

Learning for Wellbeing 2013 - 2016

Independent Evaluation Report

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2. Introduction

BACKGROUND

Learning for Wellbeing is a project delivered by CP Learning Trust, funded by the Big Lottery - Reaching Communities, which carried out development work in some of the most deprived areas in Cambridgeshire between 2013 and 2016. The project used informal arts and crafts sessions to engage isolated people in activities to help build their confidence, basic skills, social skills, life opportunities and sense of community.

The project utilised existing community bases in the Westwood, Bretton, Dogsthorpe, Stanground and Central wards of Peterborough, as well as centres in the towns of March, Chatteris and Wisbech in Cambridgeshire. Staff led a range of sessions which focussed on practical skills, as well as open drop-in sessions where participants could bring along their own craft projects to complete in a safe and social environment.

METHODOLOGY

This report was compiled following visits to two separate Learning for Wellbeing sessions, one in Westwood, Peterborough and one in March, Cambridgeshire. At these sessions a total of twelve participants were interviewed about their experiences with the project, all of whom were women aged from their mid-twenties to their mid-eighties. Participants had attended sessions for varying amounts of time, the shortest was around three months, and the longest three years.

Project partners were also interviewed about the project to establish both how it had benefited their client group and their own organisation. Partners interviewed were:

- Age UK
- The Olive Branch community garden
- Barnardos
- Parents United
- Cross Keys Homes
- The Oasis Centre
- The Green Backyard community garden
- The Rosmini Centre

KEY OUTCOMES

The project has four key outcomes:

1. Beneficiaries state they are more confident, have improved self-esteem and feel positive and optimistic regarding the future.
2. Beneficiaries report being treated fairly and respectfully and have support from people where they live.
3. Beneficiaries have increased competence, report feeling more informed of the opportunities open to them socially and economically
4. Beneficiaries feel they are more active citizens in an area with an improved sense of community.

3. Participant Feedback

KEY MESSAGES

Attending the Learning for Wellbeing sessions had clearly been a life changing experience for some participants, with all reporting an increased sense of wellbeing, community and confidence. For many the craft activities were what initially drew them in, but it was the companionship and opportunities to socialise with new people that kept them coming back. This was particularly evident amongst the high percentage of participants who described severe social isolation and anxiety before they became involved in the project, with two women stating that the sessions were still the only time they left the house, and that they rarely spoke to anyone not connected to the project.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

The overwhelming highlight for the majority of participants was the fact that they had made new friends through the sessions, many of which they now spend time with outside of the sessions, sometimes informally and sometimes in smaller craft groups that they have set up. For many this represented a significant achievement since they had previously been socially isolated, depressed, suffering from anxiety, or a combination of all three.

Participants also frequently reported achieving things that they never thought they would be able to do, such as overcoming nerves to mentor another participant or share a skill by leading a session. This created great pride for the people involved and they clearly had improved opinions of their own abilities as a result of this experience, with some reporting that they were now undertaking further training to gain more technical skills.

OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE

When asked what could be improved, many participants could not name anything. Several commented that some of the sessions have become so popular that they would like a bigger room to meet in, in order to accommodate all of the people wanting to attend.

The participants interviewed in March, Cambridgeshire also identified that they would like to learn a range of more practical DIY skills, and how to use household power tools, in addition to the craft sessions.

FURTHER NEED IN THE COMMUNITY

When asked, most participants said that they did know of other people in their area or community who would greatly benefit from attending Learning for Wellbeing sessions, with some having already undertaken to spread the word and brought new members to the group. Many also commented on how difficult it is to engage vulnerable and isolated people. There was a clear feeling that social isolation is an increasing, rather than decreasing problem, an issue highlighted by the fact that the only participants who could not identify others who would benefit from the sessions, could not do so because they literally did not know anyone else outside of the group.

The group who met in March, Cambridgeshire also identified a particular need amongst young mothers, who they felt were often isolated and lonely, with low incomes preventing them from taking up other opportunities to socialise and meet new people.

CASE STUDY 1 – LOUISA

Louisa is 83 years old and came to live in Peterborough later in life. She has no family at all and describes herself as very lonely. She has previously had counselling following bereavements and for depression, but still feels very isolated. A series of break-ins at her home have left her feeling very vulnerable, and whilst she likes to keep active she now doesn't feel safe leaving her house. Attending the weekly Learning for Wellbeing drop-in session at the Westwood Hub in Peterborough is often the only time she leaves the house. She has been attending these sessions for more than two years now and says her self-esteem is much improved because of them and she is so happy that she now has friendly people that she can turn to. Through the Learning for Wellbeing sessions she has found out about the University of the Third Age, and hopes to go to some of their events if she is well enough.

CASE STUDY 2 – JILL

Jill has been coming to the Learning for Wellbeing sessions for around 2 years, having first been referred through the Cross Keys Community Hub. When she started coming she had been ill with ME for some time and had become increasingly isolated after the symptoms of her condition, which include memory loss, fatigue and reduced concentration, left her lacking the confidence to talk to people. She became virtually housebound. She now feels that both her confidence and self-esteem are greatly improved and has made friends at the sessions, who she keeps in touch with and meets with in their own time, and she has even gone on to teach some of the skills she learnt in the sessions to other participants. She says that she is really proud of herself for doing this, has learnt loads of new skills as well as using ones she'd forgotten she had, and feels so amazed that she has been able to help others. She would now like to do more skill sharing and is also keen to learn about crafts from other cultures.

CASE STUDY 3 – JOYCE AND TAMMY

Joyce and Tammy are a mother and daughter who have been coming to the Learning and Wellbeing sessions for 2-3 months. Tammy is autistic and finds social situations very difficult, but reports that her confidence is much improved since starting to attend. She has overcome her initial anxiety and now feels comfortable interacting with all the other group members. Both feel that through the sessions they have learnt skills that they might not otherwise have even attempted, and have also both made new friends, who they see outside of the group setting.



4. Partner Feedback

EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING FOR WELLBEING

All partners reported very positive experiences of the project. All had hosted sessions and also referred people from their client group to the project. They found the project to be very well run by the CP Learning Trust staff, particularly mentioning their approach to working with vulnerable adults as being excellent, and good at engaging harder to reach people. Several expressed their desire to work with CP Learning Trust again.

BENEFITS FOR CLIENT GROUPS

All partners reported benefits for the particular client groups they work with, particularly in those clients often deemed hard to reach, isolated and vulnerable. The partners who work with family groups reported that many participants had gone on to pass skills learnt at sessions on to their children and other family members.

A number of the partners reported that Learning for Wellbeing had helped bring vulnerable clients to their centres where they were then better able to access advice, support and further training. Partners who were community groups themselves, i.e. the two community gardens, reported that on several occasions participants began volunteering with them outside of their time at a Learning for Wellbeing session, and that having the project running sessions there increased local awareness of their project, helping them to reach more people.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Many partners felt that the way that Learning for Wellbeing acted as first step to further support, activities or employment was a key highlight for them, often mentioning how participants had overcome initial reservations and were now far more connected and supported, either within their own community or through the services offered by the partner organisation.

OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE

Partners felt that there were a number of ways that the project could be expanded to provide further benefits for their clients. One issue for some partners was childcare, so varying session times and having more sessions where children were able to attend could prove popular. Others would like to see further consultation with participants to identify new routes for learning, such as the DIY skills identified by the group in March, Cambridgeshire. This was echoed by one of the community gardens who felt that they would like to do more to get the participants outside.

A number of partners also highlighted the potential for participants to sell some of their own items that they have made using the skills at a Learning for Wellbeing class, with at least two partners stating that they would be happy for their venues to be used for this purpose, and would help promote the opportunity to staff and their wider network.

By meeting these challenges all partners felt that the project still had lots to give, in terms of benefits to their clients and also to their own organisations.

CLIENT CASE STUDY – RACHEL FROM PARENTS UNITED

How would you rate the Learning for Wellbeing project overall?

It has been absolutely fantastic at engaging harder to reach parents and carers.

How has it benefitted your client group?

By offering 'fun' looking courses this engages our harder to reach parents and carers and once engaged we are able to work to build more confidence which in turn can lead on to parents and carers moving on to other training, work or volunteering.

Have there been any specific successes?

Yes many! For example: one has become a Learning Champion and started her own business, some have moved on to paid work. We have engaged volunteers through this project.

One parent walked in to complete a Learning for Wellbeing course and after 10 mins in walked out feeling very anxious, the development worker in the group went out and reassured her and she came back in. She went on to complete her course and also acquire a qualification in Food Hygiene, from this she went on to further training with Cross Keys Homes and from this went on to volunteer with a local charity and securing paid work. She was nominated for an achiever of the year award with Cross Keys Homes.

What could be improved?

One of the barriers to learning for our parents and carers is childcare so if there was provision for this we could potentially have more parents and carers attending.

If the project continued, how would it benefit your organisation?

More confidence for our parents and carers to attend other courses and feel part of the community.

If the project continued, how would it benefit the wider community?

Families more engaged in local activities – meeting people, building communities, less isolation and fear of their community. Parents and Carers moving on to work when sometimes there has been generations of workless households within the communities we work, which in turn builds positive role models for future generations.

Anything else?

We would really like to work with CP Learning Trust to deliver more Learning for Wellbeing. They had a deep understanding of how to engage people and the barriers that those people face in everyday life.

5. Project Outcomes

Outcome 1: Beneficiaries state they are more confident, have improved self-esteem and feel positive and optimistic regarding the future

Every participant interviewed reported increased confidence, both in terms of their practical skills and abilities, their ability to communicate with others, and social skills. The informal nature of the sessions clearly helped participants feel less anxious about trying new things, or meeting new people, with the CP Learning Trust staff member working with the participants to create a welcoming, relaxed atmosphere.

One participant reported suffering years of discrimination because of mental health issues, exacerbated by cuts to mental health services, but that she had found increased confidence and self-esteem since joining the project.

Some participants reported reasonable levels of self-esteem before the project, but many did not, crediting the project with greatly improved feelings of self-worth.

The new skills taken on by participants seemed to have a clear effect on their outlook for the future, with some reporting a desire to begin producing their own crafted items for sale and others wanting to organise meet-ups. Other participants, particularly the older members, just expressed a desire to keep attending sessions in order to stay active and socially engaged.

Outcome 2: Beneficiaries report being treated fairly and respectfully and have support from people where they live.

The CP Learning Trust staff had clearly done an excellent job of creating a welcoming and supporting atmosphere, in which the participants appeared to thrive, and take great pride in contributing to by supporting each other. This support was extended into the wider community with several participants reporting that they do now meet with other participants outside of group sessions, and one even reporting that she now often recommends the session when chatting to strangers on the bus!

Without being asked, most participants wanted to praise the attitude and work of the staff members they had worked with, feeling that they had been well supported and respected throughout their time with the project.

Outcome 3: Beneficiaries have increased competence, report feeling more informed of the opportunities open to them socially and economically

100% of participants interviewed described how they had learnt new skills as a result of the project, not only leading them to feel more competent in those specific areas, but for some also leading them to develop teaching skills when they helped other participants to complete projects.

Over 80% of participants interviewed said that they had found out about other opportunities available to them, with these ranging from other craft classes, to volunteering at a community garden, to getting involved with the University of the Third Age. Opportunities to sell craft items in the future have also been identified, with some participants selling their own items through a partner organisation in the run-up to Christmas 2015.

Outcome 4: Beneficiaries feel they are more active citizens in an area with an improved sense of community.

In addition to getting to know more people in their area, participants described their pride in being part of a community focussed group, often making reference to how the project is open to anyone, and how everyone in the group makes sure that new members are made to feel welcome. There was particular mention of how keen participants were to welcome people from other cultures into the group, with members feeling excited to learn about other cultures, and crafts from different places in the world.

As previously mentioned, several participants had taken it upon themselves to promote the project to others who they felt might benefit, hence the increased participant numbers previously mentioned.



6. Conclusions

MEETING OUTCOMES

From the participants and project partners interviewed it is clear that all project outcomes have been met, with the vast majority of participants reporting increased confidence, improved self-esteem, being more aware of opportunities and having an improved sense of community

Whilst the feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, it also ranged significantly in its personal reach, with some who found the sessions a pleasant way to pass their time, to others who had overcome significant barriers through their attendance. A number of the participants are still very vulnerable and the project was described as a 'lifeline' on a number of occasions, particularly due to the closure of other services that some of them used to access.

Based on the responses from the participants and partners, it is evident that CP Learning Trust's 'learning by stealth' approach is proving effective in engaging hard to reach people who feel that conventional education is not for them. The fun activities are an efficient 'hook' to entice people, who may well have been outside of the education system for decades, and enables them to begin building the essential confidence they need to take their development further.

SOCIAL IMPACT

As with any project of this nature the true impact is difficult to quantify, but due to the often complex mix of disability, disadvantage and discrimination experienced by the participants interviewed, it seems likely that the project has provided significant social value through its work in reducing social isolation and improving community cohesion. The participant interviews and other participant case studies included in previous reports make clear that there are often multiple mental and physical conditions underlying a person's social isolation. A project of this type, that on the surface is light-touch but well connected and staffed, appears very effective in helping to keep people healthy and independent, rather than disengaged and isolated, and therefore dependent on already stretched public services.

CONNECTING SERVICES

A key value highlighted by a number of project partners, was the projects role in connecting participants in to other services being provided - adding value not just through its own activities, but by increasing the number of people accessing help and support they might otherwise never have asked for.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

All participants felt that there were many more people out there in their communities who would benefit from the Learning for Wellbeing project. There are also a number of new ideas which can be expanded on to deliver further benefits to existing participants. These include trading, finance and marketing skills for those wishing to start small businesses, and practical skills for those wanting to be more independent at home.