



The Learning Zone

**An Evaluation by the
University of Leeds**

**The Learning Zone Partners: Learning Partnerships, Leeds
Thomas Danby, Joseph Priestley College, Leeds City Council Jobs
and Skills, St Luke's Cares, Vera Media, Belle Isle Foundation.**



FINAL REPORT ON THE LEARNING ZONE PROJECT

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Dr Paul Sharp,
Access and Community Engagement,
University of Leeds

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NATIONAL SETTING

The government is committed to helping the unemployed return to work. It wants to ensure that those currently unemployed are 'job ready', and funds organisations and projects which provide pre-employment training and support for people preparing and equipping themselves for work. The Prime Minister has said:

'In Britain today there is still too much potential untapped, too much talent wasted, too much ability unrealised. Full prosperity for our country can only be delivered – and Britain only properly equipped for the future – if we transform the way we think; using not some of the talents of some of the people, but all of the skills of all of the people.'

(Department of Works and Pensions, press release, 18 July 2007)

Government stresses that:

'The goal of full employment matters for people because the chance to work opens up the chance to progress, to develop and to participate fully in society. We know that people in work are often healthier, and more fulfilled, than people who are not. It matters for society because the poverty linked to worklessness divides our communities and deprives too many children of a fair chance in life. It matters for the economy because sustained economic growth depends on an active growing workforce. As the population ages the natural growth of the labour force is slowing and we need to draw new people in. And full employment matters for the taxpayer because the cost of welfare diverts funds that could be used elsewhere.'

(Department of Work and Pensions, In work, better off, July 2007, executive summary, para. 3)

Although progress has been made with raising the employment rates of ethnic minorities overall they still remain low for some groups. It has been reported that:

'Many people [from some ethnic minority groups] who are out of work don't even claim benefit even though they are on very low incomes. The result is very high rates of child poverty. Overall, a child who is in an ethnic minority family is twice as likely to grow up poor. Three-quarters of Bangladeshi and two-thirds of Pakistani children grow up in poverty.'

(Department of Work and Pensions, In work, better off, July 2007, executive summary, para. 42)

Across all ethnic groups the link between worklessness and poverty is strong and a matter for considerable concern.

'Children living with a workless single parent are over three times more likely to be in poverty than those living with a single parent who is in part-time work. They are also eight times as likely to be in poverty when compared to those whose parent works full-time.'

(Department of Work and Pensions, In work, better off, July 2007, p.32)

Government sees work as the best way to tackle child poverty and a study of the economy by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (Guardian, 28 March

2007) concludes that its findings confirm 'the government's emphasis on work as the most important route out of poverty'. A study of Sure Start by Capacity, a think tank funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, came to similar conclusions. Margaret Lochrie, director of Capacity said: 'It is well established that high quality education and childcare is useful, but it does not bring about fundamental changes in people's lives. Unless the (Sure Start) centres support economic wellbeing, they are only dealing with the symptoms of poverty, not the root cause' (Times Educational Supplement, 21 September 2007). The Capacity study maintained: 'Sure Start was conceived with the aim of helping to reduce poverty. If it is to achieve its aim, support for parents to gain employment or to move into better paid work must have a higher priority'.

Looking to the future Chris Humphries, formerly director general of City and Guilds, and now chief executive of the new UK Commission for Employment and Skills, stresses the economic importance of helping the unemployed to return to work. Humphries 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 maintains 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. He 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 and he maintains that 'more attention has to be paid to an estimated 7 million people of working age who are not active nor registered as unemployed' (Guardian, 7 November 2007). The Prime Minister told the Confederation of British Industry (CBI): 'millions of people faced being left on the scrapheap unless a concerted effort to get the out-of-work into training and give skills to those who did not possess themOf today's 6 million unskilled workers in Britain, we will soon need only half a million' (Times, 27 November 2007). Gordon Brown warned the CBI that because of changes in the global economy more than 5 million unskilled jobs would be lost. 'We have 9 million highly-qualified workers in Britain, but the challenge of the next 10 years is that we will need 14 million – 5 million more. Higher standards of living will depend on higher standards of learning' (Guardian, 27 November 2007).

Official statistics show that 'the biggest remaining concentrations of worklessness and poverty are now in our big cities' (Department of Work and Pensions, In work, better off, July 2007, p.33) with particularly large concentrations in the North West, the North East and Yorkshire and Humber. Therefore, a Project such as the Learning Zone which sets out to address these issues in the disadvantaged areas of Leeds is particularly apt and appropriate.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Over many years Learning Partnerships has accumulated experience of running initiatives in inner city schools to raise pupils' educational aspirations and attainment. For some time it had responsibility for two Education Action Zones (EAZs) in Leeds. Staff at Learning Partnerships were increasingly convinced that it was not possible to break out of the cycle of deprivation and exclusion by working with schools and children alone. They believed that programmes targeted at socially excluded children could not succeed in isolation and that it was necessary to help and support excluded parents in a complementary fashion. They stressed 'socially excluded parents do not bring up included children'. Learning Partnerships argued that programmes that built up the capacity and self esteem of socially and economically excluded parents enabling them to support their offspring and to play a fuller part in their communities were just as essential as efforts to raise the aspirations and achievements of children. Government increasingly came to this conclusion too and parental involvement has been given high priority in several recent initiatives. In a major speech at the University of Greenwich setting out his vision for education for the future the Prime Minister said:

'We now know the level of parental engagement in learning is actually more important in determining a child's educational achievement than the social class background, the size of the family or the parent's own educational attainment.'

During 2005 through its work with the South Leeds EAZ Learning Partnerships was in touch with the Leeds City Council South Leeds District Partnership (SLDP). A skills audit had shown that there were several significant pockets of unemployment amongst hard-to-reach groups in this area of the city. Although some good work was being undertaken problems of low skills levels and low aspirations continued to persist and there was little evidence that existing efforts were succeeding in engaging 'the very hardest to reach'. Staff at the SLDP wanted to encourage headteachers to take on a much wider role in the regeneration of the area. They were aware of a scheme on the Bransholme Estate in Hull that had achieved considerable success in this respect. Primary schools in Bransholme had managed to connect to and engage parents (predominantly mothers) who had been out of employment for a long period or indeed who had never been in it at all. They were enabled to build up their confidence and develop their skills in readiness for work. This experience led some of these parents to take much more interest and become more and more involved in their own community and its future. A member of staff at Learning Partnerships was encouraged to visit Hull and see the scheme in operation for himself. Soon afterwards Learning Partnerships took steps to start putting such ideas into practice.

In August 2005 Learning Partnerships submitted a bid to the European Regional Development Fund for the Learning Works Project. The bid was accepted and the Project commenced in January 2006. It sought 'to develop the capacity of local people to participate in economic activity and local regeneration' and was focussed on economically inactive adults. The Project put in place support mechanisms for these people so that they could enhance their capacity and quality of life. The ultimate purpose was 'to create a culture where entrepreneurship, training and jobs became key to the local ethos and culture' and thus unlocked 'the ability of the community to share in and contribute to economic and social renewal'.

Earlier the Regional Economic Strategy (RES) for Yorkshire and Humber for the period 2006-2015 had been developed. This attached importance to improving 'basic skills and skills for employability and everyday work'. The RES maintained:

'We need to make it easier for people to understand what they need, how and where to get advice and how and where to get the training they need. E-Learning, ICT and language skills are of increasing importance'.

(RES for Yorkshire and Humber 2006-2015, Government Draft, October 2005, p.47)

It was stressed that in some parts of the region: 'We need to make sure that we address the "two-speed economy". Wealthy areas with full employment still sit side by side with others that are run down and have a mass of interrelated problems like poor housing and health, low skills, drug abuse, run down environments and low aspirations. Successful solutions join up these issues and engage communities in doing so. Tackling this issue is important to the region's quality of life and economy as more than three times as many people here (Yorkshire and Humber) live in the most deprived 10% of communities nationally than in the least deprived 10%'.

(RES for Yorkshire and Humber 2006-2015, Government Draft, October 2005, p.52)

It continued:

'Whilst unemployment is very low, the proportion actually in employment is lower than the national average, with increasing numbers of people on incapacity benefit. Assisting those people that can work back into training or a job is a key challenge to improve growth and people's lives. This issue is tightly linked to health, culture, skills and aspirations as well as the available jobs.The Government's analysis shows that there is a danger in some areas of vicious circles that breed a culture of worklessness and low expectations that can pass on to future generations.'

It was recognised that Yorkshire and Humber was 'so diverse that a one-size-fits-all approach would not work'. Yorkshire Forward (the Regional Development Agency) decided that the RES would be best delivered by Sub-Regional Investment Plans (SRIPs). In the sub-region of West Yorkshire the planning process was broken down into major funding themes detailing priorities for investment. One of these themes was 'Skills' which was taken forward by the West Yorkshire Skills Theme Group set up in February 2004. This Group identified West Yorkshire's five skills priorities and in the summer of 2004 each metropolitan district was asked 'to review the supply and demand of skills in their area against the West Yorkshire Skills Theme Priorities'. Five local district and one sub-regional action plans were developed by the Skills Group, and in due course specifications were issued as tender briefs to commission projects in each district.

With the support of the South Leeds District Partnership, Learning Partnerships submitted an application for a Learning Zone in south Leeds for the period April 2006 to March 2009. The West Yorkshire Learning and Skills Council (LSC), which took a lead responsibility for securing the necessary funding on behalf of the Skills Group, did not support this application initially. However, a re-tendering exercise which indicated need for Learning Zones in both south and east Leeds took place in February 2006. Following the success of the Learning Works Project, Learning

Partnerships submitted bids for both (south and east) Zones with each Zone valued at £500,000. By the spring of 2006 the LSC indicated that both applications were accepted in principle but subject to further negotiations. When this initial commissioning process was completed, the responsibility for managing the progress of the Leeds Skills Theme Programme, which included not only Learning Partnership's south and east Learning Zones but also other projects, moved to the Resources Team in the Housing and Neighbourhoods Department at Leeds City Council.

Long delays ensued. The LSC and Leeds City Council had to negotiate contracts for all the Leeds Skills Theme projects before Leeds City Council could issue its contract to Learning Partnerships for the Learning Zone. Difficulties with just one of the projects led to delays for all. It was soon apparent that there were problems within the LSC which was making progress very slow.

Originally Yorkshire Forward had intended to fund all the sub-regional skills projects using its investment planning programme but revenue issues had arisen. Eventually the LSC had to use the European Social Fund (ESF) for three of the four projects in the Leeds Skills Theme Programme including the Learning Zone. Initially Leeds City Council was informed that ESF objective 3.3.1 (catch all) was to be used to fund the Learning Zone but much later (March 2007) this was corrected and the LSC said that this Project was to be funded equally by objectives 3.3.1 (catch all) and 3.2.2 (unemployed). This had important consequences for the eligibility criteria to be applied to beneficiaries. ESF funded projects also had to be completed no later than the end of December 2007. This tended to negate Learning Partnership's original plan to engage beneficiaries steadily taking time to build up their trust and confidence over a sustained period of learning.

Eventually the contract between the LSC and Leeds City Council was signed in February 2007 and backdated to June 2006. Leeds City Council then issued its contract with Learning Partnerships. Even at this late stage errors were found in the LSC generated contract with Leeds City Council. Corrections had to be made with the final version of the contract not being signed off until June 2007. Leeds City Council and all the delivery organisations, including Learning Partnerships, were greatly concerned and frustrated by these long delays.

As a small charity Learning Partnerships did not feel able to put itself at risk and spend money on the Learning Zone Project before the LSC/Leeds City Council contract was signed. By December 2006 it was concerned that if it did not start almost immediately it would not be able to achieve the Project's outputs particularly those relating to beneficiaries obtaining qualifications with specified periods of study. A part-time Project Manager was put in place and was later made full-time. This took place before the contract was signed and left Learning Partnerships at risk. Work with beneficiaries did not begin until the end of March 2007 and, given the short period of time that the Project would now be in operation (April-December 2007), reduced numbers of outputs and outcomes for certain categories had to be negotiated. The LSC had to acknowledge that the significant delays in contracting were going to lead to reduced project activity.

Learning Partnerships found the period from June 2006 to March 2007 very difficult. It had been awarded a £1 million contract in principle but could not start work on it. Learning Partnerships had reservations about the Learning Zone Project only lasting for nine months and found this for-shortened timescale far from appealing. It pointed out that the contracting process had taken as long as the time now available for delivery.

The Learning Zone was to identify people ‘with low aspiration, low motivation or skills deficit and assess their barriers to learning and economic well being’ and then support them in accessing training and qualifications. The operation of the Project was to be based on the delivery of specified outputs and outcomes, and it was expected that Learning Partnerships would engage delivery partners, including further education colleges, to provide the training to meet the needs of hard-to-reach members of the identified local communities in south and east Leeds. The ultimate aim was for the learners to develop their potential, obtain appropriate qualifications and move into employment.

With the Project’s substantially reduced timescale the geographical boundaries of the two areas were extended so that the Learning Zone could maximise the number of outputs and outcomes.

Project outputs were expressed in terms of accredited learning and training qualifications achieved by beneficiaries and outcomes in terms of the stages on the route to employment completed. The ten Project outputs and eight Project outcomes are set out below:

	Outputs and outcomes
OP1	Pre-vocational qualification or accredited learning below NVQ Level 1 achieved
OP2	Pre-vocational training modules completed including ICT qualifications or accredited learning below NVQ level 1 – minimum of 1 unit
OP3	Basic Skills module completed – Entry level 1, 2 or 3
OP4	Basic Skills training achieved – Entry level 1, 2 or 3
OP5	Key Skills supported
OP6	IT training at NVQ Level 1 or 2 achieved
OP7	Basic vocational training or accredited learning at NVQ Level 1 or equivalent achieved
OP8	Basic vocational training module achieved at NVQ Level 1 or equivalent
OP9	Progression to Entry level 3: NVQ level 1 or 2
OP10	Progression to further education/college. Attending an accredited course with a minimum of 60 guided learning hours, on a college main campus
OC1	Number of starters
OC2	Completed Individual Learning Plans
OC3	Initial Assessment of Individual Needs at basic skills level
OC4	Taster Sessions completed
OC5	Work Experience completed

OC6	Full-time employment achieved
OC7	Part-time employment achieved
OC8	Voluntary work undertaken

Learning Partnerships pointed out to its staff that ‘the entire project is centred around the achievement of meeting various outputs, outcomes and milestones’. Achieving outputs and outcomes formed ‘the backbone’ of the Project and its success was to be measured in this way. Consequently payments were to depend on the number of outputs and outcomes achieved. During the early stages of the Project there was considerable discussion and negotiation about where responsibilities for achieving outputs and outcomes lay.

Gateway Development Workers were appointed for each of the two Gateways (south and east Leeds). Their roles were key to the whole Project and these are discussed in detail in a later section of this report.

Each Gateway had learning providers that delivered the training and the courses. In the south Gateway the learning providers were: Belle Isle Foundation, Joseph Priestley College, St. Luke’s Cares and Vera Media. In the east the sole provider was Leeds Thomas Danby College. In terms of volume the further education colleges were the major learning delivery providers. Towards the end of the Project, Jobs and Skills, Leeds City Council, also became a delivery partner.

A range of levels of learning was to be made available including taster sessions, pre-vocational qualifications, entry levels 1,2 and 3, key skills and NVQ levels 1 and 2 or equivalent. The colleges told Learning Partnerships that in their experience most people beginning learning programmes in the target areas in south and east Leeds were at entry level 2. It was acknowledged by all parties that people with low or no qualifications were a very difficult group to engage in learning and that they would require a substantial level of support. Learning Partnerships also expected the types of courses provided to range widely and include Basic English and Mathematics, Information Technology, Business and Training for Classroom Assistants. In practice the types of courses ranged even more widely than this and, in addition to the above, included Pre-Vocational Training, Basic Vocational Training, Childcare and Paediatric First Aid. Taster sessions on a wide variety of topics were also offered.

At the outset Learning Partnerships sought the advice and assistance of a person with a very strong background in further education and community outreach work in Leeds. She was able to advise on the courses and qualifications which would be appropriate for the client groups in east and south Leeds and which were also on the LSC’s list of approved accredited vocational courses and thus available for inclusion in the Project. Particularly in relation to east Leeds she had several long conversations with key practitioners there about the area’s needs and what should be offered taking into account the Project’s shortened timescale. She believed that adults who were unemployed and out of mainstream education and training would only commit themselves to relatively short courses in the first instance. These adults would not take on long courses which might interfere with the processes of looking for work, child care arrangements and family commitments. They also lacked confidence and were often far from convinced that they would be able to cope with the sustained demands of long courses. Normally in the first instance they were more

at ease to commit to single modules than to whole courses. Learning Partnerships much appreciated the help and guidance it received and acknowledged that this person transformed the Project from an agreed scheme into a practical working proposition that was ready for implementation.

THE LOCAL AREAS

In order to understand the local situation it is worth quoting at length a report prepared by Leeds City Council:

‘The economy of Leeds is strong and contains by far the greatest level of employment opportunity in the sub-region (West Yorkshire). The majority of the employment opportunities are accessible from central Leeds and the local transport network is good. However, Leeds has marked contrasts between its wealthier and more deprived areas. While, on the whole, the City performs well, the issues faced in the most deprived wards are amongst the most severe in the sub-region. Profiles of the poorest performing areas show that issues of economic inactivity, employment, education and health are all significantly worse in these areas than elsewhere in the sub-region.’

‘Employment in Leeds has grown by 11% between 1996 and 2000, 8% between 2000 and 2004, and is forecast to grow a further 6.1% to 2016. Leeds economically inactive levels are similar to the sub-regional average, the current unemployment rate for the city as a whole is 5%. The claimant count for Leeds residents is high, especially long term claiming. Eight wards have a claimant rate of more than double the West Yorkshire average, while two have over three times that average.’

‘There is a concentration of issues in specific wards. 20% of the Leeds population live in wards which are the worst 10% of wards within the UK, as measured on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Skills surveys covering people in these areas show that only around 31% have full-time jobs, unemployment rates are about 8%, 47% have no qualifications, and aspirations and connections for learning and work are low.’

‘The Bangladeshis and Pakistanis have the lowest rates of economic activity in the city and, at 24%, the Bangladeshi community has the highest unemployment rate of any community in the city.’

‘Leeds is the economic driver of West Yorkshire accounting for 40% of its employment. It has a large economy and in the past decade has successfully diversified to a more knowledge-based business and employment base. A high proportion of people working in Leeds commute in, making the City economically important to the wider sub-region and beyond Whilst the economy of Leeds is growing, employment growth has been more modest in recent years and that growth has been concentrated to skilled work. Furthermore, Leeds has several wards with high levels of worklessness, low educational attainment, and low levels of economic activity. It is a city of two economies.’

(Leeds City Council, Common Inspection Framework: Self Assessment Report Sub-regional Investment Plan, Skills Theme, Leeds, October 2007, pp1-4)

The Learning Zone operates in south (Beeston Hill, Holbeck, Belle Isle and Middleton) and east (Gipton, South Seacroft, Harehills and Burmantofts) Leeds, areas which have not shared in Leeds’ economic growth in recent years.

Despite their proximity to the economically vibrant city centre, in the south Beeston Hill and Holbeck have the typical characteristics of inner city areas and experience multiple and often inter-connected problems. This part of Leeds has a relatively large minority ethnic population including a substantial South Asian community. Unemployment remains stubbornly high; high density housing is the norm; incomes are low; health problems are prevalent; educational attainment is well below average; and there are above average rates of crime and anti-social behaviour.

Belle Isle and Middleton are made up mainly of large estates of council housing built several decades ago. They share many of the problems experienced by Beeston Hill and Holbeck.

Particularly relevant for this Project, the proportion of adults without qualifications living in all these districts of south Leeds is much greater than for the city as a whole. Despite considerable efforts over a long period these areas remain 'economically excluded'; and there has been very limited progress in connecting these communities in south Leeds to the economic success achieved by the city overall.

In the east Gipton and South Seacroft are mainly large council housing estates. Educational attainment is low and there have been persistent problems with secondary schooling in these parts of east Leeds over many years. Disaffection has resulted and has contributed to high rates of crime and anti-social behaviour which at times has threatened community safety. Unemployment is high compared with Leeds as a whole and many adults suffer from serious health problems.

Harehills and Burmantofts contain large areas of traditional nineteenth century back-to-back housing and include super output areas with extremely high population densities. The area has a large minority ethnic population with substantial communities of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin.

Overall in the east a high proportion of the population is economically inactive when compared with Leeds as a whole. A particularly key issue for this area is the large proportion of adults without qualifications which is well in excess of that for the city overall. The extent of disadvantage experienced in the east is similar to that in the south; and, like the south, the east has very largely missed out on the prosperity enjoyed by Leeds over the last two decades.

CO-ORDINATION OF INTERVENTIONS

Those who originally encouraged Learning Partnerships to bid for the Learning Zone Project were aware that there was in Leeds a wide variety of local agencies all of which were trying to assist those without work in the disadvantaged districts of the city. There was concern that their efforts tended to be fragmented, and to a considerable extent they pursued their own individual interests and did 'their own things'. At times their priorities were quite parochial and, without much doubt, in some instances there was duplication of provisions. Those seeking change wanted these efforts to be brought together with the different agencies working in collaborative partnership. In their view emphasis needed to be placed on co-operation and cohesion and they believed that the Learning Zone would be a means to help bring this about. The Project would take responsibility for the co-ordination of provisions, prevent unnecessary duplication and organise delivery of support, learning and training. With the assistance of the various groups mentioned later in this section, the Learning Zone aspired to meet these objectives and offer a more integrated and strategic response to these issues than had been achieved in Leeds hitherto.

A Steering Group for the Learning Zone Project was set up and included representatives from Job Centre Plus, Leeds City Council, Aire Valley Employment Team, voluntary faith and community sector organisations based in south and east Leeds and the further education colleges responsible for delivering learning. This Steering Group was to serve both the Learning and Job Zones (the Job Zone is discussed briefly later in this report). The Steering Group's aims were to co-ordinate the Learning/Job Zone programmes; to add value by identifying common threads and facilitating sharing of best practice; to provide a mechanism to report back to invested and interested parties on the performance of the projects. It brought together partners who had many years' experience and much expertise in meeting the needs of people living in the most disadvantaged districts of south and east Leeds.

Leeds City Council set up a Skills Steering Group that included representatives from all the Leeds Skills Theme projects administered by the Council's Neighbourhoods and Housing Department as well as the LSC. This forum considered issues that applied across the Skills Theme projects and proved a useful means of sharing experiences and good practices and disseminating information.

Initially, there was some discussion about whether the Learning Zone Project should 'encourage members of the community to form focus groups in each of the areas (east and south) to monitor the Project's development and act as a voice for the community to help influence the further training provision that will be provided'. Eventually it was decided to link to the communities through Parents' Focus Group meetings held in the south and east. Reports on the progress of the Learning Zone were regularly presented to these meetings and comments from members of the local communities noted. At times it proved difficult to meet requests from community members because they did not fall within the permitted parameters of the Learning Zone Project. For example, requests were sometimes made for courses on subjects not approved for the Project by the LSC.

The Learning Zone was also connected to the local communities through Learning Partnerships' representation on the Worklessness Sub-groups for the South and East Leeds District Partnerships. The work and progress of the Project were reported to these Sub-groups.

METHODOLOGY

The research for this evaluation of the Learning Zone Project consisted of:

- analysis of documents and databases held by Learning Partnerships
- analysis of documents provided by Leeds City Council
- interviews with key people connected with the Project
- focus groups with Project beneficiaries (learners)

Documentation

The documents, statistics and databases supplied by Learning Partnerships plus the documents and statistics provided by Leeds City Council were a very rich source of high quality information relating to the Project. This material included bids and drafts concerning the origins of the Project, various sets of minutes including those of the Steering Group, committee working papers, quarterly reports, several reviews and Project reports and plans, leaflets of various kinds, posters, notes made by Project workers and items of correspondence.

Interviews

Key participants in the Project including the manager, the co-ordinator, the administrator, the development workers and the delivery partners were all interviewed as were several people who had been very much concerned with the setting up of the Project in the first instance. The interviews were conducted by the evaluator and were semi-structured with simple interview schedules to ensure that the same questions were put to all the interviewees in the particular categories. There was ample scope for interviewees to introduce their own material and put their own views and most did. Notes were made during the interviews and these were extensively used in the subsequent analysis.

Focus groups of learners (beneficiaries)

Three focus groups of learners (beneficiaries) were arranged, and the Project, their learning and their experiences more generally were discussed. The groups were led by the evaluator and Project staff were not present at these meetings. The same issues were put to all three groups and there were also plenty of opportunities for the learners to put forward their own points and their own views. At all the focus groups the learners took these opportunities and they were very willing to talk and participate actively in the evaluation process. Notes were made during the focus group meetings and these were used in the analysis.

Names

Names have not been used in the report as anonymity was promised to all those who contributed to the evaluation. It is likely, however, that those who know the Project very well may be able to identify individuals by 'inspired guesswork'. It is almost certainly impossible to write up a Project of this nature in a completely anonymous

way for the staff who have been concerned with it although the evaluator has done his best. On the other hand, the learners do remain completely anonymous.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Learning Zone were agreed as follows:

- Open a 'Skills Gateway' in South Leeds primarily to serve Beeston Hill and Holbeck and a 'Skills Gateway' in East Leeds primarily to serve Gipton and South Seacroft. Each will directly identify at least 300 people with low aspiration, low motivation or skill deficits, and assess their barriers to learning and economic well being. The total number of beneficiaries during the lifetime of the project will be at least 600.
- Link with the Aire Valley Employment Team to provide access to employment opportunities to learners and to offer learning opportunities to residents within the Aire Valley catchment areas.
- Bring together a range of partners from colleges, Job Centre Plus (JCP), Leeds City Council area committees south and east, and Voluntary, Community and Faith (VCF) sectors to form a Steering Group to more effectively co-ordinate interventions.
- Develop individual learning/employability plans for all beneficiaries that will raise their aspirations, identify suitable learning and skills development opportunities and support them to gain the generic skills, employers require.

These objectives were to be achieved during the lifetime of the Project.

OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES: TARGETS AND MONITORING FRAMEWORK

The original target outputs and outcomes for the Project are set out in Table 1. Although overall totals for the Project were not changed, there were some adjustments to the targets for individual delivery partners as the Project progressed.

TABLE 1

ORIGINAL TARGET OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES BY PROVIDER

	Output and Outcomes	Project Total	Thomas Danby College	Joseph Priestley College	Belle Isle Foundation	St. Luke's Cares	Vera Media	Not allocated initially
OP1	Pre-vocational qualification or accredited learning below NVQ Level 1 achieved	110	55	45	0	0	10	
OP2	Pre-vocational training modules completed, including ICT qualifications or accredited learning below NVQ level 1 – minimum of 1 unit	70	35	0	20	15	0	
OP3	Basic skills module completed – Entry level 1,2 or 3	60	30	15	0	0	15	
OP4	Basic Skills training achieved – Entry level 1,2 or 3	60	30	15	0	0	15	
OP5	Key skills supported	48	24	0	0	0	24	
OP6	IT training at NVQ Level 1 or 2 achieved	90	45	13	10	19	0	3
OP7	Basic Vocational Training or accredited learning learning at NVQ Level 1 or equivalent achieved	30	15	12	0	0	2	1
OP8	Basic Vocational Training Module achieved at NVQ Level 1 or equivalent	80	40	30	0	0	10	

OP9	Progression to Entry level 3, NVQ level 1 or 2	120	60	50	10	0	0	
OP10	Progression to further education college. Attending an accredited course with a minimum of 60 guided learning hours, on a college main campus.	25	13	12	0	0	0	
OC1	Number of starters	550	275	120	45	38	39	33
OC2	Completed Individual Learning Plans	300	150	55	26	36	33	
OC3	Initial Assessment of Individual Needs at basic skills level	400	200	96	36	32	36	
OC4	Taster Sessions completed	50	25	15	0	0	0	10

The Project totals for OC5-OC8 were as follows and were to be achieved directly by the Learning Zone.

	Outcomes	Project Total
OC5	Work Experience completed	34
OC6	Full-time employment achieved	14
OC7	Part-time employment achieved	14
OC8	Voluntary work undertaken	40

Throughout the Project quarterly review meetings were held with Leeds City Council's Skills Team. These meetings considered, amongst other things, progress made against targets across all outputs and outcomes, reasons for under and over achievements, actions already taken and those planned. This quarterly monitoring framework not only kept the Learning Zone in close touch with those leading and managing the Leeds Skills Theme Programme, but also provided a useful mechanism to stimulate regular self review which was followed up by actions to secure improvements agreed with the City Council's Team.

DEVELOPMENT WORKERS

Initially a Development Worker was appointed to each of the south and east Gateways. Later in the Project a third member was added to the team. The Development Workers came from different backgrounds. One had worked in training organisations and in a job centre as a lone parent adviser, the second was a former youth worker, the third had many years' experience of working with the unemployed helping them to return to employment. They were not themselves adult education teachers nor were they professional guidance counsellors. Their roles, however, were key to the whole Project. They had to be in very close contact with their communities, make contact with potential learners and provide support to them through the processes of accessing training, obtaining qualifications and finding employment.

The ways in which the Development Workers made contact with potential learners were not prescribed and a wide variety of methods were used. The Development Workers stressed that 'customers don't come to us, we have to go out there and get them'. Leaflets were distributed through doctors' surgeries, schools and other institutions. Regular drop-in sessions were arranged at suitable locations in the local areas. Several learning events were organised at community centres, schools and family learning centres. Close links which often led to beneficiary referrals were established with many different partners including schools, family learning workers based in schools, Job Centre Plus, Connexions and voluntary, community and faith sector organisations. As the Project became more firmly established learners were also recruited by 'word of mouth' in the local communities themselves. The Development Workers had responsibility for ensuring that 'courses offered through the Project were well advertised and marketed at a level that was appropriate to the client group'. There was consensus that this was effectively done. In its self-assessment review, Leeds City Council commented that 'the Project is very good at targeting groups who face social exclusion' and this achievement owed much to the efforts of the Development Workers.

The Development Workers had to ensure that at the outset learners were provided with necessary information, advice and guidance (IAG) and had opportunities 'to discuss their personal aims and objectives and match them to the training available'. IAG was delivered impartially by Belle Isle Foundation, Leeds Thomas Danby and Jobs and Skills through a separate contract. The Leeds City Council self-assessment review acknowledged that 'this Project targeted beneficiaries who have few or no accredited skills and that these beneficiaries tended to be wary of training and "official" organisations. They require a high level of initial support and hand-holding to enable them to see the value of self-improvement, give them a belief in their ability to improve and to start on the improvement process'. The review continued: 'The Development Workers' role is critical in aiding beneficiary transition into learning, especially where a beneficiary has not accessed learning of any kind for several years. Feedback from delivery agents indicates that a positive and supportive relationship between the Development Worker and the learner has a direct correlation to the retention and progression of that learner. Excellent relationships have been

established between the community referral and training partners, with the Project Co-ordinator and Development Workers’.

It was pointed out by the Development Workers that once induction was completed the amount of contact between them and individual learners varied considerably and according to the latter’s perceived needs. The Development Workers sometimes talked to learners towards the end of their courses about progression. As required, the Development Workers provided assistance with job finding skills and with locating appropriate and supportive work experience placements. They signposted beneficiaries to further opportunities including more advanced training and qualifications in further education, voluntary work and full or part-time employment. The Development Workers indicated that some of the delivery partners preferred to deal with progression issues themselves as they saw the beneficiaries as their own learners. Nonetheless the Development Workers talked to beneficiaries about progression when this was required. In its self-assessment review of the Project, Learning Partnerships acknowledged that the system for giving advice and guidance to learners about progression opportunities was insufficiently developed and needed to be improved. This is considered in a later section of this report.

There was consensus that the Development Workers have developed excellent and close relationships with people living in the local communities. This kind of close contact and support is essential when potential beneficiaries are thinking about taking their first steps into learning for many years. Often the different Development Workers have worked together and supported each other when they have been enrolling new learners. The Project Co-ordinator and all the Development Workers believe that they have operated very much as a team and this has strengthened both them and their work in the local communities. Inter-personal relationships within the team have been first class and there has been a very positive ‘team spirit’. There has been flexibility in day-to-day working and there has been enough ‘space’ for the Development Workers to develop their roles in their own ways. Autonomy for individuals has been combined with a high level of trust between the different members of the team. The team has worked well in practice because members trust each other, know what is necessary to get the job done and regularly support each other. There is no doubt that the Development Workers together with the Project Co-ordinator have been key players in delivering the Learning Zone Project. In the main they were the people who have brought in economically inactive members from the local communities, have supported them and have put them on track to develop their skills so that in due course they can take opportunities to engage in and contribute to the Leeds economy.

LEARNING DELIVERY PARTNERS

As already mentioned in an earlier section, in the South Gateway the learning delivery partners were Belle Isle Foundation, Joseph Priestley College, St. Luke's Cares and Vera Media. In the East Gateway the sole delivery partner was Leeds Thomas Danby College. In terms of volume the further education colleges were by far the major learning delivery partners. How the delivery partners operated was not uniform and their different *modus operandi* reflected not only the requirements of the Learning Zone Project but also their different strengths and the different roles they had established and played in their local communities. Belle Isle Foundation and St. Luke's Cares, for example, were involved exclusively in provisions for Information Technology whereas the further education colleges provided a very wide range of courses.

All the delivery partners used the Development Workers for recruitment of learners but the extent to which they were utilised varied between the different partners. One college and two voluntary sector organisations reported that the Development Workers had brought in a large proportion of their new learners. One voluntary organisation commented: 'The Development Workers have helped tremendously. We were a well kept secret but there is now much increased awareness in the local area. Many learners joined who would not be here without the Project'. One of the colleges indicated: 'The Development Workers have done most of the recruiting. A few students have come directly through the College but the majority through the Development Workers. The Development Workers have been invaluable'. On the other hand, one college and one voluntary sector organisation reported that they had done most of their recruitment themselves through local agencies they already knew well. One of these institutions indicated that initially the Development Workers were inexperienced and their services had not been used to a great extent. It was added that with hindsight it was possible that the Development Workers had not been utilised enough or as effectively as they might have been. One organisation took the view that the Development Workers and its own efforts regarding promotional activities had contributed almost equally to recruitment.

The composition of the different groups of learners is of interest. Both colleges estimated that two thirds of the learners were female and one third male. Two of the smaller learning providers reported a 50/50 split in terms of gender balance and the third indicated that there were slightly more women than men on its courses. Overall there was a wide age range amongst the learners. The colleges felt the predominant age range for their learners was from about 25 years to about 35 years. Of the smaller providers, two suggested the predominant age range was from about 30 years to 40 years and the third accommodated a large number of older learners who were 55 years of age or older. Both colleges and one smaller provider had people from ethnic minorities very well represented amongst their learners and the two other smaller providers had largely white British learners.

The delivery partners believed that this Project had many strengths. The colleges stressed that the possibility of running a very wide range of courses under the auspices

of this Project was a great advantage. The provisions for taster courses were seen as very important, even essential in the context of provisions for learners in vulnerable circumstances with little, if any, previous experience of adult education. Tasters were short courses for new learners that were not 'over-fancy'. They could be put on in topic areas likely to appeal to and engage new learners returning to education. They were really good for 'getting in' learners, and once they were 'in' they would talk to their tutors and to other members of their classes which often opened up possibilities of 'moving on' to more substantial vocational courses. Tasters were a simple thing but an important key for many learners to start unlocking their own potential and the opportunities that education and training could offer. Within the Learning Zone Project it was possible to put on courses with small classes because the standard further education norm of at least 15 learners per class did not apply. This meant that classes with (say) 6 to 8 people could go ahead; and small class size where all the members of the class and the tutor could quickly get to know each other very well was frequently very important to socially excluded learners returning to education for the first time for many years. Both the colleges and the smaller providers also valued highly the fact that the Learning Zone permitted the use of tried and tested flexible learning methods which they regarded as essential for IT provisions to be successful in their localities.

There was unanimous praise for Learning Partnerships about how the Project had been administered. Several delivery partners had previous experience of LSC/ESF projects and they knew how complex the arrangements and the paperwork would be. The relationships that developed between the delivery partners and Learning Partnerships were excellent. The delivery partners found the staff at Learning Partnerships efficient and very helpful and they believed that Learning Partnerships had made the administrative processes as straight forward as they possibly could. They had received good support with the difficult and extensive paperwork for which they were very grateful.

All the delivery partners felt that the main challenges facing the Project stemmed from the very short timescale which had been caused by the very late start. One college said: 'The main problem was getting the courses set up in time.' It believed that the Project had in practice been one term (September to December) with a small amount of extra time during the previous summer period. There was agreement that this had led to a situation in which delivering the outputs was very pressurised with little opportunity to build up the confidence, abilities and skills of the learners over time. The timescale posed particular problems for courses, such as some in Information Technology, that required and specified long hours of study. It also could make demonstrating learners' progression difficult because there was limited time available within the parameters of the Project for the learners to show progression.

There were, in addition, problems at the beginning of the Project with LSC requirements which seemed to change and with the LSC generated paperwork. The colleges were particularly badly affected by these factors. Many early claims had to be done twice because some of the first submissions were not in line with the most recent LSC requirements or lacked all the required signatures. Because it was not clear at first one college carried out initial assessments of learners but did not put in claims for them. This had to be rectified later at great speed. Towards the end of the Project there were also potential problems over achievement data as awarding bodies

did not turn round examination results, pass lists and certificates as quickly as the Project required. There were worries that outputs would be lost if the LSC did not allow more time for the necessary evidence to be supplied by the awarding bodies to the delivery partners. Steps were taken by Learning Partnerships and Leeds City Council to try to ensure that these outputs were not lost to the Project.

Early in the Project there were concerns from two of the smaller providers about delays in the making of payments to them. These delays threatened to cause cash flow problems for these small organisations. They took the view that they should be paid as soon as their claims were verified. On the other hand, Learning Partnerships was itself also a relatively small voluntary sector organisation and was not in a position to pay out until it received the relevant funding from Leeds City Council. Fortunately, once the early 'teething problems' had been resolved, this was no longer an issue as payments were made promptly.

In addition, one of the smaller providers found that a number of potential learners met all the criteria for inclusion in the Project except the one relating to residence within specified postcode areas. It had either to put these people onto programmes other than the Learning Zone or turn them away. Normally it managed to do the former but it found this a frustration particularly as it was situated close geographically to an ineligible postcode area which included several disadvantaged districts.

There was overall consensus that this had been a good project which had been well led by Learning Partnerships. Real progress had been made in a very short time. There had been good team work with people helping and supporting each other rather than 'competing for the spoils'. The colleges stressed that at the present time they were not provided with the financial resources to employ their own development workers so they were unable to do much community outreach work themselves. They were, therefore, particularly pleased that the Project's Development Workers had been able to perform these roles. They believed that the Learning Zone provided a good model with the voluntary sector working on the ground in the localities to recruit and support the learners with the colleges responsible for most of the delivery. It was hoped that this model might be used again in the future. It was acknowledged that the model was costly but work with hard-to-reach client groups was by its very nature extremely intensive and, therefore, expensive. Without extensive support such work could not be effective. The Learning Zone had shown that different partners could co-operate, provide support, deliver courses and be effective in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the city.

THE LEARNERS (BENEFICIARIES) AND THEIR VIEWS

Three focus groups of learners (beneficiaries) were arranged and led by the evaluator. The same issues were put to all three groups and there were also plenty of opportunities for the learners to put forward their own points and their own views. The learners were very willing to share their thoughts with the group and with the evaluator and to express their own views.

All three groups were very predominantly female and the ethnic minorities were strongly represented. The first group was studying Drugs Awareness at level 1, the second was following a level 1 Clait course and the third was about to complete a Child Care certificate at level 1.

The responses from the three groups had much in common and, although this was not sought, on major issues there was consensus both within and between the groups.

The learners had found out about their courses from a wide variety of sources including the Development Workers, the Project Co-ordinator, a delivery partner, parent liaison staff at several local schools, Job Shop, a voluntary sector organisation and in one case each 'my employer', and 'my sister'. They were aware that their courses were being provided as part of the Learning Zone Project and indicated that it was very important to them that they were provided free of charge. They doubted whether they would have been able to afford to attend the courses if they had had to pay fees.

The learners liked their courses, found them valuable and were enthusiastic about them. They had clearly built up good relationships with their tutors and their fellow learners. The learners were pleased with their teachers. Those on the Drugs Awareness course said that it was very informative and had succeeded in raising their awareness in many respects. It had also enabled them to do some research on drugs and they had considered how drugs were portrayed in the media. Those studying Child Care particularly liked the discussions and debates they had had and also the opportunities to give presentations. The practical nature of the Computer course was much appreciated and participants reported that it was helping them to build up their self-confidence.

All the focus groups stressed that their present courses linked to possibilities of paid employment in the future and this was of great interest to them. Those on the Drug Awareness course largely wanted to move into the health care professions. One course member was already employed in health care and another was working very specifically towards this goal. Those on the Clait course were sure that greater knowledge of and experience with computers would open up job prospects for them. They remained open-minded about the types of jobs but mentioned clerical, secretarial, jobs in schools such as classroom assistants and one member of the group who had had some previous experience of being a classroom assistant now wanted to set out on the long road to becoming a teacher. Predictably all those following the Child Care course wanted to work with children, normally young children up to the

age of seven years. Two members of the group were very clear that they were doing the course because they wanted the qualification to give them a firmer base for work as child-minders. They were convinced that the course would help them to get jobs. One person explained her own aims succinctly 'to move into employment and fairly quickly'.

Most of the learners had not been involved in education for some years although a substantial minority had taken adult education courses before. Many felt that short courses were particularly appropriate for re-introducing people to education. Several said that initially they would have been reluctant to commit themselves to a longer course and they also believed that a short course had an advantage in that 'it keeps you focussed'. Some, but not all, of the learners on the Clait course would have like this to have been extended.

Almost without exception on completion of their current courses the learners wanted to progress to a higher level. They expressed a strong commitment to doing this, but not all believed that it would be possible. Amongst some learners there was a real concern that they would have to pay what they regarded as high course fees and that they would not be able to afford them. Those on benefits realised that this would not apply to them, but some, not on benefits, stressed that their families had low incomes and that it would just not be possible to give priority to fees for an adult education course. A few who wanted to move directly into employment hoped that they might be able to combine this with a part-time level 2 course.

A few suggestions were made as to how the Learning Zone Project could be improved. It has to be acknowledged, however, that not all these suggestions could be implemented within the current regulations of the Project.

There was a request for a broader range of courses with a few learners feeling that the present Project is too skewed towards IT provisions. These people were particularly keen to take up a level 1 counselling course with the possibility of eventual progression to level 2.

Some learners could not understand why courses were restricted to people living in districts with particular postcodes. They felt that this was not right. As long as the non-geographical conditions of the Project were met, they believed that there should have been no postcode boundaries and it should have been available right across Leeds. The same learners also said that there should have been more advertising and promotion of courses available in places like Sure Start Centres and primary schools so that more people were made aware of what was on offer in their own localities. These learners did not seem to know that the Development Workers were already very much engaged in such promotional activities.

Although the learners did not comment directly on the matters referred to in this paragraph, the evaluator was able to observe such phenomena in the focus groups. In all cases the groups gelled very well. Good working relationships have been developed between group members and they clearly trusted one another. No doubt their classes had taught them how to work well together and in many ways they were operating as 'teams'. In this respect they had already learned the 'soft skills' which are so important in the workplace – mutual respect, co-operation and team work. The

Learning Zone had provided the opportunities 'to get out of the house', to develop the self-discipline to attend regular classes, to meet people and to work together in a group to achieve a common goal. These are all important skills that should not be underestimated. This may be seen as the 'hidden curriculum' of the Project and the evidence suggests that it has been operating most effectively. The learners in these focus groups were not just engaging in learning in preparation for employment, they were really enthusiastic about the process. They wanted opportunities to progress to more advanced studies and were certainly committed to seeking employment.

SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT AND QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PLAN

In the contract agreed between the LSC and Leeds City Council there was a short reference to a self-assessment report (SAR). For some time there was little information about this requirement, but eventually it was made clear by the LSC that all three ESF funded projects in the Leeds Skills Theme Programme would need to carry out a self-assessment as would Leeds City Council. This self-assessment employed the 'Common Inspection Framework' devised and used by OFSTED. At the end of the process Leeds City Council combined the four SARs (one from each of the three projects and its own) to produce one report covering the whole of the Leeds Skills Theme Programme. In this section the SAR refers to the Learning Zone's own self-assessment.

During September Learning Partnerships undertook its self-assessment of the Learning Zone Project and followed this up with a quality improvement plan. The self-assessment process was led by the Contract Manager and all staff at Learning Partnerships working on the Learning Zone Project were involved and had opportunities to input, to comment and to suggest ideas for improvements. The SAR is an important wide-ranging document which is considered here in some detail. Recommendations in the SAR are closely linked to the actions indicated in the quality improvement plan, and in general the two documents will be considered together.

As soon as Learning Partnerships received its contract, a Project Handbook was produced for all partners. This provided guidance about the systems that had been put in place and explained how outputs and outcomes were to be delivered and reported and how claims were to be supported with evidence. The SAR pointed out that initially some delivery partners did not fully understand the systems and the evidence requirements that Learning Partnerships had put in place to monitor and control the delivery of the contract. At the beginning of the Project there was in consequence some confusion on the part of some partners over claims. With hindsight Learning Partnerships believed that there should have been more training and direction for delivery partners on these matters. As soon as these problems were identified Learning Partnerships addressed the issues with the partners concerned. These matters, however, had an effect on the overall delivery of the Project and some remedial work had to be carried out.

The quality improvement plan made provisions for this remedial action to continue and further visits, where appropriate, were made to delivery partners. Contract guidelines were recapped with all providers with a view to ensuring that all partners were aware of their target outputs and outcomes and could compare these with their actual achievements made and recorded so far. Good practice regarding the delivery and recording of achievements was shared across all the providers. These actions made certain that all partners knew their exact positions. They also underlined very clearly and precisely which outputs and outcomes required particular attention and effort during the last few months of the Project. The delivery of outputs and outcomes were very important to the overall success of the Project and these actions were rated 'medium priority' in the quality improvement plan.

The SAR also considered that the system for giving advice and guidance to learners about progression opportunities was insufficiently developed and needed to be improved. Although the Development Workers were still involved with some learners on the completion of their courses, this was not always the case. The SAR recommended that all should have progression/exit interviews to ensure that progression opportunities were explored with them whilst they were still engaged. This was much more likely to lead to successful outcomes than trying to follow up learners after they had left the Project. The SAR felt that there was also a need for the systematic recording of progression opportunities which could be matched to learners' aims. This applied to progression to both further study and employment, but this need was particularly urgent in the area of progression to employment.

The quality improvement plan instituted a progression/exit form which was to be completed by Development Workers with all learners nearing the completion of their courses. The aim of these interviews was to increase progression to jobs (by 50%) and to further courses (by 20%). These interviews were likely to be key to the achievement and recording of outcomes OC5 to OC8 and to output OP10 (progression to full-time or part-time employment, work experience, voluntary work or further education college). This action was rated 'high priority' in the quality improvement plan. In addition, an extra Development Worker was appointed to help address these issues before the completion of the Project.

The SAR reviewed the quality assurance system put in place by the Project. It was stressed that there were guidelines in the Handbook concerning partners' roles and responsibilities. Clear systems were put in place, but the Project inevitably relied on 'a high standard of staff working relationships' to ensure that procedures were consistently put into practice. Project staff checked carefully that all claims met the detailed criteria laid down by the Learning and Skills Council. As already mentioned Learning Partnerships also conducted a monitoring review exercise which checked fully on how sub-contractors were progressing with the delivery of the Project outputs and outcomes. From the outset it was understood by all parties that Learning Partnerships would not deliver courses directly itself. It had to rely on the professional skills and considerable experience of its sub-contractors in this respect. All the sub-contractors had their own quality assurance systems in place and the two major providers were inspected by OFSTED. Learning Partnerships did not have staff in post with the expertise and experience to inspect the educational quality of the courses provided and it should be stressed that the Project specifications did not require or expect Learning Partnerships to do this.

In terms of quality assurance Learning Partnerships' roles and responsibilities related to the effective management and administrative efficiency of the project. The SAR produced considerable evidence to show that these functions had been carried out well. The Project, however, in the quality improvement plan instituted measures to improve its procedures and internal systems so that all activities completed by partners and learners could be tracked more effectively and the performance of sub-contractors more fully evaluated. These actions were rated 'medium priority'.

'Medium priority' was also given in the quality improvement plan to the development of the Learning Zone database so that it collected and recorded information relating to equal opportunities. This enabled information about different equal opportunities areas to be accessed and analysed during the Project and provided a valuable resource for considering areas such as gender, ethnicity and disability. It should be stressed that no substantive issues concerning equal opportunities arose during the Project and that Learning Partnerships could claim with justification that this was an area of considerable strength. However, the greater possibility of accessing and analysing equal opportunities data from the Project was much welcomed.

The SAR reviewed a much wider range of issues than has been considered in this section. Successes were identified in many areas and evidence provided to back up these claims. This section has concentrated on the issues in the SAR which led to actions given 'high and medium priority' in the quality improvement plan. There were eleven areas identified as 'low priority', and, although these were not unimportant, it is not necessary to list all these in this evaluation.

Overall the SAR brought out clearly the many strengths of the Learning Zone Project and underlined what had already been achieved and what was well on the way to being achieved. It also maintained balance, and was self-critical where necessary. This thorough self-assessment led on to the detailed quality improvement plan.

OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES: ACHIEVEMENTS

The outputs and outcomes achieved during the Project are set out in Table 2. These figures are best estimates (at mid-January 2008) rather than definitive.

TABLE 2
OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

	Output and Outcomes	Project Target	Project Achieved	% Achieved
OP1	Pre-vocational qualification or accredited learning below NVQ Level 1 achieved	110	97	88
OP2	Pre-vocational training modules completed, including ICT qualifications or accredited learning below NVQ level 1 – minimum of 1 unit	70	63	90
OP3	Basic skills module completed – Entry level 1,2 or 3	60	60	100
OP4	Basic Skills training achieved – Entry level 1,2 or 3	60	60	100
OP5	Key skills supported	48	44	92
OP6	IT training at NVQ Level 1 or 2 achieved	90	90	100
OP7	Basic Vocational Training or accredited learning learning at NVQ Level 1 or equivalent achieved	30	30	100
OP8	Basic Vocational Training Module achieved at NVQ Level 1 or equivalent	80	80	100
OP9	Progression to Entry level 3, NVQ level 1 or 2	120	118	98
OP10	Progression to further education college. Attending an accredited course with a minimum of 60 guided learning hours, on a college main campus.	25	25	100
OC1	Number of starters	550	550	100
OC2	Completed Individual Learning Plans	300	300	100
OC3	Initial Assessment of Individual Needs at basic skills level	400	390	98
OC4	Taster Sessions completed	50	50	100
OC5	Work experience completed	34	34	100
OC6	Full-time employment achieved	14	14	100
OC7	Part-time employment achieved	14	5	36

OC8	Voluntary work undertaken	40	35	88
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In October/November 2007 Learning Partnerships decided to approach a project partner, which up to this point had not been involved with the delivery of learning, to see whether it could help in this area. This partner was Leeds City Council's Jobs and Skills. It quickly agreed to participate and provided excellent support and assistance to the Learning Zone. Jobs and Skills helped enormously with delivery in a very short timescale. It also worked very swiftly to turn round all the paperwork and provided all the required information to Learning Partnerships to meet the very tight deadline. Without the considerable assistance of Jobs and Skills it would not have been possible for the Project to have achieved the numbers of outputs and outcomes that it did.

St. Luke's Cares was the only delivery partner to achieve 100% of all its target outputs and outcomes and is congratulated on this.

Taking the outputs and outcomes overall the Learning Zone achieved almost 98% of its targets. Given the very short period for delivery and the initial problems encountered by the whole Leeds Skills Theme Programme, this was a considerable, even outstanding, achievement.

In some areas the Project over-achieved by a significant amount. It had, for example, over 100 more starters (OC1) than are recorded in Table 2 (above), but did not put them onto the system because it was not possible to make claims on behalf of these additional beneficiaries.

In a small number of areas the division of the outputs and outcomes between objectives 3.2.2 (unemployed) and 3.3.1 (catch all) cost the Project a few achievements because they over-achieved on 3.2.2 but under-achieved on 3.3.1.

Towards the end of the Project great efforts were made to ensure that outputs were maximised. All the partners were visited and plans were agreed to put all the providers on track to deliver, as far as possible, their profiles. A number of fast track courses were provided so that the maximum number of beneficiaries could complete their studies within the strict time limit. There were concerns that there might be problems with Information Technology level 1 outcomes and progressions, but Table 2 shows that to a considerable extent these problems were overcome. Progressions to further education colleges (OP10) were achieved in line with profile although it was feared that this might be problematic because most learners saw this aim as completely out of sight and out of reach at the commencement of their courses. Progression to employment was always going to be very challenging particularly for a Project whose period of delivery lasted for only nine months. The vast majority of beneficiaries in disadvantaged circumstances and with very low skills bases needed longer than this short period to reach a level where they were ready to enter employment. It was very much to the Project's credit that it met its target for progression to full-time employment and the fact that only 5 (target 14) obtained part-time work should not detract from this achievement.

CONCLUSIONS

The objectives specified for the Learning Zone were achieved.

‘Skills Gateways’ were opened in south and east Leeds. People with low aspiration, low motivation and skills deficit were identified by the Development Workers, the delivery partners or through other means. Their barriers to learning and economic well being were assessed. It was eventually agreed that the target for the number of starters (OC1) would be 550 but the Project achieved over 100 more than this target. These beneficiaries all completed individualised learning records.

Links with the Aire Valley Employment Team were forged and the Team was represented on the Learning Zone’s Steering Group. Some referrals were made in each direction – from the Aire Valley Employment Team to the Learning Zone and vice versa.

A Steering Group was set up and included representatives from all the organisations specified in the objectives. The work of the Steering Group has already been considered in the section ‘Co-ordination of Interventions’.

Individual learning plans were negotiated with beneficiaries to ‘raise their aspirations, identify suitable learning and skills development opportunities and support them to gain the generic skills, employers require’.

In this Project detailed aims and objectives were expressed in practice through target outputs and outcomes. There was no doubt that the Learning Zone would be judged according to the extent to which it achieved its outputs and outcomes and this was fully understood by all parties.

Initially the Learning Zone had been designed as ‘a steady thing’. Time was to be taken to engage people who had no or little experience of adult education or skills training and to build up their confidence, motivation and aspirations. They would not be rushed, but eventually they would move onto more advanced accredited courses and hence into employment. The delays at the outset caused by the problems with agreeing, finalising and signing off the contracts for the Leeds Skills Theme Programme meant that the delivery period for the Project was reduced to only nine months. Such a short delivery period had not been envisaged and the new circumstances made a gradual build-up for the beneficiaries impossible. All those involved in the Project, including the learners, now had to move fast. Although these new circumstances were far from appealing, great efforts were made by all concerned to ensure that the target outputs and outcomes were met.

During its early months the Project had success in recruiting beneficiaries but, as expected, they needed high levels of help and support and normally started their learning from a low base. Consequently there was a much slower rate of progress in hitting targets involving qualifications than had been originally envisaged. However, during the last third of the delivery period (October-December) stupendous efforts were made by all to reach the targets. As has already been reported, to its credit the

Learning Zone achieved almost 98% of its targets – an outstanding achievement particularly in the context of the early problems encountered by the Leeds Skills Theme Programme and the consequent short delivery period. It was not a matter of co-incidence that the areas in which targets were not quite fully achieved were ones that required long term build-up such as ‘voluntary work undertaken’ and ‘part-time employment achieved’. There is not much doubt that with a little more time, achievement in even more outputs and outcomes would have reached 100%.

From the learners’ perspective the Learning Zone was a success. Without the Project they would not have engaged with the learning process, but once they had become involved and started to attend their courses they had real enthusiasm for the process. They built up good working relationships with their teachers and with their fellow learners. Their experience of successful learning improved their self-esteem and their self-confidence, and they clearly saw close links between their learning and their employment prospects. They were interested in progression and had no doubt that the underlying purpose of their learning was a step towards trying to enter or re-enter the job market. There is no doubt that the Learning Zone made considerable impact on the learners and their aspirations.

The LSC required the Leeds City Council’s Skills Team to review the quality assurance systems put in place by all the Leeds Skills Theme projects in relation to learning and teaching. The Learning Zone stressed that there were guidelines in its Handbook concerning partners’ roles and responsibilities. Clear procedures were in place, but the Project inevitably relied on ‘a high standard of staff working relationships’ to ensure that these procedures were consistently put into practice. Project staff carefully checked that all claims met the detailed criteria laid down by the LSC. As already mentioned monitoring review exercises were also conducted to check fully on how sub-contractors were progressing with the delivery of outputs and outcomes. From the outset it was understood by all parties that Learning Partnerships would not deliver courses directly itself. It had to rely on the professional skills and considerable experience of its sub-contractors, the delivery partners, in this respect. All the delivery partners had their own quality assurance systems in place and the two major providers were inspected by OFSTED. Learning Partnerships did not have staff in post with the expertise and experience to inspect the educational quality of the courses provided and it should be stressed that the Project specifications did not require or expect Learning Partnerships to do this. It is worth noting that the Leeds City Council Skills Team was in a similar position to Learning Partnerships with regard to the inspection of teaching and learning. The Skills Team itself ‘lacked the expertise to undertake formal observation sessions’ and could only sample the learning experience very lightly. However, the fact that the Learning Zone’s major learning providers (the two further education colleges) followed the national inspection arrangements and were fully inspected by OFSTED surely provided adequate quality assurance for the Project’s learning.

The Development Workers were key to the success of the Project. They developed positive and close relationships with the people living in the local communities in south and east Leeds and were responsible for much of the recruitment to the Project. The Development Workers then supported the beneficiaries during the learning process as and when required. The Learning Zone’s SAR showed that the system for giving advice and guidance to learners needed to be developed further. As already

noted, although the Development Workers were still involved with some learners towards the end of their courses, this was not always the case. The SAR recommended that all learners should have progression/exit interviews with Development Workers to ensure that progression opportunities were explored with them whilst they were still engaged. The Project's quality improvement plan put in place a progression/exit form which was to be completed by the Development Workers with all learners nearing the completion of their courses. This innovation was much welcomed and marked a significant improvement in the system ensuring that all learners were helped and supported throughout their whole engagement with the Project.

There is clear evidence that the Development Workers, together with the Project Co-ordinator, worked very well as a team regularly supporting each other. This strengthened not only their own individual efforts but also their work with the local communities. They were key to delivering many of the outputs and outcomes of the whole Project. In the main the Development Workers did not have professional backgrounds in guidance and counselling but were often called upon to perform such roles. It should be considered whether opportunities might be made available to individual Development Workers, as appropriate, to undertake formal in-service training courses in guidance and counselling.

The Delivery partners were also key to the success of the Learning Zone. They were the direct providers of the learning and their staff were in regular and close contact with the learners. The very positive feedback from the learners was very much a reflection of the efforts of the delivery partners and their staff. There was an excellent and supportive relationship between Project staff and all the delivery partners. The latter praised Learning Partnerships' organisation and leadership of the Project and they were pleased to support Learning Partnerships as the lead partner in applications for further projects and further funding. Several delivery partners commented that they had encountered the complexities of ESF projects before and that they were impressed with how the Learning Zone had handled these issues. They appreciated the team work they experienced with people helping and supporting each other with all members 'pulling in the same direction'. As already mentioned, the colleges stressed that they were no longer funded to employ community outreach workers themselves and were pleased that the Project's Development Workers had been able to perform these essential roles. They suggested that the Learning Zone provided a good model with the voluntary sector working on the ground in the local communities to recruit and support the learners with the colleges responsible for most of the direct delivery of the courses. They hoped that this good model might be considered for further use in the future when arrangements for projects of this type were being considered.

It has already been shown that the Learning Zone made considerable impact on the Project's learners. The three previous paragraphs have demonstrated that those directly responsible for making this impact were the Development Workers and the members of staff employed by the partner providers to deliver the learning. The Project was an exemplar of good practice in all these respects.

Although Learning Partnerships' equal opportunities policies worked well, from the available data it was not easy to establish and summarise the characteristics of the

Project's learners. Subjective evidence from the delivery partners and Project staff at Learning Partnerships indicated that learners were predominantly female and in the age range 30-45 years. People from ethnic minorities were also well represented amongst the learners. The Learning Zone's SAR recognised the need to develop a database that collected and recorded information relating to equal opportunities. Such a database would be a valuable resource enabling information about learners' gender, ethnicity, disability and postcode to be stored, accessed and analysed. It will remove reliance on subjective evidence and provide much more accurate information. It is very much welcomed.

Despite the confusion and the initial problems with paperwork at the beginning of the Project (already mentioned in the section on the Learning Delivery Partners), the management and administration of the Project have worked smoothly.

Some of the LSC/ESF forms were complicated and not easy to complete for people with little or no previous experience of them. These forms presented some challenges particularly to the learners. The amount of evidence required to back up claims was considerable but probably essential to ensure that everything was in order and falling clearly within the scope and terms of the contract. The division of the outputs and outcomes between objectives 3.2.2 and 3.3.1 led to some difficulties, previously mentioned, concerning over-achievement for one objective and under-achievement for the other.

Regular meetings were held with the delivery partners and monthly targets and achievements were reviewed. Visits were also made to the delivery partners to discuss new developments and share good practice. Without exception the delivery partners stressed how helpful and efficient the administrators of the Learning Zone had been. They could hardly have been more positive about this aspect of the Project indicating that the level of performance in this area had been exceptionally good and better than for most projects they had experienced in the past. When Project team members left Learning Partnerships to take up other posts or to move away from the West Yorkshire area, replacements were found and put in post quickly. In this way the impact on the delivery of the Project was minimised. Recently the LSC has audited the Leeds Skills Theme Programme and expressed satisfaction with the Learning Zone's meticulous paperwork. Leeds City Council has congratulated the Project on its performance in this respect. Learning Partnerships was relatively new to leading a Project of this type. It learned quickly and can be justly proud of how well it performed.

As has been explained those who supported the setting up of the Learning Zone sought to put in place a Project which would take responsibility for the co-ordination of provisions to assist people without work in the disadvantaged districts of Leeds. The Learning Zone would be able to organise the delivery of support, learning and training and also prevent unnecessary duplication. When in late 2006/early 2007 it was clear that the starting date for the Learning Zone was going to be delayed and the length of the Project drastically shortened, Learning Partnerships negotiated with Neighbourhood Renewal at Leeds City Council to provide funding to extend the Project's provisions until the end of March 2008. This was to be done through a new project entitled the 'Job Zone' whose boundaries and terms of reference were not identical to those of the Learning Zone. It is not within the remit of this evaluation to

consider the Job Zone except to say that it has a somewhat broader brief than the Learning Zone and that, within this brief, it was possible to continue the provisions of the Learning Zone for a further three months. This provided a most welcome and potentially productive extension to what has been a very short intensive Project.

The Job Zone is still in operation and thus, under a new name, much of the work of the Learning Zone is continuing for three months. In November 2007 the Government announced new arrangements for neighbourhood renewal funding in its document 'The Working Neighbourhoods Fund'. The new provisions have allocated only transitional funding to Leeds. Grants to Leeds for 2008/09 and 2009/10 fall sharply and progressively and there will be no Neighbourhoods Funding for the city at all in 2010/11. In these circumstances Leeds may not wish to initiate many new projects during the period of transitional funding and may prefer to extend and consolidate existing ones. Given the many successes of the Learning Zone achieved in a very tight timescale and given that people without work in south and east Leeds continue to have pressing needs for learning and training opportunities, consideration should be given to whether the Learning/Job Zone can be extended beyond the end of March 2008.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

- The Learning Zone has achieved its objectives.
- Despite a late start and a shortened delivery period of only nine months the Learning Zone has achieved almost 98% of its target outputs and outcomes.
- The areas in which outputs and outcomes were not quite fully met were ones requiring long term build-up.
- The Learning Zone made considerable impact on its learners (beneficiaries) who much valued the opportunities the Project offered them.
- Together the Development Workers and the delivery partners were primarily responsible for the positive impact made by the Project on the learners and their progress.
- The Development Workers were key to the success of the Learning Zone, developing positive and close relationships with the people living in the local communities, recruiting beneficiaries to the Project and supporting them during the learning process. The Development Workers operated very well as a team.
- The provision of progression/exit interviews for all learners nearing the completion of their courses is much welcomed. This will ensure that all learners are helped and supported throughout their whole engagement with the Project.
- It should be considered whether opportunities might be made available to individual Development Workers, as appropriate, to undertake formal in-service training courses in guidance and counselling.
- The provider partners and their staff were also key to the success of the Learning Zone as they directly delivered the learning. There was very positive feedback from the learners about their courses.
- There were excellent and supportive relationships developed on the one hand between the delivery partners and the Project staff employed by Learning Partnerships and on the other between the Project staff and the Skills Team at Leeds City Council.
- It was suggested that the Learning Zone provided a good model with the voluntary sector working on the ground in the local communities to recruit and support the learners with the further education colleges responsible for most of the direct delivery of the courses. It should be considered whether this collaborative model might be used again in future projects.

- Learning Partnerships' leadership, management and administration of the Project was much appreciated by all involved. The administrators of the Learning Zone were seen as very helpful and efficient and the level of performance was regarded as exceptionally good. These comments were well deserved.
- The provisions of the Learning Zone have been extended for three months under the auspices of a new project, the 'Job Zone'. This provides a most welcome and potentially productive extension to what has been a very short intensive Project.
- Given the many successes achieved by the Learning Zone in a very tight timescale and given that people without work in south and east Leeds continue to have pressing needs for learning and training, consideration should be given to how funds can be identified to extend the Learning Zone/Job Zone further into the future.