Executive Summary

Background and History of the Project

The Horizons Community Learning Project began in 1995. It has grown and developed successfully over the past 10 years in two areas of social housing in the Neighbourhood Renewal Areas of Greater Hollington and Ore Valley; areas suffering high levels of social and economic deprivation. It has established itself as an accessible, supportive and trusted learning broker within these communities.

Horizons has established a successful and proven track record in engaging vulnerable and isolated non-traditional learners, providing advice and guidance and supported learning opportunities linked with local needs. It has worked in active partnership with a wide number of statutory and voluntary agencies and local community groups to ensure a network of support, progression and access. It has become firmly embedded in its local community and has worked in partnership with 1066 Housing Association, Amicus Group, local Neighbourhood Forums, Hastings Voluntary Action, SureStart Children Centres, Playlink, Under 5's Association, local schools and colleges, Health and Mental Health Workers, local Resident Associations and a range of smaller voluntary projects such as Together (Mental Health) and Ashley Homes.

The Project has grown to meet the varied, and increasingly ambitions demands, of the communities it works within. It has developed from a higher education initiative, funded for 3 hours a week in 1996, to a project that offers free learning opportunities across all levels of adult education including Basic Skills, Further and Higher Education qualifications such as GCSE,NVQ and HE level 1 courses. It also offers many tailor-made, non-accredited tasters and courses of varying lengths and informality.

Between 2001 and 2003 Horizons Community Learning Organisation developed to become an independently constituted voluntary organization made up of local residents and students working to support and sustain the project and its learners.

It had appeared to have consistently overachieved its targets in terms of learner outputs and outcomes and demonstrated good progression pathways. These have been achieved through strong links with local colleges and universities, employers and service providers and voluntary organizations. More recently this has also included progression from its accredited volunteer courses onto Certificate, Diploma and Community Development Foundation Degree courses at the University Centre Hastings.

Why we undertook this research:

The purpose of this research was to explore the critical factors that facilitated people achieving success in learning with the Horizons Project and to find out in what way, if any, these successes were sustained.

We intend to use the research findings to:

- Identify and evaluate the means of sustaining community learning as individuals and as an identified community of learning.
- Highlight models of good practice in engaging non-traditional learners and identify the most effective partnership approaches
- Identify and evaluate what impact learning has on the wider community using the Greater Hollington and Ore Valley areas as exemplars.
- Map non-traditional learners' journeys in order to tailor future provision.
- Assess what support and skills learners need to learn and sustain learning from pre-level 1 to Further and Higher Education.
- Highlight models of good practice in engaging non-traditional learners.
- Inform future development of the Horizons Project.
- Explore this as a model that could inform community learning initiatives in other areas.

Who was involved and why

The Impact research was undertaken by The Horizons Project, Horizons Community Learning Organisation (its student community and voluntary body) and the regional Workers Educational Association Learning Coordinator, with the support of the Universities of Sussex and Brighton. It was guided and supported by a Steering Group made up of Coordinators of the Horizons Project, HCLO members, BSCKE, WEA, The Scarman Trust and Aim Higher.

The research focused on 1400 students in an area of significant economic and social deprivation who have accessed the Horizons project as it has grown and developed over the last ten years.

The research was funded by the Brighton and Sussex Community Knowledge Exchange (BSCKE) Project which endeavours to effect a knowledge exchange between the Universities of Brighton and Sussex and their local communities. The Horizons Project is part of the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Sussex, receiving and being supported by external funding.

The Horizons Project itself provided impetus and direction. Its two co-ordinators provided the ethos and their own experience of working with the project since its inception.

The WEA became involved with Horizons as it shared an ethos of learning for social purposes, believing that learners can and should decide what they want to learn. As Horizons has its student and voluntary body to guide and inform the executive of the community's needs, the WEA is structured to facilitate students becoming volunteers actively organizing learning in the community and participating in the governance of the organization. This fundamental positioning of the learner at the center of the process has been instrumental in devising and guiding the research questions and methodology.

The partnership drew on the strengths and experience of its own students and voluntary body, the Horizons Community Learning Organisation (HCLO), in steering and playing an active part in the research.

The Workers Education Association provided a useful external perspective within an educational context.

The questions we asked ourselves

In the 10 years of provision there has been year on year growth in both the number of learners completing courses and the number and type of courses on offer. This demand- led provision, together with a holistic approach to learner needs, has resulted in increasing numbers of local residents seeking support and opportunity from the project in order to achieve their learning aspirations.

Anecdotal evidence from users and stakeholders led the project workers to believe that the project was raising aspirations, leading to a wide range of progression models that have impacted substantially on the wider community. We wanted to explore:

- Whether raising learners' skills and aspirations results in action/changes in the community?
- Does it lead to further learning, raised self esteem, community engagement and employment?
- What impact does it have on children and families and stakeholders?)
- Does learning increase individual social capital?
- Whether this individual success leads to the development of a sustainable culture of learning in the community ? (If so how, and if not, why?)
- What barriers exist to sustaining learning and to sustaining learning communities? (What are these and have successful strategies been developed to overcome these? How can these be sustained and developed further?)

- What are the learning processes that lead to individual learners identifying and following their own learning paths? (How do learners engage, learn and become motivated independent learners?)

Our Methodology

The Impact Research Project carried out both quantitative and qualitative research.

Quantitative

1400 learners were identified through initial interviews and attendance on courses.
744 of these were chosen for further analysis because they were supported by records which covered the following: age, gender, ethnicity, health and disability, employment status, prior academic achievement and postcode. Also identified was individual support required in terms of language, learning, childcare, transport and carer needs.

A variety of funding streams over the life of the project meant that not all of these details were recorded in the case of all 1400 learners. Some records were difficult to locate due to time elapsed. The processing of such a large quantity of data couldn't be carried out within the time allowed.

A sample of 30 of these learners were chosen by the 2 Project Coordinators, one of whom had been with the project since its inception, the other since 2001. The 30 were selected for the following reasons:

In the experience of the Project Workers they provided good exemplars of learners who had attended the project.

Contact by researchers would be appropriate to the personal circumstances of the learner.

They provided a clear cross section of learners who had accessed the project between1995 and 2005. They could be grouped within 3 clearly identifiable stages of the project to reflect its development. These were: The first years in Ore Valley from 1995 to 1999; the expansion to include Greater Hollington as well as Ore Valley with the acquisition of a dedicated community learning flat in 1999 to 2003; the conversion of flats in Greater Hollington to allow for further expansion from November 2003 to 2005.

Qualitative

The same sample of 30 learners were interviewed as part of the qualitative research.
Structured, taped interviews were held in a variety of venues with past and present learners by HCLO members and researchers. Interview training was provided.

15 telephone interviews were made with stakeholders consisting of local family support services including SureStart, the local FE College,Hastings Borough Council, 1066, Hastings Trust about the impact of project/learners on community services.

The learner journeys and progression of the 30 learners were tracked over the lifetime of the project. We also tracked the community engagement of these learners over the same period.

In addition, the Steering Group took an active role in guiding the research. Decisions were made collectively following often lively debate and discussion. At certain points the sheer quantity of work involved meant that hard decisions had to be made along the way.

All members of the research project found this to be an enlightening and ongoing learning process which it is hoped to be continued in the ensuing series of dissemination events, presentations and publication.

FINDINGS

In the process of the research and our attempt to address the research questions these key themes emerged:

1. **The Learning Journey and support**

2. **Embedding learning in the local Community**

3. **Funding and Programme Development & The Future Direction and Development of the Project**

The Learner Journey
- Open access – a positive model focusing on potential rather than a deficit model of learning – focusing on what learners can do rather than what they cannot.
- Creating ownership of learning. 80% of interviewees claimed that personal support from peers and tutors had a positive impact on their learning.
- Developing learner's confidence. 46% of interviewees claimed to have developed confidence which directly impacted on improved self-esteem and enabled them to learn new skills to gain employment.
- Creating a 'buzz'

- Social learning – interactive learning with social purpose integrated into approaches.
- Tackling Isolation – low level mental health issues and isolation were helped by engaging in learning.
- Aspirations – recognising aims and barriers. 47% of learners broke their journeys.
- Data from GOSE shows that while 22% of learner went onto further FE courses, only 8% of learners continued to HE outside the project.
- Vocational opportunities through learning initiatives like NVQ childcare courses where learners become workers in the Under 5's service or volunteered or gained work within teaching and childcare.

Supporting learners
- Personal attention to uncover aims and support needs
- Locally based provision. The majority of learners were within walking distance.
- Structural support for childcare, transport and learning needs. 57% of interviewees used the crèche provision.

Embedding in the Community
- Responding to local needs - micro rather than macro approach to delivery
- Networking & partnership working. 46% of learners came to Horizons via referrals from other agencies.
- Learning to promote active citizenship
- Brokering - building opportunities for community engagement. 50% of interviewees were actively engaged in community activities.
- Learners moving from being service users to service providers
- Disseminating good practice

It is evident from the ethos and approach to learning, the embedded nature of provision within community activity, locality and interest that Horizons meets objectives focusing on individual learners. The project encourages learners to become actively involved in the project as volunteers through HCLO or through participation in community activities. This is important in developing the learner voice. In other words, empowering someone to focus and clarify their aspirations and know how to fulfil them. However by being part of a learning community, the learner voice is often about representing a community of learners rather than just an individual. There is a sense of community responsibility which impacts on learner's ability to demand on behalf of the adults' entitlement to learn. This community development model, based on an humanistic approach to learning is the key factor for students to grow both personally and academically within Horizons rather than outside of Horizons.

Funding and Development

The data also illustrated gaps in provision and funding streams that Horizons or other organisations wishing to adapt this model of provision to develop a learning community are likely to face. These not only impact on individual learning but are likely to constrain the development of a learning community as access to education is restricted and support limited.

The main threats identified included:

- Gaps in Level 3 provision
- No time/resources to develop meaningful partnerships
- Course development to respond to both local need and local economic interests
- PCDL fund will not address local needs in course provision
- Individualised response to supporting learning
- Lack of strong links and routes into HE
- Funding for long term strategic development of projects

For the learner sustainability depends on allowing time for growth and development toward independence, and supporting this process. For the community it means provision of relevant courses with relevant support and progression routes within a wide context of personal, professional and family needs. For the local authority it means matching skills shortages with training pathways which enable learners to take the first steps to full qualifications; developing learning which encourages residents to actively engage with their communities. For a community learning project like Horizons the challenge continues to be to find the resources to address the above. While trawling the net widely to draw on a variety of funding streams enables the project to be diverse and inclusive in provision, it is usually short-term which constrains the project's ability to respond to need and develop learning opportunities for learners and the community.