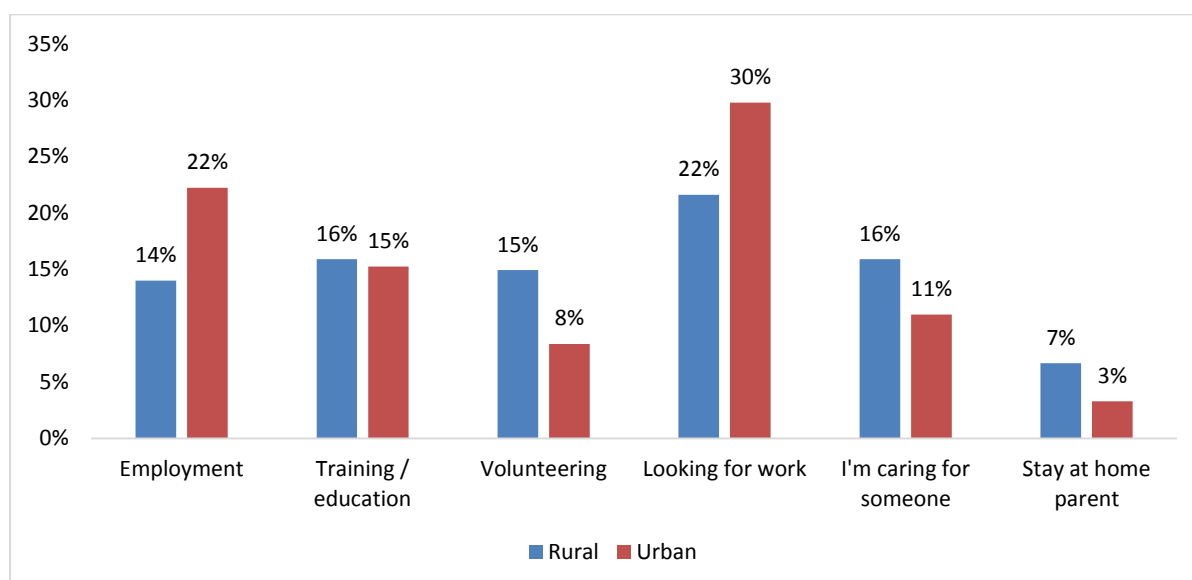
Figure 7.9: What are you currently doing?



The current situation of respondents was also analysed by programme area which identified no difference in job outcomes with 20% (108/550) of convergence and 20% (98/494) of competitiveness in employment and 15% of respondents from both areas (85/550 convergence and 76/494 competitiveness) were in some form of training. A further 5% (18/318) of respondents had been employed at some point since leaving the support but are no longer.

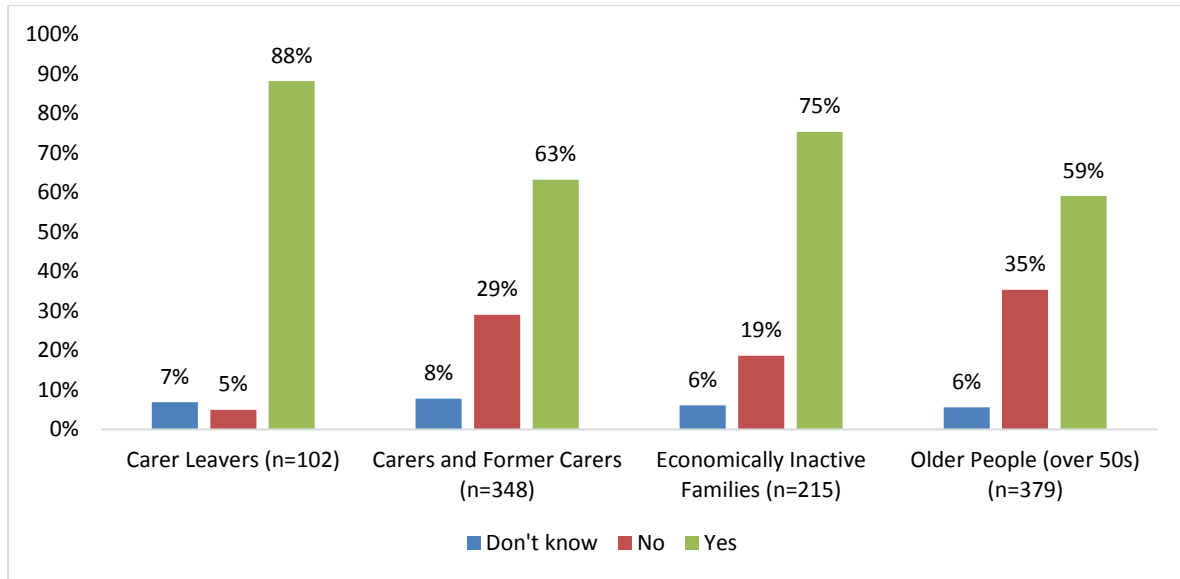
The same analysis was then undertaken for the rural and urban areas. The analysis of data in figure 7.10 below suggests a far greater degree of success in urban areas than rural areas for those in employment however it should be noted that this is likely to have been influenced by the different proportion of respondents from each target group with participants from the Economically Inactive Families and the Older People target groups far more prevalent in the urban authority areas than within the rural authority areas.

Figure 7.10: What are you currently doing? Rural vs. Urban Areas



To provide an insight into the counterfactual situation (i.e. what would have happened anyway), survey respondents were asked if they would be doing anything different if they hadn't been supported by the project. Across all target groups around 52% of respondents felt that they would not be doing anything differently (the so-called 'deadweight'), this ranged from 42% amongst Care Leavers to 66% amongst Older People. These findings further support a general trend of lower rates of perceived impact amongst those respondents from the Older People target group.

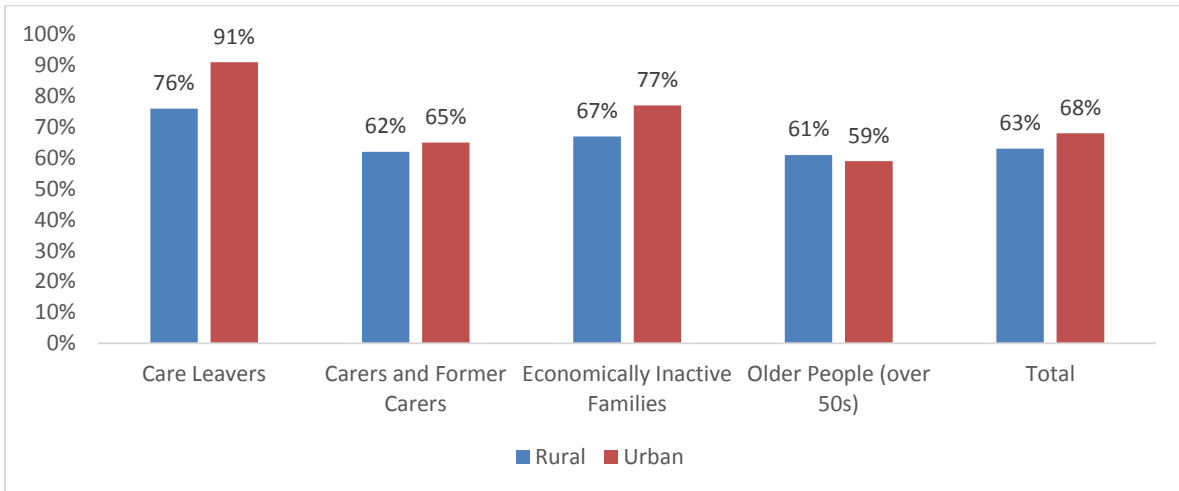
Figure 7.11: Do you think that your job prospects are better due to the support that you've received?



When analysed at the programme level there is very little difference between the Convergence and the Competitiveness programme areas with 65% (323/494) of those residing in Competitiveness areas describing their job prospects as having improved whilst the proportion rises slightly to 68% (373/550) of participants residing in Convergence areas.

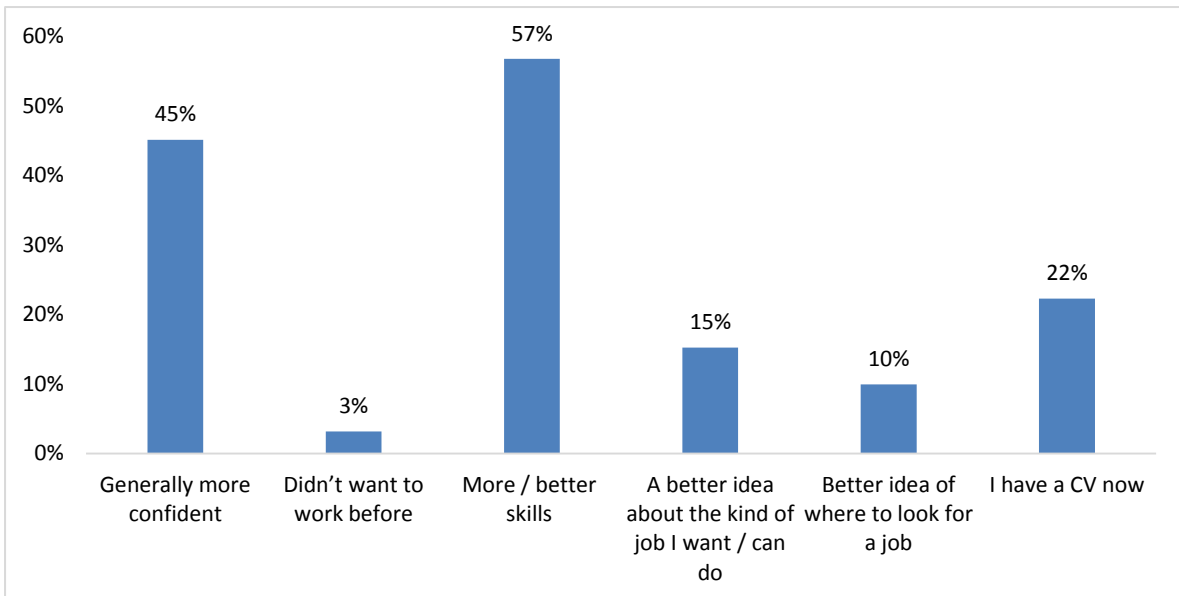
When the analysis of perceived job prospects by those residing in rural local authorities compared to urban local authorities is undertaken there is some evidence of a trend emerging with those in urban areas more likely to describe their job prospects as having improved than those in rural areas. Whilst the trend would appear to be particularly strong amongst Care Leavers, caution is needed given the sample size. However the Economically Inactive Families group includes a far larger sample size thereby strengthening the likelihood of a trend emerging. However any trend is confused a little by the slight reversion of this trend evident amongst the Older People target group.

Figure 7.12: Percentage of respondents that think their job prospects are better due to the support that they've received? – Rural vs. Urban



When participants were asked why they felt their job prospects had improved, a host of responses were received. Figure 7.13 below illustrates the spread of these with little meaningful difference evident between the different target groups or geographies.

Figure 7.13: Why do you feel that your job prospects are better?



n = 696

Participant Case Study (A4E (Round 6))

John²⁶ suffers from depression and anxiety attacks. He was referred to the Life Skills project by the Job Centre. He hoped that Life Skills would be an opportunity *“to boost my confidence and gain knowledge”* as well as supporting him to write a CV. He has now been receiving on/off support from the project for over two years.

Before he joined the project John felt *“depressed”* and says *“I had just split up with my wife and had to move away from my four children.”* He was really *‘unhappy’* and says how he *“didn't know how to get myself out of feeling like that”*. John had been *“looking for motivation”* and he was *“stuck at home and not really interested in finding work”*.

John described the staff at Life Skills as *“very supportive and understanding”* and says that they would *“go out of their way to help in any way they can”*. He described his adviser as *“friendly”* and explained how the meetings they had *“were quite informal”* which he says made him *“feel a lot more relaxed”* which helped him to *“focus”* on what he wanted to do;

“My advisor listened and understood how I was feeling; it was amazing to talk with someone about your problems as well as actually solving them”.

Since joining the project John received financial support to fund his SIA security license as well as support to help him create a CV. He was also offered the opportunity to do a few courses *‘but found work soon after’* so was unable to attend any of them.

When asked what he thinks he would be doing now if he hadn't been supported by Life Skills, John replied;

“I don't know where I would be now.... probably still be moping around in my flat”.

He went on to explain how he now feels the complete opposite of this as the support he has received *“has changed my whole life around”*, John also feels *“more open minded about the training opportunities out there”* and he is *“more confident”* and *“focussed”* on what he wants to do.

John described how he now feels a lot fitter as he is back doing boxing and also training kids’;

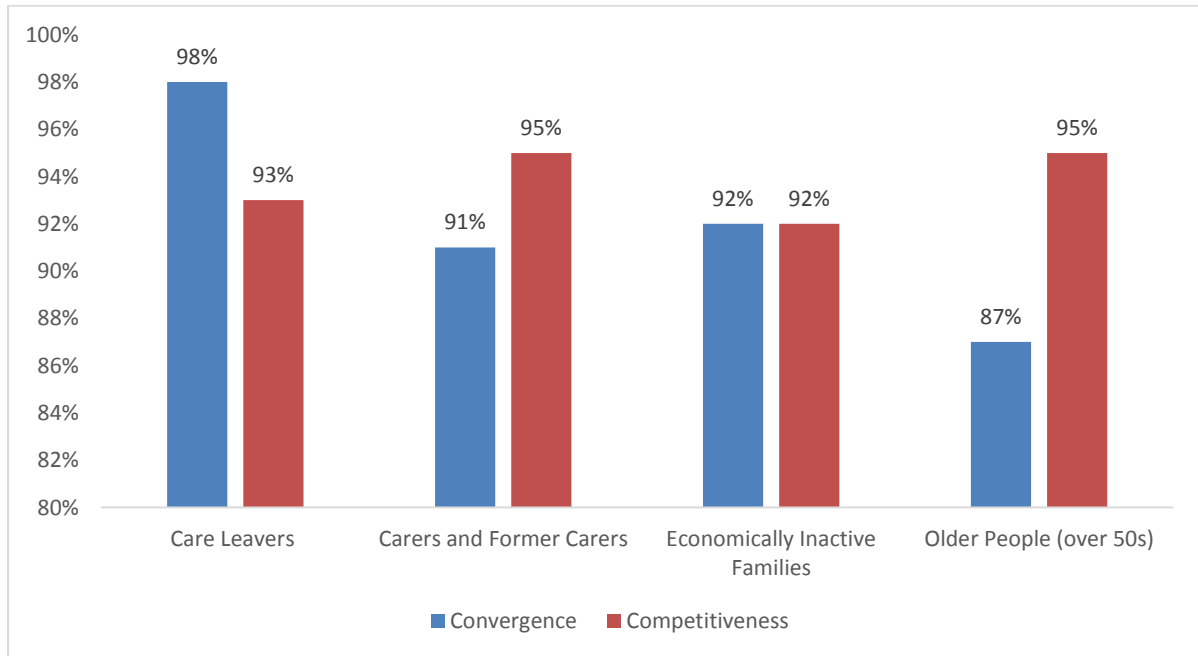
“I am definitely a lot happier and a lot more confident”.

As a whole, John believes that the project *“helped motivate me and build my confidence ready to start work”* and at the time of writing this case study he had been doing *“seasonal security work at festivals”* on and off for the past two years. John explained how his Life Skills advisor had continued to support him in looking for work; *“I pop in to have an informal chat every now and again as I want something to do when I am not working at the festivals”*.

²⁶ Names have been changed to protect confidentiality

Participants were asked whether they would recommend the service they received to others. Figure 7.14 below highlights that a very high proportion of participants would recommend the service to others, with the lowest rate of recommendation amongst participants from the Older People target group who resided in Convergence areas.

Figure 7.14: Would you recommend the service you received to others?



Finally, respondents were asked to pick three words to describe the support they received. These have been presented in a word cloud in figure 7.15 below.

Figure 7.15: Pick three words to describe the support you received



7.3 Participant Re-interviews

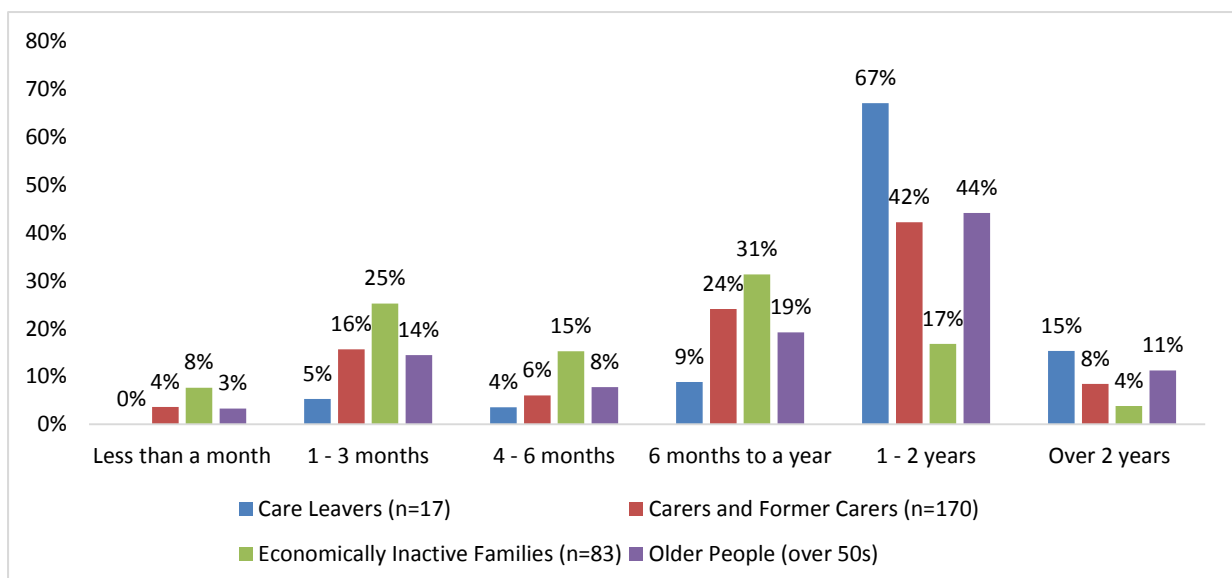
As outlined at the beginning of this section, the study team sought to re-engage with a cross section of participants from across the target groups and programme areas. Table 7.1 below summarises the number of respondents from each target group and illustrates that there proportionately fewer participants responded to the re-interview survey from the Care Leavers target group. This reflects the difficulty in maintaining engagement with this target group who, out of the four target groups, appear to have the most chaotic lifestyles and are most likely to change their contact details on a regular basis. This challenge of retaining engagement was also a key issue for providers of Life Skills services to this target group.

Table 7.1: Re-Interview Survey Numbers by Client Group and Programme Area

	Competitiveness	Convergence	Total
Care Leavers	8	9	17
Carers and Former Carers	76	94	170
Economically Inactive Families	40	43	83
Older People (Over 50s)	59	72	131
Grand Total	183	218	401

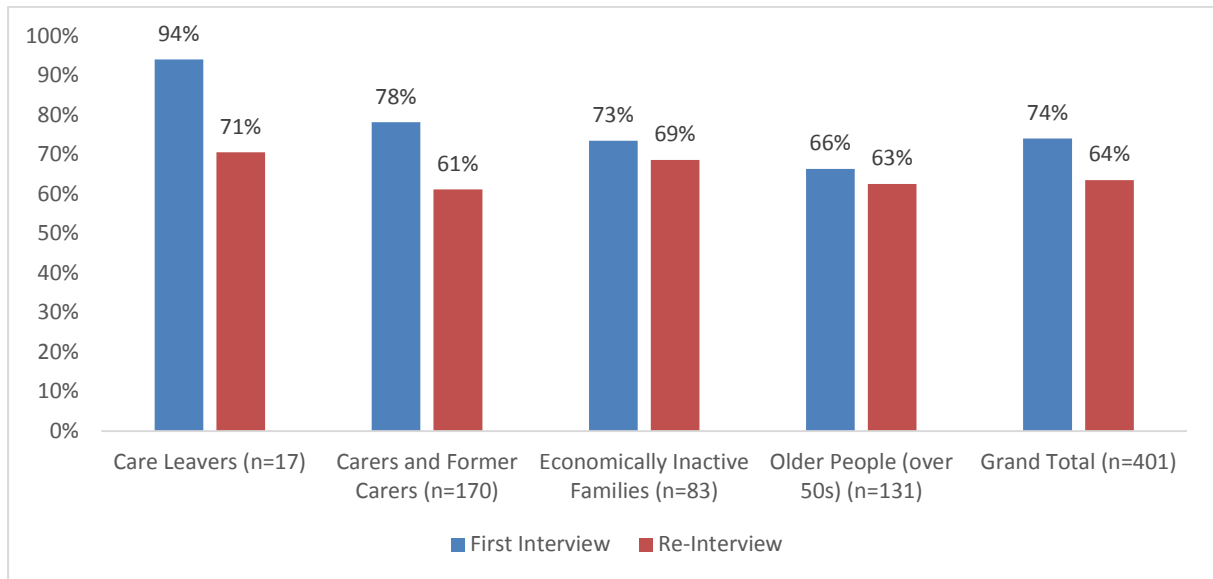
Those who were re-interviewed were once again asked the question as to how long they had been supported by the project. The question was designed to reflect the fact that at the initial interview 40% of those surveyed were still in the receipt of Life Skills support (this fell to 18% at the re-interview stage) and therefore further analysis would provide a better understanding of the full length of support that a participant typically gained through the project. The chart highlights that over half of all participants who were from the Care Leavers, Carers and Former Carers and Older People target group were supported by the Life Skills project for at least 12 months and highlights the need for long term support for these groups.

Figure 7.16: How long were you supported by the project?



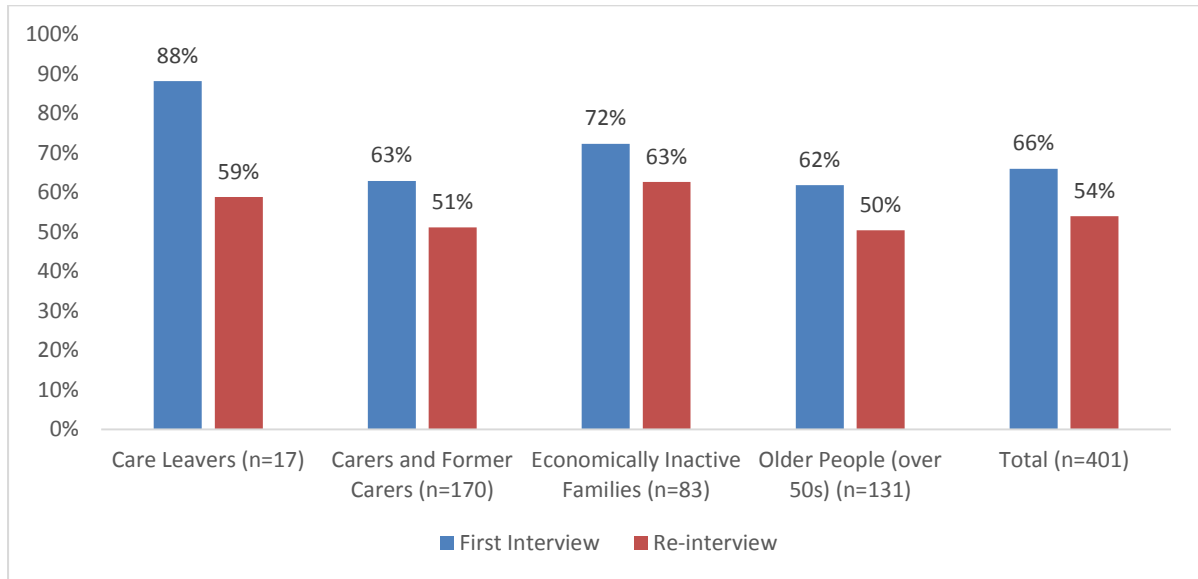
Respondents who were re-interviewed were also asked again whether they felt the project had been able to help them in the ways that they had hoped. Figure 7.17 below highlights a fall in the proportion that felt this way across all target groups and likely reflects the challenges that participants encountered after leaving the support. It may also reflect the ‘natural’ fall in perceived benefit arising from the support (this is a recognised issue and is often termed the ‘persistence rate’).

Figure 7.17: Proportion of respondents who felt that the project was able to help them in the way that they hoped



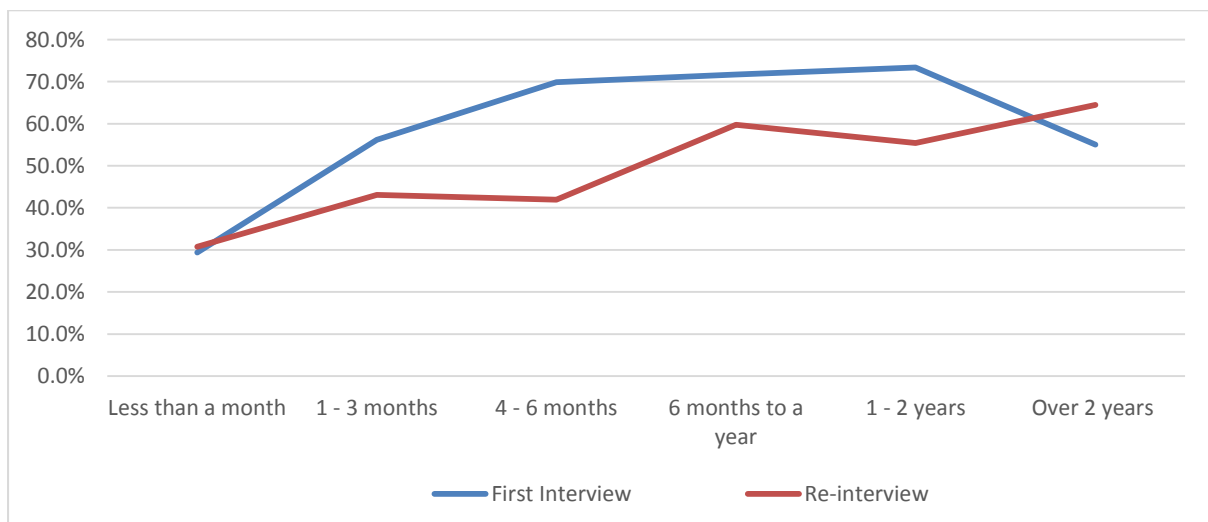
Further evidence of the challenges that participants may have encountered in securing employment is evident from analysis of responses from those re-interviewed when they were asked whether they felt their job prospects had improved as a result of the support. Once again, there was a fall in the proportion describing improved prospects, most markedly so amongst Care Leavers (although once again the sample size demands caution) but across all target groups there was a substantial fall of 12 percentage points.

Figure 7.18: Proportion of respondents who felt that their job prospects are better due to the support they've received



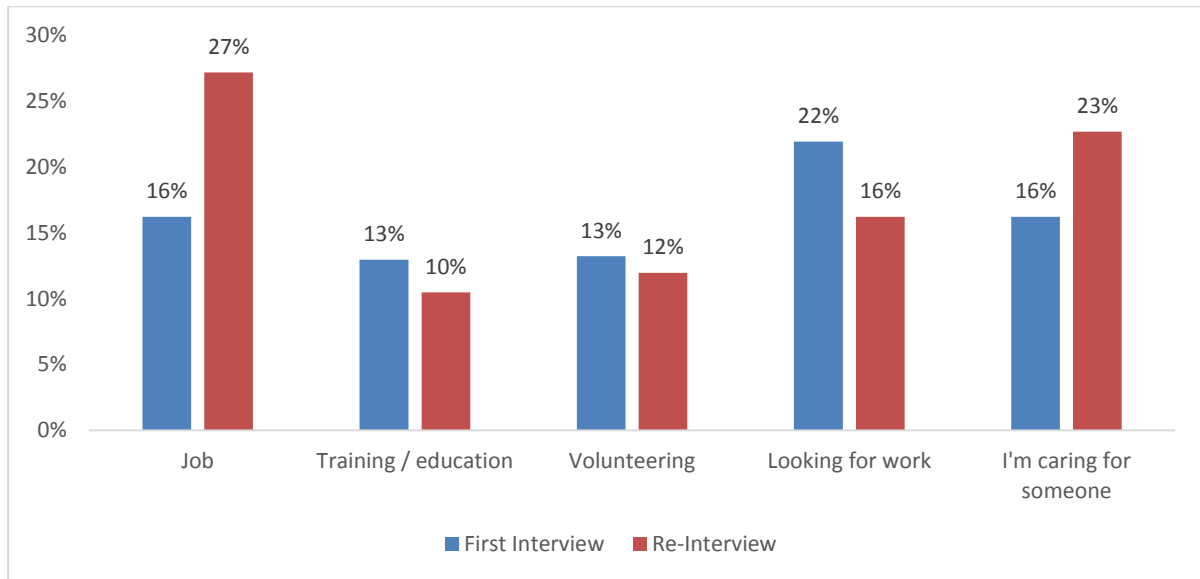
Analysis of perceived job prospects was then undertaken by duration of support and is presented in figure 7.19 below. It illustrates a steady increase in the perception of job prospects having improved as support lengthened although there is something of a tailing off in improvements cited after one year, thereby suggesting 12 months of support is perhaps the optimum length of support that should be offered to participants.

Figure 7.19 Percentage of respondents perceiving that their job prospects are better due to the support they've received by duration of support



Respondents were asked for an update with regards to what they are currently doing. Figure 7.20 below highlights that there was a significant increase in the proportion of participants in employment amongst the re-interviewed participants with slight falls across the other areas.

Figure 7.20: What are you currently doing?



n=401

On a target group basis, figure 7.21 below provides a summary of the responses of those re-interviewed at the baseline (initial interview) stage. The subsequent chart then provides analysis of the percentage point change and illustrates growth in the proportion in employment across all target groups with Carers and Former Carers bucking the trends with regards to volunteering and training / education outcomes. Also of note is the significant rise in the proportion of Carers and Former Carers describing themselves as caring for someone, it is unclear as to the reasons behind this increase but may reflect an inability to secure other care for an individual or that the individual they were caring for had a relapse or indeed that those within this target were unable to secure alternative outcomes and therefore have returned to caring for someone as the primary activity.

Figure 7.21: What are you currently doing? (Baseline of re-interviewed cohort)

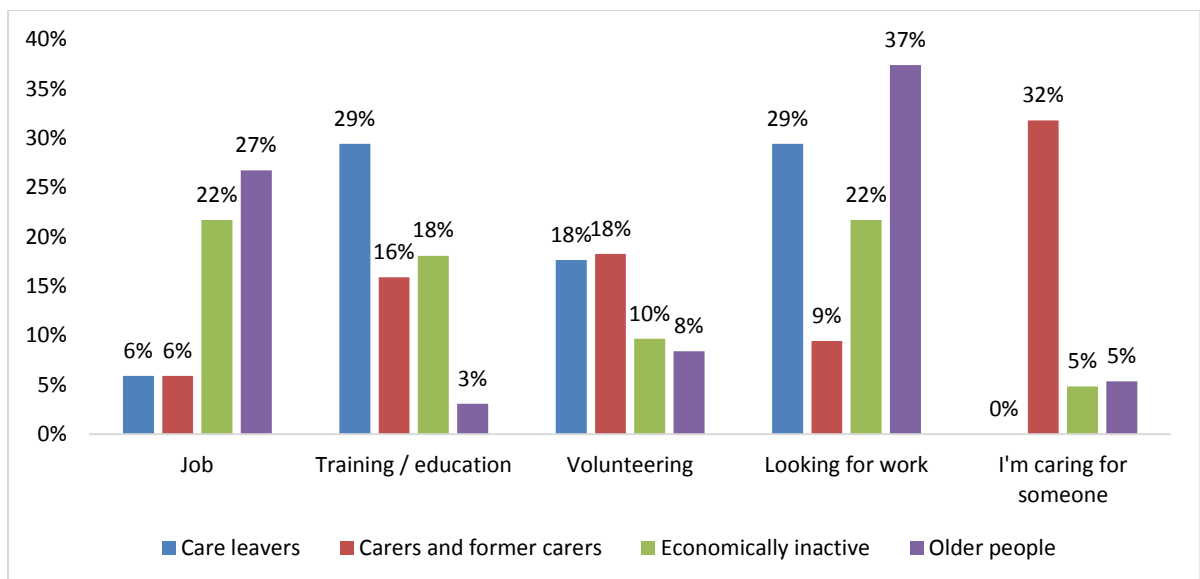
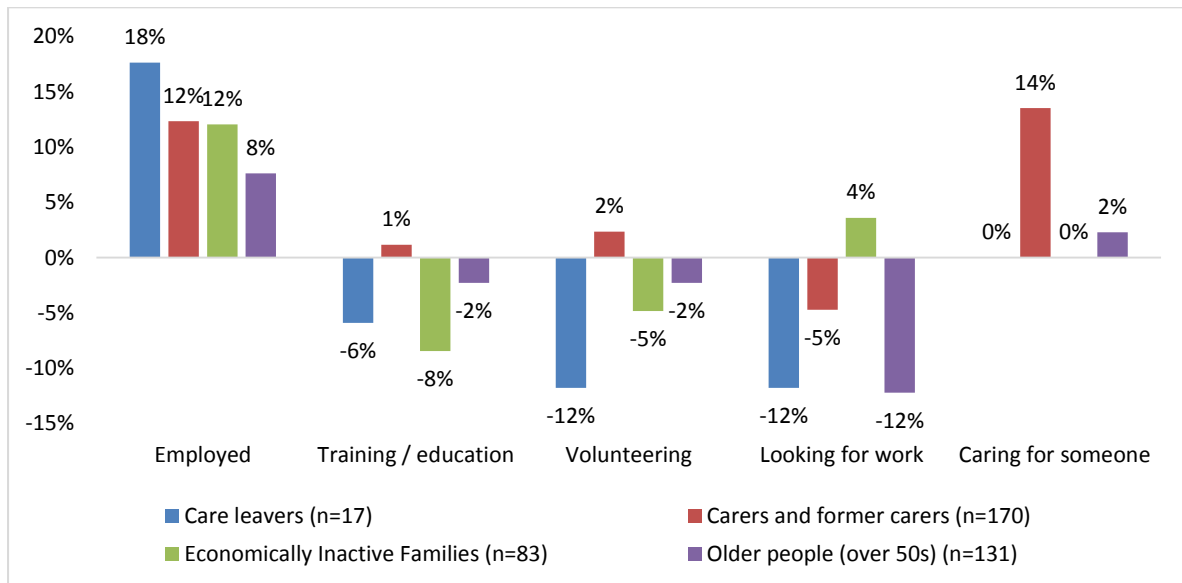


Figure 7.22: Percentage point change between what individuals are currently doing when the initial interview and re-interview stages are compared by client group



Amongst those that were re-interviewed, a further 13% had been employed at some point (38/293) since finishing the support but are no longer employed, this was highest amongst Older People (23%; 20/66) and Economically Inactive Families (20%; 11/44). Most commonly (26%; 10/39) they were no longer in work as the employment they had secured was temporary (most likely seasonal), other issues included medical issues (18%; 7/39) and the need to return to caring for someone (13%; 5/39).

Finally, respondents were once again asked whether they would recommend the service to others. There was a slight fall in rate from 93% to 91% but this is marginal and could simply relate to sample error.

8 Summary of Findings and Recommendations

8.1.1 Performance Overview

The Life Skills project enabled the sustained delivery of support to a range of target groups that had typically been underrepresented as beneficiaries of mainstream employability provision. The rationale for supporting these groups was reinforced during the development of the project when the country fell into deep recession. However despite being delivered in the midst of a very challenging economic period, the support provided has met the aims of the project by increasing participant confidence and enabling many to access education, volunteering or employment.

By matching European funding at source the project has enabled a number of third sector organisations to deliver the service provision. In doing so it has built knowledge and capacity amongst this sector of delivering contractual services of this nature, thereby strengthening the third sector support infrastructure in Wales.

8.1.2 Project Management and Contractual Model

The contractual approach to delivering services was largely (and increasingly) welcomed by service providers as it offered them significant flexibility in the approach they adopted in to deliver the outcomes that they were targeted against.

Providers were able to tweak and tailor provision depending on the needs of participants and had the scope to engage with services for long periods of time if needed. In three of the four target groups over 50% of participants re-interviewed for the evaluation had been supported for over 12 months. This ability to support individuals over lengthy periods was evidentially beneficial, however it did create challenges for the provider who needed to secure financial compensation through some form of 'outcome/result' in return for the significant level of resource invested in them.

From a contract management perspective, procuring contracts (with competitive grants the preferred route of service delivery in the past) enabled the Big Lottery Fund to pass on much of the risk in the delivery of the project to service providers, which is as it should be. It has also enabled them to gain a much greater insight, through monitoring requirements for contract, into what is being delivered than would be gained from the delivery of services through competitive grants. In this regard, the twin-tracked role of a contract manager in scrutinising delivery (which could ultimately lead to a reduction in contract value) whilst offering support and advice to a service provider was a difficult relationship to balance. However service providers were largely positive about the role of the Contract Managers and they appear therefore to have met this challenge effectively.

Similarly, whilst there has been a steep learning curve amongst service providers most welcomed the experience of contractual delivery and some built on this experience to look to secure further contracts through procurement exercises. Others found the experience helpful in tightening their approach to service provision, welcoming the influence the contract has had on moving them towards a culture of operation that is more target and results driven.

With regards to payment by results, many concerns associated with the payment structure related to the lack of a management fee which the Big Lottery Fund subsequently introduced for the contracts delivering to the Older People target group. The fee's introduction was a welcome change for service providers and gave them sufficient resources to plan and develop the provision by lessening the initial pressure for securing payments for outputs and results. Furthermore, service providers became increasingly positive about the payment by results model as the evaluation progressed with many reflecting on the positive behavioural change it had brought about in service delivery in their organisation.

Whilst there was flexibility in the provision that could be offered through the contractual approach, the sheer number and deliverability of the targets curtailed that flexibility from both a delivery and contract management perspective. In hindsight the Big Lottery Fund is conscious that it may have stipulated too many targets within the application to WEFO, which clearly had to then be reflected in service provider contracts.

Certain targets were particularly challenging as the demand for (for example) respite care was far lower than expected, whilst the need for basic/essential skills was also lower than anticipated. The significance of this misjudgement was enhanced by the fact that contract values and therefore payments were reliant upon the delivery of these targets.

Recommendations

That contractual approaches adopted for future employability schemes include a management fee and are built around a thorough understanding of need and/or demand for specific outputs and results.

For future programmes, funders should review the appropriateness of some output indicators, particularly where they are wholly reliant on client needs and almost entirely devoid of any reflection on the effectiveness of the service on offer.

8.1.3 Communication

The project suffered from a lack of clarity in some instances with regards to eligibility, as have all projects delivered through the ESF programmes in Wales. This proved a particular challenge for the Big Lottery Fund as the Contract Managers had to field enquiries and queries from 18 different service providers whilst waiting for an often delayed response from WEFO.

Further challenges emerged in relation to the dissemination of implications surrounding policy, most notably with the introduction and potential impact of the Work Programme. The mixed messages that were shared in regarding this issue were something of a frustration for service providers and reflect a need to consider the relevance and clarity of policy prior to its dissemination.

Recommendation

For any future programmes, project teams should vet any elements of clarification / response from funders of future programmes in relation to new initiatives or policy changes prior to their release to service providers. Any concerns raised through the vetting process should be addressed with the funder as a matter of urgency.

Despite all its successes the Life Skills project suffered somewhat from a low profile. Several service providers and the majority of stakeholders referred to the fact that the project remained somewhat unknown even amongst those organisations involved in delivering similar support. For service providers (although they did acknowledge useful promotion in a recent press release) they felt it to be a missed opportunity for the promotion of what they had achieved.

Recommendation

For any future programmes, the project team should consider options that would promote and disseminate more widely an overview of schemes of this nature in future to provide greater awareness amongst policy makers, strategic representatives and other key organisations to build understanding of what is being delivered and by whom.

8.1.4 Delivery Models

In considering the models of service delivery it was notable when reviewing the approved contracts that much of North West Wales did not benefit from Life Skills services, whilst some authority areas had multiple service providers looking to support the same target group. This reportedly created challenges in terms of service delivery in at least one location.

Recommendation

Aspirations for service delivery (in terms of target group and location) should be captured at PQQ stage so that partnership and collaboration can be encouraged at full tender stage to avoid providers competing for beneficiaries.

Across the majority of service providers outreach was seen as a popular approach to engagement, particularly for client groups considered to be furthest from the labour market with models of support primarily focussed on the delivery of one-to-one services. However, the nature of support delivered was very much provider specific with a high degree of flexibility to deliver to a participants needs.

Geography and Rurality

Geographical variances in delivery were reported by service providers as rural areas in particular required significantly more resource than urban areas. Furthermore, contractual challenges existed for some service providers who were operating sub-regionally, over several authority areas, yet with little resource (in several instances one staff member operates over multiple local authority areas). Service providers have raised concerns that this leaves resource spread too thinly to be effective in all areas.

Challenges were also encountered where service providers had little experience or exposure of delivering services of that nature in a particular geographical area. This led, in some instances, to service providers focusing on the geographical areas they were most familiar with. Based on these findings it would appear that the upper limit of £1m for a service contract of this nature would appear entirely appropriate as any delivery of a greater scale may dilute the local presence that some of the smaller, more targeted contracts benefit from.

Recommendations

For consideration to be given to additional weighting (in terms of scale of payment) to those results achieved in locations considered most rural or most marginal and/or to those clients considered to be hardest to reach.

For the appraisal of tenders to include a specific focus on the ability and experience of tenderers to deliver support in the identified geographical areas for service delivery.

8.1.5 Service Provider Partnerships

The extent to which service providers collaborated was rather limited. Most described the setting up of their projects as something of a rush particularly where no management fee was in place and they had limited opportunity to engage with other providers. A partnership event for service providers earlier in the project may have helped with collaboration particularly at project set up stage and was something that several service providers reflected on as something of a missed opportunity.

Recommendation

For service provider events to commence far earlier in a project to encourage sharing of practice, to explore collaboration opportunities and to encourage informal networking.

8.1.6 Project Performance

A number of targets associated with the Life Skills project were revised downwards, some significantly so. Several of these were due to a misjudgement on the level of need for the services, specifically the respite care and the basic / essential skills or the misinterpretation of reportedly unclear eligibility criteria (the entering further learning as an exit outcome for example). More widely other indicators were influenced by the emergence of the Work Programme and the temporary hiatus this created led to a pause in delivery and a need to revisit targets due to the impact it would create.

Following the reductions the project performed well against targets and particularly so against the number of participants engaged (which surpassed the original target) and the number gaining employment which more than doubled the original target estimate. Interesting patterns have emerged when analysed by target group with Care Leavers performing particularly well against learning outcomes and the Older People target group performing particularly well against the employment outcomes.

8.1.7 Participant Perspectives

The analysis of participant perspectives provides an insight into the diversity between each of the target groups with Older People far more likely to engage with the Life Skills project to find work than the other groups. However they were least likely to have had their expectations met through the support, although their judgements may have been influenced by whether they had gained employment.

Economically Inactive Families had a similar focus to the Older People target group and secured a similar proportion of employment outcomes as a result. However, they were typically more positive about the impact the support has provided them, despite receiving the least amount of support on average (in terms of duration).

For Care Leavers there was far less clarity as to why they were engaging with Life Skills, and this group were the most likely to engage with Life Skills with no expectations from the support. However they were typically the most satisfied with the support they had received and were most likely to have entered some form of training provision following the receipt of Life Skills support.

Carers and Former Carers engaged with the support for the widest variety of reasons but typically were most likely to refer to issues of isolation prior to their engagement. However they have ultimately been the least successful group to secure employment outcomes (when the re-interviews were analysed) but this may reflect the fact that employment of less than 16 hours (which carers may look to securing if they are still caring for someone) is ineligible for being counted as an employment outcome.

In terms of impact, when asked to describe themselves prior to receiving support, participants most commonly referred to feelings of low or no self-confidence/self-esteem. Conversely when asked how “they felt now”, the most common reference related to the feeling of being confident and happier in themselves. This illustrates the wider impact support of this nature has on the well-being of those participants supported.

In terms of ‘hard’ outcomes, at the re-interview stage it was welcome to see an increase in the proportion of participants in employment across all target groups. At first sight this may seem to be contradicted by the fall in the proportion perceiving that their job prospects have improved, as a positive correlation between a rise in employment and a rise in perceived job prospects would seem likely. However it is probable that the majority who haven’t found employment feel far less positive about their prospects than they initially did due to their continued lack of success in securing employment.

Of further interest regarding job prospects is the noticeable difference between those participants residing in rural areas and those in urban areas. The data suggests a more positive perspective for urban areas which would appear to reinforce the anecdotal evidence that suggests obtaining employment and other hard outcomes for people in rural areas is more of a challenge to achieve.

8.1.8 Soft Outcomes

For projects of this nature where the focus was on the provision of holistic support to improve life skills, the capture of soft outcomes was particularly important. However the diversity of client groups and service delivery models meant that a consistent approach to the capture of outcomes was not adopted with the template created by the evaluation team only deemed suitable by some service providers. Whilst all did capture soft outcomes the models applied and the perceived usefulness of this data varied significantly from one service provider to the next. This lack of available evidence represents a missed opportunity for service providers and evaluators to gain some considerable insight into the wider benefits achieved through support.

Recommendation

For future interventions to consider the application of broad parameters with regards to the capture of soft outcomes and distance travelled, including, as a minimum, that information is captured at more than one interval and is then held electronically for analysis by both service provider and if appropriate, the evaluator.

8.1.9 Summary

The evaluation has highlighted the significant benefit that participants have derived from the Life Skills support, particularly in relation to the well-being of those engaged but also in relation to some of the hard outcomes achieved. The contract length offered through the Life Skills project is of critical importance to groups of this nature and should be repeated in future whilst retaining the payment by results approach to ensure that a results focussed approach remains.

The model of matching at source proved successful in encouraging the service providers from across the public, private and third sectors to come forward to deliver these services. The flexibility of the funding model enabled service providers to tailor and tweak their model of support to best reflect the needs of each group. In doing so it has built their capacity and strengthened their ability to continue the delivery of support of this nature and has provided them with an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the specific needs and challenges that each of the participant groups face.

Appendix 1: Phase 5 Evaluation Discussion Guides

Discussion guide for BIG project staff

Questions for discussion

1. What key challenges have emerged over the last 12 months that are facing/have faced service providers?
2. How have service providers overcome these challenges? In what ways have you helped them to overcome these challenges?
3. What challenges have you encountered in **your** contract management role (particularly in the last 12 months)? (Please consider internal factors – within BIG and external factors – e.g. changes in policy when responding to this question). How have you overcome these
4. How does the contract management approach compare to managing competitive grants (if you've had experience of both)
5. In your opinion, based on the contracts you have overseen is there an optimum geographical area over which to deliver Life Skills services (and is this participant specific)?
 - In your opinion, is there an optimum contract value for delivering Life Skills service provision (and is this participant specific)
6. To your knowledge, to what extent are service providers sustaining, or looking to sustain the services that were provided through life skills beyond their funded project?
7. What do you believe the main lessons deliverers have learned so far? What can be improved?
 - And what have been the main lessons you have learned so far?
8. If you were starting the project again is there anything you would do (or advise BIG to do) differently to improve the management and delivery of Life Skills?
9. Are there any other points you'd like to raise?

Thank you for your time

Discussion guide for service delivery managers

1. Please introduce yourself and your role and how it relates to the Life Skills project

Delivery

2. (As a reminder) Can you briefly outline the Life Skills service your organisation provides/provided (including which partners you are working/worked with to deliver the services)
3. How has the Life Skills project complemented and added-value to the other support your organisation provides to the group(s) that you are working with?
4. How effectively has the project been managed by the Fund? Are there any improvements that could be made to their approach?
5. Please list the local authorities where your Life Skills contract has been operating – was this appropriate scale for the contract? *I.e. does it spread resource too thinly, could you have worked in other areas, could you have done more with the money etc.?*
6. Are there any geographical variances in the ability for you to deliver the Life Skills contract? (Is it easier to deliver in rural or urban areas, in convergence or competitiveness areas)?
7. What are / have been the key challenges that you encountered in delivering the Life Skills project over the last 12 months or in the last 12 months of delivery?
8. How have / did you overcome these challenges?
9. What external factors have helped or hindered the management and delivery of your project over the last 12 months or in the last 12 months of delivery? How have they been or could they be overcome? *(Interviewer note: things like Work programme, Personal Independence Payment, Universal Credit, Any changes to benefits etc.*

Impact

10. Thinking about the delivery of services through the Life Skills, which elements of the service that you offer have been most successful?
11. The payment by results approach to contracts was regularly explored through the earlier phases of this evaluation, now that the contract(s) are at or near to the end what do you consider to have been the benefits to this approach?
 - a) What issues if any have been encountered through the use of the payment by results model?

12. How have / did you progress against the targets (key performance indicators) that were agreed for your project?

- Had progress been more or less than you had anticipated?
- Has progress been more difficult or easier than you anticipated against any of the targets / indicators in particular?
- Why do you think progress has been more difficult/easier?

Project Closure

13. Have you closed or commenced the closure of the project yet?

- (If yes) How have/ did you found the project closure process, what has worked well/less well?

Forward strategy

14. What plans do you have for the provision of these services following the completion of the Life Skills contract? Will any elements be retained and how will they be resourced?
(So what are you doing with those participants currently on your books the funding is now coming to an end (they have started to see a few coming into people and places)


15. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Big Life Skills Survey for participants 2015

- QA Name of person being interviewed:
- QB Organisation supporting the interviewee
1. Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself/yourselves and the kind of support that you've received?
- 1a Are you currently caring for somebody or are you a former carer?
Carer
Former carer
Neither of the above
2. How long have you been supported by the project?
Less than a month
1 - 3 months
4 - 6 months
6 months to a year
1 - 2 years
Over 2 years
3. Are you still receiving support?
Yes - go to 5
No - go to 4
4. How long ago did you stop receiving it?
5. Have you at any point left the support and then returned to it at a later date?
Yes - go to 5a
No - go to 6
- 5.a How many times?
6. What do you think about the support you've received? Good and bad
7. When you first joined the project, how did you hope the project could help you?
8. Has the project been able to help you in the way that you had hoped?
Yes
No
Not sure

9. How would you describe yourself before you joined the project?
10. How would you describe yourself today?
11. Has the support that you received changed how satisfied you are with your life generally?
Yes
No
Don't know
12. What are you currently doing?
- 12.a Please specify other
13. Have you been employed at any point since you started receiving support from the project?
Yes - go to 13a
No - go to 17
- 13.a Could you briefly outline why you are no longer employed?
14. How long were you employment for?
15. How long have you been in employment?
16. Have you / did you receive any support from xxx (organisation) since / when you were in employment?
- 16.a What type of support did you receive?
- 16.b Why not? (interviewer to explore whether any contact was made by the supporting organisation since the participant found employment)
17. Would you be doing anything different if you hadn't been supported by the project?
19. What were you doing before you joined the project?
18. Has the support you received changed how you feel about education, training and/or employment?
Yes
No
Don't know
- 19.a Please explain your answer

20. Do you think that you're job prospects are better due to the support that you've received? For example, if you haven't got a job, are you more likely to get one or if you have a job are you more likely to stay in employment.
- Yes*
 - No*
 - Don't know*
- 20.a Please explain your answer
21. Would you recommend the project to somebody in the same situation as you?
- Yes*
 - No*
 - Don't know*
22. If you had to pick three words to describe the help you've received, what would they be?
23. Finally, in what part of Wales do you live?



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