

What can non-accredited learning contribute to Public Value?

The experience of Shaidy Characters

In 2006, County Durham Learning (CDL) commissioned a piece of research into measuring progress and achievement within pre-level 2 learning. This was undertaken as part of CDL's effort to provide evidence of the need for continued funding for non-accredited adult learning, in particular for disadvantaged and disaffected adults who may have a number of barriers to first steps engagement.

As part of this work it was possible to work with fragile learners attached to SHAID (Single Homeless Action Initiative in Derwentside), a small, local voluntary organisation. SHAID was interested in progression and achievement, but had a specific interest in identifying and quantifying the savings that could be made to public bodies through a co-ordinated and well thought out intervention into young people's lives at critical crisis points.

This work was extended as a result of becoming part of the 2006 NIACE project *A Framework for Assessing the Impact of Community based Adult Learning*.

SHAID was already a partner of CDL and the proposed work was seen to have benefits for both partners. SHAID was established in 1993

as a response to youth homelessness in the local area; it provides a range of housing advice, support and related services to help vulnerable young people make the transition from being homeless to living independently. The Shaidy Characters group is brought together by a development worker from SHAID, but is an autonomous group and all decisions are made and carried out by group members.

The work of this project shows clearly the need to be able to offer non-accredited learning which can be negotiated and planned to suit an individual's needs. These learners will have a 'spiky' profile of learning, which would not be served by any sort of conventional programme offered by other providers.

The focus of the project was an in depth consideration of some of the non-accredited learning offered by SHAID and experienced by the members of Shaidy Characters. Two particular programmes were looked at: the Life Skills Programme and the Holistic Leadership Course. To supplement this analysis three case studies were prepared, based on individual life experiences. Impacts were measured within the case studies in relation to housing, employment, education, criminal justice and health.

Impact on individuals

The Life Skills programme of learning includes a number of modules designed to impact on the individual. The learning is supplemented with advice, support, drop-in sessions, and in Shaidy Characters the skills and knowledge gained are put into practice. For instance, young adults have taken part in interviewing new members of staff and the group is responsible for accessing its own funding and maintaining its own records. They are supported into housing, accessing benefits, training and employment.

Impact on families

Case studies demonstrate an increased sense of personal commitment to the individuals' families and towards others experiencing homelessness. Life Skills training and experience gained impact on their own newly-formed families as they live independently.

Impact on communities

All the above impact on the community in which they live. The support offered by SHAID means that a young person stands a greater chance of maintaining a successful tenancy, which breaks the cycle of homelessness and creates a more stable environment from which to develop skills and abilities. Avoiding the negative effects of poor tenancy, such as eviction and neighbour disputes, contributes greatly to neighbourhood regeneration and community cohesion. Other impacts include a reduction in crime.

The Public Value of Adult Education

Shaidy Characters

Wider Benefits

There is substantial evidence of the way in which SHAID's support has resulted in health improvements, both from a physical and mental health perspective. It has been possible for previously undiagnosed conditions to be identified. This has resulted in some individuals receiving a medical explanation for their previous educational failure, which has enabled the process of re-establishing confidence to be accelerated. Individuals have learned to manage depression without previously essential medication, to be signed off from psychiatric help and medications previously needed to cope with agoraphobia and stress-induced Irritable Bowel Syndrome and to substantially reduce the number of visits made to GPs.

From April 2004 - March 2005, 232 young people received advice, information and support from SHAID. Individuals develop their personal capital and engage positively with wider society in a way that several of them never believed

possible. They have moved from a deficit of social capital to enhancing the world around them and now contribute to the quality of life of others. Voluntary work is also promoted within SHAID; this raises aspiration, confidence and self-esteem and also provides a social outlet.

A practical example is the 20 minute video produced by Shaidy Characters in 2004 - a guide to accessing help with housing, how to avoid losing your home and falling into recurrent homelessness. The group devised a workshop for schools and youth clubs, using the video, which is delivered across Derwentside.

This research project indicates that a successful SHAID intervention in the chaotic life of one young person can result in a true saving of £35,586 per annum to the public purse. Savings are made as a result of reduced housing support costs, repeat homeless applications, failed tenancy costs and medical costs. This reflects only the financial saving but equally important gains are made at a social and civic level.

The partnership arrangement worked well at an organisational level, enabling CDL to build up constructive relationships with the members of Shaidy Characters. This in turn made it possible to draw out high quality information from the participants. SHAID's membership of County Durham Learning has enabled it to offer CDL Certificates to its learners and these can be awarded for achievement of outcomes in modules of the Life Skills programme, encouraging further progression onto nationally accredited programmes. There is sharing of information and good practice across the membership of CDL which has informed practices and procedures in SHAID.

Other partnerships are also important to the work of SHAID, including those with local learning providers,

SureStart, Citizens' Advice Bureau, Community Voluntary Services and Social Services.

The ethos operating within the SHAID organisation is such that members of the group are used to stating their views, being listened to and having their views valued. They build close relationships with their development worker in a very informal environment. Throughout the research, members of Shaidy Characters took part in discussions with the research worker.

From the researcher's and CDL's point of view, the information gathered about savings made to the 'public purse' as a result of this type of intervention could become much more detailed if time and funding were available to continue the research.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

Contact Charmian Walter on 01388 443078 or at charmian.walter@bacoll.ac.uk

or Jane Williamson, Social Inclusion & Development Worker, SHAID,
The Tommy Armstrong Centre, Clifford Road, STANLEY, Co Durham DH9 0XG
Tel: 01207 218850 email: shaidycharacters@googlemail.com
www.countydurhamlearning.org.uk