

Evaluation Report

**ESF Community Grants Programme North West and Merseyside
2011 – 2013**

WEA North West, with Locality and Community Matters

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1. Introduction

The evaluation of the ESF Community Grants Programme 2011 – 2013 in Merseyside and the North West took place between October 2012 and October 2013. An Executive Summary of this report, and additional Case Studies are also available.

The ESF Community Grants Programme

In September 2011, the SFA contracted the management of the ESF Community Grants Programme in the North West to a partnership led by the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) North West. The two other members of the partnership are membership organisations that support VCS organisations: Community Matters¹ and Locality². As there was a delay in awarding the contract, the WEA were not able to begin the programme delivery until October.

ESF community grants are grants of up to £12,000 that enable small VCS organisations to reach out to some of the most disadvantaged and excluded people, in particular:

- Participants with disabilities and health conditions.
- Participants who are lone parents.
- Participants who are aged 50 and over.
- Participants from ethnic minority groups.
- Females.

The grants have a local focus and seek to move people closer to the labour market. They support a wide range of activities including:

- initial help with basic skills
- taster work experience, including voluntary work
- training, advice and counselling
- confidence building.

Because of the nature of the target groups, project outcomes usually involve progression towards employment or further training, rather than the immediate achievement of employment or qualification(s).

The North West programme is comprised of two elements, one for Merseyside, and the other for the North West sub-regions – Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Warrington, Cumbria, and Halton. Funding for each of the programme elements (grants, capacity-building, administration, number of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) were set. The programme consisted of two contracts, one for Merseyside (£355K) and the other for the North West (£1.853K). Around 10% of the funds were ear-marked to support capacity-building. A range of requirements on the grant co-ordinating body included involving key stakeholder organisations in the third sector, and working with the SFA to promote the quality of provision for participants engaged in learning.

¹ <http://www.communitymatters.org.uk/>

² <http://locality.org.uk/>

2. Has the programme been delivered effectively and efficiently?

The first question that the evaluation set out to answer was whether or not the programme had been delivered efficiently and effectively. The key output of the programme is the number and value of grants awarded. Other outcomes to be reviewed that are related to the funding awards include the number of applications received, and the average value of the grant. The intention of the programme is to reach beyond mainstream provision to fund activities that reach deeply into disadvantaged communities and groups. The number of participants recruited and retained by the programme, and their progression to further learning and towards employment is also a key outcome.

Applications and grants awarded

Over four funding rounds, 711 applications were received.

	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Total
Lancashire	47	28	27	39	141
Cheshire and Warrington	10	10	10	16	46
Cumbria	11	8	6	6	31
Halton	0	0	4	1	5
Greater Manchester	90	85	59	61	295
Merseyside	89	53	51	n/a	193
Total	247	184	157	123	711

Figure 1: Number of applications.

165 projects were awarded grants, 24 in Merseyside, and the remainder distributed across the other areas. In Merseyside, this allocation represented 99.57% of the allocated budget (£265,221), and across the rest of the North West, just over 100% budget (£1,484,561). The average value of the grant allocation was £11,115.94.

Average Grant Value	NW	MS	
Grant round 1	£ 11,561.74	£ 11,380.74	
Grant round 2	£ 11,565.04	£ 11,018.14	
Grant round 3	£ 10,797.76	£ 10,842.88	
Grant round 4	£ 10,680.66	£ 0.00	
	£ 11,151.30	£ 11,080.59	£11,115.94

Figure 2: Average value of grant in each funding round.

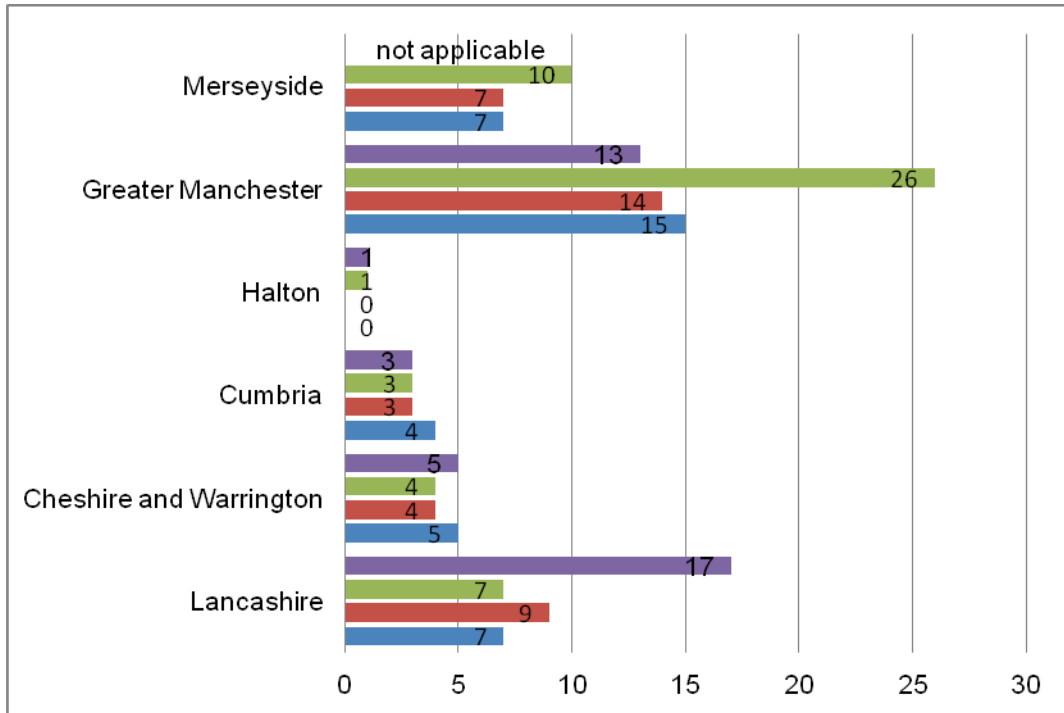


Figure 3: Number of projects funded in each area in each round

This chart shows the percentage distribution of grants in the North West by area.

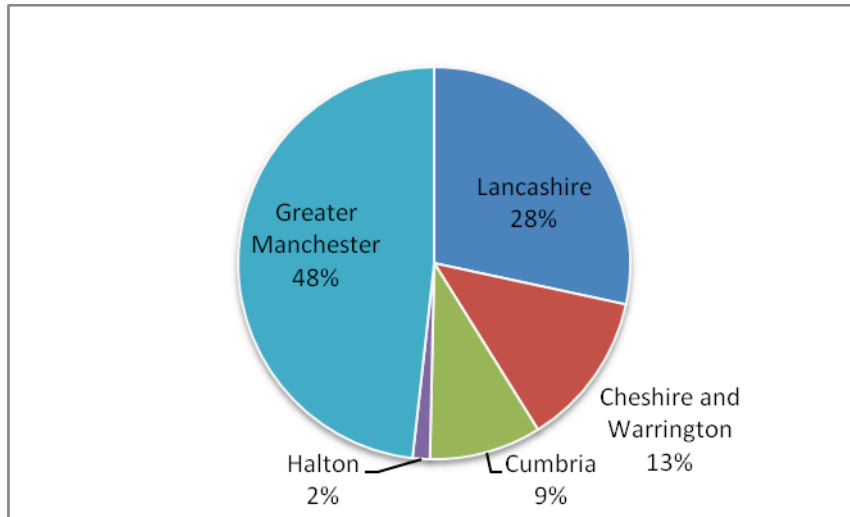


Figure 4: Geographical distribution of grants in the North West (not Merseyside)

In the North West, the SFA anticipated a geographical split of grant allocations. The following table shows that this distribution was very closely matched.

Area	Anticipated percent grants awarded	Actual percent grants awarded R1 - 3
Cheshire and Warrington	16	13
Cumbria	9	9
Halton	3	2
Greater Manchester	46	48
Lancashire	26	28

Figure 5: Percentage of grants awarded compared with that anticipated

Participants

As of September 2013, enrolments had been received from 3,575 project participants. It should be noted that the SFA expect “emphasis should be placed, though not exclusively, on the recruitment and engagement of the priority groups”.

Priority group	SFA target	Actual recorded on MIS
Disabilities or health conditions	22%	36.98
Aged 50 and over	18%	20.70
Ethnic minority	11%	38.46
Lone parents	12%	17.43
Female	51%	62.46

Figure 6: Profile of participants against SFA target

Projects were asked to describe their target groups in their application; very few aimed to support just one of the priority groups. Many people experiencing deprivation will fall into more than one of the priority groups. In the case of projects prioritising ‘People with disabilities and health conditions’, some were very specific, such as people with Asperger’s, Autism, or those recovering from brain injury, but projects also targeted wider groups, such as ‘people with mental health issues’. A few projects targeting ex-offenders were also very specific. A significant number of projects were targeted at women, and women from ethnic minority groups. A few projects mentioned lone parents particularly, although most described their target group as mothers, or parents. Many projects targeted people who were long-term unemployed, but at first, not many specifically targeted people over the age of 50. The Steering Group in September 2012 resolved to actively encourage applications from ‘over 50s groups’, as this was the only ESF priority group where numbers were relatively weak at that time compared to the target.³

³ 28.09.12 PSG Meeting minutes

Participants in the ESF priority groups were targeted by the projects selected and evidence demonstrates that this led to successful recruitment. This indicates that projects accessing the grant funding were effective in reaching disadvantaged and excluded groups.

Management and administration of the programme

The programme has been found to be well managed and administered. An ESF audit took place in August 2013, which found 'no significant issues'. Respondents to the evaluation questionnaire (59 successful projects) praised the support of the WEA team in particular, and the ongoing support and monitoring from the WEA and its partners.

"In depth help, guidance and answers to questions/problems which we asked of the team at WEA and they were always quick to come back to us"⁴

Interviews with Steering Group members and project coordinators consistently reported good communications and responsive support.

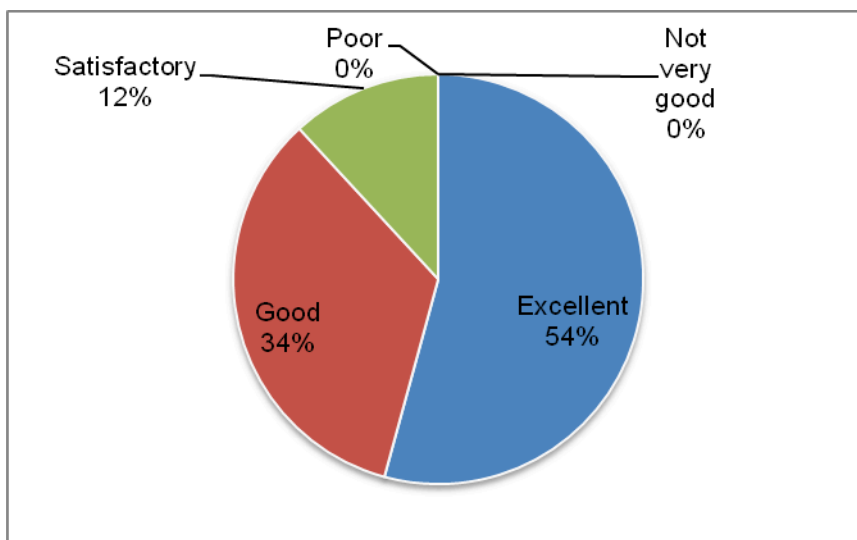


Figure 7: How would you rate the support from the WEA grants team?

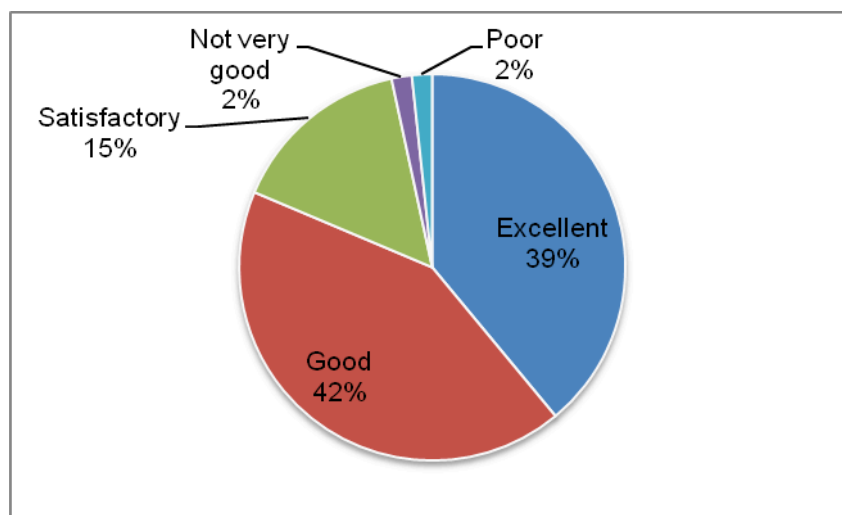


Figure 8: How would you rate the ongoing support and monitoring by the WEA and partner organisations?

⁴ Evaluation questionnaire

Final Reports, projects interviewed, and comments in the evaluation survey consistently praise the support they have received as prompt, friendly and efficient.

Programme structure

In order to manage the programme efficiently, the WEA proposed and set up a project structure and staffing to serve the grants programme. Although the organisation had experience of grant management, this is not its core business, and it was necessary to ensure an appropriate structure to service the programme, to ensure contract compliance and support the wider aims of both ESF programmes and the WEA.

The structure comprised a Contracts Board, and a Project Steering Group that represented the partners, and to whom the Project Manager reported. The WEA Regional Education Manager North West was the Project Director who provided overall strategic leadership and liaison for the project.

The Project Manager, appointed in October 2011, was responsible for the overall operational and programme management, and had overall responsibility for ensuring that project targets and deadlines were met, protocols and policies were robust and implemented, guidance services worked effectively and that financial and beneficiary data was managed at the required standard. The Project Manager was supported by two Project Administrators (for some periods of the programme delivery), and supported by other members of the WEA team – both in the North West office where the project was based, and in the Liverpool Regional office where the financial transactions and monitoring of the project took place. The Liverpool Regional office also administered data entry onto the WEA management information system and recording of enrolment forms and ILPs.

In order to ensure smooth running of internal systems, the Project Manager set up an internal Monitoring Group which met quarterly, and was found to be useful in ensuring better understanding between the project requirements and WEA mainstream systems. There was also overall supervision through national WEA systems at the Contract Board.

The Project Steering Group met quarterly and was attended by personnel representing the two formal partners (Locality & Community Matters) and Network for Europe. The Project Steering Group minutes indicated that all partners were fully engaged in the project and had actively contributed to the implementation of the project. All members of the Project Steering Group interviewed agreed that the project structure was appropriate and functioned very well. Comments suggested that the Project Manager had endeavoured to maintain very good lines of communication and had encouraged Project Steering Group members to contribute to decision-making between meetings online, as well as face-to-face. This had been appreciated and members felt fully included.

“Involvement in the steering group has been positive and has enabled us to make good adjustments to the process as we’ve developed the programme”⁵

Although not partners in the project, Network for Europe were Project Steering Group members, and were felt to have brought much added value through their knowledge of previous grant programme operation, and understanding of European funding. Network for Europe ensured there was awareness of the North West programme at a national level in the debate about future management of ESF, as local experience had been fed through their channels. Projects were also invited to their events which provided up-to-date access to information about good practice and funding opportunities.

⁵ Project Steering Group member

The partnership of three VCS organisations who undertook this programme was an essential element in its success. All three organisations have credibility and recognition in the sector and in the area. This certainly contributed to one of the priority service requirements of ensuring the active engagement of key stakeholders in the management of Community Grants in the region.

All those interviewed felt that the partnership had worked well and that each partner had brought different expertise and strengths.

“The WEA have been very keen to draw on partner input”⁶

It was generally agreed that the funding opportunity had been well promoted through the networks and contacts of these organisations, and that some smaller organisations had been reached, beyond the ‘usual suspects’. In addition, partner organisations felt they had benefitted from involvement with the WEA and in the grants programme in a number of ways – improving their understanding of community learning provision, and gaining a clear picture of the issues and challenges facing many groups, some of whom were their members or potential members.

Some comments suggested that the high uptake of the funding opportunity had led to more work than had originally been anticipated, and the WEA had sought support from the partners to work through ‘pinch points’. It was generally felt that more resources were needed to provide adequate support, and Network for Europe confirmed that they had made representations at national level, that 10% of contract value was insufficient funding for effective administration.

The programme structure has been effective and has enabled the WEA to manage the project well.

Selection process

There were three calls for grant applications in Merseyside, and four in the North West.

Round 1 (Closing date - January 2012)

Round 2 (Closing date - May 2012)

Round 3 (Closing date - September 2012)

Round 4 (Closing date - January 2013)

Applications for Round 1 funding were invited in November 2011, very shortly after the contract was awarded.

The high number of applications, in Round 1 in particular, (see Figure 1: Number of applications above) suggests that awareness of the funding opportunity reached far into the sector. A key success factor was the ability of the co-ordinating body to draw on the pre-existing networks and contacts of the three partner organisations and Network for Europe.

As can be seen from [Figure 1: Number of applications](#) above, the funds in Greater Manchester and in Merseyside were oversubscribed. A decision was made in Round 3 for Merseyside to spend the full allocation for that area. There was a feeling that good projects were being turned down in Merseyside, due to a lack of funds overall. In other areas, notably Cumbria and Halton, it was difficult to raise the numbers of applications and significant concerted action was taken to go out to network organisations and events in

⁶ Project Steering Group member

those areas to promote the funding opportunity. The Project Steering Group minutes indicated a differentiated approach:

“In three heavily oversubscribed areas – Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Merseyside – the emphasis has been on encouraging unsuccessful first round applicants to reapply.

In the three other areas - Halton, Cheshire, Cumbria – we have taken a more proactive approach, with stalls at funding fairs and training events (Runcorn, Ellesmere Port, Middlewich, Crewe and Carlisle), contacting local intermediary bodies, articles in newsletters etc”⁷

The following chart, drawn from evaluation questionnaire data shows how applicants (137 respondents) described hearing about the funding calls.

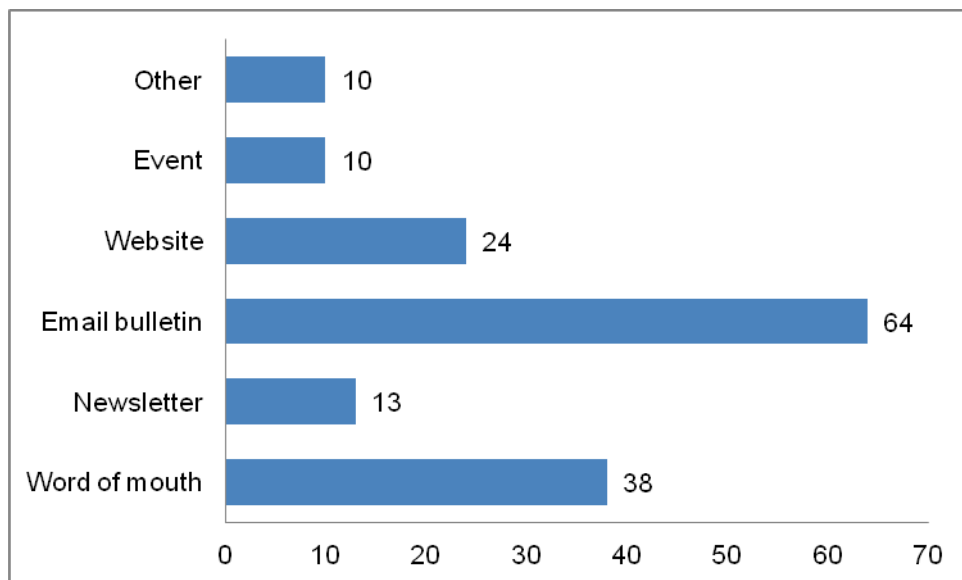


Figure 9: How did you hear about the grant funding opportunity?

This confirms the strength of both virtual and face-to-face networks.

A number of project reports and interviews contain comments that indicate projects were embarking on ESF funded activity for the first time, and that the administration and record-keeping expected was unfamiliar to them. The WEA team and partners provided a high level of support. This suggests that the funding opportunity reached relatively isolated and diverse organisations as intended, beyond the ‘usual suspects’.

The application process is considered to have been robust, and effective in selecting a good range of projects – the majority of which have been sustained. Of 165 awards, 158 (95%) have proved viable to date. This indicates that the substantial checking procedures carried out prior to awards being agreed was largely successful, although not able to completely eliminate the risk of awards being made to organisations that were unable to implement their project.

One of the key criteria in the selection of projects is that they would be able to work with ESF priority groups. Of 59 successful projects responding to the evaluation questionnaire, 58% said they had been able to do so ‘Very easily’, and only 2% said they had not been able to engage with their target groups, all of which are generally described as ‘hard to reach’, or ‘seldom heard’.

⁷ Project Steering Group 30/3/12

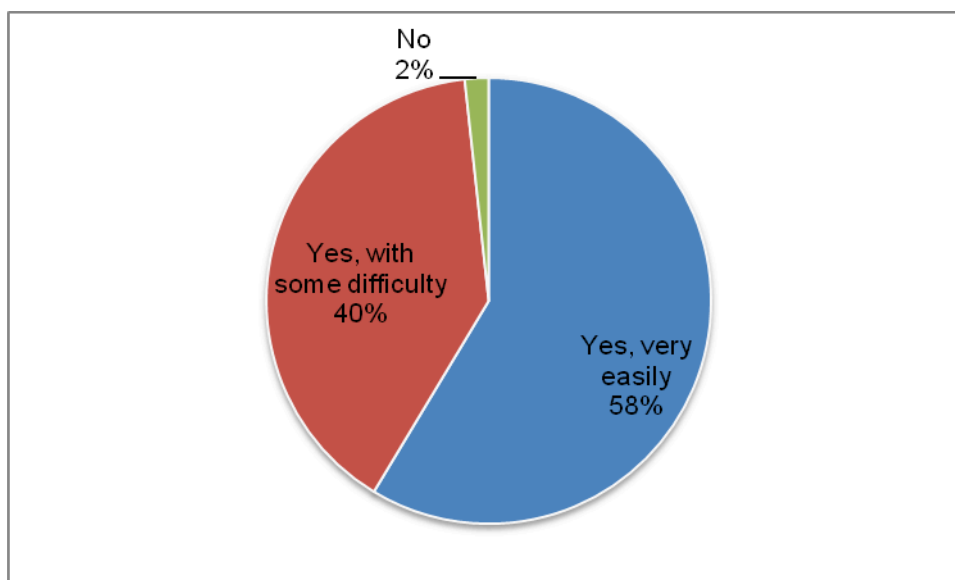


Figure 10: Were you successful in engaging with your target groups?

This suggests that the selection process successfully identified projects led by organisations with close ties to their communities, either geographical or of interest.

Although the process was felt to be onerous by some, evidence shows that the process was thorough, and mainly well regarded.

The information provided to grant applicants on the website was comprehensive, including Guidance notes for applicants and FAQs.

“The website was good too”⁸

Each application was assessed by the WEA team to ensure its eligibility. This included submission of documents, such as a constitution and independently audited accounts, and an Annual Report, to verify the organisation’s status, and indicate its robustness.

Interviews with Project Steering Group members described support offered to applicants, but acknowledged that there is a limit to the amount of support an organisation can be given and that ultimately the quality of an application is in the hands of the applicants themselves. The Project Manager felt that it was the case that there were communities with high levels of need, who nevertheless had not found an organisation or project that was able to articulate that need sufficiently clearly, or had not been able to align those needs with ESF priorities.

“.. it may be that there’s a community with very pressing needs, but that the people working on that on their behalf haven’t succeeded in expressing that clearly, or come up with a particular project that panel members feel would address those needs.”

The success of re-applications – which was high (over 65%) – demonstrates the commitment of the project team to providing effective feedback and enabling applicants to refocus their bids. However, there were a number of disappointed applicants who were not satisfied with the feedback and information they received (see responses to the evaluation questionnaire below).

⁸ Evaluation Form from participant at Induction Workshop

Over the course of the funding rounds, the form was amended, FAQs and Guidance notes were updated and expanded to take account of new queries and to continue to clarify the process for applicants. The grants team in the WEA office, as well as partner organisations, provided support to potential applicants. The final version of the application form consisted of a nine-page set of questions and an eligibility checklist. Applicants were asked to provide Health and Safety policy, Equality and Diversity policy and Adult Safeguarding policy, as well as guarantee they could produce further documentation on request, such as public liability insurance.

“It [the application process] focussed on the need to provide a list of policies which are now in place”⁹

Part 1 of the evaluation questionnaire (see Appendix 1) invited comments on the application process. All applicants, successful and unsuccessful were invited to participate. There were 137 respondents from all project rounds and across all areas. The following two charts show the distribution of the respondents – 83 (60%) of these were from successful projects.

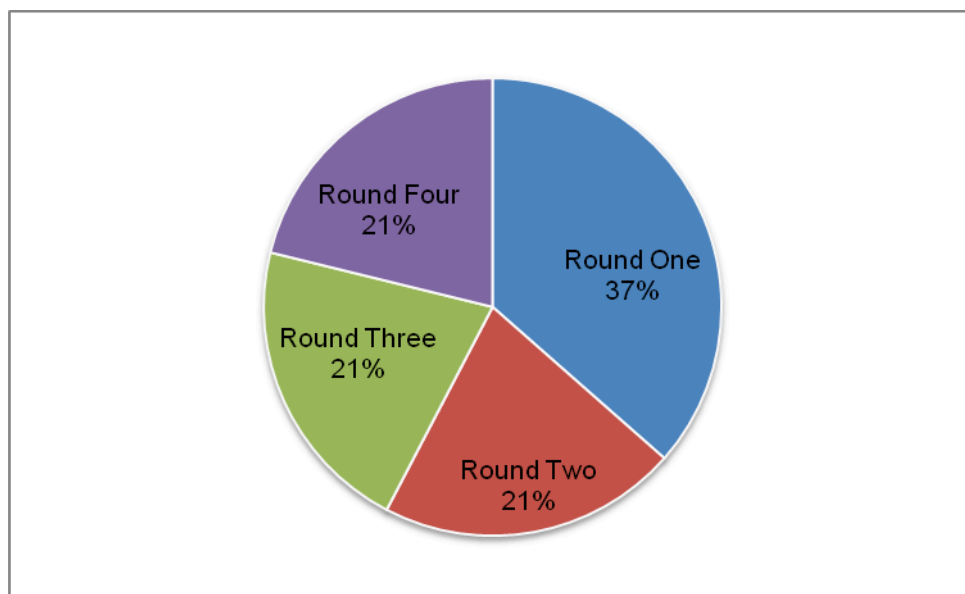
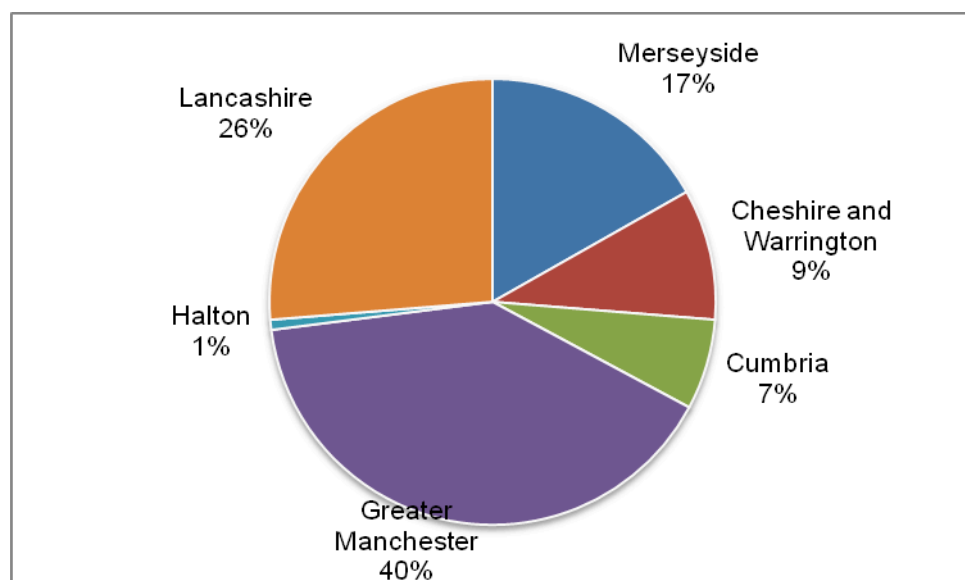


Figure 11: In which round was the first application made?



⁹ Evaluation Questionnaire

Figure 12: What region did you apply in?

The majority of the respondents, 69%, found the application process to be 'Very straightforward' (15%) or 'Straightforward' (54%).

"Application form was easy to follow and although it asked for all relevant information it wasn't pages long"

"Clearly defined and verbal support available"

"Easy to fill in application process"

Only four respondents found it to be 'Very complicated'. Of these, three were not successful with their application, and two of them failed in more than one round. The three unsuccessful applicants who found the process very complicated were not satisfied with the feedback they received. Their comments refer to the long-windedness of the process, unclear information regarding financial reports, and difficulty with timescales. There were eleven respondents who found the form to be complicated, and seven of those were unsuccessful, although one succeeded with a subsequent application. There were complaints that there had been no acknowledgement of receipt of the application forms, and that there had been no opportunity to correct errors with paperwork.

"Some of the questions were presented in a complicated way"

"Too bureaucratic and formal"

"As we were trying to secure 4 or 5 small pockets of match funding to fund this project the boxes in the financial section could have been bigger to allow for more information to be inserted"

"Too complicated for the amount of money we requested"

"Some elements were not clear such as stipulations about supporting documents - we were not advised policies needed to have signatures for example"

75% of respondents felt that the application form had helped them to formulate their project a little or a lot. In the case of successful projects this rose to 85%.

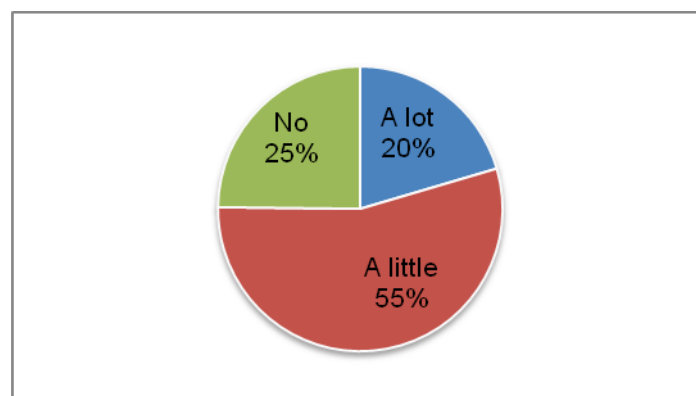


Figure 13: Did the application form help you to formulate your project?

"It helped to plan the learning and assessment journey"

“We were already doing a lot of the things which we put in the project application although the person centred development plans were changed as a result of the application and funding”

“The project was formulated but the questions helped focus the project targets”

“It has given us the business plan as the application lays out in sections what you will do - who with and how much etc”

Only 25% projects sought support to help write their application. Several asked the WEA, others turned to their local CVS or equivalent. In some cases professional fundraisers were consulted. A number were assisted by volunteers.

Unsuccessful projects (53 respondents) were asked if they were satisfied with the feedback they received. Only 32% were ‘Satisfied’ or ‘Very satisfied’.

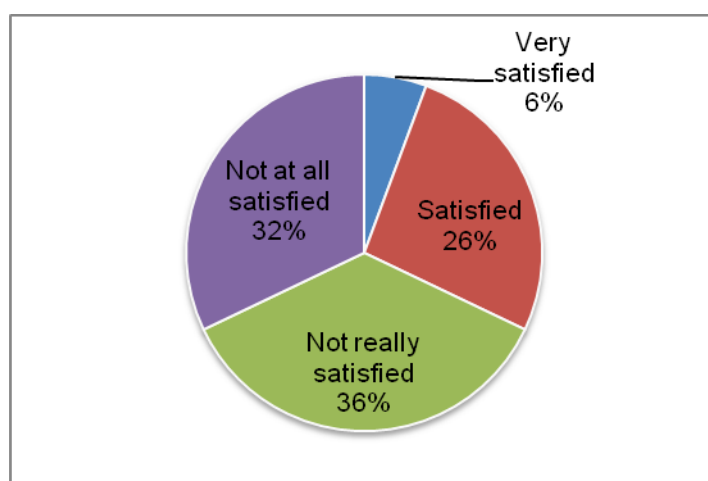


Figure 14: Were you satisfied with the feedback you received? (unsuccessful applicants)

Of those respondents who were unsuccessful in their first application (53), just under half, 24 had made subsequent applications, and nine had been successful with these. Seven of these had been successful on a second attempt, and six of them had said they were satisfied with their feedback.

“I liaised with WEA staff in Liverpool to look at how our application could be improved for the next round”

Of the remaining three who were not satisfied, one had been successful at the third attempt was ‘Not at all satisfied’, and one, successful at the fourth attempt was ‘Not really satisfied’. Of the unsuccessful project respondents, 12 had not been able to apply in a further round as no further funding was available.

Over half (27) of the unsuccessful applicant respondents had clearly had a disappointing experience, with either no opportunity to apply in a further round, or more than one rejection. Their comments inevitably reflect this dissatisfaction.

“Extremely disappointed as we did seek advice from previous application”

“The feedback was helpful although when we addressed the items in a second round application our second round application was declined for different reasons which left us slightly confused and wondered if we were aiming at a moving target”

“The application was unsuccessful a second time and we could not understand why as we had made all the improvements suggested and developed the project. The feedback this time we felt was simply making an excuse as it mentioned something not mentioned in the first feedback. This area had been the same in both applications”

“The reasons given were trivial and had no bearing on the quality of the application. Indeed, we were encouraged to re-submit but were still unsuccessful. The second time we were told that [our area] was over-subscribed”

Some unsuccessful applicants however, were clear that they understood why their application had failed.

“The team have been fantastic and have throughout the process been supportive. They liked our bid, however recognised that as an experienced startup with funding we could not necessarily meet the full criteria”

“We are a new organisation and could not meet the criteria at the time. However we found the feedback very useful for future information”

Clearly, there were organisations who did not feel satisfied with the outcome of their application, and a very few who indicated that the process was not transparent as far as they were concerned. However, only two formal complaints were made.

The partners, Project Steering Group and Contract Board were satisfied that the process was robust, and grant panel decisions, as well as Project Steering Group minutes adequately recorded the decision-making process.

Many grant giving bodies do not provide feedback on unsuccessful applications. A point to consider in future would be whether this approach should be adopted. However, to support ESF objectives, it might be better to consider whether improved feedback could be offered, although it must be noted that this has a high administrative and consequent cost overhead.

Grant panels

The practice of involving volunteers as grant panel members has appeared to be very effective, perhaps more so than was anticipated. This also contributed to the service requirement to ensure clarity and transparency in the selection process, and also the engagement of key stakeholders. Over 40 Community Grants panel members were recruited, including past grant recipients and members of the panels from previous Community Grants contracts in the region.

Applications were scored and selection was made at grant panels that took place in each of the sub-regions and in Merseyside. Panel members were volunteers invited to take part in the process when the programme began. All grant panel applications were agreed by the Project Steering Group – there was an instance of inviting a re-application that was then successful, and another where there had been misunderstanding about the role, but otherwise all were accepted. Information about the role of grant panel members was made available through the website and through local networks.

“The steering group looked at the applications of each of the grant panel members – they were a very good mix. The applicants were all people who

could see the value of the programme and therefore wanted to volunteer as assessors and ensure good provision in their local area”¹⁰

A large group of potential panel members enabled there to be ‘mixed’ scoring (applications were scored by two individuals, but the scorers did not work in permanent ‘pairs). This also meant that where a potential conflict of interest was declared, suitable panel members could be allocated, even if they were working out of their area.

All the Project Steering Group members interviewed commented on how well this had worked, and how impressed they had been by the commitment of the panel members. Training was offered in each region to establish consistency.

The 40 people, who took part in five panels, all had experience of either managing third sector organisations or running training programmes, and often had previous experience of ESF and other grant adjudication work. Their training included familiarisation with the objectives and procedures of the grant programme, identification of potential conflicts of interest, and how to be as objective and consistent as possible with scoring and ranking applications. Some of the same panel members later volunteered to also assess applications for capacity building fund training bursaries.

Each panel was responsible for the selection of successful projects and the Project Steering Group ratified their decisions.

The partners – Locality and Community Matters – were not involved in the scoring and selection process with the panels, and attention was given to transparency in declaring potential conflicts of interest.

Ensuring viability of projects

There was a good success rate for the projects selected. Four withdrew before the grant agreement was signed for a variety of reasons. Two others had difficulties with wider funding and were able to repay the ESF grant when they found they were unable to run their projects. One organisation was wound up in the life of the project, and although every effort was made to recoup the funding allocated to them, this was not possible.

Concerns about project viability were discussed and addressed in the early stages of establishing the programme, when it was agreed that all projects would be visited prior to the issuing of the service level agreement. All projects were visited by the grants team and/or one of the partners, and these visits were generally felt to have been time well spent, both in clarifying aspects of the proposed project, and further verifying organisational robustness.

The following chart shows how the project visit was valued by the projects themselves (drawn from 92 responses in the evaluation questionnaire).

¹⁰ Steering Group member

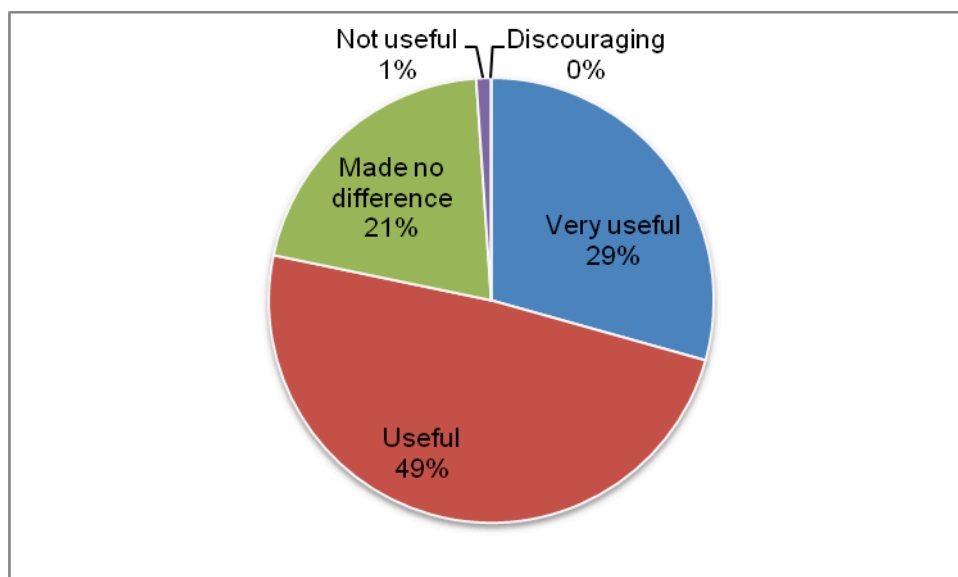


Figure 15: How useful was the project visit in terms of developing and implementing the project?

Of the projects visited, 78% considered the project visit to be ‘Very useful’ or ‘Useful’, which suggests that while the project visits represent an intense use of resources, they represented a valued source of support and reassurance about project implementation.

In addition, the visits brought to light some anomalies in representation of projects/organisations, and provided the delivery team with an opportunity to build a supportive relationship. This led to some modification of aims and objectives, or target numbers of beneficiaries, and provided a good basis for exchange of information in most cases. One example given was of a music project offering drop-in support, where it was established that there were insufficient resources -this led to modification of the project outputs.

“The project site visits had been very useful and flagged up a number of important issues re individual projects”¹¹

Not all projects were able to complete second and final claims for the amount they were initially awarded. This was due to a range of factors such as fewer beneficiaries completing, which resulted in lower costs, inaccurate budgeting in the original claim, and difficulty with producing evidence. The current overstretching of personnel in third sector organisations has also been reported as part of the reason for projects not completing their claims. One example is described here¹²:

“We actually gave work experience training/learning to a total of 60 new people. However we only completed learning plans for 11 of these people.

The reasons for only completing 11 Learning Plans were due to a number of organisational pressures. At the time of application we were fighting for survival in terms of securing funding for the continuation of the project beyond the grant period. A large proportion of my time through this grant period has been occupied with grant applications and implementing cost saving measures in order to survive. As part of this process, two full time staff members accepted voluntary redundancy and as a consequence, the work

¹¹ Project Steering Group 30/3/12

¹² Project 2044

*load for remaining staff has increased in order to deliver project services.
we are not in a position to claim the second instalment of the grant”¹²*

The current financial climate in the North West and Merseyside has put VCS organisations under considerable pressure, and this has taken its toll on organisations who have struggled to maintain their funding.

“Unfortunately our income has reduced this financial year, and we are currently not able to progress all the elements of work we aspire to”¹³

The WEA and partners sought to ensure that small organisations were able to benefit from funding, and strike a balance between the two criteria of reaching into the community and organisational viability. This is inevitably risky, but their diligence has minimised risk as far as possible.

Induction workshops

All successful grant recipients were required to attend an induction workshop to receive their grant letter and project handbook. The workshop and project documentation is very clear about the audit requirements of the project. The co-ordinating body took thorough steps to meet the service requirement to ensure accurate and correct financial records were kept. The WEA project team encouraged attention to detail and submission of supporting documents. Projects interviewed consistently reported the value of the workshops, and an analysis of the evaluation forms confirms how useful it was for organisations to have a clear view of all the reporting requirements from the outset of the grant programme.

“We have had some funding in the past where we were not told about the reporting requirements until too late in the day, so this was really useful”¹⁴

The following chart shows how respondents to the evaluation questionnaire valued the induction workshops (92 responses).

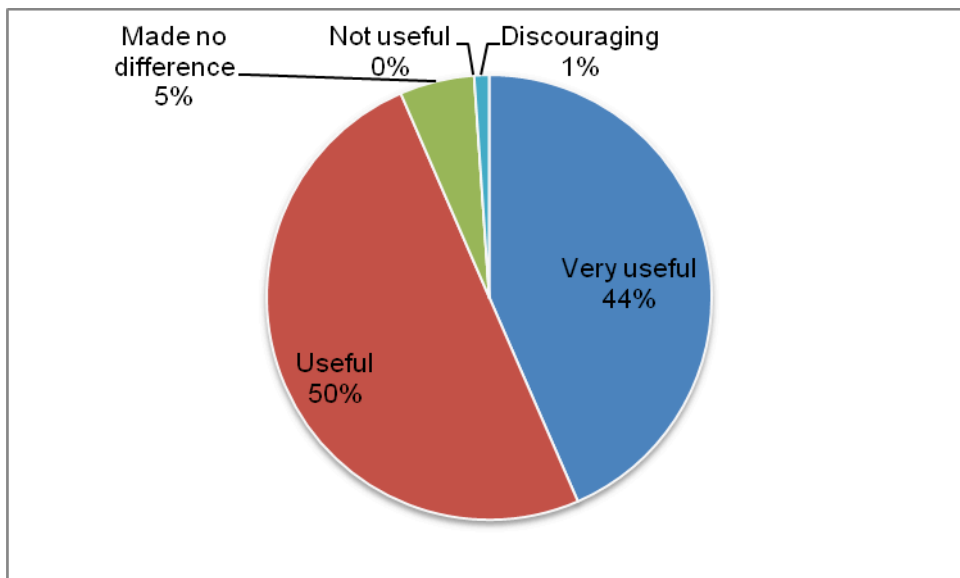


Figure 16: How useful was the induction workshop?

¹³ Project 2056: Final Report

¹⁴ Project Manager, Project 12

Of the respondents, 94% rated the workshops as 'Very useful' or 'Useful'. The comment from the one respondent who found the workshops 'Discouraging', was that it had been "*confusing and overwhelming*". However, this respondent also rated the support from the WEA grants team as 'Excellent'.

An analysis of the evaluation forms collected from 12 workshops also showed very high levels of satisfaction, with 99% agreeing that the workshops were 'Useful'. Comments are overwhelmingly positive about the structure and detail of the day with many praising the extensive knowledge of the speakers, and appreciating the project handbook.

*"Very informative, comprehensive workshop, which covered all aspects of managing the project. Very useful to have a file full of info + templates to take away. Also enjoyed networking opportunity"*¹⁵

*"The methodical manner in which the session flowed and made the whole process less daunting – the networking approaches were most useful and very interesting"*¹⁶

Participants also responded well to the question and answer sessions, and were very positive about hearing actual examples – some suggestions were made to have more of these:

*"Looking at some real case studies would be interesting and demonstrate good practice – or bad practice and how not to do it"*¹⁷

Project coordinators interviewed regularly commented on the value of the workshops and the accompanying handbook.

Cross-cutting themes

Attention was paid to the ESF cross-cutting themes throughout the programme delivery. At the outset, applications for grants had to demonstrate understanding and awareness, and the grant selection process took this into account. Successful projects (as previously mentioned) were required to have appropriate policies in place. Final Reports gathered data on these themes. A separate report on sustainability will be produced at a later date.

For many of the organisations funded to deliver projects, gender equality and equal opportunity are part of their core business – their work is to prioritise access to learning for disadvantaged groups, and they have utilised project funding to improve their services, or extended services to previously under-represented groups. For example, one organisation running a community radio is targeted at the LGBT community and another community station offered a programme through the project for people with learning difficulties. In the latter case, the Project manager reported that another support organisation for people with learning difficulties was now running their own radio project, and that as a result of working with the group, they now felt able to support individual volunteers with learning difficulties.

A significant proportion of projects have worked with disadvantaged women, and BME women in particular to raise participation and attainment. One project working with South Indian women reported:

"The experience of not having positive role models within the immediate family who introduce the work ethic, and work discipline make it difficult for the women to learn these things later in life...."

¹⁵ Evaluation Form from induction event

¹⁶ Evaluation Form from induction event

¹⁷ Evaluation Form from induction event

The programme was a steep learning curve for many of the beneficiaries who worked hard, but they needed additional support with their personal problems or social problems as well as requiring language assistance”¹⁸

Projects have reported how their funded activities have influenced their work and future plans:

“We collaborated with local, Salford refugee and asylum seeker community group, ‘Women of The World (‘WOW’) to celebrate ‘International Women’s Day in March 2013, which brought over 250 women from all different backgrounds, other community groups and local people together from all parts of Salford in a colourful celebration of women’s achievements, in support of gender equality and diversity”¹⁹

“Since evaluating feedback we have decided to look into ways of developing Social Media Skills Workshops and targeting training at specific groups that are in need of specific support with using digital technology, including those who are aged 50+ and those suffering from mental illness”²⁰

Some comments were made in the participants survey regarding inclusion, with most participants agreeing that their personal needs had been met, although one commented *“More could be done for the disabled”*.

The range of evidence analysed and described in Section 2 demonstrates that targets were met and that there were high levels of satisfaction in the sector and amongst successful projects that the project was managed well, and delivered effectively. Although some aspects of the programme delivery required high levels of support, this approach had beneficial impacts in that the vast majority projects were able to implement their projects, and reach their target audiences. They felt the WEA team and partners supported them well.

¹⁸ Project 2011: Final Report

¹⁹ Project 2086: Final Report

²⁰ Project 2014: Final Report

3. Has the Community Grants Programme contributed to ESF objectives in the North West and Merseyside?

The Community Grants Programme has had very positive impact in Merseyside and the North West for participating organisations and for individual beneficiaries. This can be demonstrated through the importance that organisations attached to the grant funding, what they have achieved with it, and the ways in which they have engaged excluded groups. In addition, the response of participants to the activities they took part in, and the reported outcomes, demonstrate varied ways in which the grant funding has benefitted individuals, their families and the communities they are a part of.

Impact on organisations

Of the projects responding to the evaluation questionnaire, 98% (59 responses) reported that the grant was 'Very important' or 'Important'.

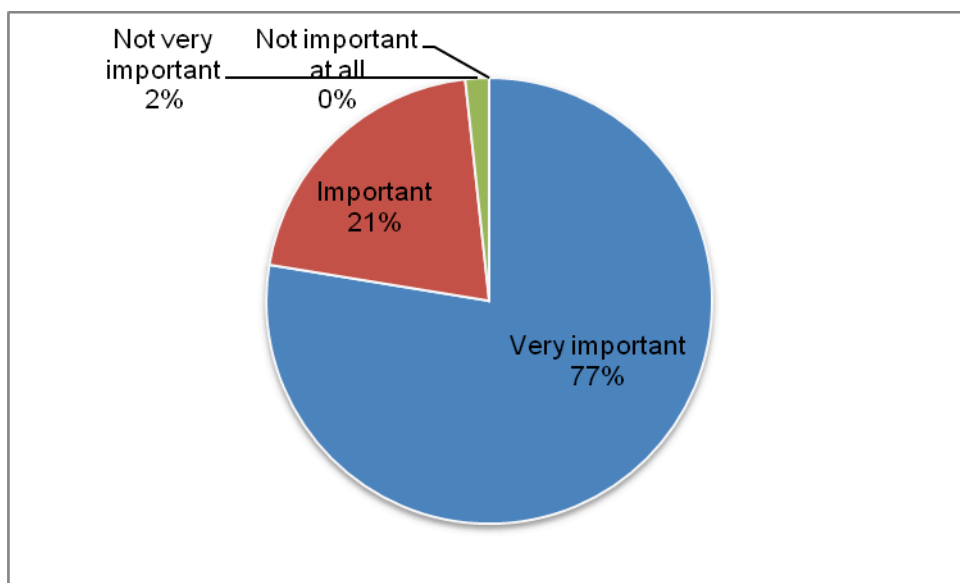


Figure 17: How important has the community learning grant been to your organisation?

Comments demonstrate that projects valued the ways they were able to provide support to the groups they worked with:

“Sparth Community Centre operates in an area that is seen to be falling behind the Rochdale Borough and National averages in literacy and numeracy levels as well as health related issues. The grant has enabled us to start the long road to increasing the basic skills of people within the area so they can increase their opportunities and aspirations”

“It has helped us meet our aims, to enable disabled people to live sustained, independent lives”

“Although not our largest pot of funding, has had substantial positive social impact in the area of provision”

Projects also report on how this funding has enabled them to be more sustainable:

“It has enabled us to meet the needs of local people who needed to gain computer skills. It has allowed us to attract many new

centre users who have attended the centre for computer classes. Many individuals have started to take part in other activities at the centre. It has enabled us to offer new, valuable volunteering opportunities for students and others. It has enabled us to develop partnership working with job centres/sheltered housing schemes/local learning hubs. It has helped us identify new community needs and to attract funding to meet these needs, eg setting up a new work club”

“It provided evidence of financial capability for grant management”

“Through this grant we have identified a range of activities we feel are important to our service users”

“The success of this first phase has been outstanding. On the basis of this success the Liverpool Mental Health Consortium has secured funding for us to deliver a project with people who have experience of mental health issues”

A number of projects described how the grant had enabled them to undertake activities for the first time:

“This is the first time the project has engaged with prolific and priority offenders.....and has been a valuable learning opportunity for the organisation”²¹

“The project was the first attempt by this community centre organisation to deliver training courses on its own with the help of a qualified tutor”²²

Projects also report that the grant has been effective in raising the quality of learning provision:

“The organisation has gained working knowledge of how to professionally handle a training course, from designing to delivery. This has given us the confidence to explore further opportunities to deliver training courses in the future and, thereby, sharpen our experience and delivery in the related field”²³

Of the respondents to the evaluation questionnaire, 91% (59 responses) felt that the quality of learning provision in their organisation had been improved as a result of the grant funded activities.

²¹ Project 52: Final Report

²² Project 87: Final Report

²³ Evaluation questionnaire

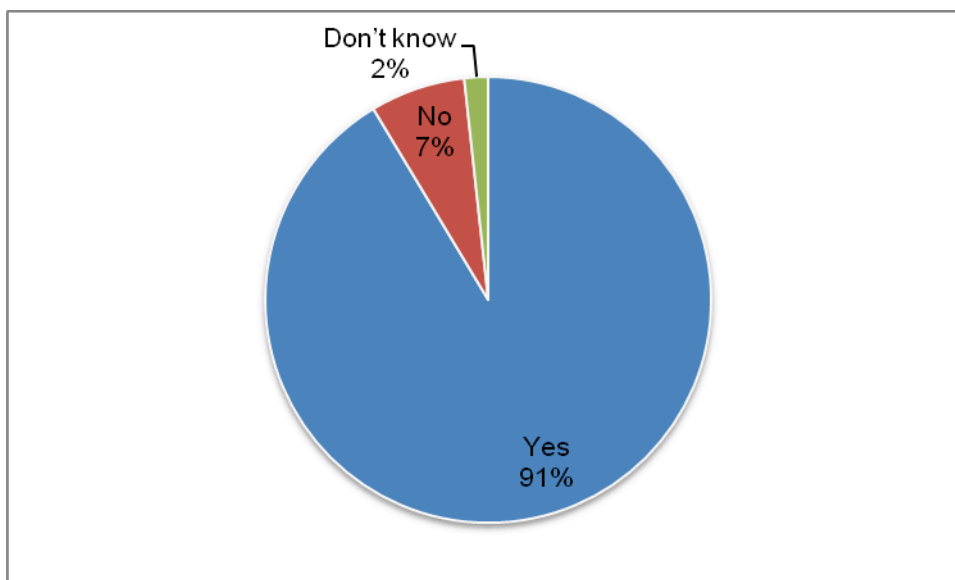


Figure 18: Has your involvement in the Community Grants Programme improved the quality of learning provision in your organisation?

For some organisations, this improvement included being able to offer accredited courses and becoming registered centres with an awarding body.

“It has resulted in us becoming an accredited centre for delivery of Open Awards qualifications”²⁴

“Having the capacity to offer bespoke accredited personal development courses certified by a national awarding body added the achievement potential for all those who participated in accredited courses. Just over a third of those who achieved their accredited Level 2 certificates, held no previous qualifications”²⁵

The case study of East Lancashire Women’s Centres describes the impact on their work of becoming an accredited NCFE centre.

For other projects, the grant has enabled them to provide non-accredited and more informal learning opportunities that have acted as a stepping stone to accredited provision.

Projects also report improved relationships with mainstream providers.

“An additional area of training has developed through a growing relationship with Lancaster and Morecambe College. This is “Supporting education in Formal and Informal situations”. It provides a real opportunity for certain members of the group, giving them the qualification for Teaching Assistant”²⁶

²⁴ Evaluation questionnaire

²⁵ Project 61: Final Report

²⁶ Project 3300: Final Report

“As a result of the project, [we] became a member of the Local Area Network hosted by Accrington and Rossendale college [so we could] engage further with other agencies supporting the priority groups in the area”²⁷

Some discussion took place in interviews with projects, the Project Steering Group and with the Project Manager concerning the indirect capacity building that engagement with the grants programme had. Project visits had sometimes shown up issues (such as Health and Safety problems) with certain venues, which were assessed using a WEA checklist. The provision of policies, such as Equality and Diversity, had focussed some groups on their own practice. Projects are asked to provide schemes of work and session plans, as well as ILPs. The RARPA²⁸ process, which is not well-known in the voluntary sector, was explained at the induction workshop.

These factors contributed to improving the quality of the learning experience for the beneficiaries.

The reported impact on organisations provides clear evidence of benefits for organisational capacity as a result of involvement in the grants programme. It has been practically valuable, for example bringing about improvements in Health and Safety in some venues, as well. These benefits complement the impact of the targeted capacity building support offered by the WEA and partners, as described in the next section.

Capacity Building

The allocation of funds for capacity building as an aspect of ESF support was anticipated as approximately 10% of the full contract value. In the early part of the project, the Project Steering Group discussed a range of ways in which to offer this support. It was known that other co-ordinating bodies had offered these monies as a grant programme and this option was considered, but ruled out – mainly on the grounds that it would require significant additional administrative burden, for what was likely to be small amounts of money for groups, and could cause confusion and be detrimental to the main grant awards process. Extensive consultation took place through discussions at the mandatory induction workshops, on project visits, and in other communications. While this was a time-consuming piece of work, it was felt by the partnership members to be ‘participative’ and worthwhile. A full programme of training activities and workshops was offered. In addition, organisations were able to apply to a panel for funds to cover bespoke activities, such as consultancy or external training. In total, 32 projects were allocated a total of £47,644 additional funding to pay for bespoke training and consultancy to enhance their sustainability. As part of the capacity building service, the WEA has directly run eight accredited Preparation to teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS) courses and 52 other training events for staff, committee and volunteers. Overall, 224 people from 71 projects have benefitted.

All projects interviewed for case studies agreed that the capacity building programme was very good, although many also reported that current financial pressures, and consequently demanding workloads had prevented them from taking advantage of the programme as they would have liked.

“We did not take advantage of offer due to our time constraints”²⁹

²⁷ Project 41: Final Report

²⁸ Recognising and recording progress and achievement (RARPA) is a widely accepted approach to assessing non-accredited learning.

²⁹ Comment on Evaluation questionnaire

Responses to the evaluation questionnaire show that 86% projects felt they had been adequately consulted about the capacity building offer. The following chart shows the way in which respondents (59) rated the quality of the activities.

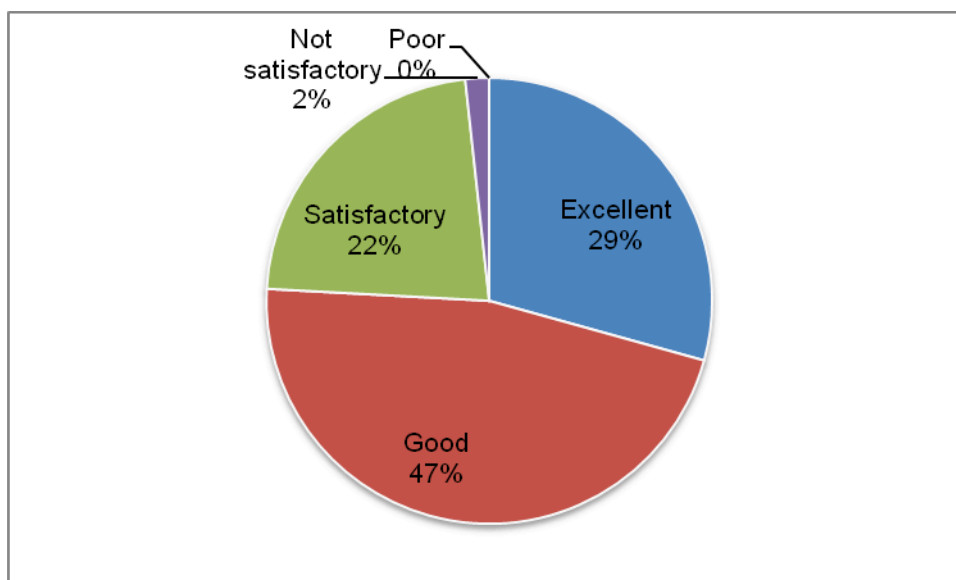


Figure 19: How would you rate the quality of the capacity building support you engaged with?

Some further comments from respondents show what aspects were valued:

“We appreciated being able to send volunteer tutors onto the PTTLS course”

“It was a very informative session and I was provided with a lot of information around how to measure social impact and quality assurance systems”

An Essay by Lindsay

In my fifty fourth year of life I was called in by The Department of Works and Pensions to review my future, in the past I have suffered from alcohol addiction and it took its toll on my health in the form of three heart attacks and mental problems which had taken me a long time to get back to a healthy and sober life.

It was decided for me to get involved in Volunteering as there would be no pressure and leave me free to come and go as I please. I sent an e-mail to the Community Volunteer Service explaining my past and interests that I had, I received an appointment to see the 'Fast Forward' co-ordinator which is a voluntary group of people that are in recovery and want to give something back to the community, funded by an ESF community learning grant. I decided that this was for me.

My first taste of volunteering was a team building exercise at Waddow Hall near Clitheroe in Lancashire. Nervous as I was, I went and although it nearly killed me, had a great time meeting all the other Volunteers and listening to what they were involved in. About one month in I was asked if I would be interested to go to a course called 'Training the Trainers' which I found very hard to get my head around as I have never been academic and did not even have a certificate to say I attended school. In the November time I was asked if I would like to do a PTTLS course which would open up a new world to me. When I started the course I discovered that being at the Train the Trainers some of it must have stuck with me as I understood a little bit of what the PTTLS was about.

The most interesting thing was that the course was being administered by the WEA which goes back many years and our tutor gave us a bit of the history about it.

Bearing in mind that I never did anything to its completion and when the pressure came on I would turn to my old friend Smirnoff vodka for solace, I changed from my first day onwards and found that my tutor Linda was patient, and I mean Patient, and guided me through the course at which at the end I felt for the first time in my life that I finally finished something.

The WEA must be really proud of having selfless and dedicated Teachers whom without my life would probably be the same. The PTTLS course not only gave me the empowerment to now go to University and study a degree level Criminology course but to believe in myself and to pass on to others the gift that the WEA gave to me through their wonderful tutors.

Case Study of PTLLS participant

Project activities

Project activities have been varied; training has covered job search, CV building, interview skills, giving presentations and other work-focussed activities, personal development and confidence building, goal setting and action planning, ICT skills – particularly internet and email, media skills, business planning, independent living skills, and a range of specific and practical activities such as First Aid and Health and Safety, Driving Test Theory, support for people with specific disabilities, support for ex-offenders in how to make a positive disclosure of a conviction, gardening, cooking, portable appliance testing and many others. Over the four rounds, a total of 26 projects offered accredited training to at least 700 participants.

The following chart, drawn from the participants' survey (104 responses) is a good indication of the range of project activities undertaken:

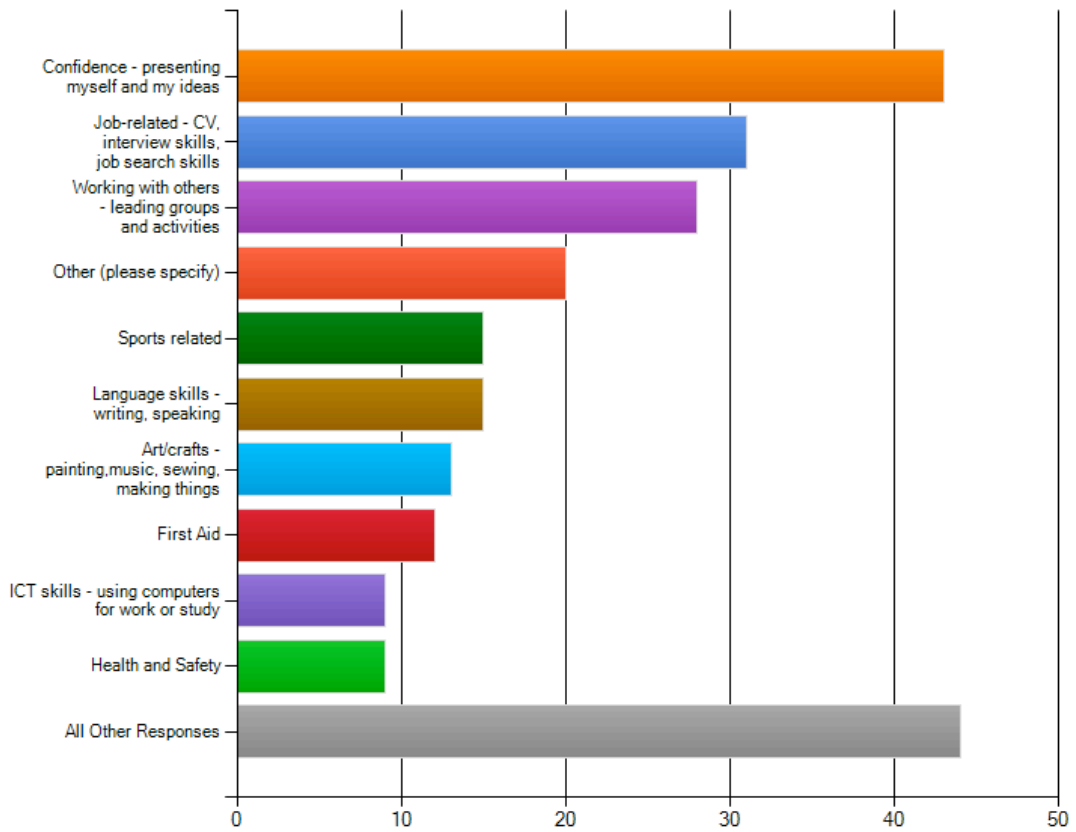


Figure 20: What kind of things did you learn?

Of the participants, 98% rated the activities they were involved in as 'Excellent' or 'Good'.

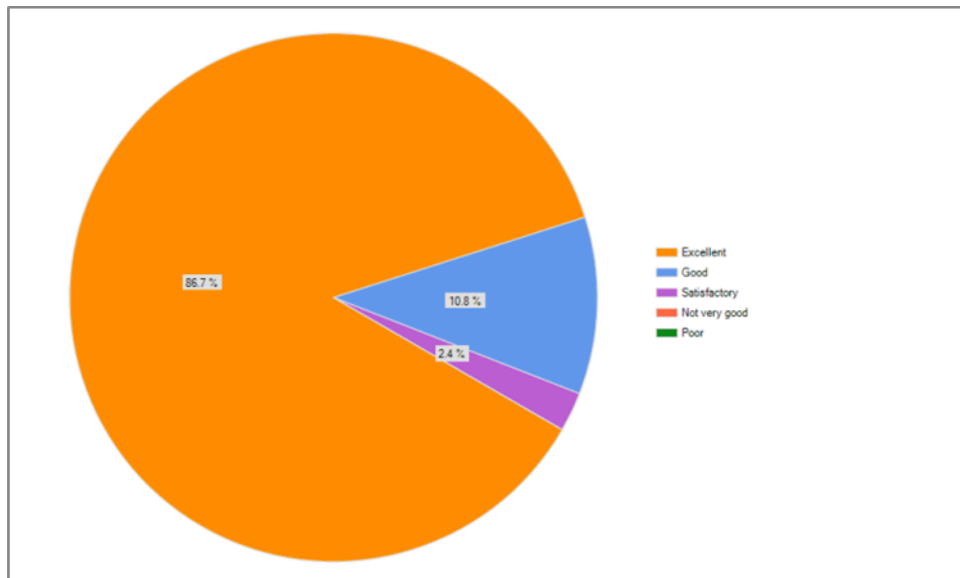


Figure 21: How do you rate the activities?

Of the two participants who rated the activities as satisfactory, one made no further comments. The other made some criticism concerning the activities, saying that 'lack of experience' of the provider showed as activities overran, and best use was not made of existing skills within the group.

This participant commented:

"new course – needs to be in; we were treated all the same – patently not the case"

This comment contrasts with a body of evidence that points to projects being able to offer very personalised and tailored approaches, with a high degree of individual support.

Personalisation

Working on a small scale, projects have been able to adapt activities to suit participants in a variety of ways. When asked if they had modified their original project plan, 18% of projects said they had not made any significant changes, but 20% said they had added extra support or activities to meet needs, 20% had changed times, days and length of sessions, and 20% had modified the content of their activities.

"The problem was overcome by changing the course timetable to make it more appealing to beneficiaries (eg moving from one day per week to two half days per week)"³⁰

Projects completing the survey were asked to comment on how they had supported participants:

"Lots of one-to-one support – more than we had budgeted for"

"Regular 1:1 reviews, differentiated taught sessions with a multi-sensory approach, adaptable and appropriate resources, RARPA and a consistent approach to feedback"

"Ensuring that the project was flexible and responded to participant needs. ie one participant with severe physical condition had prolonged breaks and more one to one time to facilitate her learning"

"Work programmes were tailored to the assessed needs of each individual. Obtained a small amount of additional funding from a separate source because of the severity of need of 2 of the initial group. This allowed flexibility in offering extra sessions for those with the lowest literacy levels"

These comments show that projects were able to provide the levels of one-to-one support that are difficult to achieve in mainstream education. In addition, it is clear that projects ensured a range of needs were met, demonstrating effective equality and diversity practice. This included bringing in additional interpreters and/or ESOL support, working with volunteer mentors, enabling participants who were not able to attend all sessions to make up time. Many of the comments mention initial assessment, reviews and the use of ILPs to identify need.

³⁰ Interim Report:3053

Case Study: 'Steve'

Steve (name changed) is a recovering alcoholic and ex-offender. He's been unemployed for 6 years. His confidence and self-esteem levels were extremely low and it took a lot of persuasion to get him to attend the first session – he was nervous about learning new skills and meeting new people. A thorough initial assessment was carried out to make sure that he was fully supported and he met with the course tutor after every session to discuss any issues he may have had. His confidence built as the project progressed as did his interaction with other members of the group. By the third session his participation had increased and he was contributing to discussions. By the end of the project he was like a different person and felt comfortable taking the lead in different activities.

Respondents to the participants' survey also confirmed that activities had been tailored to suit individuals. 73% said that they had been asked about their personal needs and preferences, and 40% said they had some individual help. A further 65% agreed that 'Some changes had been made to suit different participants', and 67% agreed that 'The teachers/tutors/session leaders knew about the preferences of individuals'.

"We each had our own problems but the ladies made sure we could get the exercises to work for us. There was a lady in the group who was very visually impaired and the ladies made the work easier for her, tailored things for her didn't make her feel isolated"

"The course seems to have been the same base of improving literacy but applied differently to each of the participants to meet personal needs and preferences"³¹

Preparation for work

Projects described working with many participants who lacked awareness, skills and the confidence to seek work effectively. This comment from the Gateway to Employment Programme, run by the Bangladeshi Association and Community Project, Rochdale, summarises:

"At the beginning the learners were, generally, unaware of the concept of CVs and covering letters, lacked confidence in speaking, interacting and reflecting on their skills and experiences, had little knowledge of the structure of interviews and use of IT. The project has been able to impart in them the confidence of taking the next step towards improving their chances in the job market"³²

Comments on ILPs from participants on this project describe this too:

³¹ Comments in participant's survey

³² Project 87: Final Report

"I don't know how to write a CV"

"Need help with interview skills"

"Need help to fill application forms"

There were 35 participants on the courses, and positive outcomes were recorded, also confirmed by comments on ILPs, such as:

"I am very glad that I have found a full time job after 2 years. I am very thankful to my teacher. She helped me a lot. I'm also working voluntary for British Heart Foundation. I am fully confident I can find more jobs now"

"My biggest improvement is answering interview questions I am very confident now. I have found two jobs"

"I have been told my education level is sufficient to find a job as a classroom assistant but I need training so I have got a place for level 2 CA training at Hopwood Hall College from September. I am happy I did this course"

The following case study describes the success of one participant:

Case Study: Zaitun

Background

Zaitun was a 53 year old female learner, originally from India, who attended the second cycle of the employability course. A widow and a mother to one daughter, Zaitun was found to be very hardworking and motivated. Side by side with attending the employability course, she was also attending ESOL lessons with the sole determination to improve her chances in the job market at this later stage of her life.

Challenges

Zaitun needed to nudge her confidence, improve her basic IT appreciation and become more conversant with the Internet. She was able to converse in English but needed to work on her inhibitions in facing interviews.

Outcome

Zaitun has learnt how to face interview questions, talk about her positives and bring her experience and life skills to the fore to impress in interviews. She has created a good CV and has become independent in searching for new opportunities both on and offline. She has shown immense improvement in her confidence level. She has attended a few interviews in her attempt to find employment.

Zaitun has now secured a part-time role in the health and social care sector.

Another project that focussed on building skills for work readiness was Step Up!, run by the Gender and Participation Unit (GAP) in Manchester. This organisation was funded in Round 1 and again in Round 4 of

the programme. It was targeted at unemployed black and minority ethnic women. There were 32 attendees on the first run of courses:

“The majority were refugees, who had been granted leave to remain and had the right work in the UK, but faced multiple barriers to employment and formal education”

The project outcomes included progressing participants to ESOL and other educational opportunities, including one enrolment on a degree course. Some of the women found employment soon after completing the course, others reported getting interviews whereas prior to the course, they had not been successful with job applications.

“When I came to this class, I didn’t know where to look for job opportunities, but I know now, I know how to find jobs and what are the key things for a good job interview”

“I have more confidence about my own skills and achievements; I know how to write a CV and where to look for a job”³³

³³ Project 179: Final Report

This case study from one participant demonstrates how the course has raised her aspirations as well as developing her practical skills.

Case study: Yvonne

I am from Jamaica, I came to the UK in June 1999, its now 14 years. I came on a visiting visa to support my sister-in-law as a kidney donor. From 1999-2010 I wasn't allowed to work in the country and had to rely on friends for everything. In 2010 I finally got my indefinite to remain because of the family and my children. Now I can work and am free. Yvonne heard about the Step Up course by email, through a previous participant. After learning more about it, she decided to sign up. According to Yvonne:

The course was very, very, very, very helpful, because we were given lots of information and the way the tutors teach you gives you the confidence to go out and do what you want to do out there.

They let you believe in yourself... if one day you are down it uplifts you, your spirit, mood, belief and the way the group unites and participates it was really, really, really good.

The most important aspects for her were:

How to do an interview and how to write an application and even a CV – that was the most important thing. Because even though I knew about CV and job search, without the additional information I gained through the course I wouldn't have gone out and got the confidence to find the job.

Just before the final session, Yvonne was interviewed for the post of lunch-time organiser at a Nursery School. The previous week the session had involved role play interviews, with trainees being asked to describe previous occasions on which they had demonstrated particular skills and qualities. Yvonne got the job – her first paid work in the UK – and attributed it partly to having felt thoroughly prepared. Her final comments were:

In addition I'm also seeking and applying for other jobs as this one is part time. I would like to see myself self-employed in the child-minding field – running my own business.

Don't stop tutoring this programme because it's a really good programme and it has a lot of effect on people's lives in terms of getting jobs and going for interview. We have to use what we were taught...[Step Up] builds self-esteem, self confidence and it tells you about the different skills and careers in which you can learn and go into.

ICT skills

Many of the courses offered included the use of computers for job search and CV writing, some focussed on digital skills, and a number offered accreditation in ICT.

Case Study

I feel the new service (job club) is very good. I have attended job clubs before and did not find them helpful so was very reluctant to join this one at first. However, after attending this job club I don't know why I was so reluctant! By attending the job club, I have identified my employment skills and have also learnt new skills. I signed up to UK online, and I am slowly learning to use a computer. I have always found it difficult to adjust as I am a Polish woman and have language barriers and feel scared I will not get a job. However, by learning to use a computer I feel more confident and feel I am developing a positive skill which is necessary in trying to gain employment. The job club has also provided me with a chance to look at voluntary options in my area and training opportunities I could apply for. I feel the job club has delivered very well; it has made me feel much more confident in facing future challenges.

Training

Some projects offered a range of practical training opportunities, including a number that offered qualifications in Health and Safety, Food Hygiene, Manual Handling, Driving Test Theory. Some projects focussed on a particular qualification for all participants, such as Football Coaching Award.

Case Study: Mohammed

I came to the UK from Spain, to be able to get work in this country I needed to be mobile. In Spain I worked in the building industry as an employee. I wanted to set up as a self-employed builder in the UK. Passing the Driving theory was my biggest concern. I came across this course through an advert in the local mosque. I contacted the centre and explained my situation. I was given a thorough IAG interview in which I discussed all my skills and aspirations. I got support with learning how to use a computer which would help me to take the theory test. I then attended all the driving theory classes. With the support of all the staff at Awaaz I passed my driving theory test. I am currently learning driving with a local driving school which Awaaz put me in touch with. I am confident that I can achieve my aim of becoming a self-employed builder.

Media

A number of projects developed media skills in radio and film making. This added a new dimension to job search activities:

*"20 Participants took part in 3-day workshop developing their ability to use social media to network and promote themselves online"*³⁴

In one radio project, the group work and the making of the shows has developed confidence:

³⁴ Project 204: Final Report

"I have always wanted to try presentingIt has given me much pleasure and boosted my confidence"³⁵

Supported volunteering

Many projects have found volunteering to be a very effective way of preparing participants for work. Often this has meant working with small numbers of beneficiaries, with close one-to-one support.

One example of this is the Duckling Club Volunteer programme, run by a community nursery in Accrington, where a small group of women were trained in Paediatric First Aid, Safeguarding and Health and Safety, then volunteered on supported placements in the centre.

"We realised quite early that the volunteers would need quite a lot of support and guidance (which was not anticipated or budgeted for in the initial application)"³⁶

At the end of the project, this organisation who had not previously run a programme of this kind, reported:

"Our Centre has benefitted greatly from running our volunteer program, funded by the ESF grant. The volunteers who have accessed the program have provided us with excellent feedback, have grown in confidence and have certainly developed their employability skills. One of our volunteers is now on our governing body here at the Centre, three have accessed employment, I have recently provided a reference for another volunteer and two have gone on to further training. The volunteers with young families have continued to access a variety of family service provision offered here at the Centre. We have also developed strong links with our local College who will continue to work in partnership with us to help deliver the Certificate in Community Volunteering.

We have decided to continue with the volunteer program and intend to offer it three times per year, one each academic term as part of our services offered at the Centre. We will be funding this from existing sources of funding but I am continuing to look for other funding opportunities and found the workshop on future funding options very useful"³⁷

Participants in this project recorded their progress on their ILPs. At the start of the project, this participant rated herself as D against all the learning outcomes. At mid-course review, she commented that she wanted her mentor to give her more of a challenge. At the end, she rated herself A against the learning outcomes, and commented:

"In the weeks I have volunteered in nursery school my self-esteem and confidence has greatly improved. I felt able to work as part of a team and most of all be responsible in the overlooking of the children. I supported, listened and advised them, and some in turn, did the same for me. It was job

³⁵ Comment in evaluation survey

³⁶ Project no 122:Interim Report

³⁷ Email to Project Manager

satisfaction, and a real confidence boost to gradually build trust and relationships with fellow-workers and the children”

While many volunteering activities can assist people to develop new habits and work-orientated behaviours, it is the quality of support that has the most impact on individuals in terms of how this enhances their progress. It has also changed attitudes:

“The added value of all our activities is that the project has helped women to open their horizon and perception about paid employment because the majority of the beneficiaries have never worked”³⁸

Case study: Dave

Dave started volunteering over a year ago when he had been through a tough time personally and been unemployed for some time as he felt that he would benefit from ‘getting out of the house’, meeting new people and learning some new skills. Since then, Dave has got involved with all aspects of the project including landscaping, veg growing and various horticultural aspects as well as providing inputs into many aspects of the construction of the community cafeteria. Since building his confidence and discovering how much he likes to garden, Dave has enrolled upon and completed various additional training courses in gardening and horticulture at the ‘START in Salford’ project and The New Broughton Trust, Salford, particularly focusing on soil technology and good soil conditions for gardening. Dave has now also volunteered at The Manchester International Festival and The Biosphere Project, Urban Farm, Salford, which has enabled him to expand his knowledge and expertise in sustainable food production methods.

Aside from becoming a very knowledgeable gardener and one of our most reliable and trusted volunteers, receiving recognition of his outstanding contribution to The Ascension Church, awarded by the Mayor of Salford for all his hard work in 2012, Dave has acquired the skills and confidence to now provide valuable guidance to other, new participants and has in fact recently applied for part-time paid employment as a ‘Community Champion’ with a major, national lottery funded project run by a local partnership organisation, a role which focuses on trying to get local people involved in gardening.

“We have been very pleased to support Dave on his first steps to becoming the accomplished gardener he is today and we very much value and appreciate his continued involvement and dedication to the project.” (Project Manager)

Soft outcomes

All the projects’ Final Reports examined, and every project interviewed, as well as the respondents to the participant survey (104) emphasised how participants’ confidence and self-esteem had grown.

“Involvement in this course has made me realise that confidence is a crucial tool for survival”³⁹

³⁸ Project 2011: Final Report

³⁹ Comment in participants survey

The evidence from interviews, case studies and project reports also mentions other soft outcomes such as overcoming problems, improved health and well-being, reduced stress levels, becoming more social, being less judgemental, having an open mind, making friends, feeling happy and having something to get up and go out of the house for.

“The participants were from the BME communities and many lacked the confidence to interact positively with others. The help with spoken English skill contributed to their becoming more confident. If the participants continue on this journey, they will become more independent and will be better able to positively contribute to the social fabric of the area. The project is believed to have imbibed in them a positive sense of confidence”⁴⁰

Comments from participants on their ILPs repeatedly mention confidence.

“Reduced stress. Knowledge that I am not alone, facing redundancy – more aware of opportunities open to me”

“As a result of the course I feel less stress and more confidence in speaking to people”

“The course has given me more confidence and also it has built up my skill regarding how to be positive if I do not get interviewed. All I need to do is keep trying till I get where I want to be”

Other wider social benefits are reported:

“It was multinational class. The learner got sense of belonging to the UK. It improved community cohesion”⁴¹

“The project has provided a once in a lifetime opportunity for every person to come out and mix with others and be part of a wider group to learn and share their views”⁴²

The following chart demonstrates the impact participants described in the evaluation survey:

⁴⁰ Project 87: Final Report

⁴¹ Project 143: Final Report

⁴² Project 2011: Final Report

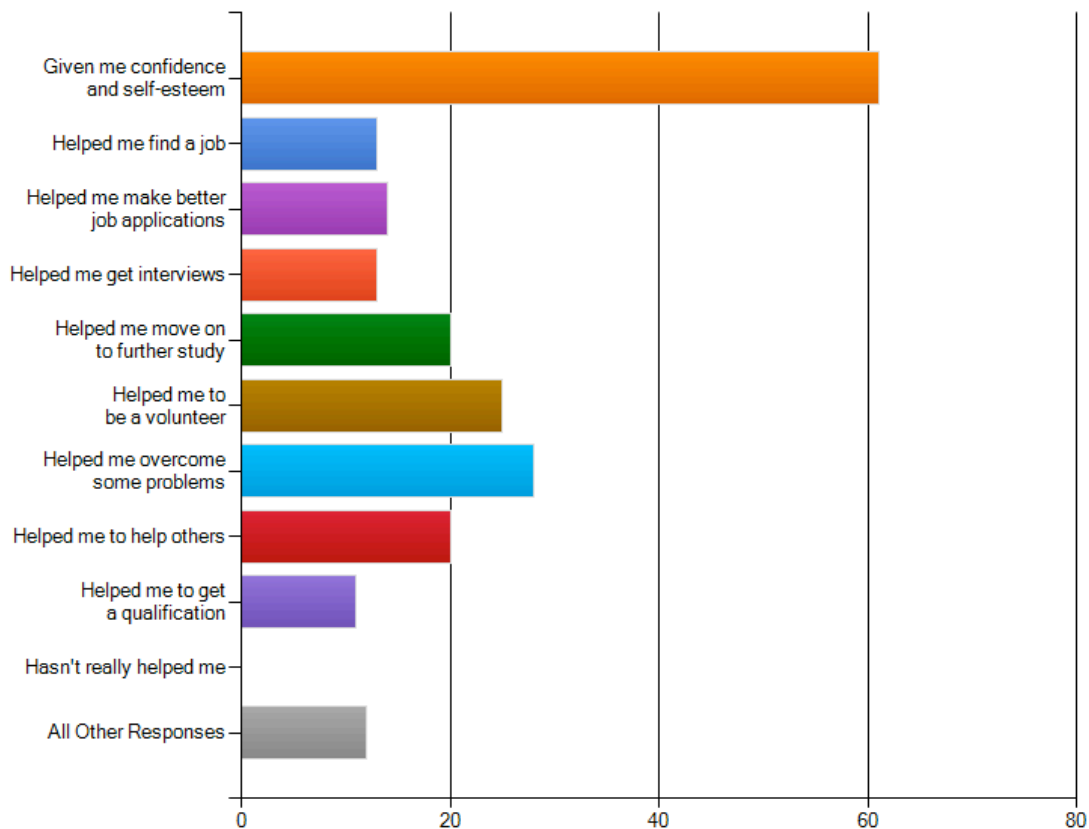


Figure 22: How do you feel your involvement has affected you?

The following comments drawn from the participants evaluation questionnaire demonstrate some very positive outcomes for individuals.

“An excellent project which gave me a great chance to meet new people, learn new skills and made me very happy”

“Really helpful and given me so much confidence that I was voted on to a panel to voluntary support carers – I won the vote by a large amount and I couldn't have stood and given the speech I gave without the confidence I gained from this course!”

“A big help, and because I am more focussed, it's stopped me from re-offending”

“It has helped me so much, it's changed my life. I would recommend it to anyone”

A fourth online survey, Beneficiary Outcomes, asked projects for specific data concerning out comes for participants. Less than a third of projects (47) had completed this at the time of writing. Reporting on 1594 participants, 74% were engaged in further activities. It should be noted that of the projects responding, several were projects that focussed on supporting volunteers in their own organisations, where a high success rate of continuation would be expected.

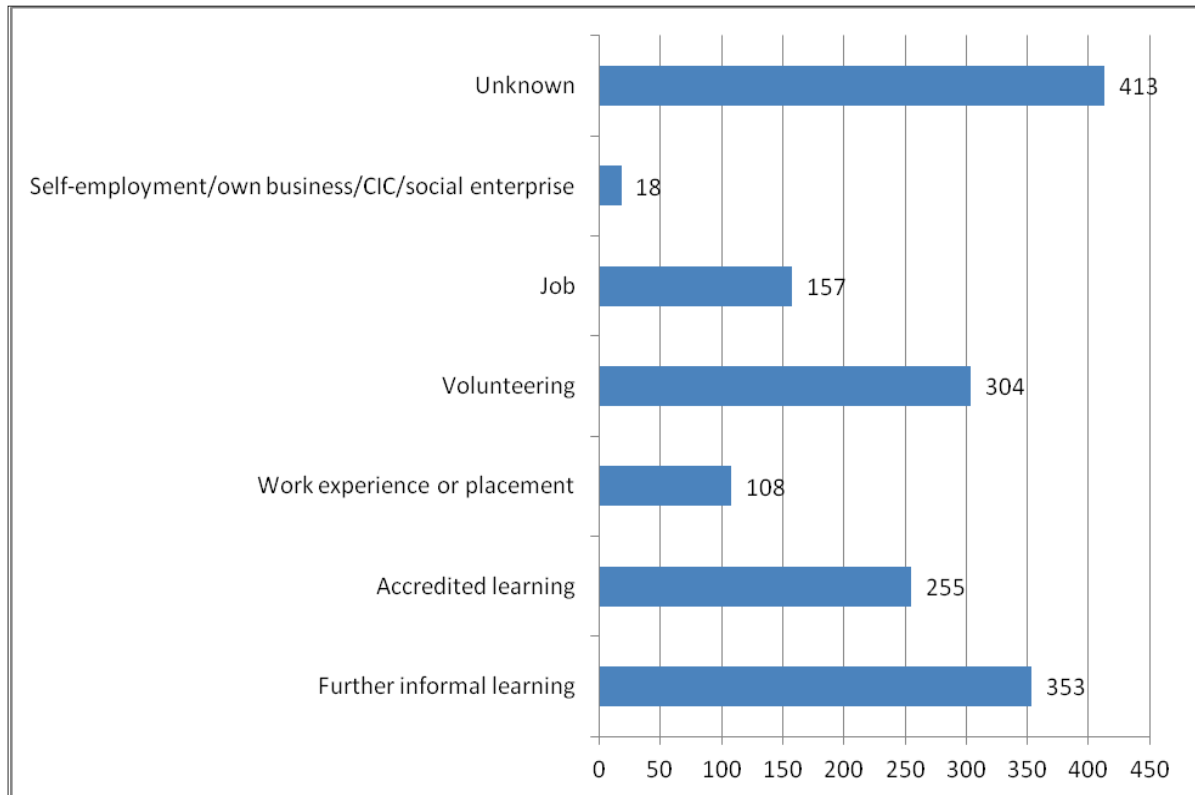


Figure 23: How many beneficiaries progressed to the following?

This survey is ongoing. The results to date demonstrate very good levels of continued engagement. However, some comments explain the difficulty of presenting this kind of data.

“Some of our participants on the project were Asian women whose literacy and numeracy skills were extremely limited. These women have made progression through gaining confidence by venturing outside of their area and undertaking small tasks focussing on their literacy and numeracy. Other participants on the project are attendees of our work club who through the funding are offered additional sessions looking at cv writing, interview techniques, job searching techniques etc. However, this is quite ad hoc in that some of the participants attend only the sessions they feel is required and some of them attend a couple of the sessions, then we don't see them for a number of weeks making it very difficult to evaluate accurately.”

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Programme delivery and data gathering

Although the programme delivery has been found to be effective and efficient, there are a few considerations for future practice. Administering this programme effectively across the North West and Merseyside has been challenging as the support required has been intensive. The needs-based approach to capacity building activity has been well-received but has high overheads. The following recommendations are based on the findings of the evaluation:

- Maintain face-to-face contact, including visits to projects and induction workshops.
- Feedback – be clear about the extent to which the co-ordinating body is able to provide feedback on unsuccessful applications.
- Offer formalised capacity building activities, following consultation, but as early as possible in the programme to facilitate networking between projects and enable maximum take-up.
- Utilise online report-back from projects on the quantitative outcomes to be reported to funders (beneficiaries on programme, destination outcomes etc).
- Consideration should be given to raising the funds available to grant co-ordinating bodies to deliver such a programme.

Grants

- The Community Grants Programme enables small organisations to engage priority target groups in activities and learning provision that enables participants to move forward with further education and training, and into volunteering and employment.
- Projects are able to offer activities and learning provision that respond to need and are learner-centred.
- Projects are able to offer activities which can be flexible and provide the intensive support that some participants require.
- The North West programme has delivered an effective intervention that has brought about positive outcomes for participants. In Merseyside and Greater Manchester there was more demand from apparently viable and effective projects than could be funded.
- A grant giving programme of this nature should be retained, and additional funding made available in areas of highest need.

Learning provision

- Projects respond well to the direct involvement of learning providers and VCS organisations in the programme delivery; their understanding of day-to-day delivery and empathy with the sector's goals has had a positive impact on the administration of the programme.
- Participant needs have been met through a flexible approach to delivery that can be achieved in small-scale projects, but is difficult to scale up.
- Participants have responded very well to some project activities, such as goal-setting, and role-play, master classes and visits to businesses, and practical steps to preparation for work, such as work-placement, and shadowing.

- Working in a group, learning to work with others, and becoming more open to others' views was a frequently reported outcome of participation.
- Well supported volunteering has been an effective way to build skills and improve employability as transferable skills can be put into practice in a work environment, providing experience that can be evidenced on a CV and enabling familiarity with workplace practice to develop.
- The ability of an organisation to relate to grant recipients should be taken into account when contracting grant co-ordinating bodies.
- Messages about effective practice in informal and community learning that move learners towards work should be disseminated as widely as possible.
- Dissemination of good practice in supporting volunteers should include a focus on the level and nature of the support required, as well as the value of the outcomes.

Emphasis on personal development

- Participants have overwhelmingly reported increases in levels of confidence and self-esteem that have enabled them to move forward.
- Dissemination should underscore the importance of building effective relationships with participants and the value of 'soft outcomes' should be emphasised.

The importance of personalised attention, a holistic approach, intensive support and encouragement that brings about changes in attitude and self-belief cannot be underestimated. Volunteer placements can offer a safe place to develop soft skills that sustain confidence in a workplace environment. In the current climate, few employers are able to risk taking on employees who need time and support to acclimatise to become fully effective. The opportunities afforded by third sector organisations to provide the pathways of support described in this report are critical to raising the chances of employment for excluded people in the region.

Appendix 1

Methodology

A meeting with the WEA and the contract manager from the SFA agreed the following research questions for the evaluation:

- Has the Community Grants Programme been delivered effectively and efficiently?
- Has the Community Grants Programme contributed to ESF objectives in the North West and Merseyside?

Phase 1: Interim Report

The first phase of the evaluation focussed on a review of documentation, and a series of interviews with key personnel. The main aim was to assess programme delivery.

An Interim Report was produced in February 2013 and presented to the Steering Group. The report was based on detailed document reviews and interviews with project staff and Steering Group members.

Documents reviewed included:

- contractual documentation
- grant application procedures and support and guidance information on the website
- minutes of Steering Group and other relevant meetings
- Interim Reports from Round 1-3 projects (sample of 40)
- Final Reports from three Round 1 and one Round 2 project.
- Other information gathering activities consisted of
- Interviews with Project Manager, Project Executive and partners represented on the Project Steering Group
- Attendance at progress meeting with SFA, Induction Workshop, two Grant Panel selection meetings, one Steering Group meeting.

Interim findings were:

- the programme was well managed and had met the service requirements of the contract to date
- the key stakeholders and third sector organisations had been fully engaged in the programme delivery
- the programme had reached deeply into the third sector
- the projects had been able to adapt and tailor programmes so that specific needs in terms of potential employability were catered for
- the quality of learning programmes had benefitted from the input of an accredited community learning provider as the co-ordinating body.

The Interim Report made recommendations for the next phase of evaluation, which aimed to further assess the impact and outcomes of the grants for successful organisations and project participants, as well as gather data from successful and unsuccessful applicants about the implementation of the grants selection procedure, the support made available to successful projects, the distribution and impact of the capacity building funds, and the impact of project activities for individual beneficiaries.

It was agreed to use online questionnaires as the principle method of gathering data from projects, and to offer an online questionnaire for completion by project participants (beneficiaries). In addition, case study visits were planned and projects selected were asked to arrange for the evaluator to meet learners, volunteers and staff involved in the project if possible. It was felt that this would add to the opportunity for beneficiaries to contribute directly to the evaluation.

The Interim Report was presented to the Steering Group in February 2013.

Phase 2: Online questionnaires for projects

Online surveys were chosen as the main means of gathering data from projects about the impact of the programme.

The advantages of using online survey software are that it enables easy distribution of access to the questionnaire through email, can present a variety of question types that generate quantitative data through multiple choice answers, either with only one answer, or multiple selections, and offers some straightforward analysis of results with built-in presentation options, such as charts. There are some disadvantages in that the software can constrain some question types. Respondents are attracted by the relative speed and ease of response to multiple choice questions. In our questionnaires, these were supplemented by non-mandatory open text comment boxes. In this evaluation, the data collected through online surveys was also supported by findings from other sources, such as case studies, interviews, Interim and Final Reports. The software used to create the surveys was the professional version of Survey Monkey, <https://www.surveymonkey.net/>.

For reasons of timing, it was decided to use one initial questionnaire to reach as wide an audience as possible, including all fund applicants as well as contacts in successful projects. The first part of the questionnaire focussed on the application process; use of skip logic took unsuccessful applicants out of the questionnaire after that point. The second part focussed on the early stages of project support – the visit and induction workshops. The third part of the questionnaire asked about ability to reach target groups, tailoring of activities to meet needs, impact on the organisation, and consultation and participation in capacity building activities. It was felt that data concerning outcomes for participants could be drawn from project's Final Reports.

Applicants were sent the links to the surveys in an email, and a .pdf version of the questions was also supplied.

Data from the first survey was used to draft the emerging messages for consideration by the Steering Group in May.

Further questionnaires were sent to Round 3 and 4 projects in June. This offered the opportunity for those that had previously completed the survey to only answer continuation questions, and for those who had not done the first survey, to answer all the questions.

In order to produce the data that is presented in the report, all the responses were downloaded into a spreadsheet and collated. The number of responses to each questionnaire is shown below, with details of responses to each question shown in the tables.

Name	Date	Number of responses
ESF Community grants evaluation	April	121 (76 successful after 1 or more bids)
ESF Community grants evaluation continuation (questions 21 – end)	June	10
ESF Community grants evaluation 2	June	15

A further questionnaire was received by hand, bringing the total responses to the first questionnaire to 122 (77 successful projects).

The second phase of data collection using the online questionnaires was not as successful in generating responses. This may be due to timing, difficulty in ascertaining which questionnaire to respond to, or other unknown factors.

The surveys could be completed anonymously, although respondents were asked to provide contact details if they wished. Of those giving details, all were checked and found to be genuine.

The complications of collating data and interpreting it across three questionnaires were challenging. However, the quantitative data was supported by other data collection methods to support the conclusions drawn.

Additional sources of information included:

Interim Reports (sample of 30 in addition to interim report sample)

Final Reports (sample of 30)

ILPs (sample of approximately 50 from those submitted with Final Reports, and those seen on visits)

Emails commenting on projects sent to Project Manager (9)

Written responses to questions supplied for participants in group or individual interviews (9)

Interviews with project co-ordinators on case study visits (12)

Interviews with participants, or groups on case study visits (8)

Phase 2: Online questionnaire for participants

It was decided to use an online questionnaire to invite participants to contribute to the evaluation.

Projects were asked to encourage participants to complete the questionnaire using resources and time during the project, or send the link to participants and ask them to complete this individually.

They could also print the questionnaires and enter the data on behalf of participants, or send them by post to the evaluator.

A total of 104 responses to the questionnaire were received; approximately a quarter of these were received on paper by post, or by email.

Phase 3: Beneficiary Outcomes

Following the presentation of data generated by online questionnaire, it was felt that it would be worthwhile asking projects to complete a very short quantitative survey about the outcomes of their project. This has generated some evidence of very positive outcomes, although it should be noted that only 47 projects, less than a third of the total, have completed this to date.

Copies of the questionnaires can be supplied on request.