

# **PROGRESS REPORT ON *LEARNING WORKS* PROJECT**

FOR LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

APRIL 2007

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### CONTENTS

Background to the Project	3
Description	5
Location	5
Objectives	6
Methodology	7
Informal activities and provisions	7
Formal activities and provisions	9
ICT	9
Literacy and Numeracy	10
ESOL	11
STEPS	11
Special events and activities	12
Providing opportunities for work, training and volunteering	12
Family Learning Workers	14
Conclusions	15
The Future	16
Suggestions: for Family Learning Workers	17
Suggestions: for Government and Funders	18

# PROGRESS REPORT ON *LEARNING WORKS* PROJECT

## BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

In August 2005 Learning Partnerships submitted a bid to the European Regional Development Fund for £370,000 for the *Learning Works* Project. This bid was accepted, and the Project commenced operation on January 2006.

To quote the bid, 'Learning Works seeks to develop the capacity of local people to participate in economic activity and local regeneration.' The Project is particularly focussed on non-economically active adults. Learning Partnerships acknowledged that 'this group has been very difficult to reach through traditional social inclusion methods' and suggested that this Project could build a support mechanism for these people that would enhance their capacity and quality of life. The ultimate purpose was 'to create a culture where entrepreneurship, training and jobs become key to the local ethos and culture' and thus unlock 'the ability of the community to share in and contribute to economic and social renewal.'

With their previous experience of running Education Action Zones, Learning Partnerships believed that the best way to access the target group was through local primary schools and argued that the school was 'the ideal mechanism' because it was 'one of the very few institutions that engage with hard-to-reach adults in a positive environment.' It was pointed out that it was unusual 'for even the most socially excluded parents not to engage with their children's primary school', and that the Project linked closely with the Government's *Every Child Matters* and *Extended Schools* strategies which envisaged schools working together in clusters and with other agencies to provide a wide range of services and supports for families.

The *Every Child Matters* agenda includes 'economic well-being' as one of its five intended outcomes. It maintains that 'the best way to tackle child poverty is to widen opportunities for parents to work and raise the income of working families.' Learning Partnerships point out that 'the role of parents is crucial if young people are to achieve economic well-being' and that young people will fail to achieve this outcome if their own parents are excluded. Economic well-being is viewed as the key to the whole strategy. In the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper, Government acknowledges that 'in the past public policy has paid insufficient attention to supporting parents and helping families find solutions for themselves', but stresses that in the future it 'intends to put supporting parents and carers at the heart of its approach to improving children's lives.'

As a result of *Every Child Matters* Government developed its *Extended Schools* strategy. Extended schools are to offer their communities a range of services such as childcare, adult learning, health and community facilities that go beyond their core educational function. Government stresses that 'by consulting with parents and involving them in the planning of services, schools will be able to develop the package of services which best meets the needs of their community.' It calls for adult education and parenting support programmes to be included within extended activities

and attaches importance to providing wider community access to IC T facilities. Government concludes that :

‘Parents have the biggest single influence on their children’s lives and are their child’s prime educator. We know from research that good parenting in the home makes an enormous difference to children’s outcomes and we want services in extended schools to support parents in this key role.’

It is suggested in the DfES’s prospectus for extended schools that many schools will best be able to develop the core offer of extended services ‘by working in partnership with existing local private or voluntary sector providers or by building on existing links with other local schools and working as a cluster.’

In their bid Learning Partnerships stress the cyclical nature of deprivation and exclusion. They point out:

‘Sadly it has been our experience that children who will be the hub of anti-social behaviour in their teens can be identified by staff in the primary schools as early as reception. It is our experience that generally the child who habitually arrives late and has poor attendance is the same child who is continually disruptive in both the classroom and the playground. And is the same child who will be excluded from high school, is the child who will not succeed academically and is the same child whose parents engage least with schools. This situation will mirror a similar experience of the parents and is how the cycle of economic and social exclusion perpetuates itself.’

This view is supported by the Government’s own research. *Every Child Matters* states that ‘even at 22 months, there is a big gap between the development of children from different socio-economic groups’ and this gap widens as the children get older. ‘Children from a poor background with a high developmental score at 22 months have fallen behind by the age of 10 (a more recent Government report, *Widening Participation in Higher Education, 2006*, says the age of 7) compared to children from higher socio-economic groups but with a low developmental score at 22 months.’ There is no doubt that pupils eligible for free school meals on average do considerably worse in their key stage tests and in public examinations than those who are not eligible. The Government is very concerned about young people aged 16 to 18 in the NEET (not in employment, education or training) group where many without qualifications end up. Those classified as NEET have remained at about ten per cent (or a little more) of the total for well over a decade and this proportion is higher than that experienced by other European countries. It must be stressed that NEET is a very heterogeneous grouping but there is consensus that it includes the most vulnerable young people in our society. Government is determined to do something to improve the position of the NEET group and is currently consulting on whether all young people to the age of 18 should be obliged to be in education, training or in employment with training.

Learning Partnerships are convinced that the cycle of deprivation and exclusion will only be overcome when excluded parents break out of it – ‘socially excluded parents do not bring up included children.’ They believe that programmes targeted at socially excluded children cannot succeed in isolation. If no support is being given in a complementary fashion to their parents, such programmes seem destined to fail.

Learning Partnerships maintain that programmes that build up the confidence, capacity and self esteem of socially and economically excluded parents enabling them to play a fuller part in the communities in which they live are just as essential as efforts to raise the aspirations and achievements of disadvantaged children and young people themselves.

## DESCRIPTION

*Learning Works* is a team of six Family Learning Workers (FLWs) based in six primary schools (one FLW per school) in an area of high economic and social deprivation. The FLWs target and engage the socially excluded parents of children who attend their schools. They set up support networks for the parents and sometimes for other adult members of the local community. The FLWs involve parents in adult learning activities that build capacity and at the same time increase confidence and self esteem. In consultation with parents, they develop programmes designed to meet the particular needs of their client group. The programmes often include workshops on parenting, literacy, numeracy, ICT and healthy living.

The Project emphasises the importance of personal empowerment and uses the Pacific Institute STEPS (Steps to Economic and Personal Success) programme. This encourages participants to set goals, make choices and achieve more, thus building the capacity of individuals and communities.

FLWs also make arrangement for parents and other adults in their communities to make greater use of ICT facilities and to improve their computer skills. It is expected that progress in this area will open up new opportunities for participants to return to learning and employment.

As soon as parents have the necessary skills and confidence, they are encouraged to act as tutors of their own children. Parents are also able to participate in family 'fun' activities and family learning events organised by the FLWs.

Finally, as part of their role, FLWs are expected to organise, as required, vocational training and job skills workshops and to signpost parents to job search agencies.

## LOCATION

The *Learning Works* Project is located in the South Leeds Development and Employment Pact (LDEP) area which includes Beeston Hill and Holbeck. Despite its proximity to the economically vibrant city centre, this area has the typical characteristics of the inner city and experiences multiple and often inter-connected problems. Unemployment remains high particularly amongst certain communities; high density housing is the norm; incomes are low; health problems are prevalent; educational attainment is below average; and there are higher than average rates of crime and anti-social behaviour. Particularly relevant for this Project, the proportion of adults without qualifications living in this area is very much greater than for Leeds as a whole. Beeston Hill and Holbeck missed out on the economic success and prosperity experienced by most of Leeds over the last decade and this has been

recognised by the designation of these districts as one of only four Neighbourhood Renewal Areas in the city.

The Family Learning Workers took up their posts in five local primary schools (Cross Flatts Park, Greenmount, Hunslet Moor, Ingram Road and New Bewerley Community) in January 2006 and a sixth school (Beeston Hill St. Luke's Church of England) joined the Project in September 2006. At these schools a much higher proportion of pupils than average are entitled to free school meals, a recognised indicator of deprivation. At several of the schools there are also high proportions of children whose first language is not English. There can be no doubt that schools with high levels of social exclusion amongst parents and children alike have been identified to take part in the Project.

## OBJECTIVES

The key objectives of the Project were identified as follows:

- to create 5 (later 6) new jobs in the target area
- to recruit and develop project staff from within the South Leeds LDEP area
- to provide a range of opportunities to overcome fundamental barriers to social inclusion for a group of parents of children attending 5 (later 6) local primary schools
- to provide a range of opportunities which uncover and develop the expertise and strengths within a group of socially excluded parents; to help these parents to develop and contribute to community cohesion and economic growth
- under the extended schools banner, to facilitate the use of ICT teaching resources within the targeted schools by economically and socially excluded parents and members of the wider community so that they can develop their own ICT skills
- to build the confidence and develop the capacity of parents to act as tutors of their own children
- to use the Pacific Institute's STEPS programme, which introduces personal empowerment and leads to change in people's lives as they set goals, make choices and achieve more, to build the capacity of these communities
- to organise family activity events within the local community which use fun to encourage parents to take responsibility for their children's actions
- to signpost economically and socially excluded parents to opportunities for basic skills training, accredited training and job search agencies

## METHODOLOGY

The research for this progress report has consisted of three main elements: analysis of documents; interviews with key people; and focus groups of parents.

Documents relating to the bid for the Learning Works Project were supplied by Learning Partnerships and utilised in the preparation of this report. Several seminal Government publications such as *Every Child Matters* and *Extended Schools* were also used.

Interviews with key people connected with the Project including the present and former team leader, the family learning workers and some headteachers took place. These interviews were conducted by the writer of the progress report and were semi-structured with simple interview schedules to ensure that the same questions were put to all those in the different categories. There was ample scope for interviewees to introduce their own material and most did. Notes were made during the interviews and these were extensively used in the analysis.

In addition small focus groups of parents were arranged in the schools, and the Project was discussed with these groups. The parent focus groups were organised by the family learning workers and chaired by the writer of the report. The same issues were put to all the focus groups, and there were also plenty of opportunities for the parents to put forward their own points and these opportunities were taken. Notes were made during the focus group meetings and these were extensively used in the analysis.

Names have not been used in this progress report, and it is hoped that individuals will remain anonymous.

The writer of the report is most grateful to all those who agreed to be interviewed and to the parents who attended the focus groups. Help has been given in abundance, and in a very kindly, friendly manner which has been much appreciated.

## INFORMAL ACTIVITIES AND PROVISIONS

One of the first tasks facing FLWs was to make contact with hard-to-reach parents in their schools. Normally the FLWs took the initiative and made themselves known to parents as the latter brought their children to or collected them from school. Often the FLWs also sent out letters via pupil post to all parents telling them that FLWs were now appointed, explaining their roles and how to make contact. On some occasions particular parents were referred by the teaching or other school staff to the FLWs. Initial contacts were almost invariably informal and very often took the form of a 'chat' between the parent and the FLW. Such conversations frequently provided firm bases for further development of the relationships.

The FLWs often quickly moved forward to set up regular, normally weekly, 'drop-in' sessions or coffee mornings where groups of parents could meet together in an informal atmosphere to talk about their lives and experiences. In some schools informal 'Parents and Tots' groups have been introduced where mothers (or fathers) could bring their pre-school children along to play whilst the adults had opportunities

to talk to each other. Several schools also set up weekly 'Arts and Crafts' sessions (again young children are often brought along to these) where parents work on practical activities together making a wide range of arts and crafts items. It is clear that the parents gain a great deal of enjoyment from both the activities and the conversations in these sessions. Many of the FLWs stressed that the arts and crafts products were much less important than the processes and interactions experienced by the parents working together in the sessions. At one school, however, the whole school, including the parents, had contributed to making a large wall-hanging. This has been displayed in an art gallery and the project has been reported in the local newspaper. It provided a focus which brought the whole school and community together.

Parents, FLWs and headteachers were agreed that one-to-one personal contacts and informal activities were absolutely crucial to the success of the *Learning Works* Project. Parents stressed that individualised personal contact with the FLW was very important to them. They often viewed the FLW as a personal friend with professional expertise who was regularly there to help and support with a wide range of problems. Advice about benefits was frequently on offer and help with filling in forms and writing and reading official letters was available. If parents had concerns about their own children including issues around settling in and/or progressing at school, help was regularly given. Several parents expressed the view that the FLW was someone whom they trusted, and, if they had a child at school who was experiencing problems, they said that they asked the FLW to talk to a teacher on their behalf. They felt that they lacked the confidence to do this themselves and the FLW's mediation was much appreciated. In some instances it was clear that parents had not had positive experiences of schooling themselves and that they did not find interaction with teachers easy. These parents found it easier to relate to the FLWs whom they felt were 'much more like us'. Some praised the FLWs for the way in which they treated parents in an adult fashion. Personal touches were much appreciated with one parent mentioning that the FLW at her child's school was one of the first people to visit her when she came out of hospital.

Parents were very pleased that the Project had been instrumental in providing facilities for regular informal gatherings. Coming out of the house to attend these events was regarded as much better than being 'stuck in the house with never-ending daytime television.' They liked the opportunities to meet and to talk to fellow parents, share problems and engage in constructive activities and thus avoid some of the loneliness so common in bleak urban environments. Over the weeks and months some parents reported that they built up their confidence and began to consider possibilities of returning to employment. Parents really appreciated that there was 'a really friendly, relaxed atmosphere as soon as you came through the door' and they stressed that the FLWs were pivotal and the catalyst for action. In their view these activities would not be taking place in the local communities in South Leeds without the efforts of the FLWs. They reported that parents' commitment to the primary schools had been increased, and they believed that schools doing something for parents was new, important and vital. In a newly built and recently opened school which had superseded two older ones it was argued that the Project had helped to bring parents from the two old sites together. Parents maintained that this unity was crucially important in the development of the new school. A headteacher pointed out that many parents had bad memories of their own schooling and this sometimes prevented

them from engaging fully in the education of their own children. She/he believed that it was very important to raise the confidence, self esteem and trust of parents because, if they could be persuaded to become more fully involved in the life of the school, the educational aspirations of their own children would be raised. A similar point was made by a parent at another school who said that parental engagement with the *Learning Works* Project was leading to ‘added value’ for the adult community which in turn fed back into greater pupil involvement and achievement.

The FLWs in all the schools organised sessions for parents in areas which were of interest to them. These areas included aromatherapy, massage, henna, make-up, self image and presentation to a potential employer, well-being and healthy eating, cooking, gardening, sewing, first aid, games and fun activities for children, brain gym, beauty therapy and hairdressing (in the latter two cases longer courses of a more formal kind were also arranged for parents who requested them). In most instances the FLWs set up these sessions because they felt that they would appeal to the parents, but in some cases parents made requests for sessions in specific areas that they particularly wanted themselves. Parents were extremely appreciative of these sessions. They were clearly not only providing information and instruction but also motivating participants whose personal interests were being developed. Some parents said that they would particularly like more sessions on cooking (with a range of ethnic traditions represented in the provisions) and some on ‘do-it-yourself’. Often these sessions enabled the FLWs to try out different things and to find out whether new parents who had not attended *Learning Works* activities before were attracted to them. The evidence from the parents and from the FLWs alike was that these relatively informal sessions formed an integral and important part of the Project and were very successful in interesting and motivating participants.

There can be little doubt that the informal activities and provisions have been crucial to the success of the Project. They have helped to lay down firm foundations and have provided the means to develop and cement good relationships between parents and FLWs. They have reduced the isolation of many parents and carers in this part of South Leeds and have successfully encouraged greater positive interaction between different parents. Consequently some parents have become much more involved in the life of their children’s school and this has helped to promote greater cohesion in the local communities.

## FORMAL CLASSES AND PROVISIONS

### ICT

One of the main objectives of the Project is to develop the ICT skills of economically and socially excluded parents. A key target is that a minimum of 100 parents (at least 50 in 2006 and at least 50 in 2007) are trained during the lifetime of the Project. The FLWs are required to organise a series of ICT workshops for parents. These workshops are tailored to meet the needs of individuals. Participants who need basic skills such as the use of email, logging on to the internet and filling in forms on line are accommodated but more advanced users are also provided for. The further development of skills and progression are strongly encouraged and well supported.

The FLWs often arrange these provisions in conjunction with specialist adult education providers such as Computers on Wheels, the Workers' Education Association, Learning and Leisure (Education Leeds), Neighbourhood Learning and local further education colleges. Several of these organisations bring their own portable computers to the schools for the workshops. In at least one case the school's own computer suite is available for use. Evidence suggests that these different arrangements normally work smoothly.

The FLWs jointly arranged for parents from several schools to attend a computer workshops about design technology and textiles at the South Leeds City Learning Centre adjacent to Cockburn High School. A range of impressive objects were produced, and the parents who attended were enthusiastic about the workshops which they found interesting and informative.

Parents report that they have found the ICT workshops very helpful. Several said that when they started they were complete beginners with computers. All those involved report the development of a wide range of IT skills. Many had progressed and new possibilities of which they had been unaware at the outset were opening up. After experiencing the Project workshops, some parents had moved on to obtaining qualifications such as Clait and National Council for Further Education awards. They are keen and committed to take their ICT work further as opportunities arise. One parent who finds work with computers highly motivating has progressed so well that he/she has been able to obtain a placement as an IT technician at a local secondary school. Having started out with no formal qualifications this person takes the view that his/her prospects for potential employment were transformed by the experience gained through the Project.

The Project is well on course to meet its numerical targets in the ICT area and some opportunities beyond the formal targets have opened up and are being taken.

## LITERACY AND NUMERACY

The schools have used 'Keeping up with the Kids' (Workers' Education Association) and 'Keeping up with the Children' (Adult and Community Learning, Education Leeds) courses with parents. These classes aim to help parents improve their skills in literacy and numeracy and place emphasis on the ways in which schools in the twenty first century teach these areas of the curriculum. After completing these courses, parents should be more confident about supporting their own children's learning at home and, moreover, should be able to provide such support more effectively. As part of the courses parents bring their own children out of classes and work with them on a one-to-one basis. This prepares both the parents and their children for one-to-one teaching and learning at home. Parents found these classes worthwhile, and in some cases they were extended at the parents' request. Some stressed that it had been important to have these courses on school premises. They doubted whether they would have had the confidence to travel to and register for college-based provisions. Local availability at a primary school they knew well with their own children available to work with and with encouragement from a FLW whom they trusted and liked gave them the initial impetus to start on a course which they soon found valuable and helpful.

Some parents had moved on to adult literacy and numeracy classes involving examinations and qualifications provided on local sites by further education colleges or voluntary sector agencies working in the community. One FLW had arranged for some parents to take tests to assess their abilities and potential in English and Mathematics. These parents found this process motivating, and after the tests they were encouraged to take courses to the appropriate level for their own individual needs. One parent needed English and Mathematics at GCSE level for entry to a training course for midwifery which was her ultimate aspiration. As a result of her experience in one of the Project schools she was beginning to take the necessary steps to achieve this.

## ESOL

Nearly all the schools offered classes in Esol (English for Speakers of Other Languages). These were extremely important provisions in an area with significant numbers of children and parents from ethnic minorities. The classes were normally taught by specialist teachers brought in from outside agencies; but one FLW with expertise in appropriate languages was able to provide such classes herself, and in another school teaching support staff with similar skills also helped out. Parents from ethnic minority backgrounds in one school reported that their English was really coming on as a result of the Esol classes. They stressed that one session per week was not enough. They wanted more instruction so that they could progress more quickly. Some of these parents pointed out that learning English was a very high priority for them.

## STEPS

From the outset the Project was committed to use the Pacific Institute STEPS (Steps to Excellence for Personal Success) programme, a course for parents. STEPS 'encourages people to think about themselves and the way they choose to live their lives.' The programme aims at personal empowerment and encourages participants to see that life is full of opportunities, to cope with changes, to set targets, make choices and pursue their opportunities with confidence. STEPS is delivered over 12 sessions for 12 weeks. A trained facilitator takes participants through the course using DVD units. There is ample time for group discussion and personal reflection. Most of the FLWs are trained STEPS facilitators.

Parents and FLWs alike spoke highly of the STEPS programme. The parents found it a positive experience which genuinely did build up confidence. They enjoyed working together and felt that the discussions enabled them to take things further than the DVD material. One parent described STEPS as 'fantastic' and said that it had inspired her to volunteer to do part-time work. Another parent who was at 'rock bottom' in terms of self esteem at the beginning of the course improved in confidence so much that she was able eventually to organise and lead classes for other people in a particular specialist interest she had. The FLWs often worked in pairs on STEPS bringing together parents from two different schools for the sessions. The FLWs found this co-operative working enjoyable and stimulating and believed that it was

beneficial for all concerned because it brought different viewpoints and perspectives to situations. Like the parents the FLWs were equally enthusiastic about STEPS.

## SPECIAL EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES

A wide range of special events and activities have been organised in the schools as part of the Project.

At one school a community open day attended by over 300 people drew attention to the many and varied support services available locally. It was well supported by many local organisations and several parents helped by running stalls. The event was very successful and raised £200 for a local cause. It also helped to bring the community together to enjoy a pleasant occasion in which many local people participated.

Several schools involved parents in activities connected with Christmas. School Christmas fairs were organised, decorations produced in craft sessions, gifts for children collected and wrapped ready for distribution and a Christmas card competition held. At one school the FLW set up a toy library which is now operated by the parents themselves.

At another the parents connected with this Project held a Valentine disco which raised money towards the erection of a pram shelter for the school. The same parents' group is working actively on several projects – developing a school travel plan which encourages parents to walk their children to school; helping the school towards national healthy school status; and supporting the school in its bid to achieve the Stephen Lawrence award.

At yet another school parents are being encouraged to be involved with 'environmental issues – planning, planting and maintaining some of the school's many raised garden beds.' Arranged through the FLWs, women's health screening will also be on offer to mothers of children at the school.

Arrangements were made by the FLW at one school for some parents (and their children) to have a residential weekend away at Northern College, Barnsley. This involved interesting learning activities in a pleasant rural and relaxed setting and was much appreciated by all those who took part.

There can be no doubt that 'family activity events within the local community which use fun to encourage parents to take responsibility for their children's actions' are being delivered by the Project as was promised in the original bid.

## PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORK, TRAINING AND VOLUNTEERING

One of the aims of the *Learning Works* Project is to organise vocational training and job skills workshops and to signpost economically and socially excluded parents to job search agencies. Several schools have made considerable progress with such

activities. One school offers one-to-one sessions which give help with job application forms, curriculum vitae and interview techniques. It also puts on job search workshops providing access to free newspapers, telephone, internet and e-mail. In a number of cases the FLWs have been able to explain to individual parents the important question of the extent to which taking up full or part-time employment may impact upon their current benefits.

Some parents are interested in possible employment opportunities – particularly part-time opportunities in the locality which could be combined with bringing up a young family. One parent commented, 'It is boring being in the house all the time. It would be good to get out. I would like a job like a lunchtime assistant in a school – a part-time job to fit in with school hours.' The assistance provided by the FLWs regarding possible employment opportunities is much appreciated with one parent saying that the FLW had explained things more clearly and had been much more helpful than the careers advisers she had met at job centres. Sometimes FLWs were able to put a parent in touch with a person who could give advice about a suitable area of employment and sometimes the FLWs were in a position to provide the advice themselves. In several cases FLWs had been able to arrange work placements for parents as first steps into employment. Many of these placements were in local primary schools and included jobs such as lunchtime supervisors, classroom support assistants and school cleaners. One parent who had a strong interest in computers had been helped to obtain a placement as an information technology technician in a secondary school. Another parent had aspirations to train as a midwife. She had taken tests in English and Mathematics to see whether she had the necessary potential to take GCSEs in these subjects which were requirements for entry to the desired training course. She did well in the tests and was set to start on the long road to qualify as a midwife.

The FLWs realise that one positive way in which parents can be re-introduced to and prepared for the world of work is through volunteering; and as volunteering is unpaid, it does not affect a person's benefit rights. In several schools parents now work on a voluntary basis on a range of tasks. In one school one parent volunteer works in the school library, a second helps young children with their reading, a third assists with pupils' sewing skills and others work more generally as learning support assistants. At another school there are as many as ten parents working as volunteers. Some parents are able to offer specialist skills such as art or music, and schools are pleased to be able to utilise their particular expertise. Other parents have taken opportunities to be volunteers to see whether or not they like working as learning assistants. For those that have found this experience positive, there is a strong possibility this may become a first step into employment. The parents themselves believe that experience gained through volunteering is an excellent way for them to move forward towards employment. The FLWs take the view that training for volunteers in schools is essential and they are making considerable efforts to ensure that this is made available. One of the FLWs together with a member of staff from Education Leeds put together a four day comprehensive training package for volunteers. This ensures that before they go into classrooms volunteers are trained across a range of important areas including health and safety and confidentiality. This training programme is currently being rolled out by Education Leeds to primary schools across the city.

## FAMILY LEARNING WORKERS

The quality of the contributions of the FLWs is clearly key to the success of the Project, and it is worth considering briefly and in general terms the backgrounds and previous experience of the FLWs. A headteacher who was involved in short listing and interviewing for these posts recalls that the panel was looking for potential and a wide range of abilities and personal skills. Previous experience of working in a school setting was not regarded as essential and several of the FLWs had not worked in schools before they took up their current appointments.

Some of the FLWs had lived in Beeston for nearly all their lives and therefore know the area very well indeed. Some are of Asian heritage. Of the FLWs who do not live currently in South Leeds, some have done so in the past. Nearly all the FLWs have previous experience of working in the Beeston area. Some had worked previously as learning support assistants and knew what it was like to be based in primary schools before they took up their present posts. Others came from a wide range of backgrounds including careers and employment advice, work in children's homes, nursery nursing, family services and Sure Start. This diversity of backgrounds is an advantage because individual FLWs bring different experiences and skills to the team giving it greater overall strength and expertise.

All the FLWs interviewed are keen and highly committed to the Project and its success. They clearly enjoy their work and are quite prepared to go 'the extra mile'. They believe in what they are doing and they are determined 'to make a difference' in the communities they serve. They know that hard-to-reach parents need individual help and support to engage with the Project. This is provided with both enthusiasm and sensitivity. At the same time, although the FLWs often and necessarily take the lead, they are very much aware that the ultimate aim is to empower the parents to have the confidence to have more independence and work out their own plans for their own lives. There is considerable evidence that the FLWs succeed in combining friendliness, enthusiasm, encouragement and realistic, mature professionalism. This is no mean achievement.

The FLWs meet together on Wednesday afternoons as a team under the leadership of the Co-ordinator for the Beeston Hill and Holbeck Extended Services Cluster of Schools. In effect this team delivers 'the parenting support element of the Extended Schools and Services Core Offer'. The FLWs have differing backgrounds and strengths which they bring together to offer a number of joint activities between schools. The parents respond well to these joint activities and point out that they contribute to more of 'a community feeling' in Beeston. There is ample evidence that the FLWs respect and help each other. They are not isolated individuals working within the confines of their own particular schools. The FLWs do bond, share good practice and work together as a genuine team under the leadership of the Co-ordinator. All this adds to the overall strength and impact of the Project.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that the *Learning Works* Project has met or is meeting all its nine key objectives (page 6). This considerable achievement is being delivered by the FLWs who concentrate entirely on supporting and assisting parents.

In the past some similar projects have appointed staff to dual roles – to support vulnerable children in school and to support their parents. In the experience of the writer of this report such dual roles almost inevitably lead to tensions. Heads and teachers tend to see the primary role of the project workers as supporting pupils in school with helping and supporting parents slipping into the background. The project workers themselves often see what is happening and seek to redress the balance. Such differences of perspective have sometimes led to disputes between project workers and their headteachers.

These problems do not arise with *Learning Works* Project because it is clear that the FLWs are in their schools to support parents and adults in the community. Other members of the school staff have responsibility for the children. This clarity of purpose has assisted progress in meeting the key objectives and reflects a much better operational model than one where the roles and duties of the project workers are divided between pupils and parents and are potentially unclear.

Evidence from the Project suggests that relations between the FLWs, heads, teachers, learning mentors and support assistants are good. Tensions have been few and far between, and the FLWs are well integrated into the schools in which they work and are seen as valuable people doing necessary and high quality jobs. Headteachers emphasise that they believe strongly in the family learning worker concept. One headteacher praised the work of her/his FLW hugely. She/he pointed out that the FLW is covering a considerable part of the extended schools agenda (parenting support) for her /his school, and added realistically that, if the FLW was not doing this work, it would fall on her/his shoulders and she/he just would not have the time to do it.

There are variations in the programmes in the different schools. This should be viewed as a strength and not a weakness. The FLWs have different backgrounds and experiences and rightly have the opportunity to play to their own particular strengths. Moreover, the schools, although in close proximity, are not identical. The parents from some schools are without much doubt 'harder-to-reach' and in more disadvantaged circumstances than those from some others. The individual FLW has to judge the situation in his/her own school very carefully and must tailor the programme offered to the particular needs of the parents at his/her school. In addition the FLW has to decide the speed with which particular parents are able to move forward to more advanced and ambitious activities and courses. It is not at all surprising that there is variation between schools, and it is appropriate that the programmes and their pace of development are determined by the knowledge, experience and professional judgement of the FLWs who are the people in closest touch with the needs of the parents at the individual schools.

In most schools there is a 'core' of parents who are highly committed to a relatively wide range of the activities connected with this Project and a larger group who

participate occasionally. The FLWs are very much aware that they must continue to support and meet the needs of their 'core' groups so that these parents, who are moving forward at varying paces, have opportunities to achieve their full potential. At the same time the FLWs are also conscious of the need to open out activities to bigger groups involving more parents. It is important that the benefits of the Project are not restricted to 'core' groups of parents with others in similar circumstances who might wish to participate being left out. There is a delicate balance to be achieved here as it is difficult to ensure that sufficient individual attention and support are given if group sizes are large. The FLWs are well aware of these potentially conflicting pressures, and achieving an appropriate balance is almost certainly best left to the professional judgement of the FLWs themselves as they are in closest touch with the situations.

The Project and all those involved with it should be warmly congratulated for meeting all nine of the key objectives set for it.

## THE FUTURE

Government has recently reported that the proportion of people living in relative poverty in this country has increased 'for the first time in almost a decade and the number of children living in poor families has risen for the first time in six years' (Guardian, 28 March 2007). There were 12.7 million people (including 3.8 million children) living in relative poverty in 2005/06 compared with 12.1 million in 2004/05. This reverses the trend of falling poverty experienced since the end of the 1990s and makes very depressing reading.

A recent study of the economy has shown how important work is as a way to escape poverty. Professor Richard Berthoud (Institute for Social and Economic Research) reports that 'inequality between couple families has been increased by two-earner/no earner polarisation' (Guardian, 28 March 2007). Berthoud shows that over the last thirty years the proportion of adults with no access to an earned income has doubled from 7% to 14%, and most of these work-poor families live on social security benefits and have very low incomes. He concludes that 'his findings confirm the government's emphasis on work as the most important route out of poverty.'

Looking to the future Chris Humphries, director general of City and Guilds, believes that the British economy will soon have a deficit of 1.5 million workers. On account of the drop in the birthrate in the 1990s the number of teenagers entering the workforce will soon fall dramatically. Humphries argues that the main way in which a serious shortfall can be avoided is for 'hundreds of thousands of stay-at-home mothers' to join the labour force (Times Educational Supplement, 23 March 2007). As many of these mothers have no qualifications a huge training effort will be needed to make this possible. Humphries is convinced that this is the only way to avoid a serious labour shortage which will otherwise arise at some point between 2010 and 2020.

John Hutton, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, with the support of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, is seeking to revise benefit entitlements to provide greater incentives for lone parents to move into work once their youngest child reaches

twelve years of age (Guardian, 30 January 2007). Hutton points out that the UK is at the bottom of the league of major European countries for lone parent employment rates. He adds that 'children of lone parents not in work are over five times more likely to be in poverty than children of lone parents in full-time employment', and 'around 40% of poor children live in lone parent households, the majority of which are non-working'. Although these proposed benefit reforms are highly controversial, there is continued Government commitment to help more lone parents into employment because lack of work is seen, with some considerable justification, as a major cause of child poverty.

In the educational sphere Professor Alan Dyson of Manchester University has shown that although primary school teachers see involving and supporting parents as important they have neither the time nor the incentives to do it – particularly when the parents prove 'hard-to-reach' (Times Educational Supplement, 2 March 2007). The teachers acknowledge that engaging the parents is an important factor in raising the interest, aspirations and achievement of the child. Dyson concludes that work with parents is crucial and should be done by assistants who often live locally and whose time is more flexible rather than by teaching staff who are already fully committed.

The previous paragraphs in this section show that the underlying reasons for setting up this Project are still applicable. Researchers and even Government itself bring out very clearly how relevant this Project is to policies currently being pursued in economic, social and educational areas.

FLWs and their team leader, parents, headteachers and staff at Learning Partnerships have all pointed out that funding for this Project ceases at the end of December 2007 and that they have concerns about what will happen after that. If the FLWs are no longer in the schools, it is almost certain that the achievements already made and the positive developments taking place will all come to an abrupt end. Without funding for dedicated staff to support and develop parents, the schools will have little option but to return entirely to their core business of educating children. What has been achieved with parents will be lost and in an inner city area such as Beeston the community cannot afford to suffer such a loss. Funding needs to be found to make FLWs a permanent feature of primary schools in inner city areas. It is acknowledged that this will be expensive; but if the country is serious about supporting parents and about improving the employment prospects and the lives of those who live in deprived inner city areas, the financial resources will have to be found.

#### SUGGESTIONS: FOR FAMILY LEARNING WORKERS

1. Whilst continuing to keep up the existing high standards of support and assistance to current participants in the Project, the FLWs should strive to involve as many parents as possible in activities.
2. The FLWs should write up accounts of individual parents who have experienced major successes in their lives through the Project. To preserve anonymity in writing up these accounts the real names of neither the individuals nor the schools attended by their children should be used. These accounts should not only celebrate the successes but also should analyse why

they have come about. When completed these accounts can be supplied to funders so they are made fully aware in very tangible ways of what has been achieved.

#### SUGGESTIONS: FOR GOVERNMENT AND FUNDERS

1. Government and funders should recognise that the considerable achievements of this Project will not continue if the FLWs are withdrawn from their current roles in their schools. Without the FLWs what has been achieved will quickly be lost. Inner city areas such as Beeston cannot afford such a loss. Mainstream recurrent funding is needed to make FLWs a permanent feature of primary schools in areas like Beeston. Only when this is available will the necessary support and assistance for hard-to-reach parents be guaranteed and their opportunities to take up employment maximised. Such funding is required not only to counter the cycle of poverty and deprivation so prevalent in the inner cities but also to alleviate the labour shortage predicted for the national economy in the medium term.