



Oxfam Cymru / SRCDC: SKILLS FOR LIFE



FINAL EVALUATION (March 2017 – March 2018)

Independent summative evaluation by:

The Social Effectiveness Research Centre

www.socialeffectiveness.org.uk

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I. Introduction and Methodology

“If you help a woman, you are helping a whole family.”

Project participant, Skills for Life

Oxfam Cymru's Skills for Life project was a one-year pilot delivered in Cardiff in partnership with South Riverside Community Development Centre (SRCDC). It was funded through the Innovation Fund of the Welsh Government's Communities for Work programme. Communities for Work is co-sponsored by the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and intended to help those adults in Wales furthest from the labour market into employment by means of one-to-one support, guidance and training.¹

The target group for the Communities for Work programme's first phase was people living in a Communities First cluster who met one of the following criteria:

- with low or no skills;
- with work limiting health conditions;
- with care or childcare responsibilities;
- from jobless households;
- from a Black [or] Minority Ethnic group.

The focus of Skills for Life was on helping women aged 25+ from Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds, in order to *“build long-term, lasting outcomes for participants beyond moving into entry-level work or enrolment in Communities for Work schemes, and beyond ‘first jobs’ (whilst recognising their value as stepping stones)”*.² In this focus, the project took as its starting point the overall change goal of Oxfam GB's UK Programme Strategy 2015-2020, namely the goal of *“decent and sustainable work as a route out of poverty for women in the UK”*.³

In practical terms, Skills for Life was part of Oxfam's wider Future Skills family of projects. These projects all work towards Oxfam's 'Women United' common programme outcome, which envisions that *“women progress towards a decent life free from poverty”*.⁴ The projects in the Future Skills programme have all built on a six-month pilot, the Women's Retail Volunteer Scheme, which took place in Manchester between January and July 2016.

1. Welsh Government, 'Communities for Work' (14 October 2015), available at: <http://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/communities/communities-for-work/?lang=en> <accessed April 2018>.

2. Communities for Work, 'Communities for Work Innovation Fund: Agreement Number C130/2015/2016 (Technical Criteria Response)', p.7.

3. Oxfam GB, 'UKP Programme Update: Women United - March 2017', p.4.

4. Oxfam GB, 'Future Skills Pilot: Evaluation Report - August 2016', p.3.

Skills for Life's project plan emphasised that it would focus on *“practical work experience with a unique, person-centred package of support, professional coaching, and peer to peer networking”*, noting that it would *“take women on a journey from economic inactivity to entering the labour market, with the aim of progressing once employed”*.⁵

The project utilised Oxfam's Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), which proceeds from the starting point that all people experiencing poverty or marginalisation have some kind of asset or ability that could be built upon to improve their situation. The approach was the cornerstone of previous Oxfam work in Wales, for example, its four-year, £1.1 million Building Livelihoods and Strengthening Communities in Wales programme (BLSCW), which achieved significant employment outcomes for participants, as well as an overall net fiscal, economic and social return on investment of £4.43 for every £1 invested.⁶

SRCDC had been a community partner in Oxfam's original research around introducing the SLA, originally an approach used in its international work, to its UK activities. The organisation had also been part of the additional work done to embed the approach across Wales that had led to the Big Lottery Fund in Wales funding the BLSCW project. SRCDC was a partner on BLSCW, one of the results of which was further follow-on work by Oxfam with the DWP, in the form of a Wales-wide training programme for frontline DWP staff and management in principles and application of the SLA.

SRCDC is based in the Riverside area of Cardiff, one of Wales' most diverse areas in terms of ethnicity, with anything up to half of its 6,000 residents coming from BME communities at any one time. Between 2012 and March 2018, the organisation also hosted the Butetown, Riverside and Grangetown Communities First cluster, and, as lead organisation for the cluster, delivered frontline services, as well as administering Welsh Government contracts and acting as a key stakeholder within the anti-poverty sector in Cardiff.⁷

The Skills for Life project began in March 2017 and ran until March 2018. The first months of the project were taken up with recruiting and inducting project staff, planning activities and recruiting participants. Formal work with participants then began on a rolling basis from the last week of May 2017 onwards. An interim evaluation was completed at the midway point of the project's ten-month active life at the end of October 2017. This final summative evaluation builds on that work to consider the key learning generated by the project over its lifetime as a whole.

The methodologies used for this evaluation were as follows:

5. 'Communities for Work Innovation Fund...', p.1.

6. Oxfam Policy and Practice, 'Final Evaluation: Building Livelihoods and Strengthening Communities in Wales Project' (1 April 2016), available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/final-evaluation-building-livelihoods-and-strengthening-communities-in-wales-pr-615933> <accessed April 2018>.

7. 'Communities for Work Innovation Fund...', p.2.

- Quantitative evaluation of monitoring data (activities, outputs and outcomes) collected by the project in its first half.
- Qualitative evaluation of effects upon project participants (through a variety of methods, including focus groups, interviews and online surveys).
- Evaluation of impact by and upon project partners (such as professional coaches or employers providing work placements).
- Interviews with project staff.

All groups of direct stakeholder within the project were consulted for this final evaluation, with case histories collected for all of the project's 53 participants, as well as repeat baseline survey sets for 28 of those participants. Face to face interviews took place with six participants for the final evaluation, with one further participant opting to be interviewed by telephone. Two project staff were interviewed in person (Skills for Life's Project Training Manager and its Livelihoods Worker). Three coaches and five work placement providers were also interviewed either by telephone, email or online. All responses used in this report have been anonymised with identifying details changed where necessary to ensure participant confidentiality.

In terms of structure, this report looks first at the activities Skills for Life undertook with participants, then goes on to consider the impact those activities had, particularly in relation to the project's formal outcomes and indicators. It analyses evidence of impact against each outcome in turn, before then considering the broader, more crosscutting issues to arise during the project's lifetime. Finally, the report looks at what overall conclusions may be drawn from the project's experience and makes recommendations on how any similar project working with BME women on employability issues might seek to maximise the impact of its work as a result of that experience.

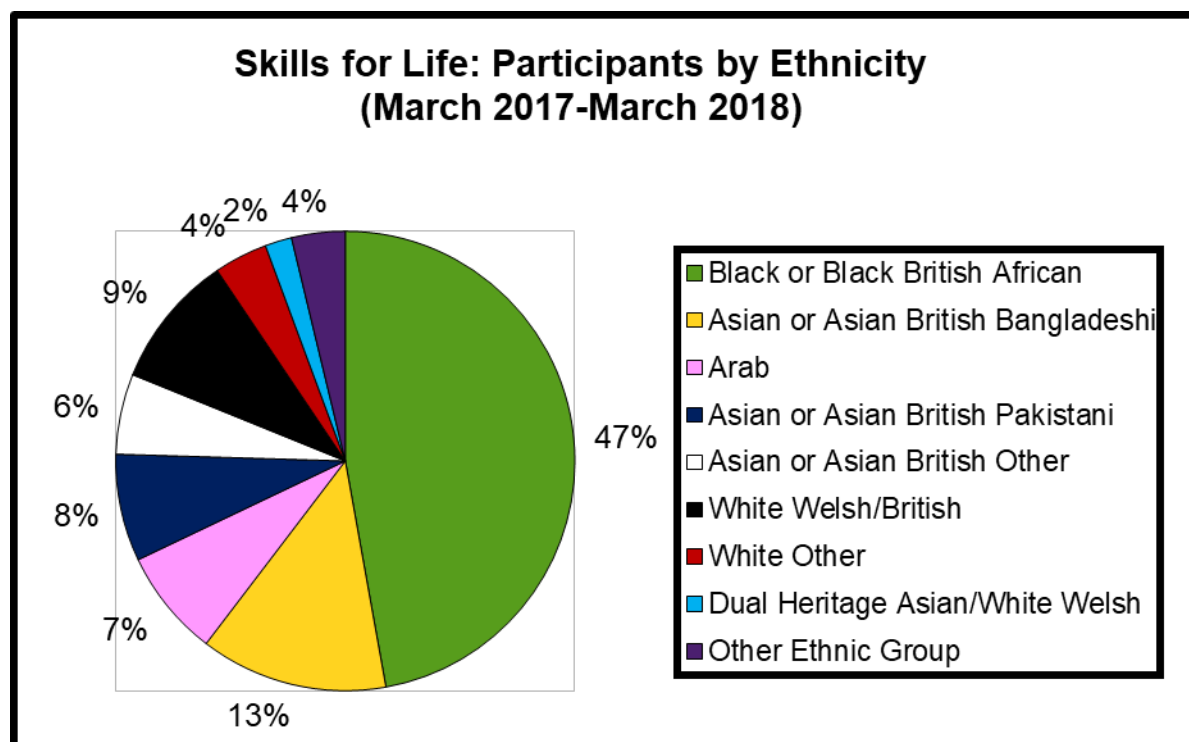
The starting point for this report is therefore the activities the project undertook during its lifetime, together with the quantitative data it collated around the types of participant it worked with between March 2017 and March 2018.

II. Project Activities

The first target Skills for Life had was to engage 75 BME or other disadvantaged women by the end of the project. Participants were to be women over the age of 25 living in one of four Communities First cluster areas in Cardiff, with a focus on those with care or childcare responsibilities and low or no skills.⁸ In total, the project

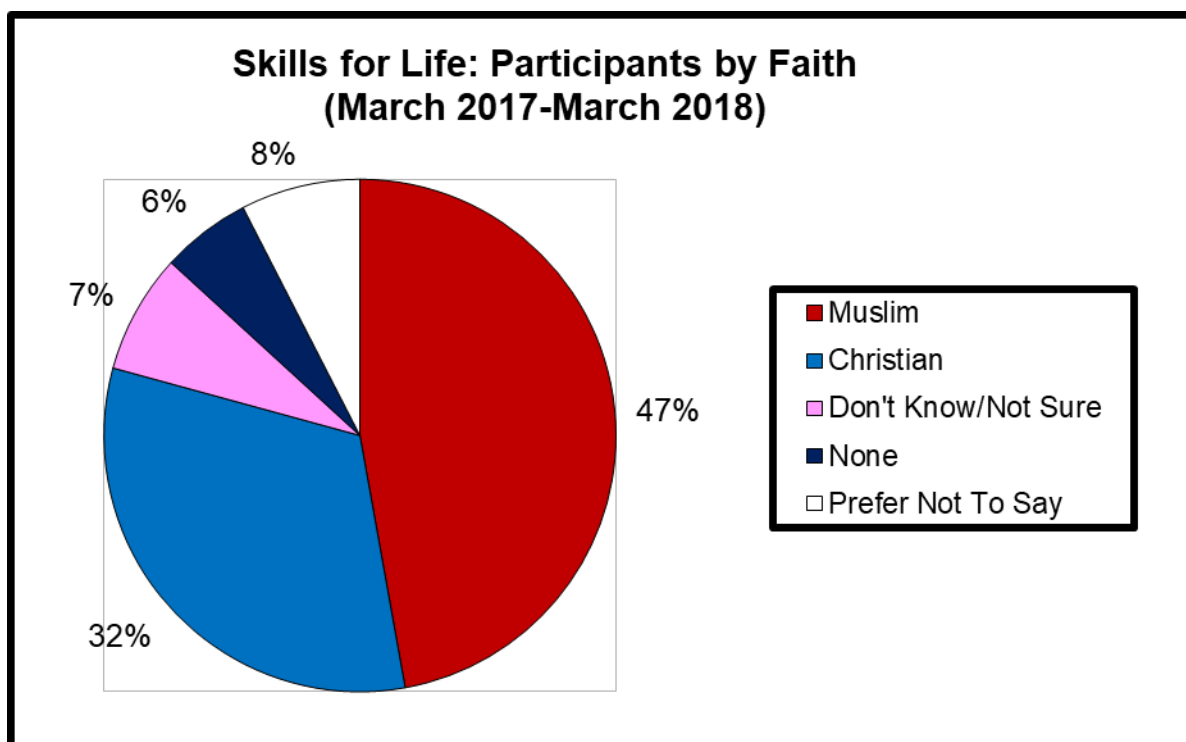
8. The Communities First clusters in question were: BRG (Butetown, Riverside and Grangetown); East (Rumney, Trowbridge, Llanrumney and Pentwyn); STAR (Splott, Tremorfa, Adamsdown and Roath); and West (Caerau, Ely, Fairwater, Trelái and Tyllgoed).

engaged 53 women, 48 of whom came from BME backgrounds, over its lifetime. Those women came from the following ethnic backgrounds:



Nineteen further participants were referred to the project but proved to be ineligible. In terms of referral routes for eligible participants, a slight majority of the project's participants were referred by Communities for Work itself (51%, or 27 participants). The remaining 49% (or 26 participants) came from non-Communities for Work sources, either other organisations that SRCDC and/or Oxfam have links with (21%, or 11 participants) or more directly via word of mouth within the BME communities where the project worked (28%, or 15 participants). According to the baseline data completed by participants upon entry to the project, both Communities for Work and non-Communities for Work referrals had very similar initial levels in terms of the baseline sustainability of their livelihoods, with only 2 percentage points separating the starting levels for Communities for Work referrals compared to non-Communities for Work referrals (on average, 48 percentage points compared to 46). The proportion of Communities for Work referrals declined as the project became more established, with the number of referrals coming by word of mouth from the community in particular increasing as it went on.

In terms of protected characteristics, while the project had no specific targets in relation to anything other than gender (where all participants were to be female), 15% of project participants had a disability (usually mental ill health). None were Welsh speakers, although the vast majority were also not first language English speakers either. None of the women stated they were non-heterosexual and the spread of faiths among participants was as follows:



Looking at activities, Skills for Life committed to undertake the following types in its project plan.

- Provision of intensive and non-intensive SLA support to participants by a Livelihoods Worker (working four days per week).
- Work experience placements for participants in a range of organisations, facilitated and supported by a Project Training Manager (likewise working four days per week).
- Access to professional coaching/mentoring on a one-to-one basis.
- Use of a dedicated Livelihoods budget for each participant to address barriers to employment (such as childcare costs).
- The creation of peer support networks (including peer mentor training).
- A programme of accredited and non-accredited training/group workshops.

Support from wider Oxfam and SRCDC staff, programmes and learning formed a further informal input to the project (with, for example, two participants enrolling on SRCDC's Teaching Assistant course and two on its Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector course), although there were no specific activities prescribed in the project plan relating to this.

Looking at each activity area in order, 25 participants were worked with on an intensive basis by the project, and 28 on a non-intensive basis.⁹ Altogether,

9. Skills for Life uses the same definitions of intensive versus non-intensive support as previous Oxfam Livelihoods projects in Wales. Intensive support is participant-led and tailored specifically to the individual concerned. Though it may also be delivered in a group setting where participants have identified common interests or needs, intensive support is predominantly delivered one-to-one basis. Livelihoods Workers may accompany intensively supported participants in taking action until they are

nineteen participants undertook a total of 23 work placements with the project (with four participants doing more than one placement). Organisations who hosted work placements included the following:

- Cardiff Business School
- Cardiff Central Library
- Cardiff University
- Grangetown Hub
- Housing Department, Cardiff City Council
- Legal and General
- National Museum Wales (Cardiff)
- Oxfam Boutique
- Wales and West Utilities
- Welsh Assembly
- Welsh Centre for International Affairs

Eighteen participants took up the offer of professional coaching sessions and 44 participants received SLA support on an individual or group basis. The following general training workshops were run by the project during its lifetime:

- June 2017 – Introduction to Skills for Life
- July 2017 – Employability Training (I)
- August 2017 – Sustainable Livelihoods Approach
- September 2017 – Being Your Own Boss
- October 2017 – Communication Skills and Assertiveness
- November 2017 – Employability Training (II)
- December 2017 – Visit: National Assembly of Wales
- January 2018 – Influencing Change
- February 2018 – Media Training
- March 2018 – Mapping Your Future

Analysis of the impact that these activities collectively had forms the next sections of this evaluation, which look at each of the project's four outcome areas in turn.

able to do it themselves. While the amount of time spent with a participant in a given period, the use of SLA tools or other factors may be circumstantial indicators that intensive support is taking place, it is the participant-led nature of the support and the handholding role played (if necessary) by the Livelihoods Worker that are its defining characteristics.

III. Outcome 1: Skills and Experience

“Before the project, I didn't have the skills to be employed.”

Project participant, Skills for Life

The first indicator for Skills for Life in relation to improving the skills and experience levels of its participants was for 30 of them to have had a work placement by the end of the project. As noted under the section on activities above, 19 participants completed or were in the process of completing work placements during the project's ten-month operational lifetime, with a further three having had placements arranged but not yet started by the time of the project's close. With 18 participants receiving coaching sessions during the project (many of whom also undertook a work placement), in total 25 participants had received either a work placement or coaching by its end.

As with many of the indicators for the project, the shortfall in terms of overall participant numbers in relation to the project's original targets made reaching this target harder to achieve. As a result, even though a slightly higher proportion of participants than foreseen had placements arranged during the project (22 participants, or 42% of participants, rather than the 40% foreseen in the project's original targets), this absolute number was still less than the target of 30.

This target was, however, described as only 'rough' in the project's original application for funding.¹⁰ It is also noticeable that Skills for Life's targets were unusually ambitious compared to similar past Oxfam projects (for further discussion of this, see the conclusions and recommendations to this report).

The project's second target under this outcome was for it to have equipped 60 women with skills and experiences useful for employment, education, enterprise or further volunteering by its close. Clearly this was not a target the project could meet, given that it only had 53 participants rather than the 75 originally intended in its lifetime. Nevertheless, of those 53, only five participants did not receive some kind of support taking them closer to the labour market from the project. That support ranged from work placements and coaching sessions and project-specific training sessions to one-to-one support for activities such as CV writing or getting DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checks, as well as other external career-related training in subjects such as ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), Administration, Customer Service or Food Safety. As a result, while the total of 48 was short of the planned 60 for this target, in percentage terms it was higher than anticipated, with 91% of the women worked with moving closer to the labour market, compared to the target of 80%.

10. 'Communities for Work Innovation Fund...', p.7.

Another metric used to measure progress across all outcome areas were sets of baseline surveys taken from participants. 53% of participants (28 women in total) completed surveys recording their positions in relation to various components of a sustainable livelihood before and after their involvement with the project. All of the participants in the sample made progress in relation to the various components of their livelihoods, with an average increase overall of anywhere between three and 54 percentage points per participant. Specifically in relation to the project's second outcome, participants increased their human assets (having the necessary skills required for a livelihood to be sustainable) by an average of 18 percentage points, or almost a fifth.

As well as the quantitative baseline data generated by the project, qualitative data from it underlined that the project was generally working with, as the Communities for Work criteria specified it should, those furthest from the labour market. This was important, given that, in the words of one participant:

“Starting steps are the most difficult. [A few months ago, I didn't think I would be applying for jobs or training. Childcare has helped me to take opportunities. I now have a CV.”

Despite their often difficult starting points, participants were overwhelmingly positive about the help they received from the project in relation to their skills. This included its help in reawakening the desire to develop those skills through (re)engaging in education. As another participant fed back:

“I enjoy the project, it gives me more confidence and skills, I want to continue to learn and get education. The project has made me excited!”

A member of the project's staff observed in her interview that, alongside the non-accredited training sessions on subjects such as employability, some of the skills development had been codified in accredited training. She added that the accredited training had actually been failed by some participants first time around but saw this as *“a positive thing in a way as it showed it was a genuine challenge”*.

Despite participants' generally low starting points in terms of their livelihoods, however, employers seemed impressed by the general skill levels of those participants who, having received training from the project, then moved on to take up work placements. As one placement provider fed back:

“We were very impressed with [our Skills for Life placement]. She is very professional and personable. She fitted in very well with [our t]eam. She was thrown in at the deep end since her arrival coincided with [a big event] [...] and I was very impressed by the way she rose to this challenge. She has very good people skills and has an open and engaging manner. We can only speak highly of [her]; she is hard working, reliable and quick to learn. [She has] grown in confidence and gained a wealth of experience.”

Another employer was equally positive about the participant who took up the offer of a placement with them:

“I find [the participant] to be very keen and motivated, [her] two mentors have both reported to me how quick she is to learn and become involved and takes ownership of all tasks given.”

Host organisations in turn appear to have played a role in boosting the skills of the women they offered placements to, meaning that even those who were not as skilled or confident as others at the start of their placement became more skilled as it progressed:

“[Our Skills for Life placement] approached all tasks enthusiastically and in general completed them well. Simple tasks required a lot of explanation initially but once they had been undertaken once, [she] was able to complete them more quickly next time. [Her] IT skills are improving and whilst IT courses will help, putting them into practice in office environments will undoubtedly help her to develop these further.”

A fourth employer emphasised the importance of the experience element of the placements, not just the skills gained:

“There have been positive effects on the participants, as all three individuals who have been shadowing or having work experience have been extremely grateful for the experience that it has given them. What the project does is great; work-based experience is essential for the future of these individuals if they're to get back into the workplace.”

One slightly unanticipated skills and experience related outcome to arise from the project were the changes employers saw in themselves arising from hosting a placement. As one put it: *“My communication skills have undoubtedly improved. I have been reflecting on how I explain tasks as it's so easy to assume a level of understanding and not explain things fully”*. Another employer reported a similar learning process for them:

“I think the project is very worthwhile, not just for the candidates who have placements but for everyone involved as I have learned so much from working with [the participant, project staff] and Oxfam [...]. [I]t is also helping me to develop too and to also understand barriers and needs.”

Overall, therefore, while the project may have inadvertently sacrificed quantity of numbers in favour of more in-depth work with its participants, in terms of its skills and experience outcome there appear to have been significant, and perhaps in some cases unexpected, payoffs for doing so.

IV. Outcome 2: Empowerment and Control

“[The participant I referred to you] has really come out of her shell after attending nearly all the courses you have run and [your] arranging for her to volunteer at [a local organisation]. She has blossomed to such an extent that she doesn’t stop talking, a marked difference to before I referred her! In fact, she went on to start work [in a well-known department store] over Christmas. Thank you again for all the support you’ve given my participants.”

Referral partner, Skills for Life project

The first aim under Skills for Life's second outcome was to create a mutually supportive group of 15 women that would enable participants to take ownership of their own support programme. With 18 participants taking part in the project's purely social aspects (such as a coffee morning it organised in October 2017 or a trip to a local farm and leisure park in February 2018), along with consistent attendance at its more work-focused sessions by a core group and other more occasional attendees, as well as the high turnout evident at its culminating celebration and awards event in March 2018, the project certainly seems to have succeeded in this respect.

These purely social activities had partly been introduced in response to feedback from participants, for example the following from an interviewee for the project's interim evaluation:

“I [have] felt a sense of belonging in a team of women where we share the information and ideas towards career guidance and job search. It personally made me feel part of [a] team, [something] that I always love to be part of. I would advise that there should be some other social activities that would help in bringing more women together.”

A member of the project staff had also noted this effect of the project in her interim evaluation interview:

“The project has improved the participants' social networks. [We are] now doing coffee mornings in addition to the monthly training sessions. The participants do things like go to [places in the town centre together] after the monthly sessions and other non-conventional spaces [for them] like community cafes. It's been good for one participant in particular, who is very socially sheltered.”

This was echoed by a work placement provider, who was especially impressed by this aspect of the project:

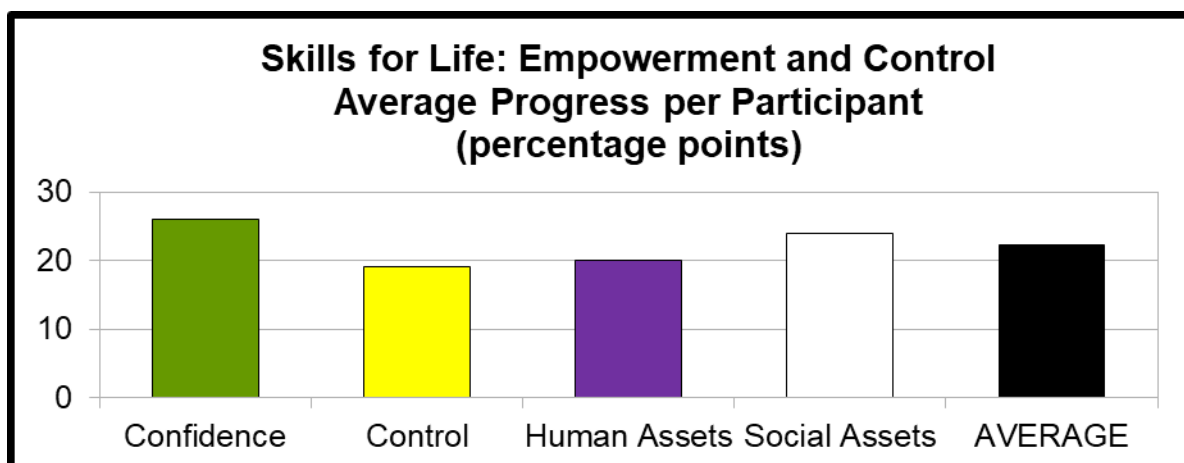
“[T]he project provides support to each candidate and is very community based. I think this is great as each lady has support not just by the project but with other candidates too.”

As the interim evaluation also noted, this slightly more 'community development' focused aspect of the project was of extra interest given the place of the project within the wider context of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach and the other Oxfam projects using the approach that had gone before it. Another staff member had also observed in her interim evaluation interview that *“this project is different to other SLA projects as it doesn't really have outcomes around community development – it's far more employment focused”*. Nevertheless, as the interim evaluation had recorded, Oxfam and SRCDC were clearly still interested in these kinds of outcomes, in what one Oxfam researcher identified as *“civic engagement, activeness in decision making – the women being part of something bigger than themselves”*.¹¹ This took the particular form in the second half of the project of a visit to the Welsh Assembly for participants, in order for them to find out more about wider civic and decision making processes in Wales. This followed on from a tour of the Cardiff Story Museum provided in the project's first half, which again helped give a greater sense of civic engagement to those project participants newer to Cardiff and the Welsh context of their lives.

Quantitative confirmation of the project's success in terms of improving its participants' feelings of empowerment and control came in the form of the progress made against the project's other target for this outcome, namely that by its end 35 women should be, and should feel, empowered to be able to take control of their own situation for the better.

The baseline surveys specifically asked about the issue of control, as well as other elements of a sustainable livelihood related to this outcome, in the form of confidence more generally, as well as social capital (having the necessary people around them needed to make their livelihoods sustainable) and physical assets (the general ability to find help to support their livelihoods when needed, particularly through accessing the right services). As the following graph shows, the project's participants made particularly strong progress in these areas:

11. Telephone conversation with S. Galandini, Programme Researcher in the Oxfam GB Campaigns, Policy and Influencing Team, 14 November 2017.



With an average progress rate of approaching a quarter (22.3 percentage points) across all four areas relating to this outcome, this was the aspect of the project where it performed most strongly. This was reflected in the qualitative feedback for this outcome too. For example, a member of the project staff observed that one of the main impacts had been that of building the confidence of its participants, commenting that *“the women really enjoyed coming together with other women and creating networks – it’s especially important for women who are not from this country”*.

The staff member was confirmed in this view by testimony from the participants themselves, such as the following piece of feedback from one participant interviewed:

“Oxfam is the best organisation I have ever known. It has helped me a lot. I have way more knowledge, I improve my English, I have more confidence, I make more friends from different cultures.”

Another participant also identified the issue of confidence as a crucial area the project had helped her with, specifically in relation to job interviews:

“I’ve learnt from the training that it’s OK to celebrate yourself, now I feel in an interview, ‘Yes I have worked’, ‘I have got the skills you want’. This really helped me in the interviews for the work placements, [...] I could say, ‘This is why you want to employ me’.”

Importantly, the change in confidence observed in the participant referred to in the opening quote to this section was also confirmed by the participant herself during her interview:

“I was really quiet before, but look at me now! The most significant change for me is that I can speak up for myself when I’m at work (I’ve now got a job [now] thanks to the project – it’s part-time, I’m looking for full-time now, it could be any retail job, not just [the kind of shop I’m currently I’m working now]). I enjoy myself in the Oxfam group by meeting with the other women.”

She was not alone; other participants also described the same process. In the view of one, *“the project is everything to me – my self-esteem was really zero, but look at me now, I have a voice!”*

The peer support element of the project also hinted at the importance of seeing examples of new ways of doing things and other 'positive peer pressure' influences on this particular participant group, for instance in one participant's observation that *“I see women who are busy, volunteering and doing training and now I care more about how I spend my time, not just playing with my daughter”*.

Perhaps the best summation of the project's empowering effect on its participants, came from a comment one woman wrote on her baseline survey:

“Now I know where to go for help [...]. [I am b]etter able to make decisions for myself. Before I feel weak and scared. Now I meet people and hear their stories – [it] gives me strength.”

V. Outcome 3: More Sustainable Livelihoods

“Without the project I'd have thought as a BME person, 'This place [where I am doing my placement] is not for me. Things I wouldn't have thought of as a possibility I can think of now.”

Project participant, Skills for Life

Skills for Life's third outcome centred on the sustainability of the livelihoods of its participants. Its first target was for 15 of them to have entered employment (in roles of 16 hours per week or more) by the end of the project. Seven participants had done so by the end of the project, with a further six having found work but in roles of 15 hours a week or less.

Given the shortfall in overall participant numbers for the project, it is perhaps unsurprising that it did not achieve the required amount for this target as well. It is also very noticeable that all of the jobs participants did manage to get with the project's help would very much come under the heading of 'stepping stones' or 'first jobs', rather than the 'decent work' leading to 'decent lives' that is the Oxfam Future Skills programme's ultimate goal.

For example, four of the participants gaining work had jobs that were either zero-hours and/or involved long shift work (12-hour shifts in two cases) in sectors such as cleaning or care. Five participants found work in reputable retail stores, but still at minimum wage level. On the more positive side, while still only stepping stones, two participants found temporary work as exam invigilators, with one of them also being offered a role by the public organisation where she did her placement, and a third found work teaching, albeit at weekends only.

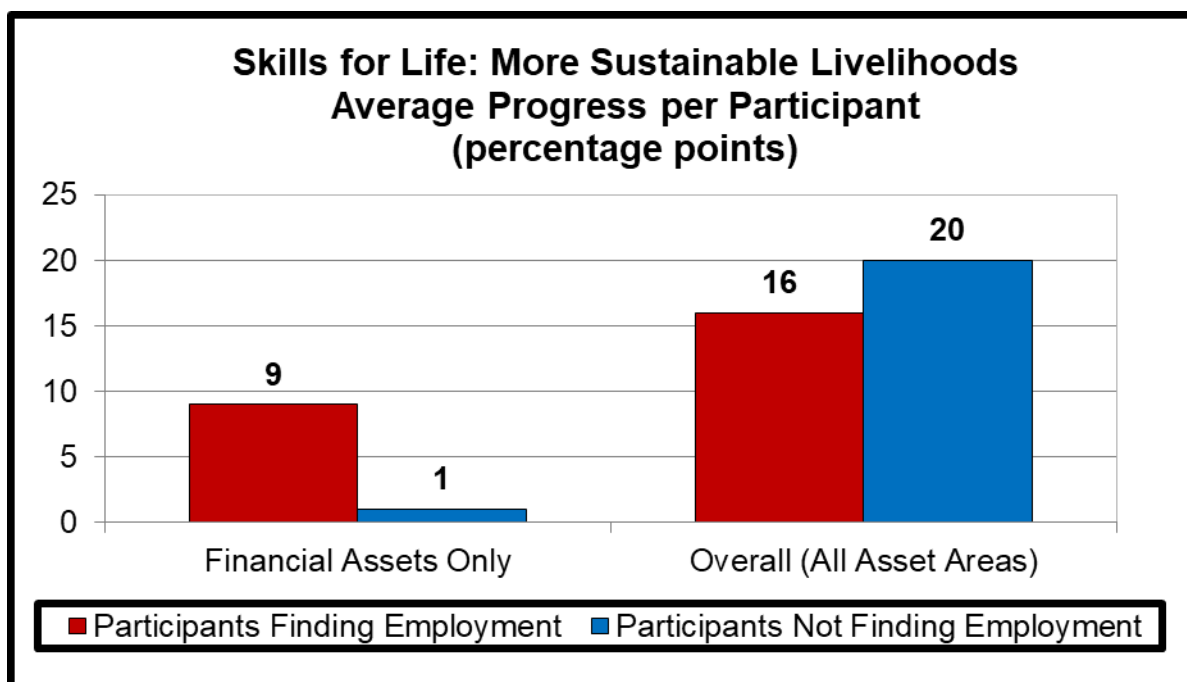
A variety of barriers to work, such as having to do unpaid training, being required to pay for uniforms or equipment or having to clear particular bureaucratic obstacles that would not have affected non-refugee applicants were reported even by those women who did successfully gain employment through the project. For example, one of the participants gaining employment in a leading High Street store was unable to start in the position as the Home Office had not yet returned her passport to her following her successful application for citizenship. As a result of this delay, which was completely beyond her control, the position was given to another (non Skills for Life) candidate instead.

All of this adds weight to the fundamental tenet of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, which is that there is (far) more to a sustainable livelihood than the bare fact of whether someone has a job or not. Stressful, irregular or precarious work (such as the long shift work outlined above) can actually be counterproductive in terms of someone's overall livelihood.

For this reason, the project's second indicator under this outcome looked at the sustainability of participants' livelihoods in the round. The target was for 30 participants to have improved the sustainability of livelihood overall, as measured by the average of the five SLA asset areas plus confidence and control.¹² While the overall shortfall in participant numbers again made it harder for the project to achieve this target, given that all participants with baseline surveys reported overall progress, it is likely that this target was still more than met, even if the project only had data to prove so definitively for 28 participants.

Perhaps more importantly, although a limited sample, the potential for gaining 'non-decent work' to be a less than completely positive factor in some cases and circumstances was borne out statistically for those participants with baselines: those women finding work actually made slightly less improvement in their livelihood overall (16 percentage points compared to 20 percentage points on average) than those who did not, as the following chart records:

12. The five SLA asset areas comprise the aforementioned human capital, as well as social capital, public capital, physical capital and financial capital. In addition to the commonly understood areas of financial and social capital, public capital comprises the services and other openly accessible sources of support that can help an individual sustain their livelihood, and physical capital is formed of the tangible things an individual needs to sustain their livelihood, such as work equipment or clothes, means of transport to and from work, a place to work if they are self-employed, and so on. Put together with levels of confidence and control, these types of asset go together to make up Oxfam's overall model of a sustainable livelihood.



As the graph illustrates, this was despite those women getting jobs making a nine percentage point improvement in terms of their financial assets thanks to those jobs. By contrast, those participants not finding work made far less progress in financial terms, with an average increase of just one percentage point, mainly derived from participants who were able to improve their debt or benefits situation with the project's help.

At the same time, the importance and potential of these stepping stones should not be in any way undervalued. As noted by the participant quoted in the first outcome section above, starting steps are always the most difficult ones, but once taken – as the participant quoted at the start of this section demonstrates – they can make the previously unthinkable thinkable, such as the mention by one participant in the interim evaluation of how the project's training had given her “a *push to try to start my own business*”. The participant quoted in the section on skills and experience above expanded on this point about starting steps in her interview:

The employability training really helped and the interview training [too]. By September my daughter will be in full-time nursery so I can look for work. Before it would be 'Where do I start?!', now I know exactly what I want.

She also emphasised that the project had been successful for her because it was about more than just finding her a job, mentioning numerous other aspects of her livelihood that it had helped with too, such as her social capital (in her words, “*The [project staff] make it so personal, it feels like friends helping you - the other women in the group are friends now too*”).

A different participant drew attention to the importance of public capital in her interview. As she put it simply, “*I didn't know where to go for help*”. Overall,

participants increased their public assets by an average of 26 percentage points thanks to the project's help, with those gaining jobs achieving a lower rate of progress (21 percentage points on average) than those not in employment (28 points on average).

The interim evaluation had highlighted the case of one participant who had found care work as an example of the issues finding work could cause. The participant had not needed help so much with applying for the role (which she had largely been able to do herself with the help of the Communities for Work adviser who had referred her), but far more with the issues that then followed. These had included being able to pay for the background checks required and the uniform needed, the physical and emotional challenges of coping with twelve-hour shifts at the same time as dealing with a small child and a bad back, as well as the challenge of keeping her general confidence to a level high enough to allow her to stay in the job (that confidence having taken a knock earlier when she had had to give up a college course in childhood studies because she could not keep up the childcare costs required to attend).

Cases like these reflect the complexity of the factors making a given livelihood sustainable or not, and the evidence of the project relating to this outcome is a good illustration of this wider point.

VI. Outcome 4: Wider Contribution

“Our staff have benefited from working with a more diverse group of people. This is the way we break through barriers.”

Work placement provider, Skills for Life

The final outcome for the project was slightly less prescriptive than the others, namely a general ambition for it to make a wider contribution to the work of the organisations it involved, be they organisations delivering the project, project partners or other third party stakeholders. One potential way flagged up in the project plan as to how this might be done was the idea of bringing together organisations involved in the project in a community service provider forum.¹³ The need for such a formal body was questioned in the interim evaluation though, given the project's successes to that point in establishing relationships with employers, coaches and other stakeholders on a more one-to-one rather than group basis, and in practice the project focused its efforts in its second half on making a wider contribution to knowledge and best practice through raising awareness of the project and its learning at pre-existing forums, such as Communities for Work staff meetings, rather than trying to (re)invent the wheel from scratch.

13. 'Communities for Work Innovation Fund...', p.10.

Partner organisations themselves also did not identify the need for any such forum during the project's lifetime. Nevertheless, their feedback regarding the project did provide significant learning for the project in terms of its wider contribution. There were two groups in particular who worked especially closely with the project: the organisations providing work placements and the professional coaches providing coaching support for the participants.

In terms of feedback from the first group, in providing testimony about the quality of their experience, employers often also revealed best practice suggestions which would be of use to any organisation working with BME women on employment issues. For example, the organisation quoted at the start of this section made the observation that: *“What I wouldn't like to see is unaccompanied referrals, people just sent over – you always want to build up that rapport first”*. They also outlined the process they had followed with their Skills for Life participant, and in doing so produced a quasi-template for such placements:

“What I do when I meet a potential placement for the first time is I just sit there and let them talk. I never pigeonhole them into what they need, I just listen. It seemed to me that [the Skills for Life participant] just needed experience, confidence building. The classic solution is to put her on the reception desk – it can be anyone in front of you there, you have to think on your feet. I didn't start her there straightaway though – our visitors expect anyone they talk to know everything about everything, so I got her shadowing people for a few weeks. Then we put her behind the desk, though early, before [we] opened [for the day]. I also got her into a group getting a lecture [to increase their professional knowledge of what the organisation does] so she would have that knowledge. Now she's got what she needs to be on the desk, and the reports back on her are excellent.”

The same work placement host was clear that this had been a beneficial approach for the participant:

“The impact on [our Skills for Life placement] is that she has a real spring in her step now. She wasn't nervous at the start exactly, but is now very confident! I have observed from a distance as she's helped out other people with things that are not directly her responsibility – she obviously really feels part of the team.”

They were also clear about the wider benefits of the placement to their organisation:

“It also shows [our organisation] is open to anyone, BME background or not – [our Skills for Life placement] is an ambassador. If you go back 15-20 years all [our] staff were white, middle aged [...] or from a certain background [...]. We had BME people in the background sometimes but people never saw them.”

The involvement of the organisation Skills for Life had also had potential wider effects for people in future similar situations too:

“I’m completely happy with the way the project has worked. I’ve started a skills development placement programme to allow people to get experiences so they can get a reference to apply for jobs: front of house training and team building [will] create a hands-on team to work behind the scenes to keep the [everything] set up and neat and tidy. But above all the participants get the feeling of being wanted and needed and a reason to get out of bed in the morning – they will have their own lockers and so on. It will go fully live this month with six-month rolling placements.”

Other employers gave similarly positive feedback about the project, its effects on its participants and the lessons they had learned from it as organisations:

- *“My involvement with the project has helped me to understand the barriers faced by BME women in the workplace and I would encourage other employers to host a placement. I think that the Skills for Life Programme is an excellent initiative which provides fantastic support and opportunities to BME women. I will admit that I was initially sceptical about the placement, mainly due to concerns of the time it would take to be an effective mentor, but I have thoroughly enjoyed it.”*
- *“We met with our participant prior to the commitment of a placement, as an opportunity for them to get a feel for our workplace. It was helpful for the wider [...] team members to realise that the senior [...] board [had] become involved and [...] was very hands on. [It g]ives the team a sense of involvement when they are actually working alongside placements [...]. We then built on this and our participant worked across the three areas of [our work]. They have grown in confidence and have gained a wealth of experience [...]. I believe the [level of] involvement was just right. We have been kept informed throughout the placement and have had opportunities to [attend] an event in March and also an opportunity to offer feedback. It seems to be a very well run project.”*
- *“The positives are numerous. As well as helping build the women's confidence in the work place they have gained valuable skills whilst being here [...]. It is very important and worthwhile work.”*

Overall, the view of a member of the project staff that *“for the ones who really want to make a difference, it's really made a difference to them”* seems a reasonable summary of the project's success with employers.

In terms of the professional coaching element of the project, the same member of the project's staff observed in her interview that *“coaches have talked about having enjoyed doing the work and working with people who aren't their usual client group*

and really making a difference". This view was borne out by the coaches themselves, for example, in the following feedback from one who worked with a Skills for Life participant:

"It has been a privilege to work with my Skills for Life client and be able to offer coaching to people who wouldn't otherwise have access to it. The woman I've been working with [...] tells me how much she values the support and space to focus on specific goals. She [has] grown in confidence relating to interviews and workplace esteem. I would encourage [Oxfam] to keep pursuing this way of working."

Another coach, who worked with numerous participants, was even more detailed in delineating the methods she had used which had had success:

"[I've seen a] commitment to attending the coaching sessions (which has increased over time) and engagement with the process. Each session [the participants] come up with a number of options for taking small steps towards reaching their longer-term goals, and then they commit to carrying out some of them by the following session, which they have succeeded in doing fairly consistently over the period. Their motivation is high and we work through SMART objectives."

The same coach also shared some of the barriers she had observed among participants and how they had been able to overcome them, at least in terms of attending the coaching sessions:

"The barriers or problems they face include childcare, housing, money, mobility (i.e. transport), language (for those who speak English as a second language), so these are taken into consideration when setting targets and actions. The five women I've been working with always let me know if they're going to have trouble attending a session (e.g. due to childcare) and are all now punctual to sessions. In fact, this has improved as the project has progressed."

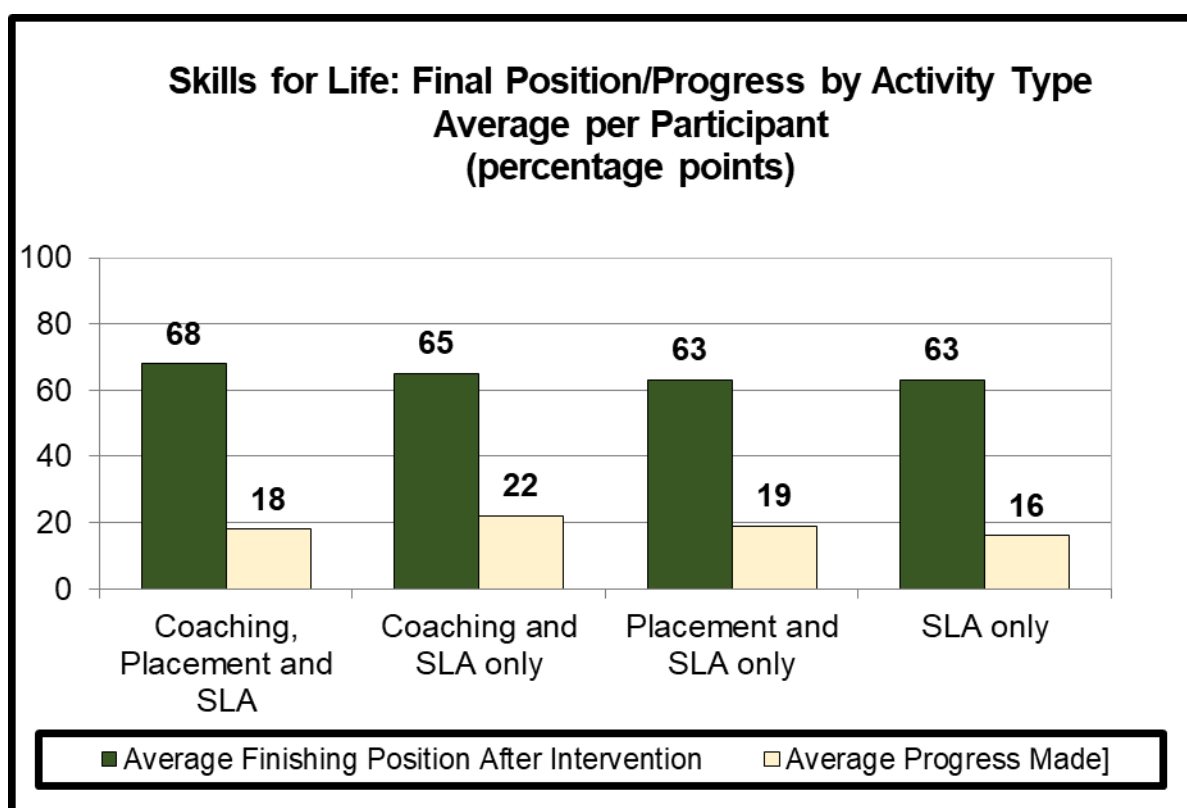
She also testified to the overall effectiveness of the support the project offered:

"This has been a very positive, humbling and rewarding experience for me. The Oxfam Cymru team have been incredibly supportive and I would love to work with them again in the future if the opportunity arose."

As well as feedback from partners about their learning, the other main indicator for Skills for Life's final outcome was that it should create a monitoring, evaluation and learning system that would allow it to be compared in terms of its effectiveness to other similar projects. The main tool for this was to be the value analysis that forms part of this report (see section VIII. below), and looks at the amount of fiscal, economic and social value created by the project per pound invested in it. Given

that the Skills for Life monitoring, evaluation and learning system was able to provide enough information for this value analysis calculation to be made robustly and with the necessary level of detail, the project clearly met this indicator.

Evidence generated by the project also recorded the effectiveness of its person-centred approach with – as would be expected in a successfully person-centred project – little difference between the amount of progress made by participants taking part in different types of project activity. Instead, whether participants undertook placements or utilised the professional coaches or just took part in the group training sessions or received one-to-one SLA support, they made much the same amount of progress, and reached much the same final position, as the following graph records:



This evenness of progress is a testament to the success of the project in helping participants in the ways that were right for them, rather than prescribing a set route (such as work placements or coaching sessions for every participant) that would have been effective with some participants but not others.

This approach was summed up by the comment of one participant at the time of the interim evaluation, which compared the project to the other help they had received from Communities for Work:

“This is better, more one-to-one, they can give you more time than the Communities for Work person. I just didn't know what I wanted, that was the problem, but [the Livelihoods Worker] could help me.”

The value of this more person-centred approach also came through in other feedback from participants, such as view of one participant that *“the most significant change for me [has been] getting the placement, getting what I really wanted, having the option that I really wanted”*.

More often, though, the qualitative evidence suggested that participants benefited most from a combination of one or more of the types of help the project offered, in different configurations depending on the individual concerned. Overall, the combination of one-to-one support and group training sessions, followed by some kind of work experience activity, seemed a frequently effective combination, with all three elements mentioned in the following feedback from one participant:

“The opportunity to do work shadowing is the most significant thing for me [...]. The one-to-one help [...] is really good, [the worker] has been really supportive, [she] says that if I need anything I can phone her. They [the project staff] have supported me throughout. I really enjoyed the [group] training, I enjoyed the outside guests who shared their knowledge and experiences, the women who talked about their business.”

Another participant by contrast picked out two of the elements in particular:

“I joined through Communities for Work, [the Skills for Life worker] working with me one-to-one was good, she gave me the extra support I needed. The Employability training was good, the tutor was great, he made the exercises interesting, then on the second day we went to [an employer] for real and that was really useful!”

In terms of Oxfam's partner organisation on the project, as the interim evaluation had recorded in relation to SRCDC, *“there is no doubt that the project fits well with the charity's stated aims of fostering the empowerment of individuals and groups, ensuring access to services and opportunities, and developing strong cross-cultural relationships”*.¹⁴ The interim evaluation had noted that this worked by not only fostering new relationships between BME women and the non-BME people they encountered in placements and jobs gained through the project, but also by fostering new relationships between the different types of BME women participants themselves, who often came from very different cultural backgrounds.

Overall, the Skills for Life project has generated a large amount of learning as part of its aim of making a wider contribution to policy and best practice in terms of helping those furthest from the labour market into employment. In this regard, it has more than met the hopes invested in it at its outset.

14. See Charity Commission, 'South Riverside Community Development Centre Limited', available at: <http://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details/?regid=1080314&subid=0> <accessed April 2018>.

VII. General Issues and Themes

“The biggest barrier to paid employment is childcare – the project has been brilliant paying for [...] nursery for my daughter so I can come, and go on the placements, but you don't get that with a job unfortunately.”

Project participant, Skills for Life

“I think childcare is the main barrier. If participants were able to do a full day I think it would be more beneficial to them [...]. If childcare was available before school or after school it would enable each participant to see a whole working day rather than a snippet.”

Work placement provider, Skills for Life

“The main barrier for all of these women has been childcare. Sometimes you're better off organising sessions last minute rather than three weeks in advance if someone is really busy like these women are.”

Professional coach, Skills for Life

At the broadest possible level, the final element of the wider contribution the project was expected to make was to generate information relating to the barriers and difficulties facing BME women seeking to engage or re-engage in the workplace. As noted in the interim evaluation, not all of the learning generated by Skills for Life relates to only one outcome. Crosscutting issues have also arisen, and these may be the most significant learning of all to be generated by the project during its lifetime.

As the interim evaluation had observed, in terms of general themes, one in particular stood out above all others: the barrier formed by childcare, and specifically the **lack of affordable childcare** available when women needed it to be able to work. The interim evaluation had recorded examples of participants who had been forced to turn down jobs by a lack of suitable care (such as care to cover evening shifts). And as the three quotes from the final evaluation interviews above indicate, the situation had not changed by the project's end. Moreover, as a member of the project staff highlighted in her interview in relation to needing childcare:

“A lot of entry level jobs are like that, retail, cleaning, hospitality and so on. For example, with cleaning you either work very early or very late – it's not family compatible, especially if you're a single parent with no networks in the UK.”

It is hard to overstate how important the issue of lack of affordable, suitable childcare is for BME women with children (as over half of the Skills for Life participants were; around half of those with children were also single parents). As one participant commented about Skills for Life in her baseline survey, *“it's the only project that*

helps with childcare”, and she was not alone among participants in drawing attention to this issue. As another put it:

“Doing the project was a real eye-opener. The most significant change for me was meeting other women in the group who were in the same position. I realised I was not alone. They understood why I was not working. Creches are too expensive, this keeps mothers at home. [The project] has helped me a lot, for example, with my housing benefit. Other services wouldn't do that. [...] I am planning to further my career and get a better job now.”

Other barriers reported in the interim evaluation were **welfare changes, especially the benefit cap**, which had been a recurring theme according to another member of the project's staff:

“The benefit cap is a big issue, as it causes longer term plans to be put on hold. The participants suddenly just need money, so go for lower ambition, zero hours stuff, care work, cleaning and the like.”

There were numerous instances recorded in the project's monitoring of participants becoming subject to the cap during the project, and it is clearly a barrier whose effects need to be addressed if BME women (or any other groups likely to have significant caring responsibilities) are to be helped towards decent work, not just any work, by projects such as Skills for Life.

Another barrier identified in the interim evaluation were **additional employer requirements facing non-Britons**. Citing a specific case where a participant had been unable to take up a placement as a result, the same member of the project's staff had also observed a more general trend at the time of the interim evaluation:

“Many of the women who have come to the UK from abroad seem to be facing more difficulties than those born here. The latter group have more support networks and qualifications and the right paperwork.”

This issue was also mentioned by one of the voluntary work placement providers:

“[O]ne barrier that we have found is the amount of time that participants have lived in this country. Due to our security vetting procedures, we require visitors to have been living within the UK for three years in order to get a building pass. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. This has resulted in us having to refuse some applicants.”

The project staff member drawing attention to the issue at the time of the interim evaluation had been of the view that more recognition of participants' home nation qualifications would help with this. This had also been an issue identified in an independent report on employment support for women commissioned by Oxfam in 2016. The report had come to similar conclusions, especially in relation to refugee

women, noting that those *“with existing vocational and professional skills would benefit from access to higher-level ESOL support or re-certification enabling them to move into higher skilled and better paid jobs”*.¹⁵

There had also been some very practical issues that participants had had to deal with in the project's first half. While things like accommodation issues for meetings or participant unfamiliarity with coaching as an approach had been largely solved by the project's second half, some new everyday issues did emerge later in the project, particularly in relation to the work placements, which had often only just been getting underway at the project's interim point.

The first of these issues was the **amount of time needed to set up placements**. As one participant put it, *“I didn't realise it would take so long to set up my placements [...], it seems to be a lot of work.”* As a pilot project starting from only having direct links with the Oxfam shops, rather than with employers more generally, this was perhaps to be expected, but it is still noticeable that the work placements seemed to take more time and effort to set up than the other elements of the project. As one of the project staff members observed:

“One of the challenges has been the time needed to set up work placements – this has been why some participants [...] have ended up doing more than one. [Some placements] took so long to set up (three months) that by the time they were set up, the participants' needs had changed or something else had been set up somewhere else in the meantime.”

Another issue was the **responsibility for participant development** once in a placement. As one employer fed back:

“I think the programme would benefit from asking organisations to provide a clearer workplan for the placement period, as I felt that due to the nature of my role, the tasks that [the Skills for Life participant] undertook were a bit ad hoc and perhaps she would have benefited more from a more structured programme [...]. That said, [the participant] approached all tasks enthusiastically and helped out across the [organisation] where needed.”

These points were echoed by the member of the project staff responsible for setting up the placements in her feedback as well.

The same employer raising the issue around development plans also felt that **more information to support the initial set up process** would have been beneficial, noting that they had not seen the participant's CV in advance and had had to produce their own confidentiality document for her. The employer also commented that the preparation training session on poverty awareness that the project had been

15. J. Mansour, 'Work in Life' (24 August 2016), available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/work-in-life-how-an-anti-poverty-approach-to-employment-support-could-be-transf-618636> <accessed April 2018>, p.9.

planning had had to be cancelled, which they felt was a pity, as *“a general training session to prepare us as mentors would be beneficial”*. Had the project had more lead-in time, as one of the staff members noted in her interview, it would have been able to take a more structured approach, readying the employers to take part, delivering the training and only then arranging the placements.

As with the issue of the time needed to set up placements, problems like this were perhaps in part only to be expected in a pilot project undertaking partnerships with non-Oxfam employers for the first time. Nonetheless, the theme did flag up a potential wider issue around **employer capacity** too. There is little doubt that the involvement of non-Oxfam employers added significantly to the project's effectiveness for its participants – for example, through the employability training which was rated by participants as their favourite training session, in the words of a member of the project's staff, *“because it was a more formal environment with a dual employer training team”*. The importance of the way staff acted as an initial link between participants and organisations offering work placements also came through in employer feedback.

Nevertheless, there are limits on what employers can bring to any project like this. As one of them put it:

“The only negative from an organisational perspective is the fact that it is hard to find placements for the project participants on top of our general work experience offering. [I] think that what Oxfam and the project are doing is really, really great. I only wish that, organisationally, we had more time and resources to help out.”

Related to this was a suggestion from the same employer around placement length. They felt that longer term placements were most beneficial for the participants, *“so they can really get some experience under their belt which they can use for competence-based interviews and so on in the future”*. This view was echoed by the member of the project's staff responsible for placements, who noted that, from her perspective, with some employers, *“it's felt like a bit of a tick box exercise”*. In her view:

“It should be win-win: placements give a better view of a person than you can get just from an interview whilst also offering an opportunity for participants to build their skills and gain some experience. The placements need to be longer term though (such as six-month ones) and on a bigger scale, preferably within larger organisations – [one particular] placement [offered] was for two weeks and felt very tokenistic.”

All of these aims would depend, however, not just on employer capacity but on **project capacity** as well. The final crosscutting themes to emerge from the project all related to this issue in one way or another. As noted in previous sections of this report, the project reached only two-thirds of the participants it was intended to

according to its initial targets. Even then, however, in the view of one of the members of the project's staff, *“a smaller cohort of participants would have been better”*. Statistically, there was some evidence to support this view. As the interim report noted, the project had set itself a very ambitious seeming target in relation to overall participant numbers, given that the nine comparable projects on Oxfam's earlier Building Livelihoods and Strengthening Communities in Wales programme had averaged only 41 participants each in their first year, even with their less restrictive entry criteria. The interim report concluded that a target half that of the actual one might have proven to be nearer the mark.

This overambition, and the subsequent constant pressure to recruit high numbers of new participants, may also have been responsible for delays in placements or coaching sessions, although the coach raising the issue (who also raised the issue of a participant having to bring their child to one session) felt that other factors might have been involved:

“The only other difficulties of working on the project have been failing to start working with at least four other women that were assigned to me, who would have benefited from coaching – I don't know the reasons that sessions haven't happened but it could be down to them having a lot of other challenges outside the project.”

Similarly, while still giving the project full marks, one placement provider did observe they would maybe have liked *“more catch-up kind of things where Oxfam come in and observe the participant, or whatever they wanted to do”*.

Overall, there is nothing in the feedback from participants, coaches, work placement providers or any other stakeholder to contradict the view of another member of staff that *“[t]he targets were [...] too ambitious to begin with – Communities for Work were stricter about people not ready for work, they don't work with them, but that's not our ethos”*.

This observation in turn flags up one final general issue arising from the project – its unusually **accessible and person-centred nature** compared to other, similar projects. One of the coaches drew attention to this, commenting that project could *“maybe tighten the processes involved in bringing people on board”*. A member of staff made a similar observation:

“We're very open access and easygoing when it comes to engaging participants, which can result in difficult situations [...]. Maybe we need more paperwork before we engage people.”

As with its specific outcomes, Skills for Life generated a lot of food for thought for any future project working with BME women on employment matters in the form of the general, crosscutting issues it experienced and the barriers to women's participation in the labour market that those issues revealed.

VIII. Value Analysis

Value analysis looks at three different types of value: fiscal, economic and social. When combined, these three types of value allow the overall value of a project, including its cost/benefit ratios and Social Return on Investment, to be assessed.

- Fiscal value derives from savings that would ordinarily accrue to the state. For example, several Skills for Life participants who had previously been claiming out-of-work benefits gained employment as a result of their involvement with the project. Those participants therefore no longer required the same level of state financial support they had previously been getting, as those benefits were replaced by wages, or by wages plus in work benefits, which represented an overall fiscal saving.
- Economic value is created by savings or benefits that, though they do not accrue to the state (because they result from things the state would not ordinarily be paying for) are nonetheless still of clear economic benefit. Volunteering, and the activities of volunteers, is a good example of this. Other examples might include the additional spending power or taxes paid by participants who have increased their incomes with the help of the project.
- Social value comprises the wider savings an intervention creates for the individual and society, particularly in terms of what it would cost society to provide the same outcome for that individual simply by increasing their income alone. Social value measurement makes use of an approach known as the Wellbeing Valuation Approach. The approach takes large sample datasets, such as the British Household Panel Survey or the Crime Survey for England and Wales and uses them to calculate the effect of a particular outcome, be it gaining employment, regular volunteering or a general increase in confidence, on a person's wellbeing. Through doing this, it allows previously unmeasurable value to be quantified consistently, based on individuals' actual reported experiences.¹⁶

In talking about these three types of value, the above definitions draw heavily upon the work of two organisations in particular. The first is the Treasury-led New Economy project, and its unit cost database. The project draws together the work of a number of different UK government departments, particularly in relation to fiscal and economic value, and provides more than 600 unit cost estimates that can be used to calculate the benefits of delivering proactive services through the potential savings in reactive costs that can be achieved.¹⁷ The second is the HACT (Housing

16. For further information on the Wellbeing Valuation Approach, see L. Trotter et al, 'Measuring the Social Impact of Community Investment: A Guide to using the Wellbeing Valuation Approach' (HACT, 2014), particularly pp.10-13.

17. For further information on the New Economy Unit Cost Database, see <http://www.neweconomymanchester.com/our-work/research-evaluation-cost-benefit-analysis/cost-benefit-analysis/unit-cost-database> <accessed April 2018>.

Associations Charitable Trust) Social Value Bank, created by HACT and the former Cabinet Office senior economist and head of cost-benefit analysis at the Department for Work and Pensions, Daniel Fujiwara (now at the London School of Economics). The Social Value Bank is the source of the social value element of this value analysis report, and therefore indirectly its use of the Wellbeing Valuation Approach.¹⁸

In terms of general principles, if not specific practice, this report also draws upon the work of Social Value UK, particularly insofar as it follows the cardinal rule the organisation shares with HACT and the Social Value Bank. In the words of its guidance, that rule runs as follows:

*“Do not over-claim: only claim the value that organisations are responsible for creating. This principle requires reference to trends and benchmarks to help assess the change caused by the activity, as opposed to other factors, and to take account of what would have happened anyway. It also requires consideration of the contribution of other people or organisations to the reported outcomes in order to match the contributions to the outcomes.”*¹⁹

Or as HACT put it in their guidance for using the Social Value Bank:

*“Particular care should be taken not to overclaim. The framework includes the option to apply an average measure of deadweight, i.e. the people whose wellbeing would have improved even without your activity, but you should take care not to inflate or overestimate your impact.”*²⁰

In the spirit of only attributing to Skills for Life the value that the project itself has been responsible for creating, this value analysis includes only those outcomes explicitly recorded as having been achieved by participants and does not assume or extrapolate any outcomes that are not directly recorded as having occurred either by the participants themselves in their baseline survey or by another objective indicator (such as gaining a job) in their case record. It also applies the following qualifiers to the initial values derived from the sources outlined above to arrive at its final values:

- Deadweight – or what the participant would have achieved by themselves, without any additional support from the project. In accordance with the principle of not overclaiming outlined above, this value analysis applied a minimum deadweight of minus 25% to all outcomes, meaning only a maximum attribution factor of 0.75, or 75%, could be applied to any given participant, which was then reduced further by anything up to minus 100% depending on the case history of each participant.

18. See <http://www.hact.org.uk/social-value-bank> for further information on the HACT Social Value Bank <accessed April 2018>.

19. J. Nicholls et al, 'A Guide to Social Return on Investment (The SROI Network, 2012), p.97.

20. Trotter et al, 'Measuring the Social Impact of Community Investment...', p.18.

- Discounting – another set percentage applied to all outcomes, discounting takes into account the preference for value now (for example, in the form of the money invested in the programme) versus value (be it fiscal, economic or social) received in one or more years' time. The standard Treasury Green Book rate is minus 3.5% per year or part year subsequent to the first year. As this value analysis limits itself to benefits of one year's duration only, in order to reflect the one-year nature of the Skills for Life project, this factor was not relevant to any of the outcomes in this value analysis.²¹
- Attribution – related to deadweight, this factor allows for the role of other organisations to be included in an assessment of outcome value. While there were no instances where a participant's outcomes were wholly ascribable to a combination of their own efforts and the efforts of another organisation outside of the Skills for Life project, in some instances where another organisation or project did play a supporting but significant role, a factor of anything up to minus 50% was taken off the base attribution factor to take into account this external contribution.
- Duration – the average length of each participant's outcome(s) as recorded in the project's ongoing monitoring; as Skills for Life ran for only one year, and in accordance with the HACT Value Bank, outcomes were assumed to last for one year only, rather than the longer timeframes of anything up to five years used in some cost-benefit analyses or social return on investment studies. As a result, no factoring for dropoff (the effect of an outcome being achieved naturally reducing as it becomes more than one year distant in time) needed to be included in this value analysis.
- Substitution – substitution is a qualifier applied to finite goods, in other words, those outcomes where one person gaining them may result in another person losing them. While most of the outcomes generated by the project did not fall under this category, for those participants gaining employment, and therefore potentially displacing another job applicant from employment in doing so, a standard substitution range of either minus 10% and minus 20% was applied, depending on the nature of the employment gained.²²

21. 'The Green Book: Appraisal and Evaluation in Central Government' (HM Treasury, 2011), p.26.

22. D. Greenberg et al, 'Improving DWP assessment of the relative costs and benefits of employment programmes' (DWP Working Paper No. 100; Policy Studies Institute on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions, 2011), p.1. Note that substitution rates can vary widely, depending on the local labour market and the nature of the intervention affecting it (see also, for example the tables on pp.16-17 of the Greenberg paper), hence the paper's suggestion that value analyses may simply caution the reader about the existence of possible substitution effects in relation to supply side programmes (such as the Skills for Life project) or include it as part of the sensitivity analysis instead – see p.21 of the Greenberg paper for further discussion of this. In order to err on the side of caution, however, and avoid any potential overclaiming, this value analysis includes the substitution qualifiers outlined above in instances where participants have gained employment as a result of the project. My thanks to Jeremy Nicholls at Social Value UK for supplying the source for this reference.

In relation to methodology, it is also important to note that the references to the value created by the project that follow are references to the notional cost savings or other value generated by the project, rather than to actual cash savings or already accrued economic or social value. This is because in terms of cashability, change has to happen at a certain scale for it to translate into actual monetary savings. For instance, as noted earlier, several participants on the project got jobs as a result of their involvement with it. This would not, however, be enough change to allow the DWP to shut down one of its job centres, let alone make significant cost savings across the four Communities First cluster areas covered by the project.

More broadly, no external organisation, even a relatively large voluntary sector organisation such as Oxfam, can ever be in a position to calculate the exact effect a particular change will have upon another organisation's budgets. As a result, any assessment of value created can only be an estimate based on average unit costs, be it in relation to input and opportunity value foregone or output and outcome value created. Ultimately, if a statutory organisation wants to know exactly what a voluntary sector project has saved them, that is something it will have to work out for itself, and even then, as the Treasury's own guidance observes:

*“It is important to note that the estimation of cashable savings is imprecise: estimates of what is cashable will be approximate and based on negotiations between commissioners and providers rather than solely on a formula or calculation. Cost-benefit analysis, therefore, informs discussions around how far benefits are cashable; it is not a substitute for negotiation”.*²³

The monitoring system for Skills for Life measured the progress of its participants in terms of distance travelled in each of these areas using repeat baseline surveys.²⁴

23. 'Supporting public service transformation: cost benefit analysis guidance for local partnerships' (HM Treasury / New Economy / Public Service Transformation Network, 2014), p.17.

24. In ascertaining social value using the baseline surveys from Skills for Life, this value analysis uses the following values (correlated for age band and non-London geographical area) outlined in the HACT Social Value Bank and its accompanying guidance – see L. Trotter, 'Social Value Bank: Practice Notes – Update 2014' (HACT, 2014): EMP 1401 – Full-time employment; EMP1403 – Part-time employment; EMP 1408 – Regular volunteering; ENV1407 – Able to obtain advice locally; ENV1409 – Feel belonging to neighbourhood; HEA1401 – High confidence (adult); HEA1406 – Feel in control of life; and FIN1406 – Financial comfort. The non-employment indicators are independent from each other (as based on separate outcomes) and therefore could be used, as per the Social Value Bank guidance (see Trotter, 'Social Value Bank: Practice Notes...', pp.12-13), together in any combination. The employment and volunteering indicators for social value were mutually exclusive, again as per the Social Value Bank guidance, with a participant only able to achieve one of EMP1401 or EMP1403 while with the project. All of these indicators were chosen on the basis of being a close match for the wording of the project outcomes against which progress was recorded in the baseline surveys. The only indicator which had no explicitly comparable wording in the project outcomes was HEA1406. The notion of control over one's life is, however, particularly important to the SLA – while it is never possible for it or any other approach to eliminate entirely these external shocks, the SLA seeks instead above all to build up a participant's feeling of control over their life, so that when those external shocks do happen, they are more resilient and better able to cope with them, because of that feeling of control. For this reason, as the Social Value Bank has no exact indicator quantifying the general value of a sustainably improved livelihood in general (as opposed to contributory but separate subcomponents, such as confidence or access to services), HEA1406 was the most relevant proxy to

This allowed the progress of participants with baselines to be mapped onto the wellbeing valuation scale that forms the basis of the HACT Social Value Bank, and therefore the social value created by the project to be measured. Again with the cardinal rule of not overclaiming in mind, it is worth noting here that only improvements in wellbeing of a certain magnitude were counted as instances of the project generating social value. The outcomes listed in the Social Value Bank are divided into valuable and non-valuable outcomes, and only those outcomes in the upper part of the wellbeing scale are considered by it to be eligible, and then only when a participant has moved from a non-valuable outcome level to a valuable one (rather than starting off with, say, a high level of social assets, and simply retaining that high level while with the project).

With these caveats in place, the amount of fiscal, economic and social value created by the Skills for Life project can be calculated. The sections that now follow discuss the results of this calculation in terms of the different types of value created: fiscal, economic, social and overall value.

a) Fiscal value

Looking first at the fiscal value generated by the Skills for Life project, the largest amount of value created was generated by those participants who moved into employment during the project. Attributable gross values (in other words, the gross fiscal value of a change multiplied by the relevant attribution, deadweight and substitution factors) ranged from a high of £5,676.55 for a participant moving into full-time work to a low of £92.67 for a participant moving into a role which was only a few hours per week at a certain time of year. Altogether, the overall attributable gross fiscal value created by the project came to £26,886.00.

b) Economic value

The single largest amount of economic value created by a Skills for Life participant came from a participant who first volunteered as part of the project, and then moved into employment later on. By helping her do these things, the project generated a gross attributable economic value of £5,195.26. The lowest amount created was £34.75, produced by a participant who moved into very low hours occasional work without doing any volunteering with the project beforehand. The total gross economic value attributable to the project was £43,123.12.

c) Social value

Finally, as had been the case for the Oxfam Livelihoods project that had helped pave the way for Skills for Life, the largest amount of gross value created attributable to the project came in the form of social value. The highest single amount came from one participant who more than doubled her overall livelihoods position compared to

use in order to capture the broader social value of a more sustainable livelihood and, as per the HACT guidance, usable with any of the other indicators listed above.

her initial starting position, resulting in a gross attributable social value of £24,972.00. The smallest positive amount created, £277.50, was generated by a participant who gained some social benefits from getting a temporary part-time job, but showed no evidence of progress in any of the other areas of her livelihood. In total, the gross social value attributable to the project was £259,098.00.

d) Overall value

The overall gross fiscal, economic and social value attributable to the Skills for the Life project over one year is therefore the sum of the three numbers above, or £329,107.12. From this sum, however, needs to be subtracted the costs of the project, in order to reach the net overall value it created. Once these costs – the costs both in financial terms (funding) and non-financial terms (the opportunity costs to participants of taking part in the project) – are taken into account, then the overall fiscal, economic and social value attributable to the project becomes visible: a final figure of £208,057.91.

This final total equates to an overall net value ratio of 1.34:1. Or, to express it in other terms, the Skills for Life project generated £1.34 in fiscal, economic and social value for every £1 that was invested in it, meaning that the benefits of the project more than outweighed its costs, even given the frequently resource intensive and time-consuming nature of the work it involved.

Ideally, though, no net value ratio should ever be taken in isolation or used out of context to draw conclusions about the efficacy of one individual project against another. Unless the methodologies behind different studies are both sufficiently similar to each other, and sufficiently understood to the observer, there is always a risk of comparing like with unlike – of ‘comparing apples with pears’ so to speak – and drawing false conclusions as a result.

For example, the shorter a project's duration and the shorter its participants' involvement, and therefore the shorter the length of time it can be sure that the outcomes achieved by its participants are retained, the lower an overall net ratio it is likely to have. It would therefore be a mistake to compare the figure for Skills for Life, a one-year project with an operational life of ten months, with a longer project such as the previous Oxfam Cymru Livelihoods project, which had a three-and a half-year operational life.

Furthermore, as with any kind of value analysis, all of the above values are based at least in part on average values, rather than values tailored exclusively to particular participants' situations. This value analysis has been able to draw on the individual case histories kept for each participant in the Skills for Life project, and therefore has explicit supporting evidence for all its outcomes, including specific baseline survey data where relevant. Nonetheless, it has still had to make some assumptions in its use of base unit and other costs, in order to then turn those outcomes into figures for the project as a whole.

For both these reasons, it is therefore important to subject the final overall net value figure to a process known as sensitivity analysis. Sensitivity analysis is a process whereby the main assumptions in a value analysis are varied, in order to see what effect the assumptions being either overoptimistic or underoptimistic would have on the overall value created by a project.

According to Social Value UK's guidance, it is particularly important to look at the following areas:

- Quantity of outcomes.
- Value of non-financial inputs.
- Assumptions relating to deadweight, attribution and dropoff.
- Financial proxies.²⁵

As recalculating every assumption in a value analysis would be a task almost as time-consuming as producing that analysis in the first place, by convention sensitivity analysis looks only at the highest value assumptions made in each of the four areas, as any other over or underassumptions would by definition be of less significance, and therefore less relevant to the final result of the process, which ultimately aims to produce not a single net value ratio figure, but a net value range.

The following sensitivity analysis looks at four areas noted above in turn:

1. Quantity of outcomes: number of participants with improved feelings of control over life.

The majority of the outcomes for the project were binary, and so easily ascertained and recorded by workers – either a participant had gained a job, or a volunteering placement, or they had not. This was not true of all outcomes though, particularly those relating to social value, where the distance travelled data used recorded graded changes rather than binary ones. The social value generated from this factor was also the single highest source of value for the project, therefore this is the factor subject to sensitivity analysis in this category (as well as in one other category– see the section on financial proxies below for analysis of the factor in terms of value of proxy rather than level of participant numbers.)

The use of repeat baseline surveys to qualify all participants counting towards this outcome (in other words, no participant who had not explicitly shown progress in their surveys were counted towards the outcome) means that it is unlikely that the total number is an overestimate. However, if for any reason the numbers had been overestimated significantly, say by 25% (or three participants), then the overall value ratio for the Skills for Life project would drop to 1.20. If, conversely, the lack of repeat baseline data for participants not completing two sets of baseline surveys

25. Nicholls et al, p.69.

meant there had been a 25% underestimate (in other words, three more participants had achieved the outcome than recorded in the baseline surveys), then the overall value ratio for the project would rise to 1.47.

2. Value of non-financial inputs: opportunity costs to participants taking part in the project

Throughout the project the desire to monitor as many elements of it as possible had to be balanced with the need for workers and participants to be able to get on with their activities without having to spend large amounts of time simply accounting for their time. The nature of livelihoods support in particular, with its unpredictable workload and requirement to be able to deal with crisis situations at short notice, makes it inherently unsuited to intensive input time monitoring. The project took the decision early on not to record the specific amount of time spent with each participant in records of activities, but instead focus in its monitoring workload on capturing the nature of what was done with each participant and the outcomes that activity had.

As a result, the opportunity costs for participants, the largest non-financial input included in the value analysis, are based on an estimated average number of hours of involvement with the project per participant valued at minimum wage (as ordinary involvement with the project as a participant required no particular skillset). This average number of hours was set at 28 per participant, based on the amount of time a participant would have needed to attend all of the project's group training sessions, with the estimated lower averages for non-intensive participants who formed the majority of project participants offsetting the estimated higher averages for the minority of project participants who were intensively supported. Applying value analysis, however, in the event that these elements did not quite offset, and that the average number of hours required by each participant was therefore actually twice this amount, the overall value ratio for the Skills for Life project would drop to 1.30. If, conversely, the average number of hours required by each participant was actually half the amount assumed, then the overall value ratio for the project would rise to 1.36.

3. Assumptions relating to deadweight, attribution and dropoff: combined deadweight/attribution rate of all participants

As noted earlier, any weightings for factors like deadweight used in this value analysis follow standard national rates and methodologies, so are unlikely to be either over or underestimates. The combined deadweight/attribution rates applied likewise follow or exceed external standards, such those in the HACT guidance.²⁶

26. In applying a minimum -25% deadweight/attribution to all participant outcomes, plus further minus quantifiers on a case-by-case basis, this value analysis actually goes slightly further than the -19% average across different outcome types suggested in the HACT guidance – see Trotter et al, 'Measuring the Social Impact of Community Investment...', p.12. The scale used also follows Homes

While quantifiers such as discounting, dropoff or substitution are all uniform flat rates, however, the deadweight/attribution rate varies according to each participant's case history and is therefore is a more subjective quantifier. With an overall average combined deadweight and attribution rate for the project of 0.55 (or in other words, an average of almost half of the outcomes value for each participant ascribed to factors other than the project), and with the use of the Social Value Bank figures for the social analysis that include an already built-in deadweight amount, the value analysis for this project is unlikely to have overestimated its attribution rate. Nonetheless, in the improbable event that the deadweight/attribution rates for every participant was overoptimistic by a factor of 25%, then the overall value ratio of the project would fall to 1.01. If, on the other hand, the existing deadweight/attribution rate proved to be a 25% underestimate per participant, then the overall value ratio of the project would rise to 1.68.

4. Financial proxies: employment (average fiscal value of a previously workless participant entering work), volunteering (average economic value of a previously workless participant entering work) and increased control (average social value of feeling in control of life)

Finally in terms of sensitivity analysis, the proxies with the highest gross average value per annum for each type of value were the three above. The fiscal cost of a previously workless participant entering employment is derived from the Treasury/New Economy unit cost database, which gives per participant savings using the Department for Work and Pensions figures. In order to further prevent overclaiming, this figure is then subjected to further qualifiers dependent on the case history of the participant in question. So, for example, the value of the outcome is greatly reduced if it only relates to part-time, rather than full-time work. Further reductions are also applied if the work is paid at a level that would require the participant to still receive in-work benefits. While it is therefore unlikely that the employment element of the project's total value figures could be overclaiming, as the largest constituent part of that value it is nonetheless important to note that if it did prove to be overoptimistic by 25%, the overall value ratio for the Skills for Life project would fall to 1.31. If, by contrast, the employment value created by the project turned out to underrepresent the final situation by 25%, then the overall net value ratio would rise to 1.36.

The (separate) average economic value of a previously workless participant entering work is also the largest single component of the economic value created by the project. As with the fiscal proxy, as this is based on standard national figures, it is unlikely that the employment element of the analysis could be overclaiming, but if the proxy upon which those figures are based did prove to be overly high by 25%, the overall value ratio for the Skills for Life project would fall to 1.30. If, on the other hand, the employment value created by the project turned out to underrepresent the final situation by 25%, then the overall net value ratio would rise to 1.37.

& Communities Agency guidance – see J. Dancer, 'Additionality Guide - Fourth Edition 2014' (HCA, 2014), p.18.

Lastly in relation to proxies, as noted above in relation to quantity of outcomes, the highest value factor in terms of social value per annum was control. This proxy is part of the Social Value Bank, and therefore derives from large scale national datasets (as discussed earlier) which are unlikely to be wrong. However, if the proxy did turn out to have overestimated the social value of control created by the project by 25%, the overall value ratio for the Livelihoods project would fall to 1.21. Underestimating the value of the feelings of control generated by the project by half, by contrast, would see the Livelihoods project's net value ratio rise to 1.46.

Overall, therefore, looking across all four areas of the sensitivity analysis for this project, the highest point in the net value ratio range is 1.68 and the lowest 1.01, with the majority of values within the 1.20 to 1.47 range. Applying sensitivity analysis therefore suggests that the specific value ratio of 1.34 resulting from the value analysis as a whole is well within the likely range of outcomes for the project, even when subject to significant potential variations within its most important constituent factors.

The following table details the final figures for the value analysis of the Skills for Life project, together with the results of the sensitivity analysis, overall value range and final net ratio for the project:

Skills for Life: Net Value Ratio and Sensitivity Analysis (£ per annum)

SENSITIVITY FACTOR	TOTAL PROJECT COSTS (INPUT AND OPPORTUNITY COSTS)	GROSS ATTRIBUTABLE FISCAL VALUE	GROSS ATTRIBUTABLE ECONOMIC VALUE	GROSS ATTRIBUTABLE SOCIAL VALUE	GROSS COMBINED ATTRIBUTABLE FISCAL / ECONOMIC / SOCIAL VALUE	NET COMBINED FISCAL / ECONOMIC / SOCIAL VALUE	VALUE RATIO (PER £ INVESTED)
Quantity of outcomes: control (+3 participants)	246449.25	26886.00	43123.12	292869.70	362878.82	241829.61	1.47
Quantity of outcomes: control (-3 participants)	246449.25	26886.00	43123.12	226151.30	296160.42	175111.21	1.20
Value of non-financial inputs: opportunity costs (x 0.5)	242740.05	26886.00	43123.12	259098.00	329107.12	211767.11	1.36
Value of non-financial inputs: opportunity costs (x 2.0)	253867.64	26886.00	43123.12	259098.00	329107.12	200639.52	1.30
Combined deadweight/attribution rate (+25%)	246449.25	33716.10	54095.76	326794.88	414606.73	293557.52	1.68
Combined deadweight/attribution rate (-25%)	246449.25	20229.66	32457.45	196076.93	248764.04	127714.83	1.01
Financial proxy (fiscal): participant entering work (+25%)	246449.25	33607.50	43123.12	259098.00	335828.62	214779.41	1.36
Financial proxy (fiscal): participant entering work (-25%)	246449.25	20164.50	43123.12	259098.00	322385.62	201336.41	1.31
Financial proxy (economic): participant entering work (+25%)	246449.25	26886.00	51490.88	259098.00	337474.88	216425.67	1.37
Financial proxy (economic): participant entering work (-25%)	246449.25	26886.00	34755.36	259098.00	320739.36	199690.15	1.30
Financial proxy (social): increased control (+25%)	246449.25	26886.00	43123.12	289780.50	359789.62	238740.41	1.46
Financial proxy (social): increased control (-25%)	246449.25	26886.00	43123.12	228415.50	298424.62	177375.41	1.21
OVERALL NET VALUE RANGE	242740.05-253867.64	20164.50-33716.10	32457.45-54095.76	196076.93-326794.88	248764.04-414606.73	127714.83-293557.52	1.01-1.68
FINAL NET VALUE RATIO	246449.25	26886.00	43123.12	259098.00	329107.12	208057.91	1.34

(All figures in this table are expressed in £ sterling at 2015/16 prices.)

IX. Conclusion and Recommendations

“I still need help. This job is hard, minimum wage and only 15 hours. I want to work extra hours. I have lost my counselling support as [the] appointment time is when I'm working.”

Project participant, Skills for Life

The Skills for Life project has generated some important learning in relation to BME women and employment. The final section of this report takes that learning and turns it into a set of recommendations which may apply to a future iteration of the project, other projects within the Oxfam Future Skills programme or any programme or project which seeks to work with those women furthest from the labour market, particularly those from a BME background.

RECOMMENDATION #1: Projects working with those furthest from the labour market, and particularly BME women, should focus on the goal of helping their participants achieve decent work, not just any work.

The stated key overall aim for the Skills for Life project, as articulated in its project plan was to *“build long-term, lasting outcomes for participants beyond moving into entry-level work or enrolment in Communities for Work schemes, and beyond ‘first jobs’ (whilst recognising their value as stepping stones)”*.²⁷ This aim was to contribute towards the key impact that all projects in the Oxfam Future Skills programme seek to achieve, namely that *“Women progress towards a decent life free from poverty”*.²⁸

As the interim evaluation for Skills for Life noted, probably the most important finding outlined in the final evaluation of the original Future Skills pilot project in Manchester was that, even at the end of the project, *“arguably none of the women are in ‘decent work’”*.²⁹ This is also true of Skills for Life, for all that many of its participants are closer to that goal now than they would have been without the project's help.

This reflects one of the biggest issues that any project working with those furthest from the labour market will have to overcome if it is to achieve the kind of key impact outlined above. It was summed up best by one of the Skills for Life project staff when she made the following observation in her feedback:

27. Communities for Work, 'Innovation Fund...', p.7.

28. Oxfam GB, 'Future Skills, Future Skills Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan', p.3.

29. Oxfam GB, 'Future Skills Pilot...', p.7.

“There's a tension all the time between doing what's best for the participant and the targets you need to meet that are in the back of your mind, and between getting people into work and into decent work. The latter may take more time and need the participant to turn down zero hours, shift-based work which is not compatible with family life. Some participants have turned down jobs like this to improve their English or stay in a placement that could help lead to decent work in the longer term.”

Targets specifying the number of participants to gain employment are counterproductive in this goal and should be replaced instead by measures of closeness to decent work. Regardless of how that idea of 'decent work' is defined, or progress against this goal is measured or recorded, any system with this goal would be better than one purely oriented towards job numbers.³⁰

RECOMMENDATION #2: Any project seeking to help those furthest from the labour market, and particularly BME women, should run for longer than just one year, in order to provide sufficient duration for the longer-term effects of the work to be discernible.

One of the key findings arising from the value analysis for the Skills for Life project is that a one-year project is too short to establish long-term outcomes, particularly around increased sustainability of financial and physical assets, in a participant's life. The SRCDC Livelihoods project, although not women-only or exclusively focused on work, drew on a very similar demographic and used a similar approach to Skills for Life and was able to achieve an overall net value ratio of £4.21 for every £1 invested in it. The ratio for Skills for Life was much smaller, at £1.34 per £1 invested.

This was primarily because the Livelihoods project had run for 3.5 years, and therefore was in a position both to work with participants over a much longer timespan than the ten-month operational life of Skills for Life. It was also better able to record their outcomes as a result of its length, and to know which changes had stuck, which ones had not, and which outcomes had taken longer to achieve. While for numerous reasons it is not quite as simple a matter as tripling or quadrupling Skills for Life's ratio to make a fair comparison between the two projects, it is nonetheless the case that had Skills for Life run for a similar length, it would certainly have achieved a more comparable ratio.

Length of project matters, and any attempts to do work with BME women on the quick or on the cheap will not be able to demonstrate success without making

30. Based on research by Oxfam GB and the University of the West of Scotland, the original Future Skills pilot defined decent work as “a decent enough rate of pay to cover the basic cost of living, job security, paid holidays and paid sick leave, a safe working environment and a supportive manager” - see Oxfam GB, 'Future Skills Pilot...', p.7.

unsupportable assumptions in regard to the length and durability of the outcomes they achieve.

RECOMMENDATION #3: Any project seeking to help those furthest from the labour market, and particularly BME women, should emphasise quality over quantity in terms of the number of participants with whom it works and the type of support it gives them.

One of the notable successes of Skills for Life has been the evenness of participant's progress levels with the project, regardless of their starting point or which activities they undertook within it. This is the desired outcome for any project that claims to be 'person centred', and this achievement is testament to the skills of the project's staff in turning that approach into practice, as well as the generally holistic nature of the project and the crucial contributions of external partners (such as coaches, employers or group session trainers) in ensuring that whatever kind of support a participant needed most, they were able to find it.

That the project only worked with around two-thirds of the participants it was supposed to was a reflection of what could be achieved within a given time, budget and overall set of resources. As noted elsewhere in this report, statistically the project had much higher targets than its equivalent Livelihoods project despite having much more restrictive entry criteria, and it also aimed at higher numbers than the pilot Oxfam Future Skills project had been able to work with.

The interim evaluation came to the provisional conclusion that while numerically ambitious targets may be suitable for a more short-term focused programme with more conventional participants, working with those BME women furthest from the job market involves extra barriers that required more time to overcome. As a result, a different model to the standard Communities for Work one was required.

As early as the interim stage evaluation, one member of staff had already come to a firm conclusion regarding this when talking about her fellow project staff member's workload:

"There is quite a high workload for one SLA worker. Other services seem to get quite a churn, so it's less important for them if they lose some participants, but [the Livelihoods Worker] has to travel to the participants most of the time rather than the other way round, all over Cardiff. It is harder for her to see four participants in a day than it is for other services where the participant always comes to them to see ten!"

This did not change in the project's second half. The member of staff who was the subject of that observation was very clear that she agreed with this view in her feedback for the final evaluation:

“The cohort should have been smaller. We could speed people through, but it's not our ethos and that's not person-centred. We meet people in their own homes or other places, we're always available by text or phone, running the WhatsApp group – we stand with women, we don't sit across a desk from them.”

In their qualitative feedback, participants repeatedly stressed the value of the greater amount of time the project could give them compared to other services they had experienced. Quality over quantity should be the maxim of all projects working with those women furthest from the labour market if they are serious about wanting to help them get out of worklessness and into decent work.

RECOMMENDATION #4: Any project seeking to help those furthest from the labour market, and particularly BME women, should take a holistic approach, treating participants' lives in the round and drawing in as many other stakeholders and support techniques as can be demonstrated to have a positive effect on the ability of participants to move closer to decent work.

Despite the lower than anticipated participant numbers, Skills for Life still came out with a comfortably positive net value ratio at the end of its ten-month operational lifetime. It was able to do this primarily because of the value it was able to add to the original funding it received. It achieved this by working in partnership with coaches, employers, statutory bodies and other third sector and community organisations. The project worked flexibly, adjusting its activities to participant demand, for example by including more purely social elements when it became clear that this was a stepping stone many participants needed to have a chance of then moving further towards the labour market through a work placement.

In achieving a positive net value ratio, the project also outlined the beginnings of a best practice model for working with those women, and especially BME women, in Wales furthest from the labour market. As noted in the interim evaluation, one key way in which Skills for Life was distinct in relation to other Future Skills projects was the way in which it co-delivered its services with a partner organisation (SRCDC), rather than operating exclusively through its own (Oxfam) staff. This had clear benefits in terms of allowing the project to draw participants in who would not otherwise have been reached had it been an Oxfam only or purely Communities for Work project.

Another way in which Skills for life was distinct from Communities for Work or other Future Skills projects was its explicit use of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. As one participant had fed back in the interim evaluation:

“This is better, more one-to-one, they can give you more time than the Communities for Work person. I just didn't know what I wanted, that was the problem, but [the Livelihoods Worker] could help me.”

Or, as another put it:

“This is different to other provision. If I want to do something specific to me, I can get the help I want to do it.”

This idea had been echoed by a project staff member in her interim evaluation interview:

“For those furthest from the labour market, the SLA is crucial because people are often not quite sure what they want, let alone how to get there, even if they seem otherwise work ready. Without the SLA to get to the bottom of things, work placements can fall apart quite quickly.”

The interim evaluation had also flagged up the way in which Skills for Life, unlike other Future Skills projects, offered participants placements in a range of organisations, not just Oxfam shops. The interim evaluation report noted that the potential benefits of this were obvious, as a greater range of training and experience beyond retail or basic employability skills could be offered as a result. It also noted that valuable (and sometimes invaluable) though these skillsets are for many BME women, for those who have career ambitions not involving retail and who already have basic workplace skills like timekeeping, teamwork and customer service, shop placements alone are unlikely to provide a significant stepping stone towards decent work.

The retail skills element of Skills for Life was undoubtedly important, leading to several of the jobs participants found through the project. At the same time, while the placements in non-retail sectors may have offered fewer immediate payoffs, there was some feedback to suggest that they may offer more medium to long-term prospects of participants going on to achieve decent work through those placements. Unfortunately, however, although there were signs of this being the case during the project, the project's short-term nature means there is no way of knowing for sure whether this will actually prove to be the case.

Indeed, in conclusion to this final evaluation as a whole, the one thing that comes through most strongly in the learning from it is that there is far more to achieving decent work, and a decent life, for BME women than simply helping them find their first employment, and that there will be more to solving the problem of their

underrepresentation in the Welsh workforce than just a one-year pilot project, however much useful and important learning it has generated.

As the interim evaluation observed, the quantitative and qualitative data from the Skills for Life project suggest that if the project did not exist, then it would have to be invented for more short-term focused programmes like Communities for Work to have success in improving long-term employment rates for BME women participants. There is nothing in the evidence considered for this final evaluation to suggest that this view does not still hold.

Overall, the project has succeeded in its most basic task of all, namely that of establishing a viable model for future work with women, and especially BME women, who are furthest from the labour market. Cardiff Council's recent report into the development of city-wide employability provision makes interesting reading in this regard. Whether consciously or not, in its work with all jobless people in Cardiff it appears to be seeking to adopt a similar model to the one Skills for Life has pioneered. The list of main headings in the report encapsulates its approach ('In-Depth Mentoring and Support', 'Effective Employer Engagement', promotion of 'Self Employment and Developing Social Enterprise', a focus on 'In Work Poverty', 'Effective Monitoring', a 'Simple Gateway to Services' and a 'Proactive Approach') and almost exactly reflects Skills for Life's ethos.³¹

Skills for Life has done some extremely important work paving the way for future work with those furthest from the labour market in Wales. Projects building on the legacy of its holistic, person-centred, asset-based approach will hopefully now follow elsewhere. The project has laid down a gauntlet, and it will now be up to Oxfam, SRCDC and other organisations to follow in its footsteps and turn that approach into long-term success in Cardiff, or even on a Wales-wide scale.

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April 2018

31. See S. McGill, 'Cardiff Council Cabinet Meeting: 16 November 2017 – Agenda Item 10 – Development of a City Wide Employability Provision and A New Approach to Building Resilient Communities' (10 November 2017), available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y9k72yjd> <accessed April 2018>, pp.3-4.

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Oxfam Cymru: www.oxfam.org.uk/cymru

South Riverside Community Development Centre: <https://www.srcdc.org.uk/>

Communities for Work: <https://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/communities/communities-for-work/?lang=en>