Northern Learning Trust

# Learning Hives™

# Final evaluation &

# Participatory Action Research

## 2015 to 2018

**Northern Learning Trust**

# LEARNING HIVES: 2015 to 2018

# Impact at-a-glance

**Chart: Number of individuals (2015/16, 2016/17, 2017/18)**
- Learners
- Individual Learning Plans

Y-axis: Number of individuals (0–600)
X-axis: 2015/16, 2016/17, 2017/18

### LEARNER OUTCOMES A.
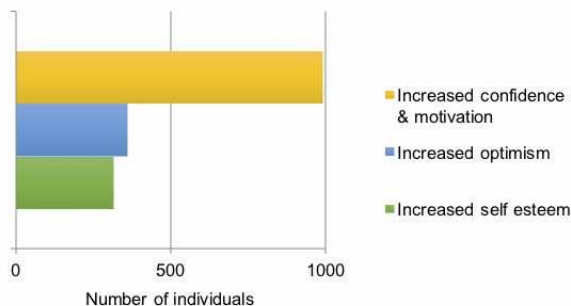
**Chart: Number of individuals (0–1000)**
- Increased confidence & motivation
- Increased optimism
- Increased self esteem

### LEARNER OUTCOMES B.

**Chart: Number of individuals (0–700)**
- Qualifications
- Volunteering
- Progress in further ed, training or employment

*They give residents a place of learning and somewhere to meet when so many other local services have closed.*

**Accessed by**

397        473

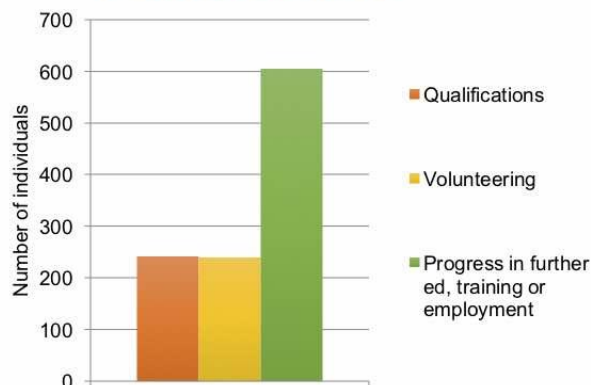## BENEFIT COST RATIO

### 23:1

## Customer satisfaction:

Not satisfied
7%

Very satisfied
93%

**LOTTERY FUNDED**
BIG LOTTERY FUND

# Table of contents

# 1.0 Introduction

This is the final evaluation report of Northern Learning Trust's (NLT) community education Learning Hives project delivered across three sites in the North East of England. The project was a funded over three years by the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) between 2015 and 2018.

The report is broadly divided into two sections, one looking back and the other looking forward. The first presents a summary of the impact the Learning Hives have had on local communities over the three years of delivery. The second section is a report on the progress of Participatory Action Research (PAR) carried out with service users of the Learning Hives, which represents efforts by NLT to integrate project beneficiaries into decision-making and at co-producing delivery

**Figure 1.0 The Learning Hive brand**

## 1.1 An analytical framework: entitlements and capabilities

The evaluators[1] of this project have found that entitlement and capability theory provides a useful framework to understand inequality and disadvantage in the communities where the Learning Hives are located. These theories were developed by the welfare economist, Amartya Sen, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on entitlements in 1998. Entitlement theory relates to a set of mechanisms and resources that an individual inherits, is naturally bestowed or develops over a lifetime (Sen, 1983[2]). In the context of the United Kingdom, many of an individual's entitlements relate to their rights as a citizen. These entitlements are utilised/exchanged for resources and services, such as housing, health services, minimum income and recourse to the law. Sen proposed that poverty and disadvantage are created as a result of a failure in entitlements, as opposed to absolute shortage/unavailability of resources and services. For example, if entitlements to a minimum income and housing are lost then the result may be homelessness, hunger and ill health, despite there being no absolute shortage of homes, food or health services.

Complementing entitlement theory, Sen's ideas of capabilities put forward that an individual has a set of characteristics and traits which enables them to function and capitalise upon their entitlements (Sen, 1984[3]). Capabilities are necessary to access entitlements; it is not sufficient to state the entitlement exists but as Nussbaum (2003) says access involves affirmative material and institutional support, not simply a failure to impede (Nussbaum, 2003: 38[4]). An individual's capabilities are influenced by sociodemographic class, family and upbringing. They can also be developed

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[1] Barefoot Research and Evaluation, www.barefootresearch.org.uk
[2] Sen, A. 1983. Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation, Oxford University Press.
[3] Sen, A. 1984. Rights and Capabilities. In Resources, Values and Development. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
[4] Nussbaum, M. 2003. Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice, Feminist Economics 9(2–3), 33–59.

through education, instruction and modelling behaviour, e.g. Livni (2018)[5]. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds generally start life with a weaker set of capabilities and entitlements. This leads to poorer functioning and individuals less likely to achieve their potential as productive members of society. Robeyns (2003[6]) says:

> *'Wellbeing and development should be discussed in terms of people's capabilities to function, that is, on their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in, and be whom they want to be. These beings and doings, which Sen calls achieved functionings, together constitute what makes a life valuable. Functionings include working, resting, being literate, being healthy, being part of a community, being respected, and so forth. What is ultimately important is that people have the freedoms (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be. (Page 6).'*

When capabilities are lost or fail to function it can lead to disadvantage and inequality: Sen defined poverty as *'capability deprivation'* (Tiwari, 2007: 173[7]). When entitlements also fail, then livelihood crises can ensue (see table 1.0).
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**Table 1.0 Entitlements, capabilities and what happens when they fail**

| Entitlements | Failure causes |
|---|---|
| Safety | Victim of crime |
| To be housed | Homelessness |
| Minimum income | No food, utilities & other essentials |
| Access to health services | Poor & sometimes critical health |
| To have an education | Difficulty in engaging verbally or literally |
| Access to the democratic process | No recourse to state mechanisms |
| To live independently | Poor mental health |
| **Capabilities** | **Failure causes** |
| Literacy & numeracy | Poor communication & understanding |
| Mobility | Isolation & frustration |

[5] Livni, E. 2018. https://qz.com/1289236/resilience-is-the-new-happiness/
[6] Robeyns, I. 2003. The Capability Approach: An Interdisciplinary Introduction, University of Amsterdam.
[7] Tiwari, M. 2007. Chronic poverty and entitlement, Third World Quarterly. 28 (1)

| | |
|---|---|
| Reasoning & judgement | Poor choices, behavioural difficulties |
| Resilience & emotional fortitude | Mental breakdown |
| To be able to work | Worklessness |
| To be healthy | Sickness, infirmity |
| To create and maintain relationships | Relationship breakdown/loneliness |
| Understanding | Ignorance |

Source: Hartworth, 2018.

During the evaluation, we have observed how people's entitlements and capabilities become stronger as a result of the community education they access in the Hives. The following box illustrates this with a case study.

**Box 1.0 Case study: weak entitlements and reduced capabilities**

Mary is 35 years old and a single-parent with three children, aged eight, 12 and 16 years. Mary hated school and left when she was 15 years old with no qualifications, the same as her mother **[poor endowment from educators; weak entitlement to education; capabilities of literacy and numeracy undeveloped]**. Mary spent her early life working in retail but when she became pregnant with her first child, she stopped working and instead relied upon welfare payments and child benefit **[weakened capabilities to be able to work]**. Lately, she had started feeling hopeless and had periods of depression **[weak capability to be healthy].** The transfer of her benefits onto Universal Credit was increasing her anxiety because she did not have a computer at home and she was worried about having her benefits stopped and the effects this would have on her family, because she could not do the required online job searches. She had heard about the local Learning Hive that could help with job searches and she paid a visit. Whilst she was there, the Learning Hive tutor said she could use the computers at any time and also told her that she could get involved in learning at her own pace. Mary felt that it was nothing like school and so she enrolled onto an entry-level English and maths course **[Increasing entitlements to education; strengthening capabilities of numeracy and literacy].** Mary went on to complete the level one and level two English and maths and is now

a regular volunteer, where she enjoys helping others and getting to know people who live in her community but who she had never met previously **[further developing capabilities of numeracy and literacy; increasing capabilities to maintain and create relationships]**. She has been helping her children a lot more with their homework and feels much better about herself and her future prospects **[increasing capabilities of: resilience; decision-making; reasoning and judgement; to work; and to be healthy].** Mary says if the Learning Hives were not here, this would have never had happened.

## 2.0 Outputs, outcomes and social value

This section presents an analysis of output and outcome data which is derived from the project's comprehensive data monitoring systems. These have been collected using different approaches, including: quantitative project recording; self-completed service user outcome measures, including Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) and Goal Based Outcomes (GBO)[8]; and geographical spatial data.

### 2.1 Outputs

**Since starting in 2015, the project has worked with a total of 1306 learners** and created a similar number of learning plans. The following figure shows the relative distribution of learners across the project sites. As can be seen, the project experienced relatively lower numbers of learners in the first year, increasing in year two and three, with the exception of the Walker Hive, where a reduction in the numbers of attendees during the third year was attributable to the redevelopment of Social Housing in the immediate vicinity resulting in a reduction in numbers of the target demographic locally. Of particular interest is the growth in Newbiggin and the increase and maintenance of learners in Bedlington. This illustrates a service which has demonstrated a local credibility and one that is able to engage with potential learners in those areas.

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[8] Law, D. 2013, Goal Based Outcomes, London, CAMHs Press.

**Figure 2.0 Learners in the Hives, 2015 and 2017**
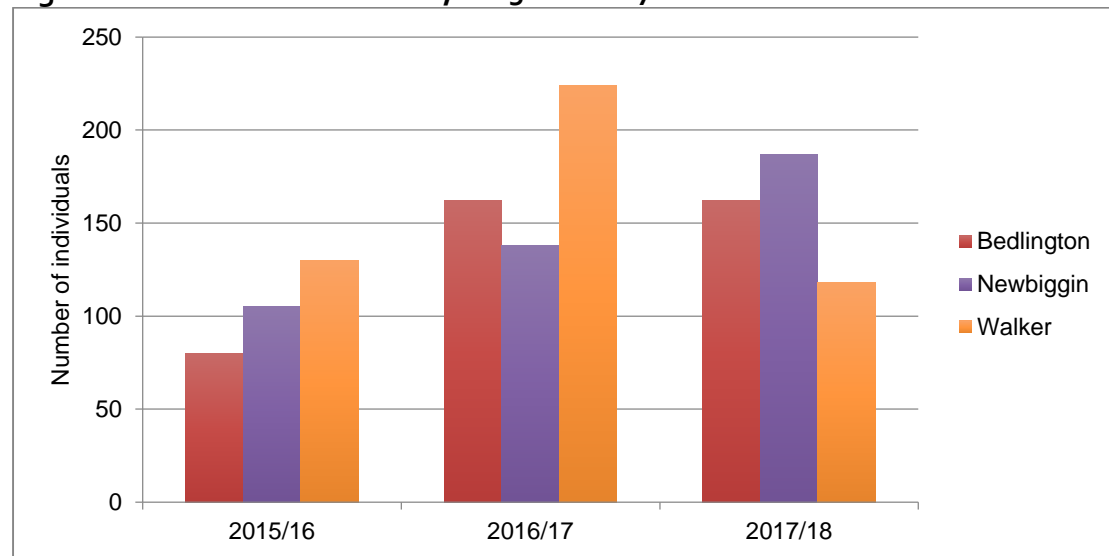


The following figure shows the total number of learners over the three years on the number of Individual Learning Plans (ILP). These are significant because they represent engagement with the individual in a fundamental aspect of learning, not just a passing interest, and they are an indicator of the quality of the service delivery.

**Figure 2.1 Learners and Individual Learning Plans, 2015 to 2018**
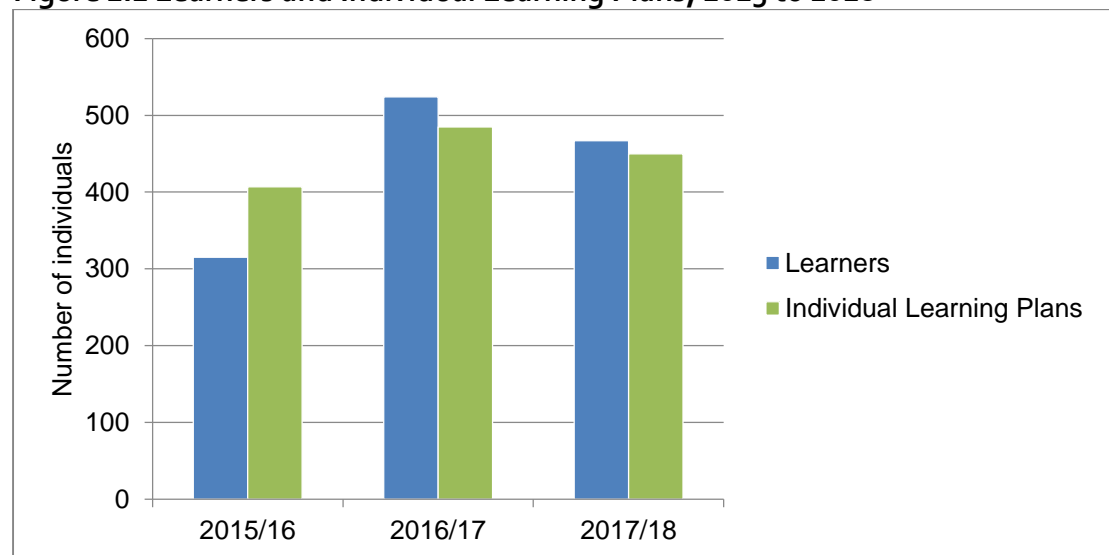


The three figures overpage show this year's data indicating the areas where the learners live who use the Hives. The pattern which show a localism to the learners has remained consistent throughout the project period.

**Figure 2.2 Where learners live, 2017/18: Bedlington**
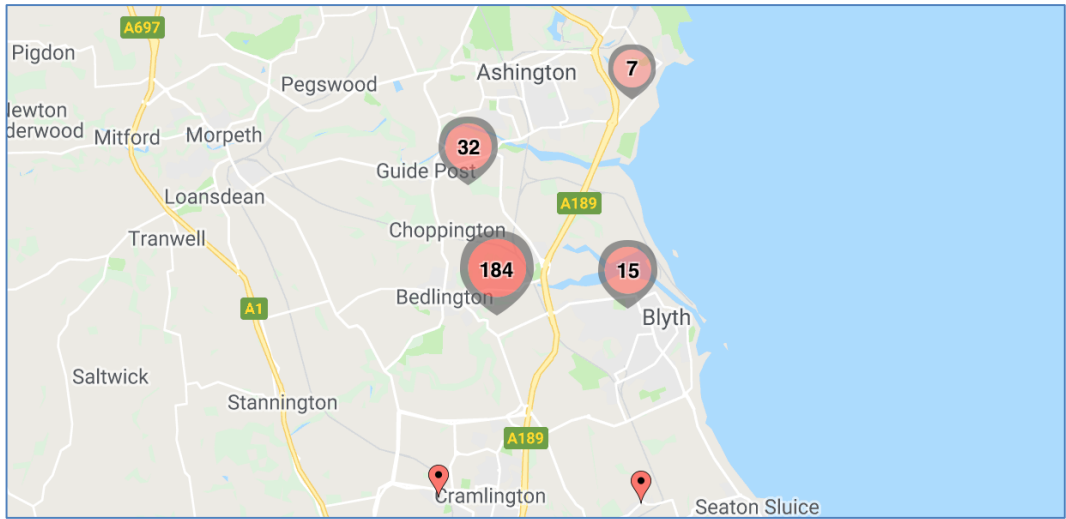


**Newbiggin**



**Walker**

The following presents demographic data. Figure 2.3 shows that there have been more female learners, than male.
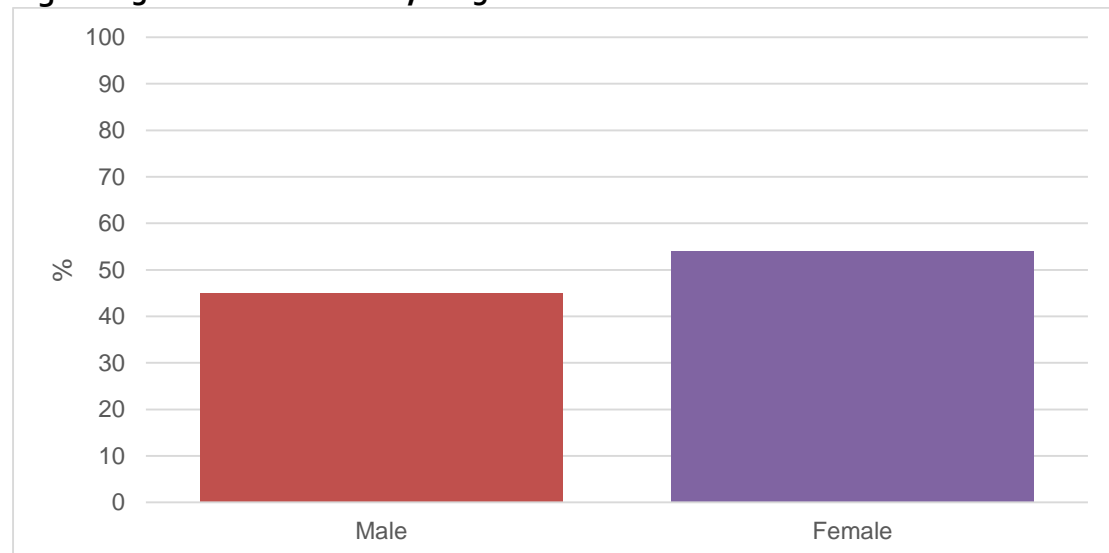
**Figure 2.3 Gender of learners, 2015 to 2018**



Figure 2.4 shows the age of learners. As can be seen almost 40% of learners are under 35 years old and just over 20% are over 56 years old.

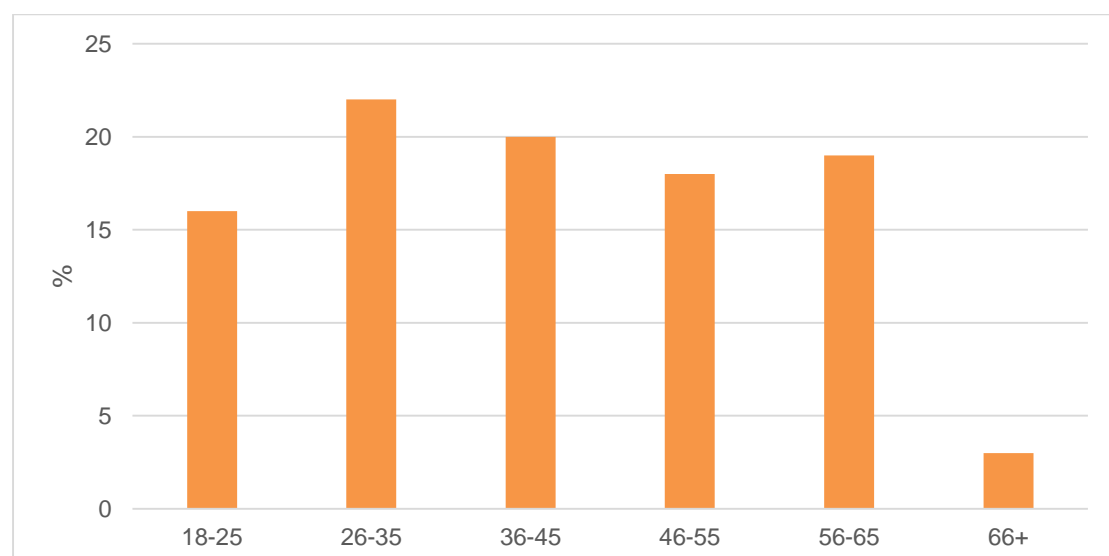**Figure 2.4 Ages of learners, 2015 to 2018**

Figure 2.5 presents ethnicity of learners and as can be seen, the majority are White British, which is broadly in-line with the ethnic make-up of the localities of the Hives. This is an area which the service user group wishes to address, i.e. working to attract a greater diversity of learners (see section 3).

**Figure 2.5 Ethnicity of learners, 2015 to 2018**
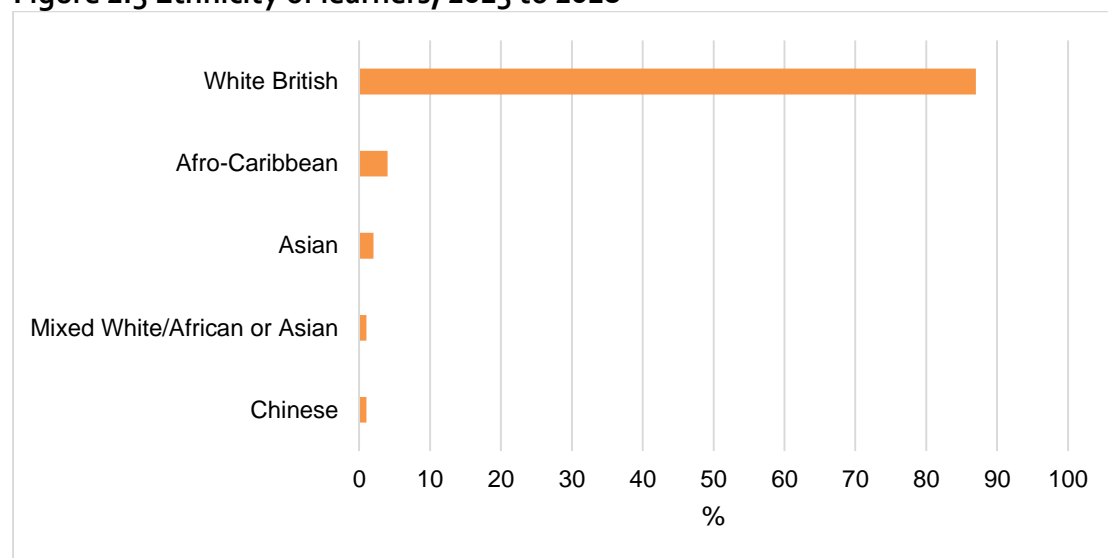


## 2.2 Outcomes

The evaluation has found a series of outcomes associated with the Hives, these include:

**Learner progression has been consistently good**: it has been demonstrated that learners do not simply engage in static learning. The following figure shows learner progression; as can be seen, a number of learners have achieved qualifications and started volunteering. Particularly noteworthy has been the increase in the number of qualifications achieved, which has effectively doubled since year one. The numbers of learners who have made progression towards and into further education, training or employment outside of the Hives has remained high as has the number of those volunteering. Over the three years, **a total of 194 learners found a job and over 300 have progressed onto further education or training outside of the Hives.**

**Figure 2.6 Learner progression, 2015 to 2018**
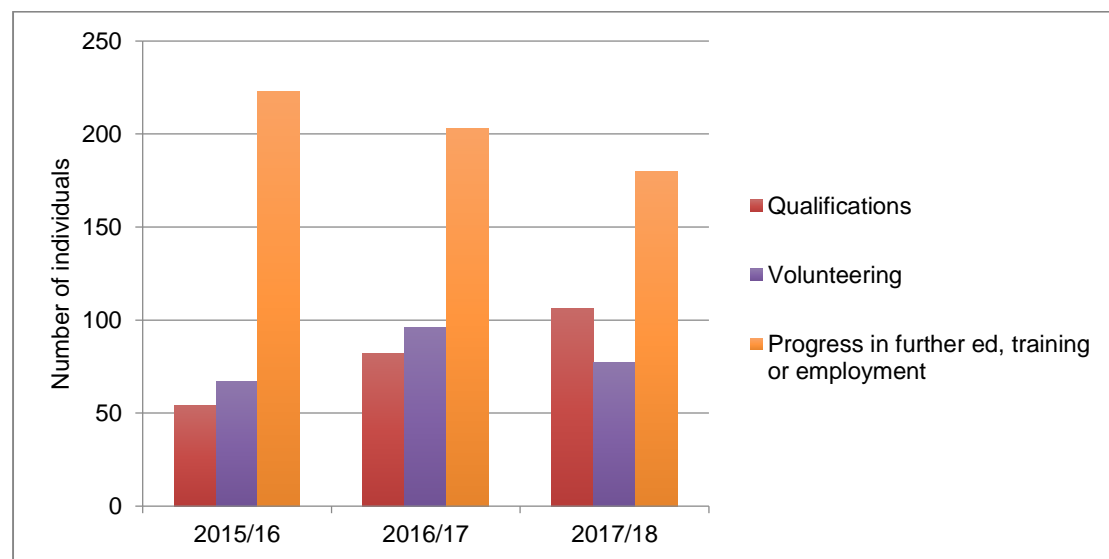


**Health and well-being outcomes associated with the Hives have been high**: there are several unconnected datasets which demonstrate improved learner outcomes, often synonymous with capabilities discussed in section 1.1. Learners demonstrate increased confidence, motivation, optimism and self-esteem as a result of engaging in the learning at the Hives. The following figure shows the outcomes experienced by learners from data collected via the Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Health and Wellbeing Score (a standard NHS measure) and from individual questionnaires. As can be seen, involvement in learning increases people's confidence and motivation, as well as increasing levels of optimism and self esteem. The results demonstrated by project data are backed up by self-reported learner outcomes, shown in figure 2.8.

**Figure 2.7 Learner outcomes, 2015 to 2018**
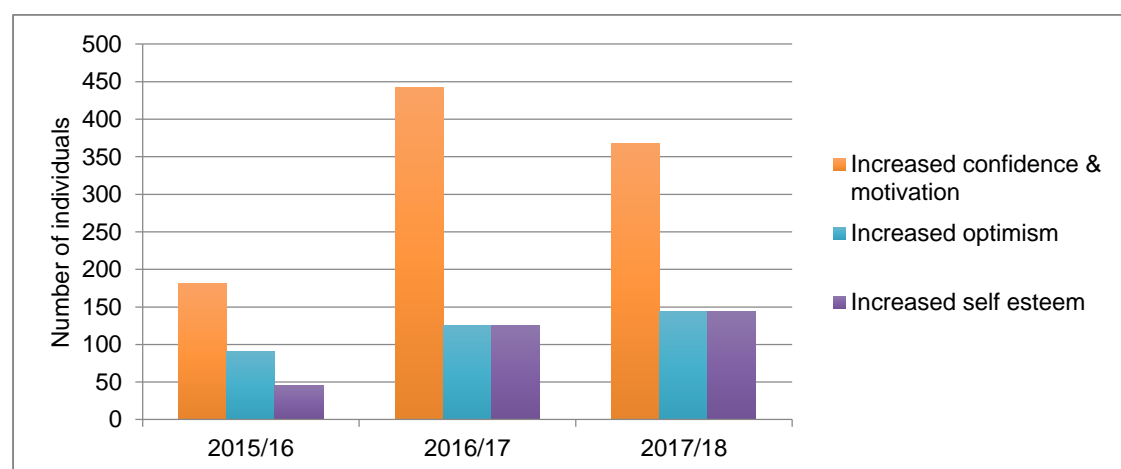
The next figure presents self-reported data on the overall learning experience, the degree to which learners' targets have been achieved as well as increases in learner confidence and motivations. As can be seen, learners have rated these areas as very good or excellent in a range from 81% to 89%.

**Figure 2.8 Self-reported experience and learner outcomes, 2015 to 2018**
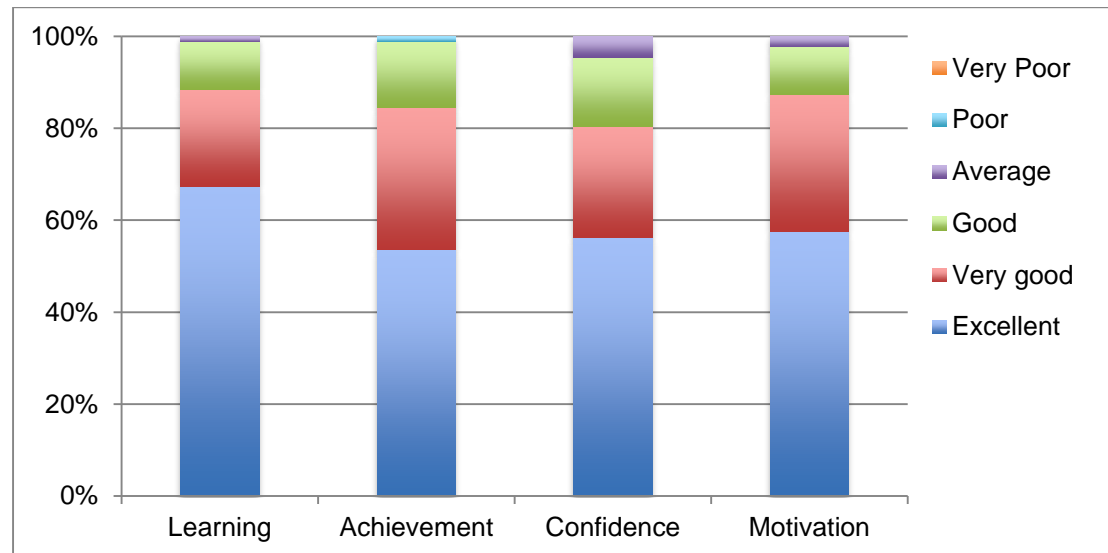


**Customer satisfaction has been high**: the following figure shows that customers satisfaction on a range of issues was very high, including: the quality of the learning resources and venue; the support from the tutors; and information on progression routes. The figure shows that self-reported satisfaction rates either very good or excellent ranged from a minimum of 82% (for venue) to a maximum of 98% (for tutor support).

**Figure 2.9 Self-reported customer satisfaction, 2015 to 2018**



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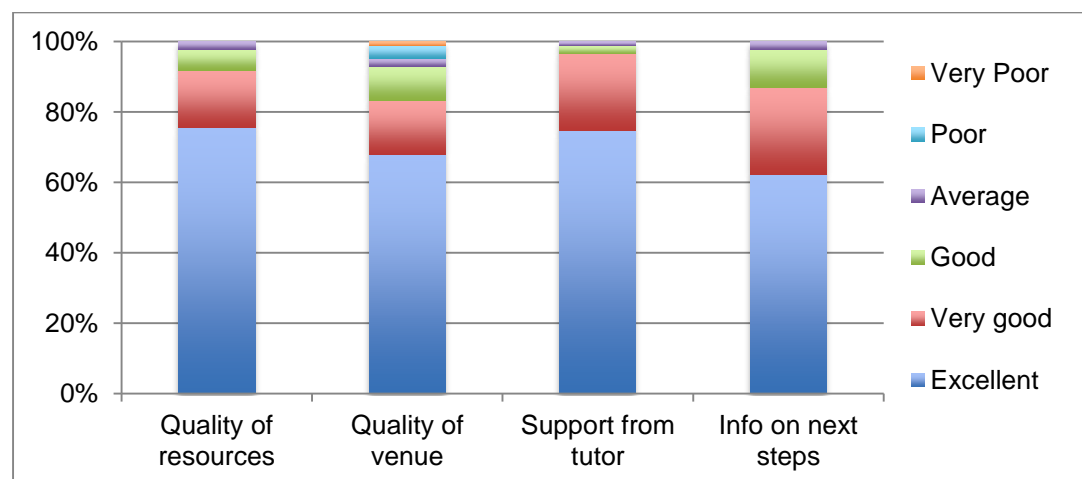
There have been a number of other outcomes, which have been evidenced over the three years. These include:

**Highly accessible learning**: learners reported high appreciation for the accessibility of the support, resources and education delivery. Learners reported that the staff were always welcoming and engaging and there was an informality of learning contact, where learners could drop in or direct their own learning. Learners said that the high accessibility was contrasted to the difficulty of access to other learning or employment-related resources in other community venues such as the Job Centre Plus or libraries. Other learners contrasted the positive and engaging attitude and behaviour of tutors at the Hives and other teachers that they have met in school and in college.

**Reduced isolation**: it was reported that the Hives facilitated social engagement and helped learners overcome loneliness (increasing the capability to create and maintain relationships). Learners reported that the Hives had impacts on strengthening their social networks. This translated into increasing the amount of times learners left their house, the numbers of their social interactions and the number of people that they knew in their locality. This is a theme that was picked by the service user group (see section 3.1)

**Providing access to resources that local communities did not possess**: learners explained that the Hives enabled them access to computers and the Internet that would otherwise be very difficult. Some learners explained that they did not have computers or broadband at home. Others said these resources were difficult to get access to in other venues, such as the library or the Job Centre Plus.

**Reducing the risk of sanctions**: benefit sanctions were a concern to users of the Hive and something that was reported to affect a number of people living in the local community (entitlement to a minimum income). It was reported that the use of

sanctions by the Job Centre Plus was increasing in frequency and benefits would be stopped with little justification (facilitating a withdrawal of entitlement). A particular area of concern was removing people from disability related benefits and putting them onto Job Seekers Allowance, which was also reported to affect a number of people and caused significant stress (reducing the capability to be healthy). As a result of the literacy support, access to contact details and telephone numbers and advocacy support, there were a number of examples of sanctions being avoided or overturned (strengthening entitlements and capabilities).

**Impacts on volunteers**: there were a number of impacts associated with the volunteers at the Hives, including:

> **Skill development**: this was evident across all types of volunteers albeit on different levels. For example, students reported that being involved in teaching and learner support was invaluable in their acquisition of educational and employment-related skills and knowledge (increasing capability to work and to make reasoned judgements); volunteers from the community spoke of how much they learnt from the experience of supporting other learners (increased capability to create and maintain relationships) and carrying out administrative duties, with some saying that it was this experience that led to them finding paid employment.

> **Increased confidence**: similar to the health and well-being impacts on the learners, volunteers reported that the positions gave them more confidence in professional environments (increased capability of resilience). This was felt to be important on both a personal and professional level and it was this particular effect of the volunteering that led to some volunteers gaining paid employment.

**Recognition from partner agencies**: there was a high level of satisfaction expressed by community-based agencies, such as health, housing and welfare services (see year one and two evaluation reports), in relation to a number of key areas, including the

teaching and learning, the quality of the resources, communication and responsiveness and in the range of learning offered. There was also a good appreciation of the impact of the Hives in the local community, with recognition of the Hives helping people maintain tenancies, improve qualities of life, assist people into employment and help people off benefits.

**Serving populations located in areas of high need**: The Hives are situated in areas of high deprivation with corresponding high rates of benefit claimants and low numbers with educational qualifications (see year one evaluation for an analysis of these issues). The people that use the Hives are from the locality and thus share those characteristics. This demonstrates that the Hives are serving the populations they were intended to benefit: those without or with limited qualifications and those seeking employment. Also, the areas are dominated by social housing stock, interspersed with private rented and owner occupied, and as such there is a clear imperative for social investment from housing agencies.

**Few similar services**:  The availability of general community resources varied in relation the geographical location of Hive, corresponding to proximity to urban centre; Walker had most and Newbiggin the least. There were some community education services, for example at Bedlington there was a new nearby community resource which included educational activities and at Walker, there were other community venues such as Byker Sands, which provided some educational activities, such as basic skills. However there were no educational services like the Learning Hives, providing supported and focused literacy, numeracy and IT learning. There was also a shortage of community resources which provided online access.

**Increasing crisis referrals**: Over the duration of the project, the Hives have noted a steady increase in learners presenting with complex needs, often in crisis, exhibiting distress and poor mental health, many of them because of benefit sanctions and/or the withdrawal of disability benefits.  The dwindling community resources as a result of government austerity have resulted in meagre support and guidance for vulnerable

people. As such, people address their issues to those services which are still available and accessible, the Learning Hives are one such resource. Although, supporting vulnerable people with their complex problems is not within the remit of the Hives, they will not turn people away or refuse assistance. Thus, considerable time has been spent by staff and volunteers, trying to find additional help to stabilise people before they can engage in learning. This issue was considered to be particularly important to the service user group, i.e. helping people in need in their communities.

## 2.3 Social value & Benefit Cost Ratio

Each year, the evaluation has presented a social value calculation of the Hives using HACT evidence based values; HACT is the housing support agency which provide the industry standard in calculating social impact and value. The objective of the exercise has been to demonstrate the social value of a Hive located in an area of disadvantage. HACT[9] says this about calculating social value:

> *'The results create a picture of the overall social impact of the community investment work, and offers insight into the different ways the projects contribute to social impact, and which projects offer the best return on investment[10].'*

There are a number of metrics we can use to attribute social value, such as regular volunteering, employment training and part-time employment, all of which can be used to estimate social value both singularly and cumulatively. In order to simplify the calculations, last year we used the metric that reflects one of the main outcome attributed to participation in the Hives by all stakeholders; that of increased confidence. HACT has placed the financial value of £13,080 of increased confidence in an adult. Over the three years, a total of 990 people have reported that their

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[9] www.hact.org.uk
[10] Trotter, L., Vine, J., Leach, M. and Fujiwara, D. 2014 Measuring the Social Impact of Community Investment: A Guide to using the Wellbeing Valuation Approach, HACT: page 25.

confidence has increased due to their participation in learning at the Hive. Using the HACT figure minus a 25% deadweight figure (this is a reduction to allow for other contributory factors), we arrive at the following figures.

**Table 2.0 Calculating social value of Learning Hives, 2015 to 2018**

| Date | Total project budget | Outcome | Evidence | Average value | No. learners | Total value minus 25% deadweight |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2015** to **2018** | 415,725 | Increased confidence | WEMWBS & GBOs | £13,080 | 990 | 9,711,900 |

**From this, we can calculate that the Learning Hives have a Benefit Cost Ratio of 23:1**

# 3.0 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

The evaluation was designed to be formative in nature and responsive to the needs of NLT and the project. As such, the evaluation has responded to a service user need identified in the year two research and has carried out PAR in this area.

During focus groups for the evaluation carried out towards the end of 2017, it was identified that service users wished to become more involved in the Hives and the work they did in their community. In response to this, NLT and the evaluation started a programme of PAR to support a coproduction process; in other words, enabling service users to become involved in the running of the Hives.

We began this process by first identifying individuals from each Hive who would like to become involved in a structured process. These individuals may have been the same as those involved in the initial focus groups, in addition to others who may not have been involved. We did this by engaging with the Hive tutors and asking them to identify learners who have shown an interest in the business of the Hives or who they thought would like to be involved. The tutors then approached these individuals with the offer and an invitation to an introductory session. This resulted in the participation of a total of seven service user representatives.

It was an important consideration that this process was independently facilitated, in order to create a neutral and independent space for service users to speak freely. This was also necessary in order to make the distinction between delivery and 'steering'.

## 3.1 The first meeting

The first meeting was held at NLT's headquarters, transport was arranged and lunch was provided. The objectives of the session were:

- To introduce everybody;
- To gauge interest/see if people wanted to be involved in being part of a service user steering group;
- To explain the purposes of the group as to help improve the services delivered from the Learning Hives and to speak on behalf and represent the wishes/needs of the community.

After the introductions, the facilitator gave a small presentation of the existing evaluation, the outputs of the Learning Hives and the outcomes and what had been achieved. This was to present a context for the steering group. Then there was a group discussion about the value of the Hives and the needs of the local communities.

There was a unanimous appreciation for the Learning Hives, the services they provide and the benefits experienced by the local community. They were firmly viewed as a valuable community resource at a time of particular hardship. Such services were vocalised as:

- Providing learning in the community in a range of areas including maths, English, IT and more vocational courses like cooking, healthy eating, retail, Health and Safety.

  Importantly these were accessible to everybody, particularly disabled people and those with mental health problems. As one member said:

  *"People can't go to college, they can't handle it, it's too much for them, but they can go to a Hive."*

  They enabled people to re-enter education for the first time after leaving school, often with little or no qualifications. As a member said:

> *"Like me, I left school with no O-levels, there's lots like that [in the local community] so when they come to a Hive it's often the first time they've ever done any learning really."*

- Providing access to computers as well as instruction on how to use them to people who need to use them for the job search element of their welfare benefits. This is a valuable service as many people do not have access to computers and may not be able to conduct their sometimes daily job searches necessary to avoid sanctions.

- Providing information, advice and guidance and problem-solving to people who need help with livelihood issues like benefit applications and appeals. This was also considered valuable as many people who have low literacy and numeracy skills may struggle with the complexity of application forms.

- Creating CVs and other job-related functions, including volunteering. Many of the learners using the Hives need a CV and the tutors and volunteers help people with this task. Learners are also able to volunteer their time and help administer the Hives, enabling people to both give something back to NLT and improve their employability prospects.

Benefits were explained to include:

- Reduces people's loneliness, by giving them something constructive and purposeful to do and a reason to get out of the house. One member said:

> *"You can see these old men, around about 60 [years old], they tend to be on their own, some have been made redundant and they don't know what to do, they don't have a computer, don't know how to do the job searches and have no reason to get out of the house. The Hives helps these with their job searches, give them something to do and stops them being lonely."*

- Increases confidence and self-esteem through the social function of the Hives, the sense of achievement from the learning and the qualifications. Members said:

  *"I would not say boo to a goose when I first came, but now look at me, I'm really confident, going to different classes, speaking up, coming here."*

  *"Some people won't look you in the eye when they first come, but after a while the difference is massive."*

- Improves people's mental health through reducing loneliness and improving confidence. The Hives also enable people with fragile mental health and anxiety issues to engage in education. One member reported:

  *"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the Hives, I would have ended it … they give me a purpose, a reason to get out of the house."*

After this discussion, the group talked about difficulties faced by communities and what would be beneficial for the Hives to include. The first of these was incoming full service Universal Credit in Northumberland and the problems that would cause. This had already been introduced in Newcastle and had been in operation for 18 months. During this time, it was thought that there had been a significant increase in rent arrears. Community members were having problems budgeting and paying non-essential debts. It was felt that related problems were going to increase and there would be a corresponding support need. Group members felt that were particular risks with loan sharks, payday loans and credit shops like Brighthouse. It was felt that community members would benefit from having additional budgeting, credit union options, cheap or recycled furniture advertisements and similar debt related services/advice.

It was also felt that demand for the Hives will increase with the advent of Universal Credit and that already busy Hives would get busier. This is a problem that could be addressed in part by increasing the number of days that the Hives are open.

Another service people felt may be beneficial was having somewhere quiet in the Hives for people who may be nervous or who would like some quiet time. One Hive suggested creating an outside building/space for this.

Members said that it would be beneficial to share the experiences between Hives, such as what courses they are running, one Hive representative spoke about a sign language course that they were running and another Hive was interested.

Members expressed some concerns about the Hives. The first of these was personal security at the Hives, especially when the NLT worker was on the own when the Hive was closing, but also when there were service users who may be under the influence of drugs or alcohol or who may be loud, rude or disruptive. The facilitator said he would address this issue to NLT, who have since actioned this.

Members of the group were enthusiastic about what they thought they could bring to the meetings in respect of community feedback. For example, questionnaires and voting on different options were mentioned. One member mentioned asking the learners to write down one sentence that would encapsulate the impact of the Hives on their lives.

For the next steps, we talked about practicalities first: people felt that timings of meetings needed to avoid school holidays, and Fridays. Wednesday's were found to be good days. It was felt that members of the group would take turns taking minutes, doubling up to help each other.

At the next group the group decided that they would create a terms of reference for the group, a set of ground rules which would include guidance on confidentiality.

## 3.2 The second meeting

The second meeting was attended by the same individuals who all expressed their continued enthusiasm for being involved with the group. A shared agenda was created, which incorporated:

- A set of ground rules to include guidance on confidentiality;

- Terms of reference for the group, e.g. evaluation, problem identification, service improvement; and

- First development proposals to look at, e.g. credit unions, sharing of courses, quiet places, personal security, evaluation questions.

The first part of the meeting consisted of discussing the necessary ground rules for future meetings. They were agreed as:

1. No alcohol & illegal drugs
2. Mobiles on silent
3. Polite language, including 'isms', sexism, racism, disablism
4. Respect views of others
5. Confidentiality – no sharing personal information, except if risk of serious harm to themselves or another
6. One person speaking
7. Civil language to each other
8. Give equal chance to everyone
9. Regular attending

Following this, the group decided upon in terms of reference which was agreed as, to:

1. Represent the needs of learners in the community
2. Speak/look out for the welfare of others and offer info/advice/guidance
3. Help with the evaluation

4. Help improve the Hives

These two previous tasks occupied most of the meeting and there was little time remaining to properly discuss development proposals. However, the group did brainstorm ideas for discussion next time. These included:

- Identity badges for volunteers

- Increasing ethnic diversity of learners

- Diversity training on 'isms'/diversity

- Newsletter

- Improving physical conditions of the buildings

- Sharing courses between Hives

- The need for quiet places for anxious people

- Developing evaluation questions (e.g. write one sentence about the impact the Hives have had on you)

- Developing publicity

- Sharing resources

- Addressing attitudes of some people towards others (unconscious bias).

It was agreed that one of the group members would type up the minutes and share them before the next meeting, which has been booked for early November. At this meeting, the group will discuss and identify the first actions that they wish to take as a service user steering group.

## 3.3 The next stages

The Participatory Action Research has proved to be very successful and has resulted in a coherent and committed group of service users who would like to continue to meet and input into the development of the Learning Hives. This represents a particular project strength as it demonstrates a commitment from NLT to the principles of coproduction and participatory development.

PAR principles state that the beneficiaries involved set their own agenda and progress at their own pace. The evaluator, in the role of independent PAR facilitator, has started the process with good foundations. There will be one further meeting as part of this PAR process and thereafter, the organisation and service users will decide together their future trajectory.

There are a number of advantages for both the organisation and service users, including:

- Services which are designed with the beneficiaries tend to be more aligned with local need.
- Service users can often identify barriers and problems to service delivery in advance.
- Representation from project beneficiaries within the project makes decision-making more democratic.
- Service user involvement creates a more equal power balance between organisation and local people, making it less likely that communities will feel interventions are being done 'to them' instead of 'with them'.
- Involvement leads to capacity building and up-skilling within those individuals who take part, increasing entitlement and capabilities and ultimately leading to community development.

# 4.0 Conclusion and recommendations

## 4.1 Conclusion

After three years of evaluation, from the evidence collected and presented, it would appear that the impact of the Hives is incontrovertible. They play a unique role in the disadvantaged localities where they are located, bringing with them accessible community-based education, support, resources and a viable route for individual and community development. Since the advent of Universal Credit (a high proportion of those communities where Hives are located are benefit dependent), the subsequent need for computer and Internet access and the ease of benefit sanctions, the Hives have played an essential subsistence function ensuring the livelihoods of many community members, particularly those with poor mental health.

The role of the Learning Hives in strengthening an individual's entitlements and building capabilities is also recognised through the research evidence. For example, increased confidence, improve mental health and better literacy and numeracy. It is through strengthening these functions that the project is most likely to achieve sustainable impact. Although this has not been precisely tested, it is suspected that the Hives have a strong impact on these areas.

In relation to looking forwards, the PAR exercise has demonstrated an interest and willingness from community members who have used the Hives, to become more involved in their administration and management. This will be beneficial to both of the project and the organisation in general, as coproduction becomes more prominent and associated with delivery and funding strategies.

## 4.2 Recommendations

We will start this section by being clear that as independent evaluators, we strongly recommend that the Learning Hive initiative is continued, built upon and expanded. The impacts on local communities are both essential for maintenance of livelihoods and for transformational reasons, leading both to self-development and material gains.

Our first service related recommendation is to continue the service user steering group and build upon the achievements to date. Depending on the progress of this, the experiences can be learned from and applied across the organisation. This can be detailed in the form of an inclusion/coproduction strategy.

Our second recommendation is to use entitlements and capabilities framework to further examine the impact of the Hives in the communities where they work. This will give a better indication of longer term impacts and the sustainability of interventions.

The views expressed in this report are those of Dr Christopher Hartworth of Barefoot Research and Evaluation and may not necessarily be those of NLT. He can be contacted via:

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