

Thanet Basic Skills Partnership

Back to Basics

An evaluation report

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Executive Summary

The following report presents findings of an evaluation of the Thanet Back to Basics project, as conducted by the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society (CePLIS, a division of the Department of Information Studies) at the University of Sheffield.

The evaluation was conducted in December 2003, and its primary objectives were to ascertain the impact of the Thanet Back to Basics project upon its participants with particular reference to the following key themes:

- Level of enjoyment and personal benefit
- Confidence levels and attitudinal change

Methodology

As the primary objectives of the evaluation were to investigate the more personal, less tangible, effects of the project upon participants (such as improved confidence levels, attitudes towards employment, changes in lifestyle and social relationships), an entirely qualitative approach was taken.

Focus groups were held with course participants (defined as ‘trainees’ within the report). Sessions were conducted on a semi-structured basis to allow some freedom in discussion, and to facilitate effective comparison between the groups. Questions included covered trainee expectations and personal objectives; social benefits; changes in confidence levels; attitudes towards continuing education and employment etc.

Interviews were also held with project staff (similarly conducted on a semi-structured basis). Staff were asked of their perceptions of improvements in trainees’ confidence levels and lifestyles, and of their opinion on the multi-agency approach to project management and ‘future direction’ for the partnership.

Evaluation findings

Levels of enjoyment and personal benefit

- When asked if their expectations of the course had actually been realised, many respondents expressed that their initial objectives had been surpassed, and the experience had offered them greater benefits than had been originally anticipated. Additional benefits have been experienced by trainees both from a learning, developmental perspective and from a much more personal self-fulfilment perspective.
- The forming of new friendships helps to boost confidence and motivates trainees to complete the course and consider other learning opportunities. This is also true of successful relationships with tutors and staff, as the positive peer/role model relationship can also help to inspire, boost confidence, self-esteem and aspiration.

Confidence levels and attitudinal change

- Socially, trainees are much more confident about meeting new people and are developing their interpersonal skills. The courses and relevant learning and development opportunities have given trainees the opportunity to re-establish a sense of self-identity further to having and looking after their children, and to form a sense of belief in themselves and openness to opportunity.
- Project staff also notice profound changes in trainees' confidence levels, and attribute such improvements to the ways in which courses are delivered and received. A relaxed, flexible learning environment in which skills can be nurtured and the importance of teamwork are all significant factors. Teaching styles are less didactic than traditional school-based methods, as conventional education has often been an unsettling experience for many community learners.
- Parents are becoming much more aware of, and actively involved in, their children's development and education, and the return to learning and pride in their work is encouraging parents to share learning experiences with family and friends
- Respondents commented on how increased confidence levels had encouraged them to communicate more openly with partners, family, friends and peers, and empowered them to confront issues and perhaps defend and articulate themselves more easily than before
- Many of the trainees participating in the evaluation are enthusiastic about continuing in education and are already considering future career options
- The widened social circle has also inspired trainees to set personal goals, building upon a sense of personal achievement and improved lifestyle and employability, as the groups are keen to motivate each other.
- Many respondents commented on how simply having 'somewhere to be' which they looked forward to had given their daily routine a structure that was benefiting their motivation, self-esteem and energy levels, and also as a consequence benefiting their children.

Project management

- All staff were in agreement that the multi-agency approach had been very successful, particularly with reference to the combination of different skills and areas of expertise, and the relative ease with which agencies have been able to communicate and work together on a professional level.
- It was strongly felt by staff that, because of the success and strength of existing working relationships between the multiple agencies, there was much opportunity for sustainability between the partnerships beyond the existing funded period and further to successful future funding bids.

Future direction

- The possibility of extending to different target groups was discussed by staff and was positively embraced, especially the possibility of extending the scheme to beyond the immediate catchment area, and to targeting specific groups such as single fathers, other men's groups and young offenders.

- It was strongly felt that the work of the Thanet Basic Skills Partnership could easily be theorised as a best practice model for the benefit of other training providers and local authorities.

Recommendations

Further to evaluation evidence, recommendations are made with respect to taking the project forward. Areas for discussion include student recruitment; staff recruitment; course design and delivery and the important maintenance of childcare facilities.

Foreword

ESF Objective 3 Back to Basics

The Thanet Basic Skills Partnership began in January 2000 and developed a mission and strategy “to improve the basic skills achievement of children and adults in Thanet by increasing the quality, coherence and sustainability of provision through an innovative, community based, multi-agency approach”.

From the start it was important to acquire funding in addition to mainstream funding in order to achieve this strategy. An initial bid for ESF Objective 3 funding ran from July 2001 to June 2002. This concentrated on widening access to basic skills provision by, for example, running small groups to establish new outreach centres and developing new courses like Story Sacks’.

New objective 3 funding, this time matchfunded, became available via the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) from September 2002. The main aims of the funding bid were for:

- 1) Improving the bid infrastructure by training gatekeepers, mentors and tutors
- 2) Continuing work in the community by offering tasters and other courses at a variety of different venues.
- 3) Offering courses that could lead to vocational training such as crèche and child minder work, IT and retail courses.

Although we had early indications that our bid to the LSC had been successful we were unable to get confirmation of this until February 2003. Some courses were run from September 2002. These were courses at community venues where we felt it was important to continue our offer so that the courses would not suffer from less credibility in the community.

When funding was finally agreed it was on the understanding that it would not include workplace and employability work that could be carried out through uncapped LSC funding, and that we would concentrate more on recruiting people to courses such as Food Hygiene which would eventually lead people into basic skills training activities. We were to leave tutor training activities to the new East Kent Professional Development centre. Apart from Skillsline (induction type work) we would not offer specific basic skills training through the project.

Activities funded have particularly included: crèches (as there is no mainstream funding for these and a lack of child minders in Thanet), partnership work providing taster courses at a variety of venues including Newlands Family Centre, SureStart Millmead and gatekeeper and mentor training leading to the new Link Up qualification which Thanet Basic Skills Partnership is piloting.

Jenny Gartland
Director, Thanet Basic Skills Partnership

Introduction

The following report presents findings of an evaluation of the Thanet Back to Basics project, as conducted by the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society (CePLIS, a division of the Department of Information Studies) at the University of Sheffield.

The evaluation was conducted in December 2003, and its primary objectives were to ascertain the impact of the Thanet Back to Basics project upon its participants with particular reference to the following key themes:

- Level of enjoyment and personal benefit
- Confidence levels and attitudinal change

Following an initial brief by the Thanet project management team, the qualitative evaluation study was designed to measure or investigate the less tangible project outcomes, such as effects upon participants' confidence and assertiveness; physical and mental health; attitudes towards training and employability; socialisation; relationships and domestic lifestyle. Questions concerning the multi-agency approach to project management, sustainability and future direction were also discussed.

Methods used include a series of focus groups with project participants (referred to as 'trainees' within the report) and interviews with key staff involved with project management and delivery. Following analysis, focus group and interview data was compared to data retrieved via interim (internal) evaluation reports and other documentary materials as supplied to the researcher by the project management team. This process of triangulation allows a greater assurance of data validity and ensures researcher and stakeholder confidence in evaluation findings. Evaluation methodology is discussed in greater detail within chapter 1.

Findings are reported under the subject headings, or 'themes', used for data collection and include direct quotations from focus group and interview transcriptions. The report includes a series of recommendations for taking the project forward based on evaluation findings. Relevant supporting documents are supplied as appendices, including evaluation research instruments, interim report findings and details of key contacts.

Project background

Basic skills and employability

The original funding application submitted to the South East England Development Agency and the Learning and Skills Agency by the Thanet Basic Skills Partnership, stressed the relationship between basic skills training and improved employability and included the following objective:

“This project aims to deliver basic skills training in innovative ways to meet the need of local employed people whose future employability or work progression is limited or threatened by their lack of basic skills”

The original funding bid also defined the negative social consequences of low basic skills and provided a rationale for the necessity of basic skills training within the Thanet region in relation to employment needs and community aspirations:

“Poor skills are closely linked to unemployment, crime, mental and physical ill-health and low educational achievement among children of low-skilled families... The poor level of basic skills has significant consequences for the cohesion of communities, for democratic participation and for issues of social welfare.”

Employment Services (who recently joined the Thanet Basic Skills Partnership Steering Group), the Connexions service and the 16 plus team have highlighted the need for vocationally oriented basic skills needs to meet local employment vacancies and link with students’ aspirations and interests. Experience of working with Surestart Millmead, Margate and Thanet Early Years project has shown a need for more local staff to be trained for crèche work, childcare and childminding.”

Midterm Report: Back to Basics ESF Objective 3, 30th May 2003

The report summarised how funding had been allocated by the Thanet Basic Skills Partnership (TBSP) with respect to crèche facilities, courses and included progression information on five students.

Crèches: It was reported that crèche facilities have been funded to support eleven courses; that is, crèche facilities provided for the children of students attending those eleven courses. This is an extremely important aspect of the Back to Basics project; without such childcare facilities, students would simply not have been able to attend.

Courses: Courses funded at this stage included First Aid, Computing from Scratch, Story Sacks, Computing for Beginners and Healthy Eating. 162 students had started these courses and student evaluation questionnaires received so far had been very positive in the main. Initial gatekeeper and mentor training had been attended by eight employers and had received positive evaluation.

Progression: Five students were on course to completing NVQ Level 2 Childcare further to progression funding. This is a positive result for both learners and community due to scarce childcare places in the region.

Summary of project objectives:

Objective 1	Objective 2	Objective 3
213 beneficiaries in 14 cohorts achieved. Taster sessions of two hours per week over five weeks attended by 312 beneficiaries. Advice and guidance given to encourage progression to accredited training (minimum of 45% progression to full accredited basic skills qualifications by December 2003).	30 beneficiaries/employees of East Kent businesses and voluntary services to be introduced to Link-up training award and eventual Gatekeeper ¹ status. 30 beneficiaries recruited between February-May 2003. 30 attended training (minimum 6 hours per course) April-May 2003. 20 progressed to full Link-up course May 2003.	10 beneficiaries/key supervisory staff of East Kent businesses trained to gain 'Introduction to Link-up' award. Once trained beneficiaries take responsibility for overseeing basic skills training for staff within their span of control. 10 recruited, 6 progressed to completion June 2003.

Example of courses offered

Story Sacks

The Story Sacks course is delivered at Open College Network levels 1 and 2 (equivalent to GCSE standard) and runs for 60 hours in total. The course is targeted towards parents, carers and play workers, and its objectives are to create an individual Story Sack for use at home with the students' children, or to be included in a Story Sack Lending Library. The idea is to bring a children's story 'to life' by creating and using a variety of props, toys and prompts, and to create a game that can be used alongside the book to stretch the child's imagination. A story tape is also produced to compliment the book. Students learn about child development and communication skills as the course progresses, with information and handouts provided during each lesson.

Teaching methods include demonstrations, group discussion, question and answer sessions, practical sessions, handouts and individual tutorials. Assessment includes the following evidence of achievement; homework, photographs, individual learning logs/portfolios and the finished Story Sack. Progression routes for students include NVQ Childcare, Learning Support Assistant (LSA) courses and basic numeracy and literacy.

Themes for discussion include the importance of reading for child development; choosing an appropriate book for a Story Sack; health and safety issues when designing props; methods for teaching children to read; how children learn from shared play; using sound effects and expression in reading; how to present your portfolio effectively.

As the course is nearing completion, the group is visited by careers guidance professionals to discuss progression with students. One to one discussion with the tutor of progress made/problems encountered is available throughout the course.

¹ 'Gatekeeper' definition: individuals who are capable of initiating change for the benefit of people/colleagues with basic skills needs

CePLIS evaluation aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of the CePLIS evaluation of the Thanet Back to Basics project were, primarily, to examine and investigate the impact upon project participants, or trainees, with particular reference to themes of level of enjoyment and personal benefit, and confidence levels and attitudinal change. These are described as less tangible outcomes and measurements, as the impact is difficult to quantify, and is subject to personal opinion and perception. With this in mind, a qualitative methodology was agreed to be the most appropriate – and flexible – approach.

Issues surrounding staff perceptions of the possible sustainability of the project, and attitudes and feelings towards the multi-agency approach to project management, were also themes for evaluation. Staff were also asked to explain their understanding of the more personal, intangible impacts upon trainees.

Research instruments were designed using the following themes and sub-headings as templates for questioning:

1. Levels of enjoyment and personal benefit

Expectations

It was important to establish the individual expectations of those people attending courses, and their motivation behind joining the programme, before assessing whether or not personal objectives had actually been realised. Areas discussed included reasons for starting the course; the extent to which participation was voluntary or in anyway encouraged; expectation versus reality; levels and aspects of enjoyment; opinions of how the course had been organised and delivered.

Socialization

Socialization is a very important concept when introducing people to new environments and experiences, especially when considering any personal benefits gained by those taking part. It was thus important to consider the effects of interpersonal relationships with tutors, staff and fellow trainees. Areas for discussion included the potential for new friendships, peers and their influence upon hobbies, interests and changes in lifestyle.

2. Confidence levels and attitudinal change

Confidence and self-awareness

Respondents were asked to explicitly consider whether or not their confidence and self-awareness had been improved or in anyway affected further to attending the programme. Specific points to consider included attitudes towards meeting new people, and openness to experience and opportunity.

Responsibility

Project stakeholders were particularly interested in the affects upon participants' attitudes towards family responsibility and domestic issues. For example, group members were asked to consider the extent of their involvement in their children's education and schoolwork, and whether or not this may change, and their ability to communicate effectively with family and friends.

Continuing education and employability

It was important to assess how attending the programme might impact upon participants' attitudes towards continuing education and employment. Trainees were asked about their intentions with regards to attending more courses, and whether or not the experience had inspired them to consider a particular career or occupation and pursue that goal.

Lifestyle

Any potential personal impacts also include changes in lifestyle. Group members were asked to consider their attitudes towards lifestyle and daily routines, including diet and exercise, time management, family and social activities etc.

3. Project management

Specific questions concerning project management and delivery were asked during staff interviews, including perceptions and evaluation of the multi-agency approach used and the feasibility of sustained partnerships beyond the funded period.

4. Future direction

Staff members were also asked to discuss the potential for taking the project forward in terms of extending the scheme to wider target groups, the development of a best practice model and the recommendation of any changes and/or developments.

At the end of each session, interviewees were asked if they would like to raise any further comments or issues that may not have been covered during the discussion. Evaluation findings and analysis are presented under the above headings within chapter 2.

1. Methodology

As previously mentioned, the nature of enquiry for this report facilitated an entirely qualitative approach, in that the researcher was seeking to establish the more personal, intangible effects of the programme upon the target group. Clarke (1999) defines the role of qualitative data within evaluation research as a means of detailing the 'subjective experiences' of programme planners and participants. The findings and evaluative outcomes of this report are subject to individual and therefore very personal responses to and interpretations of the programme. The qualitative focus group and interview methods provided an effective vehicle for conducting the research.

1.1 Focus groups

Focus groups provide the opportunity to combine some elements and benefits of interviewing and participant observation (Robson, 2002). It is intended as a non-threatening environment in which participants can share ideas and perceptions. During a semi-structured focus group, the researcher acts as facilitator and asks pre-determined, open-ended questions. Such group interviews provide a forum for participants to articulate and share experiences and to engage in "retrospective introspection" (Bloor, 2001, pp. 6). Krueger (2000) describes the conversational aspects of focus group research as one of the main advantages, as responses provide mental cues for other participants and allow further exploration of topics raised.

Five focus group sessions were held with trainees (people who were attending a course as part of the programme) over a period of three days. Focus groups were held at the beginning of a usual timetabled lesson, with the tutor remaining present during two out of five sessions. It was originally anticipated that groups would average approximately 10 members, but subject to low attendance figures on those particular days, the average group member figure was actually 5.6, with a total of 28 focus group respondents. The same questions were asked during each session to allow some degree of consistency during research analysis and comparison. Sessions were tape recorded and fully transcribed and lasted between 30-60 minutes. Focus group questions are included within the report as appendix 3.

1.2 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with key staff members responsible for the organisation, management and delivery of the programme. Interviews were designed on a semi-structured basis, in that questions were pre-determined but the sequence and wording of questions can be changed, or additional questions included, suiting the interviewee and embracing the natural flow of conversation (Robson, 2002). This gives the interviewer the opportunity to improvise in terms of 'follow-up' questions and to explore areas of interest that may emerge (Arskey and Knight, 1999).

Again, the same pre-determined questions were asked during each interview session to facilitate effective comparative analysis. Interviews were held with 5 members of staff over a period of three days, which included tutors, a Family Liaison Officer, Centre Manager and Family Liaison Co-ordinator. Staff are referred to by job title within the 'evaluation findings' chapter of the report. Interviews were held at the end

of usual lessons. Interview sessions were tape recorded and fully transcribed and lasted between 30-60 minutes. Interview questions are included within the report as appendix 4.

1.3 Ethical considerations

The researcher was conscious that some trainees (focus group participants) may feel apprehensive about the session as they have little or no experience of research fieldwork. As such, project staff pre-informed participants of the nature and objectives of the session when inviting trainees to attend or take part. The researcher approached research fieldwork in an informal, friendly and unobtrusive manner in order to reassure and comfort those taking part. Further to the information already provided by the project team, prior to beginning the interview session, the researcher fully briefed all present on the aims and objectives of the session and any procedures involved. This included; personal introduction and brief description of CePLIS and its work; reasons for the evaluation and its intended audience and dissemination; an explanation of the reasons for recording and transcription (for researcher's benefit only); an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity; a brief explanation of the nature of questioning and approximate duration of session.

1.4 Sample definition

Interviews: The sample of five interviewees includes representatives of those staff involved with the project at both management and delivery levels, which enabled the researcher to gain insight and perspective from staff members working closely with both trainees (the direct beneficiaries of the scheme) and key stakeholders, providing a fair representation of key personnel. The exact number of staff involved with the project is unavailable due to the complexities of a multi-agency approach; it is therefore difficult to define the statistical representation of the staff sample.

Focus groups: The Thanet Basic Skills Partnership has achieved 352 successful outcomes (people attending courses) as described in the project literature. The focus group sample of 28 represents 8% of the total population. In conventional research terms, the sample would not be large enough to assume statistical confidence in research findings, but the reliability of *qualitative* data is not necessarily affected by small sample sizes. The important point to make is that conclusions and broad generalisations about the population as a whole cannot be reached based on the findings of a relatively small sample. We can only treat the sample as a microcosm of the total trainee population and make inferences about the effects of the programme. When doing a qualitative evaluation however, the impact upon individuals is the main focus of the research and should not be underestimated and/or devalued.

The demographics of the target population are broken down by the key variables of gender, ethnicity, disability and employment status. A brief questionnaire was used by the researcher to ascertain how representative the focus group sample was in relation to these key population variables. The questionnaire also included information on age and courses attended as valuable background information. This information is presented in tables 1-3.

	Total trainee population		Focus group sample	
	Number	%	Number	%
Female	210	60	28	100
Male	142	40	0	0
Ethnic minority	106	30	3	11
Disability	50	14	0	0
Unemployed	312	89	26	93
Employed	40	11	2	7
Total	352		28	

Table 1: Population and sample demographics

Course attended	Number	%
Story Sacks	7	25
Little Acorns	1	3
Family Literacy	3	11
Personal Development	17	61
Total	28	

Table 2: Courses attended by focus group members

Age groups	Number	%
16-25	15	54
26-35	11	39
36-45	2	7
Total	28	

Table 3: Focus group members by age

It should be noted that the sample is unrepresentative of the male target group. This can be explained by the nature of the courses attended by the researcher when conducting the fieldwork; these courses are primarily designed for and attended by young mothers, which also explains the dominance of the 16-25 year old age group. It should also be noted that the majority of the sample describe themselves as ‘full time parents’ which contributes to the proportion of unemployed participants, although this is a more representative variable as compared to gender. Those referred to as employed work on a part-time basis. The majority of respondents were attending the Personal Development course, which has a very distinctive curriculum and dynamic when acknowledging effects upon the trainee’s confidence and sense of personal well-being; this should be considered when assessing evaluation findings.

1.5 Triangulation: *the relevance of previous evaluation reports and findings*

In order to ensure some degree of consistency and validity in evaluation research findings, it is important to relate fieldwork analysis to previous evaluation reports and their relevant conclusions. In research terms, this process is known as *triangulation* – the use of multiple information sources which enhances the rigour of the research (Robson, 2002). This allows the researcher to synthesize the partial viewpoints of stakeholders, participants, and all involved in the project and evaluation process, and

overcome any problems associated with bias. In this respect, the researcher has consulted documentary evidence provided by the project management team, in the form of any interim reports and administrative information such as committee meeting minutes, contracts and outcome statistics. Relevant document(s) are included in the report as appendix 2.

1.6 Evaluation limitations

The report can only make recommendations and predict project sustainability based on the qualitative research findings of the sample as defined above². For findings to be more empirically conclusive, a longitudinal approach to project evaluation, incorporating larger, more representative sample sizes, is recommended. Further recommendations concerning future strategy are made based on the researcher's objective analysis of the qualitative evidence obtained by interview and focus group methods, and in consideration of existing project evaluation data.

² Due to the nature of the courses visited during evaluation fieldwork, the following report represents, primarily, evaluation of the work being done in the community in terms of introducing beneficiaries to training with the objective of encouraging further progression to study for vocational awards (Objective 1). The report does not represent an evaluation of objectives 2 and 3 (Link-up training and Gatekeeper status).

2. Evaluation findings

Evaluation findings are reported under the following headings, according to the themes used during data collection:

- Levels of enjoyment and personal benefit
- Confidence levels and attitudinal change
- Project management
- Future direction

2.1 Levels of enjoyment and personal benefit

Expectations

Trainees expressed a number of different reasons for participating in the scheme and attending courses that were often subject specific. Trainees learnt about course availability through word of mouth; via family liaison contacts or at school from other parents. All participation was voluntary and approached in a positive manner. Particular courses appealed to different trainees based on their interests and learning needs, or as a ‘follow-on’ activity to previous courses attended. Other more general reasons for attending included a desire for company and to meet new people, group participation and a sense of self-achievement, particularly for the parents of young children, who saw the course(s) as an opportunity to maintain, or re-establish, a sense of self identity. The wholly positive and enthusiastic approach to course attendance, and the variety of reasons cited, illustrate a great demand and purpose for such courses and schemes within the community:

“I wanted to build up some credits to go on to a LSA (*Learning Support Assistant*) course and was curious as to what this was about; I thought ‘what does Story Sack mean’ ... and here I am”

“I need to learn more English... and grammar... and learn to write as well as speak... and to learn about different tenses. My family liaison officer came to my house and she told me about it... I didn’t need to be persuaded; it seemed like a good idea”

“I did the first one and thoroughly enjoyed that, so I thought I’d carry on and build my confidence up”

“I wanted to learn more about child development after doing the Story Sack course, and this was the course most related to that really”

“I hadn’t done anything like this before and wanted to give it a try. Also I haven’t lived here that long and wanted to get in to the community and meet people, and do something worthwhile”

For some trainees the wish to maintain a sense of self-identity via a learning opportunity was an explicit, conscious decision, but for others this desire has evolved implicitly throughout the duration of the respective course, and this provides a strong example of the intangible ‘hidden benefits’ of community learning for particular groups:

“To learn something while my kids are so young, because I did decide that I wasn’t going to work while they were little, and really your brain can just turn to mush when you have kids so you need something to keep you on the ball”

“It was the same for me really, the first thing was no kids for a few hours, but after a while I started to learn more things about myself and things that have gone on, and learn how to deal with things...”

When asked if their expectations of the course had actually been realised, many respondents expressed that their initial objectives had been surpassed, and the experience had offered them greater benefits than had been originally anticipated. Additional benefits have been experienced by trainees both from a learning, developmental perspective and from a much more personal self-fulfilment perspective. This positive experience has instilled a new sense of optimism amongst some trainees, who as a result, are enthusiastic about further learning opportunities.

“I wasn’t really aware of what it (*Story Sacks*) was; I knew it was about a story which you have to ‘act out’ as such, but it’s really opened my eyes up. At first I thought, ‘well anybody can get a few bits and pieces together and bung it in a bag to make a book more exciting’ but it’s not... it’s a lot more detailed than I first thought, so I’ve definitely gained from it, definitely”

“In a good way, during the course last year, a lot of us improved so much, and you could see it... from the beginning to the end you could literally see a change in people and in their work... from my point of view I learnt how to stand up for myself, and the change was amazing. In that respect these courses are essential”

“We’re only on week 11 and we already want to know what we can do next... that’s how much we’re enjoying it”

Project staff have also commented on the profound exceeding of trainee expectations and the subsequent impact upon them, including a strong desire to carry on learning and a greater commitment to personal development:

“The thing that’s come back is that people didn’t know what to expect... so their expectations were perhaps exceeded, because they didn’t have very high ones to begin with... that sounds negative but it is a positive! I think people have enjoyed different aspects of the course that they didn’t expect to be there, such as looking at how children learn” (Tutor)

“A lot of people had said to me that they didn’t think they had a chance in life, all they expected to do was have child after child and stay at home... Some of the parents never even went out of the house, so I just kept on and on trying to encourage them, and when they did actually get there, it was originally just a means of getting away from the children, but when they start learning and knowing that they can actually achieve something, and when you tell them that they get a certificate at the end of it, it makes a huge difference to them. They just fly then and go on to more and more courses...” (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

In terms of personal satisfaction and enjoyment, all trainees were finding the courses enjoyable and looked forward to attending lessons and completing the requisite coursework in their own time where necessary. From an observational perspective, classes were lively, discussion was inclusive and well embraced and the time was filled productively with all trainees being consistently attentive and

supportive of one another. When asked directly whether or not they were enjoying the course, answers were emphatic:

“Yes, definitely – I don’t want to stop!”

“Yes, I enjoy the time very much. I don’t feel like I have to come... I come because I want to”

“Its hard work, but its fun getting all your bits and pieces together and thinking about what you’re going to do next and how you’re going to do it”

Trainees were asked for their opinion on how the course(s) are organised and delivered, and how this impacted upon their enjoyment and attitudes towards completion. The instinctive response from most trainees was to commend the childcare/crèche facilities that had been included within course design and timetabling. Beyond any doubt, these trainees would not have been able to participate without this facility, and their enjoyment has been intensified by having the security of knowing that their children are receiving professional care and supervision.

“It’s run at a good time and the crèche is a big help”

“It is excellent... it is very good... and for my little girl too, she can play and learn English as well... she has just started. She is very happy”

“It’s going well... especially when you have children and you can just drop them in the crèche downstairs... My two are downstairs now and that’s a big help”

“Without a crèche I couldn’t have done it. It’s nice and local; the college is too far away for me... it’s been brilliant really”

Two main issues were raised about course content, design and delivery by trainees that are inadvertently having a negative impact on their learning experience, or are affecting their enjoyment of the course. The first is that course content had not been adequately defined at the point of recruitment, or secondly that course objectives and method of delivery had been changed in some way from the previous year (the last time the course was run), both causing a misconception of what the course would actually contain and ‘be about’.

“I know its called family literacy, but I really didn’t think there would be that much on literacy... but as far as the child development side goes, yeah, that’s fine”

“All our folders from the first year are really good and colourful... good references for ourselves, regardless of whether we go on to counselling, they’re just good for us to see the artwork, and its really amazing... now its just too much filling in of paperwork and they’ve taken away the one thing that really made this group a group and made us work at our folders”

Tutors commented that misinformation provided at recruitment stage had resulted in an inappropriate class in terms of trainees’ abilities and skills, and that the requirement for trainees to provide consistent written evidence of learning outcomes was inappropriate in some cases and difficult to enforce. Trainees also raised both these factors as concerns during focus group sessions. For example, a course which combines child development content with basic family literacy

taught on alternate weeks had been pitched solely as a child development course; or rather this is what was understood to have occurred. The consequences were that one trainee with A level English had enrolled on to a course which included basic literacy skills content. Another course with a high creative dynamic in terms of learning evidence had been changed from one year to the next to include more written coursework. The size of groups, especially when they are particularly large, can also have an impact upon learning.

“You have to pigeon hole your experiences, but everybody’s experiences are so different, that often you need a collage, or a drawing, or a tape in your folder rather than actual writing because a lot of people here, their actual problems are that they can’t write”

“Its too paperwork oriented almost... now its here’s your piece of paper, fill it out and that’s your work done, we don’t really talk about it...”

“I’m finding it really slow and like I’m not getting anywhere... I started this course because last year’s year ones said it was really good, you should really do it and get your confidence back, but I feel that I’m still waiting for something to happen...”

“I have to say personally I’ve been very frustrated this time around because of the nature of the course this year, or the way that we’ve structured it... the literacy used to be threaded through, but now we teach alternate weeks. It probably wasn’t as necessary as we have people with high literacy skills... it needs to be more flexible...” (Tutor)

“With this particular group there is a tendency, because it’s a large group and they want to share lots of other things, to try to keep them focused on the course and not what happened yesterday... it can be much harder to keep them directed, it isn’t just a get together over coffee, they’re at Thanet College and I do have to remind them of that... we’re doing college work and there are certain levels of expectations to meet and for that you need to have evidence...” (Tutor)

Socialization

The opportunity to meet new people has already been cited by trainees as a reason for starting a course, and the social aspect of the programme has had a very positive effect upon those taking part. This is especially important for those trainees who have been vulnerable to long periods of isolation, such as people who are relatively new to the community, new parents and those with refugee status, in helping to encourage a sense of belonging. The forming of new friendships helps to boost confidence and motivates trainees to complete the course and consider other learning opportunities. This is also true of successful relationships with tutors and staff, as the positive peer/role model relationship can also help to inspire, boost confidence, self-esteem and aspiration.

“I’ve seen everyone around... but I didn’t know anybody to talk to... now when we see each other in the street we stop and have a conversation!”

“I’d only just moved in to the area and it was recommended to me by my health visitor as a good way of meeting people... most of us now see each other outside of the group”

“It does help having a tutor that you can confide in and you can trust. That’s an important part of it... and somebody to treat you as an equal... most teachers look down at you... here its an adult talking to an adult”

“Oh definitely, especially the two Mums who come on a regular basis, they were so isolated before, they didn’t know anybody in the area... one of the ladies is from Croatia, and her friends have been deported back to the country they fled so she was very isolated... The other lady is from Algeria... now they are friends and they do things together, it is such an improvement for them”
(Family Liaison Officer)

“I think the opportunity to come in to the group and have some different company without having to worry about the kids is good for them... Once this kind of student has their children, it does seem to have an isolating effect, which varies because in one sense you lose your identity as an individual but gain an identity as a parent. Everything revolves around what the children are doing but this is about doing something for themselves” (Tutor)

“... It’s also a social thing. A lot of parents, single parents, including dads are so isolated in the areas in which they live, deprived areas, they don’t have a social life more often than not, so by coming in to groups, they make new friends” (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

2.2 Confidence levels and attitudinal change

Confidence and self-awareness

Through discussion with trainees it was clear that the experience has had an overwhelming positive effect in terms of raising their confidence levels and self-awareness. Socially, trainees are much more confident about meeting new people and are developing their interpersonal skills. The courses and relevant learning and development opportunities have given trainees the opportunity to re-establish a sense of self-identity further to having and looking after their children, and to form a sense of belief in themselves and openness to opportunity. The increased self-confidence is encouraging trainees to feel happier in themselves, which in turn is having a positive effect on lifestyle and family relationships. The sense of teamwork encouraged by tutors is enabling trainees to implicitly develop personal skills, and to support one another.

“I do feel more confident. I used to be a quite confident and outgoing person, but since having the children... I had them quite late, in my thirties... I haven’t worked for about seven years and I hadn’t realised how insular I had become”

“You lose all the friends that you had because they’re all at work... this has made me realise how I need to get out more and do my own thing”

“It is making a difference... I feel more confident about speaking with other people... I know that my English is not perfect so sometimes I am not confident to speak. I feel more able to do day to day things”

Trainees are gaining new perspective on their own potential and sense of self-worth after returning to education, and becoming much more open to opportunity and experience in a way that complements their existing domestic and family roles:

“Before, well, you just do the same thing everyday don’t you? You get up, feed and clothe the children, take them to school, go to mums and toddlers, come home, do the washing and cleaning... I wasn’t doing anything for me. At the end of the week I thought I’d done nothing constructive, or anything to help anyone else... I felt like I wasn’t doing anything worthwhile at

all... At least when I come here I've got somewhere to go, and work to do at home and I can see myself building my confidence"

"We had a lady last year who never went out the house and she could hardly write at all... she cried on the first day and thought people were going to laugh at her, and everybody helped her so much"

"Surestart has done that for me full-stop. Until Surestart I never dreamt of going back to work because of my children. I've already started to work in the nursery downstairs... so for me, the more courses I do the more confidence I get, and the more positive I get I go off and do more things"

Project staff also notice profound changes in trainees' confidence levels, and attribute such improvements to the ways in which courses are delivered and received. A relaxed, flexible learning environment in which skills can be nurtured and the importance of teamwork are all significant factors. Teaching styles are less didactic than traditional school-based methods, as conventional education has often been an unsettling experience for many community learners. Tutors feel rewarded by the improvements in trainees' confidence and lifestyles, which has a cyclical effect in improving their own professional self-confidence and commitment to the scheme.

"Different abilities come out as well but everybody supports each other, like with working the laminator this morning, people will demonstrate their forte and come out with ideas, as a group it all moulds in together which is really good" (Tutor)

"People come on the course and say I cannot do, I am not capable, I am not able, and I can see a change... You can see their self-belief rising as the course goes on... A lot of them are returning to education and that has been a negative experience for them... because the course is very social and relaxed and the facilities are so good, it's not a school environment... To walk back in to a learning environment is tough for a lot of people because it hasn't been a pleasant experience, but we are equals, I facilitate, don't lecture, so it's a different style of learning" (Tutor)

"I think it is time to feel valued, as we do a lot of discussion. We have very good student participation and very good support of each other, without any judgement. The people who didn't contribute at the beginning will now join in so from that point of view the self-confidence has grown" (Tutor)

"One of the girls last week who's just finished level 2 said that when she started she wouldn't even write a shopping list... she couldn't spell the word lettuce so she wouldn't write her shopping list down... now she's at main Thanet College doing a course in Health and Social Care, she wants to be a nurse... she's a single mum, she works and she's now at college... it's that kind of thing that makes it all worthwhile... everything's worth it, even though I go away after two hours feeling exhausted sometimes, it's a good feeling!" (Tutor)

Responsibility

Issues concerning family responsibility, relationships and domesticity are of prime concern to the project team, and fieldwork evidence reveals remarkable progress in these areas on behalf of participating trainees. Parents are becoming much more aware of, and actively involved in, their children's development and education, and the return to learning and pride in their work is encouraging parents to share learning experiences with family and friends:

“We’ve learnt loads on the course about children – I probably observe them more than I did before and think about why they are doing things... I think more about how I play with them; it’s probably much more age appropriate and focuses on different skills”

“It’s helped me realize what I’m good at... I’m a bit artsy-fartsy anyway! At the weekend my little n’ was bored and I ended up making lanterns with her and we’re using them as Christmas decorations... and I’ve bought her some paper chains... so just to be able to do things like that with her... to show her how to do things and to see her enjoy it”

“I’m definitely going to do more with them... we’ve already started making Christmas cards this year... he’s only two, and we got some stickers out, and he coloured them in and stuck them on! I didn’t think he would do that at two... but he’s really enjoying it and it’s good fun...”

“I did feel like that before but I’ve made little changes... for example, the tutor said something about always having a dictionary and a thesaurus around, because it helps with working words out and things like that, and she said something about having them for the children. So I went out last week and bought the Oxford Children’s Thesaurus and Dictionary... and that’s been really helpful for them and I wouldn’t have thought of that, it’s something I wouldn’t have done, I would have thought they were too young”

Returning to education is also helping trainees to motivate their children to study and achieve, as their children can watch and observe their parents sharing similar experiences to them:

“My twins that go in to the crèche say ‘oh we’re coming here while Mummy does her work... they don’t know what I’m doing but they’re pleased I’m doing something... so it’s positive for them, and my boys as well. I tell them I’ve got my homework to do, so it’s really important that they do their homework and Mummy will do hers”

“It helps to encourage your kids about the importance of an education and that. I like helping my stepdaughter with her homework because I did actually like school, and I miss school as well sometimes... which it’s why it’s good to come here”

Trainees are also re-evaluating their attitudes towards family relationships and emotional responsibility as a consequence of returning to education and feeling more confident and self-assured. Respondents commented on how increased confidence levels had encouraged them to communicate more openly with partners, family, friends and peers, and empowered them to confront issues and perhaps defend and articulate themselves more easily than before:

“I can stand up to my husband more now and deal with my son a lot more easily... I used to be a bit of a pushover but I’ve got a lot more confident and can handle things better. I’m a lot calmer than when I first came”

“I feel able to tell my partner that I need some ‘me’ time and not feel guilty about it, because the guilt was the main problem, especially if you’ve asked for time off and need to go to the pub! But now you’re more able to cope with the stick... having the confidence without feeling guilty is a big part for all of us”

“And even my partner... before he didn’t take much notice of what was going on, but now when I go home he’ll sit with me when I do my homework, and ask me what I did today... We’ve been together for eleven years so that’s quite a long time but he never really told me about how he felt or how he perceived things... but now he will... whereas before he would say ‘the children are your department and you’ve got to sort it out’... now because I’m asking for his help he will help”

Trainees now feel much more able to rationalise their behaviour towards their families, friends and peer groups, and have a much greater understanding of their own cognitive processes and emotions. Trainees are making retrospective judgements about their previous experiences which are now informing their own decisions; skills which have been developed since returning to education via this project. This rationale is helping trainees to communicate more effectively not only with family and friends but also with professionals and difficult circumstances that they may encounter:

“it’s not really [just about] helping them with their work, it’s on a more emotional level, because I’m getting stuff out and working through stuff, I’m not going home and taking it out on my kids... or on my husband”

“Now we understand why we get angry and we’ve learnt lots of different ways of coping with it... it’s about taking a deep breath and thinking about something positive, because a lot of what we’ve learnt is about positive thinking”

“We look at how we’ve been brought up and what has structured our lives... it can help you to stop making the same mistakes your parents made... you can look at what you’re saying, especially if you’ve written it all down... you can realize that I don’t want my children to feel perhaps how I did and do something positive about it”

“It’s a communication thing as well... some of us have to deal with doctors, physios, social workers, and I think we’ve all learnt how to communicate with them more rather than keeping silent or shouting at them. We’ve learnt to say what we want to say in a positive way...”

Tutors and project staff also acknowledge the effects of improved attitudes towards family development and personal responsibility, and stress the important, exclusive role that the courses provide in this:

“It’s a by-product of the course I suppose... they are learning about child development through the course, so they’re getting knowledge that they wouldn’t get from anywhere else... They’re thinking about concepts and ideas and extending learning which they wouldn’t have thought about before possibly. They wouldn’t have thought about ‘how can I grow with my child’...they’re taking ideas on board that they perhaps wouldn’t normally have...” (Tutor)

“They realise now that they can do things, their self-esteem has risen, and so it has broken that cycle within their families... they are ready to move on...” (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

Continuing education and employment

Many of the trainees participating in the evaluation are enthusiastic about continuing in education and are already considering future career options. The success of the Story Sacks course, for example, is encouraging many of its students to consider working in childcare and/or taking up a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) position; this is particularly true for those students with children who are about to start school. This is a very positive outcome for the community because of its scarce childcare resources, and therefore the courses offered by the Thanet project have the potential to meet local supply and demand criteria. Some

trainees have already started to work part-time and have secured places on the relevant courses.

“I need this to go on to NVQ level 2 and I’m working towards being a classroom assistant; my eldest will be starting school in September”

“I used to be a playgroup supervisor but I want to go back in to schools as my children are older... It’s good to have the same holidays as the kids”

The widened social circle has also inspired trainees to set personal goals, building upon a sense of personal achievement and improved lifestyle and employability, as the groups are keen to motivate each other. Trainees are also appreciative of the opportunity to learn about different things and sample different subjects, which has allowed them to think about different career and employment options, their suitability and appropriateness, and to make considered, informed decisions.

“We’ve each got a goal and mine is to learn how to drive. My friend’s learning now and I have her children, so she will do the same... it will give me more freedom, I’ll be able to take the kids out more... I do get on the bus with them but it’s a struggle sometimes”

“It’s been nice to have the chance to think about it a bit more, otherwise I would have gone in to a job in this area and not really enjoyed it, but now I’ve had the chance to try it and I know it’s not for me, but it’s been a brilliant course and experience”

“I’d like to be a bereavement counsellor because I lost my Mum and Dad at a young age... and I find that a lot of people who go for counselling don’t feel like the person understands, but I will because I lost both my parents by the time I was 15, so I know what it’s like. I know it’s different if you lose a child or whatever, but I think I could help, or at least be a good listener. But I’ve just been thinking about it...”

All trainees were enthusiastic about attending more courses, but this was always dependant on available childcare facilities. Popular subjects included first aid, ICT and a desire for vocational courses including childcare, creative writing, sign language and other health and social care related disciplines. As previously mentioned, the way in which courses are delivered and facilitated plays a key role in their popularity, and the way in which they motivate trainees to learn and achieve. One tutor commented on how educational language is subtly introduced to trainees in a non-intimidating environment, which encourages trainees to continue in education:

“When I have a crèche for my daughter that would be great... She goes to nursery for three days, and here with me for two days... it is good for her and for me. I have finished an introductory IT course, now I want to do beginners IT. I would like to learn more about computers”

“They have been talking about progression and where they want to go, and they are all wanting to go on and do something. There are limitations with childcare stopping them... one is already doing a psychology course in September, so there is progression going on” (Tutor)

“It’s a nice course to start you back in to learning, and we use terms like portfolio, and use the correct terms and explain what it means... it gets them used to learning again, it’s a head-start for NVQ courses... and we use proper terms so that they are not phased; syntax, discourse, cognition... it’s a nice way of getting the jargon in” (Tutor)

The Thanet project offers help and guidance with continuing education and employment, for example, guidance advisers will attend closing sessions of certain courses to talk to trainees about what they would like to do next, and where they can go from here. Help is also provided in terms of organising work experience placements and liaising with local colleges on course availability on behalf of trainees.

“That’s one thing they’ve realised as self-esteem has risen, that they can achieve, and that they can actually find employment when the children go to school and they are actually working towards that now... That’s another thing we do, provide advice on progression, which the college can’t because they don’t have the time. We can help to find work placements and so on, for NVQs and LSA courses. If they can’t find one themselves they can come back to us. I can explain about the courses and what they’ve learnt [to training providers]. We can help them to enrol at college by liaising with college staff” (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

Lifestyle

Trainees were asked to consider how attending a course may have affected their general lifestyle, particularly in terms of daily routines, time management, diet and exercise and family activities. Many respondents commented on how simply having ‘somewhere to be’ which they looked forward to had given their daily routine a structure that was benefiting their motivation, self-esteem and energy levels, and also as a consequence benefiting their children.

“Since I’ve started with Surestart, my life has become a lot more organised... I never used to iron my clothes, I never did anything with my hair, it would just be pulled back, I’d have my little n’ in her pyjamas until 12 o’clock or when I decided I wanted to go out... and now she’s in a routine... She has to get up, have her breakfast, go to nursery, it’s just so much better. She knows where I’m going to be and where she’s going to be, and when she’s going to be picked up. She has really blossomed...”

“I am a lot more organised after attending the courses... it is better than staying at home”

“Your days are based around trips to school, so you have to get up, but some days I would sit there and think ‘I can’t be bothered to do the housework or anything’, so coming here and having a bit of fun encourages you to do it. Now I get up with the kids straight way rather than sleeping in and they feel a lot better. I look forward to coming here every week”

“If I know I have to be somewhere by a certain time then of course you’re more organised. If not for that, the kids would probably still be in their pyjamas at 3 o’clock!”

Project staff have also observed how the experience has improved the general lifestyle of trainees by building self-esteem and offering a source of mutual support and companionship. Some trainees are inadvertently becoming more accustomed to regular exercise, healthy eating, managing finances and social convention. This also has a domino effect in terms of strengthening family relationships and domestic situations, including personal hygiene and appearance, parental responsibility and employment:

“It gives them a reason to get up in the morning and I think they’ve got friendships that have started and carried on... a lot of the friendships are based on somebody more able supporting

somebody less able. For example, one lady was having trouble with her children at school and another lady was much more together, but they help each other now. The more competent lady drives a car and she helps her out. Those two ladies are having their needs met, which has been really nice” (Tutor)

“Physical exercise is helped because we take the families out to the local park, the kids get to run around, we’d like to think that they now do that on their own... even coming here twice a week makes them exercise and get in to a routine” (Family Liaison Officer)

“The parents would come on to a five week healthy eating course, half of them would go in to a kitchen and start preparing a meal, half would go in with the basic skills tutor and do budgeting, what vegetables to buy, and then they would sit down at the end of the two hours crèche and cooking time, eat the meal together, and what an eye opener! I mean most of the children in these deprived areas don’t even get a meal, they don’t sit at a table to eat a meal, so it’s a huge learning curve and social event” (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

“Seeing them now... two or three years ago they wouldn’t have been washed, their hair would have been dirty, the children would have been whinging because they’re not happy, if they had partners they would be out of work... when I see them now they’re clean, they’re smiling, the children are happy, partners have perhaps got work, and it’s all because of the small steps they have taken that have a huge knock-on effect...” (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

Trainees’ lifestyles are also being improved by an increased sense of self-awareness, including hobbies and interests. Personal interests have been discovered by attending courses such as IT, and by being introduced to other subjects via conversation with fellow trainees and tutors. This has encouraged trainees to pursue interests in their own time and thus extend social circles and provide an added sense of ownership and empowerment:

“We have visitors to the group... a lady from Surestart has introduced families in the group to their courses, such as IT, so they’ve developed new interests through networking through the group” (Centre Manager)

“We’ve been to a reiki course with [tutor] which was really good... and I’ve done a creative writing course which would never have occurred to me before”

“I’ve set up a women’s group... I think half of us go and it’s been a really good learning curve for all of us. Had I not been to this group, I wouldn’t have set up that group and wouldn’t be going to the pub with this lot”

2.3 Project management

Particular themes for investigation under the ‘*project management*’ heading included staff perceptions of the multi-agency approach in terms of project/course management and delivery and the feasibility of sustained partnerships between the agencies.

All staff were in agreement that the multi-agency approach had been very successful, particularly with reference to the combination of different skills and areas of expertise, and the relative ease with which agencies have been able to communicate and work together on a professional level. The opportunity to utilise

different resources has proved to be mutually beneficial for both staff and trainees. The incorporation of professional visitors and advisers has provided additional sources of subject specialism and given a sense of variety to courses which has encouraged student retention and enthusiasm. The use of identifiable local agencies has provided a sense of community and sharing within the partnership and a sense of belonging for trainees. Working partnerships have also been formed with schools and childminder facilities, complimentary to the multi-agency approach, to reinforce community links and meet family learning objectives:

“It’s nice because in this group I am employed by Adult Education, the Basic Skills Agency set the course up... and then we’re in Surestart... we’ve got brilliant resources... The guidance adviser at the end will talk about any courses so its nice networking together and using our different abilities and skills. It’s a good mix for all of us here” (Tutor)

“We do liaise with other groups, and we have a health visitor who comes here to give talks on health issues... the lady from Surestart comes in... it all works very well” (Centre Manager)

“If you think of Surestart as the basis then yes it has [been successful] because it’s in the community and it’s easily accessible for the client and the students” (Tutor)

“People are supportive of each other... there’s a lot of backing between the two departments at the college and the Basic Skills Agency and Surestart... so it seems to work very well” (Tutor)

“... A lot of their children are now going in to school without special educational needs because of the family literacy (FL) programmes we put on, because working closely with the schools as well, when we run the FL course, some of the head teachers have allowed us to take the children out of school, and they’ve learnt so much because of the smaller group... it is about learning with the whole family. That’s what Basic Skills have been able to do by providing childcare. Crèche staff are qualified and are working alongside tutors so that the children are learning as well...” (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

It was strongly felt by staff that, because of the success and strength of existing working relationships between the multiple agencies, there was much opportunity for sustainability between the partnerships beyond the existing funded period and further to successful future funding bids. When asked directly about the sustainability of partnerships, staff were emphatic that this would be possible, providing that funding was available and that learners were successfully targeted:

“I would hope now that this will be a rolling programme and that Story Sacks can be made for the nursery here etc. It’s good to have that relationship and communication channels which enable us to help people and follow up problems...” (Tutor)

“Hopefully... definitely if more funding is made available... yes of course and it can only improve...” (Centre Manager)

“It’s definitely sustainable provided we target the right people... I think that’s really essential if it’s going to be worthwhile” (Tutor)

“Definitely, when a successful course runs, like the healthy eating, then it will just run and run because it works so well” (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

2.4 Future direction

The possibility of extending to different target groups was discussed by staff and was positively embraced, especially the possibility of extending the scheme to beyond the immediate catchment area, and to targeting specific groups such as single fathers, other men's groups and young offenders. It was felt that further funding is essential to reach the full range of possible target groups:

“There are lots of target groups we could work with, I'd love to have a men's group, working with men... here specifically it's mostly young mums but there are single fathers out there... I'm a trained counsellor and do voluntary groups for men... they do have a voice” (Tutor)

“I think one of the problems has been in actual fact that, because of Surestart and Surestart's catchments, it's always had to be people living in the Surestart area, and I think that's changing now... I think there are people living on the outside that might benefit” (Tutor)

“I've worked with all ages and it's important to have a selection of different people but funding changes, so I don't know how it will be next year. I think funding should be there because we reach so many people” (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

Issues such as adequate course descriptors and methods of recruitment were raised when discussing targeting specific groups of learners. Misconceptions about course content and delivery had on one occasion resulted in the recruitment of inappropriate groups with mixed ability, and a growing disinterest (affecting student retention rate) within the group upon realising the actual subject content of the course. The issue of highly skilled students attending a course with basic skills content was of particular concern to tutors, as this affected the effective teaching of the course. Suggestions included more tutor involvement at the student recruitment stage, and the availability of more detailed information on course content to potential students:

“If by disguising it they may get more people on to the course and hopefully they will stay on, but by not being fully open you may find that it's not what they expected and then they drop out” (Tutor)

“I don't know where the students were recruited from... it doesn't seem to be the right target group, which we've discussed at a meeting... if we are targeting people who need to look at their own literacy skills then we need to focus not on people who already have A Level English! Otherwise it makes it difficult to teach somebody with A Level English and somebody with no literacy skills in a short hour and a half lesson” (Tutor)

“We're not involved at recruitment stage; we're involved at enrolment... It would be worth being more involved so we can sell what we're actually delivering, and to have more guidelines for other people responsible for recruitment... they need to have more guidelines about what is actually on offer” (Tutor)

It was strongly felt that the work of the Thanet Basic Skills Partnership could easily be theorised as a best practice model for the benefit of other training providers and local authorities. Certainly from an observational perspective, courses were incredibly popular with trainees, they had structure and clear learning aims and objectives, were well organised and delivered, facilities were impeccable with excellent resources, and childcare facilities were well maintained

and managed, all illustrating an effective and efficient multi-agency approach to adult education. Staff explained that any difficulties encountered had been successfully overcome, which would enable the partnership to describe the project in terms of a learning experience with any potential barriers and milestones clearly defined.

“Oh yes... I think it is. It’s a good example of organisations working together and it works. We have a good retention rate on this course... the fact that they keep coming back every week means we’re doing something right!” (Tutor)

“...We’ve had quite a few teething problems and learnt a lot along the way... there were a few issues in the beginning to deal with but we’ve overcome those and made a success of it” (Centre Manager)

With respect to taking the project forward and building upon the successes of the current funded period, respondents were asked if they would like to make any suggestions regarding changes and developments that could be made to existing provision, or if there were any particularly successful areas that must be maintained.

Many trainees expressed a desire for courses to be longer, either in terms of extra sessions or longer sessions, so that enough time would be made available for creative work, or to study topics of interest in greater depth, which illustrates the strength of feeling and enthusiasm towards the courses:

“It might help to have slightly longer courses; so that whole sessions can be devoted to making things... you don’t always have time at home, especially with children. I feel under pressure to get things done. It’s more fun to try to make things rather than buy them, it makes you think of it as mine, so it would be nice to have more time to sit and make things. To take ownership and make it all would feel like you had really achieved something”

“It would be nice to look at actual children’s work a bit more – maybe extend the course a little. We’ve only covered the basics, a few extra lessons might be nice, or a follow-on course. Learn more about why they do things”

“Because we learnt about the left and right brain functions, and the left brain needs creativity, that’s the point of the course, that you get enough time to be creative... so we need time to be creative. Now it’s especially relevant with short three week courses each session lasts one and a half hours and at least half of it is taken up with paperwork... it would be better to have a few days a week, with one devoted to paperwork and at least one devoted to creative work, so we could at least feel like we’ve achieved something”

Some trainees made suggestions as to how to overcome the barriers faced by written assessment and coursework; this was perceived as a huge barrier to those trainees with low literacy skills. This was a particular cause for concern amongst members of a personal development group, a course with a more creative, introspective dynamic than others. Suggestions included a more creative, flexible approach to assessment, including drawing and art work, or even a more interpersonal approach involving recorded interviews, similar to the informal focus group method used during this evaluation fieldwork:

“...or if somebody like you came along half way through and just assessed us by what we’re doing now... for some people filling in paperwork is a nightmare, for people who can’t write very well

or spell, it's not very nice for them, especially at first in a room full of strangers... I know a few people that have not wanted to come back because of that"

Tutors recommended greater flexibility and autonomy in course design and delivery, and a more flexible approach to the required number of students for certain courses. For example, two tutors had delivered a course that contains two distinct subject strands on alternate weeks, which had caused problems with continuity and tutor/trainee relationships. Another tutor felt that the course she teaches, which has a particularly introspective and personal dynamic, was much more suited to smaller groups than the required 10-15 students for funding purposes:

"It would be better for us to have more autonomy in course design. I feel like this was the rehearsal so I'd have much better insight... It's more difficult to build up relationships with these parents when you see them infrequently... not enough continuity between tutor and parent... You have to be flexible with this group... you don't know what crisis is going to come up that particular week that can affect what you're doing... if the other person isn't aware of that it can be difficult"
(Tutor)

"I've always said that personal development (PD) classes should not be more than 10. One because ten people is a crowd to some people... we need 8-10 for funding, but if I could say one thing it would be that PD work works well when there's only about 6, they grow quicker and better and the results come quicker... for some people if they've been an only child, a lot of these students have been abused, they're damaged, they've got problems, if there are too many dynamics going on then the trust can be weakened, you have to keep an eye on confidentiality. They live on the same estate, so if one says one thing this is where you can get falling out amongst students... could they make personal development an exception? We've been having 15 in a group and that's an awful lot to work on such emotional stuff" (Tutor)

Other staff stressed the importance of flexibility in student numbers for funding purposes when working on community-based projects such as this; it is vital not to 'drop' courses because of low attendance figures:

"it's not always been smooth running because people have different ideas, and because we're targeting the really hard to reach in deprived areas, some partners when we're trying to run short courses have had a problem because they're just looking for bums on seats. If we had 8 people and one dropped out, they will drop the course, and what about the other 7... with the funding that we've had, it's allowed us to still run them up until now, which is vital because if you help one or two families you've achieved something in the areas we work in" (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

Although the multi-agency approach has been extremely successful, potentially, there are problems with the recruitment of appropriate tutors and teaching staff for such a community-based project. One member of staff recommended that such personnel issues could be overcome if the partnership were to have recruitment rights with respect to teaching staff:

"It would be nice if [the partnership] could employ its own staff. Basic skills tutors are very hard to find, especially those that have the empathy to work in the community. There's so much need out there still. I have waiting lists as long as my arm. It needs a special type of tutor to relate to learners in the community... We would be able to vet their suitability for working in the community... You can tell very quickly if they have that empathy or not, and if they don't it would undo very quickly what we've done in the past two or three years" (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

With respect to the maintenance of particularly successful areas of the project, the importance of the provision of childcare facilities cannot be over-emphasised. This is where the partnership project has triumphed over conventional education and training providers by providing a much needed stepping stone for a deserving community and partnership staff are rightfully proud of this achievement. All trainees commented on the excellent services provided, and how they would never have been able to attend in the first place without such facilities:

“The crèche is fantastic so please don’t take it away – if there’s no crèche then we can’t bring our children and we wouldn’t be able to come!”

“You’d have to keep the crèche without a doubt; I wouldn’t be here without it, it would be impossible for me. The times are good. We get out in time to collect the children from pre-school... the facilities are great here, it’s really well done”

“Childcare is a huge issue... in Thanet there are huge waiting lists for pre-schools and nurseries, childminders are all booked up, and some of our clients, most of them with basic skills needs, they wouldn’t know where to start looking for childcare. So the college and adult education don’t come near to what we’ve been able to do in the community... The colleges wouldn’t target our learners at all because of that. There are no quick fixes and there’s still a lot of work to do out there... I just hope it can carry on...” (Family Learning Co-ordinator)

2.5 Summary

- Levels of enjoyment and personal benefit

Trainees have started courses for a number of different reasons, including an interest in the subjects on offer; following a route to other qualifications and employment; a desire to meet new people; an opportunity to re-establish a sense of self-identity and build confidence after becoming parents. All participation was voluntary and approached in an enthusiastic and positive manner. The courses have exceeded initial expectations, and trainees have benefited both from learning and more personal perspectives. Trainees’ ability to attend the courses and their enjoyment of the scheme has benefited from the provision of reliable, professional childcare.

The social aspects of attending courses (making new friends, relationships with tutors and positive role models) have had an over-whelming positive impact upon trainees in encouraging a sense of belonging and real community values. This has also boosted confidence and encouraged trainees to pursue more learning opportunities.

- Confidence levels and attitudinal change

Trainees are much more confident about meeting new people, communicating with family, friends and professionals and dealing with difficult situations as a result of attending courses and improving their interpersonal skills. Methods by which courses are delivered facilitate group discussion and participation in a

friendly, non-threatening environment, which helps the development of communication skills, confidence and assertiveness.

Parents are becoming more actively involved in their children's development as a result of returning to education themselves, and are now motivating their children to study and achieve. Family relationships are also improving as a result of improved confidence and the ability to rationalise events and behaviour.

Trainees are enthusiastic about continuing in education and seeking employment. Trainees are now setting themselves personal goals, which will facilitate a greater sense of personal achievement and employability. As self-esteem improves, trainees are naturally beginning to consider their occupational strengths and capabilities, and are consequently much more motivated to achieve and pursue career objectives. Professional guidance on routes to further study and employment are provided by the partnership.

The general lifestyle of trainees is also improving in terms of daily routines, family responsibility and activities, motivation, time management, diet and exercise and personal appearance. Trainees are also discovering new interests and hobbies, which boost motivation and confidence.

- Project management

The multi-agency approach to project management has been perceived as very successful by project staff and clients. The different skills and areas of expertise have complemented one another, and communication has been both effective and efficient across the partnership. The strong local identity of partners has encouraged a sense of community and has benefited all family learning objectives. Staff are certain that partnerships can be sustained subject to further funding.

- Future direction

Staff are in agreement that it is possible to extend the project to a number of different target groups subject to further funding. Some issues may need to be addressed concerning targeting and recruiting particular target groups in terms of the personnel involved and the quality of information provided. Owing to the success of the partnership thus far, it is believed that a best practice model can be written to be disseminated to other training providers and local authorities.

Suggestions for taking the project forward include a possible extension of courses in terms of length and duration; a greater degree of flexibility in course design and assessment methods; a revision of the required student numbers for funding purposes in some cases; a greater degree of autonomy in recruiting teaching staff with the skills to work on community-based projects. Most importantly, it is essential to retain the provision of childcare facilities, as community learners are dependant upon such resources.

2.6 Substantiating evaluation evidence

Further to interim, quantitative evaluation undertaken by the project team, it is clear that project objectives have been achieved in terms of the number of successful outcomes; that being the number of beneficiaries attending and completing courses, and the subsequent developments of Link-up and Gatekeeper training initiatives. The qualitative evaluation conducted by CePLIS can be used to substantiate the quantitative successes of the project by illuminating the broader, more social benefits achieved by the beneficiaries as a whole.

If we consider the objectives as defined in the partnership's original funding bid (Project Background, page 6) in light of evaluation evidence, then the project has been extremely successful in terms of addressing the basic skills needs and improved employability skills balance of those trainees who participated in the evaluation. Both the desire and ability to gain employment has been greatly improved for the sample studied, which illustrates the potential for the partnership to further improve the basic skills and employment status of the community, particularly in relation to the local demand for childcare provision.

Partnership objectives also stressed concern over the social implications of low basic skills in the community, including links between unemployment, crime, mental and physical health and low educational achievement among children of low-skilled families. The qualitative approach to project evaluation has illustrated how the project has had profound effects upon the trainees from a social and interpersonal perspective by significantly improving confidence and motivation, and inspiring trainees to succeed.

3. Recommendations

In light of qualitative evaluation evidence and previous outcome statistics, the Thanet Basic Skills Partnership has been a resounding success and there are clear opportunities to continue the excellent work being done in the community. Following from comments raised during the qualitative evaluation fieldwork, the following recommendations are made with respect to building upon the successes of the partnership, and taking the project forward.

3.1 Student recruitment

In order to determine the appropriateness of students to particular courses, the following procedures can be undertaken:

a. Information on courses needs to be thorough, clear and concise when presented to potential students at the recruitment stage; preferably in a written format which can be taken away with them. Course content, structure, duration, teaching and assessment methods should be clearly defined. All relevant staff should be involved in the writing, production and dissemination of promotional literature, including project management, teaching staff and family liaison staff (those who actually undertake recruitment work). It is recommended that a working group containing such representatives be formed to discuss course promotion and student recruitment. Some form of discussion with/inclusion of former students may also be useful.

b. Methods for recruiting potential students should also be inclusive of all relevant staff, and will be dependant on the demographics of the target groups. For example, if targeting young parents at local schools (a method previously employed) it may be appropriate to have an open evening at the school, whereby those staff responsible for teaching courses could be available to discuss what is actually involved with parents in person, and promotional literature can be distributed accordingly. Such an event could be run in conjunction with an existing scheduled parents evening to ensure adequate attendance. Similar 'drop in' events could be held at other community venues for the benefit of targeting other groups. Similarly, the participation of former students may also be helpful, in a more empathic 'role model' capacity.

c. Some consideration needs to be given to the appropriateness of class sizes for certain courses and to the issues surrounding desired attendance figures to secure funding. In consultation with relevant tutors, a paper should be written detailing the appropriateness of smaller class sizes for certain courses, explaining the problems associated with designated larger class numbers, which should be disseminated to those responsible for funding decisions with the objective of a little more leniency being shown to certain subjects. The issue of student retention and funding is a little more problematic, but should be formulated coherently in a similar document (for similar purposes) further to this evaluation.

3.2 Staff recruitment

The point raised about partnership ability to recruit tutors is a significant issue. Some consideration should be given to the possibility of recruiting teaching staff that are employed by the partnership, rather than recruited on a supply basis by other existing

organisations. Selection guidelines, job descriptions and employee specifications should be written by project management which define the skills required and appropriateness of working on community-based projects. Should funding not be available for such posts within the team, guidelines can be followed, in consultation with the partnership, by teaching supply agencies to ensure minimum disruption to the progress and trust established between the partnership and learners.

3.3 Course design and delivery

a. The enthusiasm displayed by trainees within this evaluation with respect to desiring more time within courses should not be overlooked. If more time is not available to extend courses or individual sessions, existing course structure could be readjusted, for example, to include 'free periods' whereby trainees can devote time to creative work, or simply 'catch up' if necessary.

b. The appropriateness of assessment methods is very contentious, and some acknowledgement needs to be given to academic standards, and the importance of substantial evidence. However, it is recommended that some consideration be given to the comments raised within this evaluation as to the appropriateness of written evidence to some courses and students and to the suggested alternative forms of assessment, and whether or not some degree of flexibility in terms of alternative assessment can be granted.

3.4 Childcare facilities

Above all, it is highly recommended that crèche and childcare facilities be maintained at all costs as an absolute priority. The benefits of such a facility to community learners are immeasurable, and the prolific results achieved by the partnership as illustrated within this report would not have been possible without such a facility.

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Appendices

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Appendix 2 – TBSP Interim Evaluation Report

Funding has been used for the following:

1) Progression for 5 students to NVQ2 Child care.

All five students are on course to complete this NVQ. They would not have continued study without the progression funding. Childcare places will have to expand in Thanet in order to increase numbers participating in learning.

2) Crèches for eleven courses.

Funding has been given for crèches to support ESF funded courses and courses funded through mainstream LSC funding. Without these crèches none of these courses could have been run.

3) Skills line.

ESF has continued to support this facility where by one to one support and assessment is accessed at a variety of community venues. Evaluation of the scheme took place in December and again in March. Some venues were dropped, but tutors and students valued the service highly as did the providers, Thanet College and Kent Adult Education Service. So far 30 learners have completed 6 hours tuition and 27 have progressed to courses.

4) Courses.

Tasters and short courses.

a) So far the only course report received was on the four week extension to St Benedict's Family Literacy run by Kent Adult Education Service. This extension enabled six students to achieve Level 2 qualifications. Evaluation sheets have already been received for a number of courses. In all 162 students have started courses; completion and progression figures are not yet available. These evaluations are very positive that except occasionally for comments on premises in the winter were too cold in one case. The courses funded so far are: First Aid at various venues, Computing from Scratch, Storysacks (not yet mapped to basic skills standards), Computing for beginners, Healthy Eating.

b) The gatekeeper and mentor training started on 29th May with a breakfast meeting which was attended by eight employers we could count as gatekeepers. All evaluated the training highly and we will follow up. Mentor training at Pfizers will take place in early June. Training with ASDA was cancelled due to problems at the Broadstairs store but we expect it take place before the end of July.

Generally the project is on track to achieve targets. We need to discuss those proceeding to Link Up training. It is clear that these will not always be those who have received the initial ESF gatekeeper training, but others who work for their companies in a supervisory capacity.

Jenny Gartland 5th June 2003

Appendix 3 – Evaluation Focus Group Questions

1. What were your reasons for starting the course/joining the scheme?
(Was participation voluntary or ‘co-erced’ in any way?)
2. Was the course what you expected it to be?
3. Have you enjoyed the experience?
(If not, why? If ‘yes’, what has been especially enjoyable?)
4. What do you think about the way the course was/is organised and run?
5. Have you met many new people and formed new friendships?
6. Have you discovered any new interests or hobbies?
7. Do you feel different about yourself after starting/completing the course?
(if yes, in what way?)
8. Do you feel more confident, for example, about meeting new people?
9. Do you feel more able to try new things and experience more challenges?
10. For the parents in the group; how involved are you in your children’s education and school-work?
(Do you think you might become more involved after returning to education yourself?)
11. Do you feel more able to ‘take charge’ and communicate better with your family and friends?
(For example, talk more openly to partners; feel more comfortable discussing personal problems/concerns with friends?)
12. Would you like to attend more courses?
13. Has the course inspired you to think about jobs you might be good at and new career opportunities?
14. Have you made any changes to your daily routine(s) as a result of the course (for example diet and exercise, how you plan your day, family activities etc)?

Appendix 4 – Evaluation Interview Questions

1. Do you think the programme has met the expectations of the client group?
2. Have your own expectations been realised?
3. Have you noticed any affects of the increased social network (tutors, fellow trainees) upon the client group?
4. Has the experience helped the client group to discover new interests?
5. Have there been any obvious changes in clients' behaviour with respect to confidence levels and self-belief?
6. Do the clients seem more open to experience and opportunity?
7. Do you think the experience will encourage the clients to take more responsibility in terms of their own and their family's development and relationships?
8. Have you had any feedback from the client group concerning a desire to continue in education?
9. How has the experience affected the clients' attitude to employment and career/occupation choices and opportunity?
10. Overall, has the experience had a positive effect upon the client group's lifestyle?
11. In your opinion, has the multi-agency approach to project management and delivery been a success?
12. In what ways, if at all, do you think partnerships will be sustained after the funded period?
13. Are there any 'issues' about project management and organisation that you would like to raise?
14. Do you think the project could be successfully extended to different target groups?
15. Could the project be used as a 'best practice' model, for example, by other education authorities and training organisations?
16. What, if any, changes and/or developments would you recommend?