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SHUSU
SUSTAINABLE HOUSING
& URBAN STUDIES UNIT

Evaluation of DWP & Oxfam Livelihoods Training Project

Executive Summary

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Adran Gwaith a Phensiynau

1. Introduction

IIn August 2016, Oxfam Cymru in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford to carry out a process and impact evaluation of the Livelihoods Training Project. The overall aim of the Project is to embed understandings of poverty within the DWP service across Wales and trial use of a people centred, holistic, asset-based approach (Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) toolkit), to enable DWP staff to better understand the needs of customers, and consequently be better placed to provide appropriate support and solutions to meet their needs.

The Project has provided training to 608 DWP staff across Wales between June 2016 and September 2017, which represents approximately 39% of DWP Wales' Work Services staff. Those who participated in the initial training (in embedding poverty awareness) were given the opportunity to attend follow up 'Leads' training sessions, which provided a greater focus on the use of the SLA tools; a total of 158 DWP staff had undertaken this 'Leads' training. This Executive Summary provides an overview of the key findings. A full evaluation report is also available.

> I think it took us back to really get to know the customer. Obviously, DWP, Jobcentres, there's always focus around work. That's the ideal outcome. But what the SLA tools did, was actually go back a step further to really invest time with the individual, to get to know their household set-up, friends, relations, and the people who can impact on that person… invest that level of understanding and time to get to know that person really well (DWP staff member)

> In the past I have gone into the Jobcentre and felt as if I was second class. Maybe because I am seeking help! However over recent months they have made me feel confident and treat me as an individual and not as just another unemployed person (DWP customer)

2. Methods

This evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to document and evaluate the operation of the Project and its impact on DWP staff and customers, and participating community partners. The evaluation is informed by the following key sources of quantitative and qualitative data: surveys of DWP staff and customers; economic data relating to the Project provided by Oxfam and DWP; facilitator notes; two Jobcentre case studies; consultation with DWP staff actively using the tools; consultation with community partners and key strategic Project stakeholders.

Key Findings

- The impact of the training on awareness of poverty, supporting customers, and using livelihoods approaches at work was overwhelmingly positive across the board with responses significantly higher after attending the training – this remained high several weeks or months after returning to work.

- The training had a positive impact on staff perceptions of their effectiveness at work, their sense of personal accomplishment at work and their interest in their work.

- Staff stated that following the training they had been able to make progress with customers where they had previously experienced difficulties.

- The social return on investment for the project was estimated to be £5.31 for every £1 spent.

- The training needs to be seen as a beginning rather than an endpoint, with the need for follow up sessions and time allocated for staff to embed the knowledge and tools in their everyday work.

- Continued senior staff 'buy in' was vital to enable full embedding of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach into working practices in the future.

3. Participation in the training

It was clear that representatives of the DWP Wales Senior Leadership team, District Managers and District Senior Leadership teams were committed to the Project. The issue of continued senior staff 'buy in' was seen as vital for maintaining the impact of the training, to enable full embedding of this approach into working practices and for any future roll out.

There was a perceived element of 'selectivity' in DWP staff recruitment to the training, rather than random selection. We recognise that the DWP made a significant investment in the Project by releasing staff to attend the training, and some 'selectivity' was understandable particularly during the period of Universal Credit Full Service (UCFS) when there were also other training priorities. However, while this Project has been piloting a new partnership and approach, for future roll out there may be a need to consider how to engage those staff who could benefit most from the training.

4. Perceptions of the training

The participants' response to the training was overwhelmingly positive and the skills of the training facilitator were seen as a key factor in its success. Responses relating to the effects of the training on awareness of poverty, supporting customers, and using livelihoods approaches at work were positive across the board and responses were clearly higher following the training. The responses also highlight the extent to which participants intended to use the tools and found them to be directly relevant to their job roles.

The criticisms of the training primarily related to the feeling that it was a lot to 'take in' in a one-day session, but also that the balance between poverty definitions and exploration of the SLA tools needed redressing. Oxfam have emphasised that a key purpose of the training is to embed understandings of poverty, and follow-on 'Leads' training provides the opportunity for greater exploration of the tools and their practical application.

5. The impact of the training

It was clear from the quantitative and qualitative analysis that the training had increased participants' understanding of poverty and provided staff with a greater insight into the circumstances some of their customers may be faced with. While some felt they already had an understanding of such issues, for many the training 'opened their eyes' to the reality of some people's lives. A follow up survey six weeks later showed participants' self-perceptions of awareness of poverty and people centred, holistic, asset-based approaches were not as high as immediately following the training but remained higher than before the training, suggesting sustained impact.

With specific reference to embedding the training into working practices, whilst some DWP staff were yet to start fully utilising the tools, for those who had been applying them there were concrete examples of positive outcomes and progress for customers. Indeed, people referred to being able to make progress with customers where they had previously experienced difficulties.

For many new staff the training was seen as part of their wider training package. For longer serving staff, while some were more reticent about such approaches, there were many who saw the value of having these additional tools to enhance their existing approaches.

With regards to the impact of the Project on customers, it was clear that there had been a positive shift in more recent months in how DWP were interacting with customers during appointments, with discussions about the increasing 'approachability' of staff. However, it is difficult to attribute these experiences solely to the delivery of the training, as the DWP noted that there have also been much broader changes to the DWP service over that time (including the roll out of Universal Credit Full Service, UCFS). As above, however, having a greater understanding of people's circumstances and additional tools to help better support people can obviously only enhance the experience of customers.

In terms of its economic impact, the Project attempts to use the SLA tools with staff responsible for supporting a high proportion of working-age customers in Wales. The results suggest a social value return on investment of £5.31 for every £1 spent. This is a considerable return on investment, primarily due to the large numbers of customers that many of the DWP staff ultimately use the training with.

6. Barriers to using the tools

While it was clear that the training was received positively, some staff felt unable to use the tools due to their job role, particularly if they had no contact or only limited direct contact with customers. There were also a number of staff who experienced barriers in the practical application of the tools in their everyday work. While DWP reiterated the changes that were occurring as a result of the roll out of UCFS, some staff still referred to time constraints and organisational barriers. However, personal factors also presented barriers for some staff, whether that related to their own confidence in using the tools or the perception that they might be difficult to use on certain customers.

However, it was clear that the training should be seen as a beginning rather than an end point, with the need for follow up sessions, whether that was formally attending a refresher session or through informal ad hoc support by DWP 'Leads' or community partner organisations. The link with community partners was particularly important as some staff lacked confidence in knowing where to signpost customers if issues were raised. As such, for future roll out there is a need to consider how to more fully engage with wider community organisations and provide a list of local organisations to staff should they need to refer a customer on to a specific type of support.

7. Next steps

This unique partnership between Oxfam Cymru and DWP Wales was made possible by the 'openness' of the DWP in Wales to exploring new ways of working with customers across their services and the commitment of Oxfam Cymru and its community partners to supporting those experiencing poverty. Discussions are underway at both operational and strategic levels within the partnership to maintain the impact that has been achieved so far.