



# Learning Hive™ Evaluation Year Two: 2016/17

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## Feedback about Learning Hives

*I don't know what people would do around here without them, there's no one else to give you help and support.*

Learner

*The Learning Hives are a great asset for the community and valuable resource for many vulnerable people.*

Local community service organisation

*The Hives are very inviting and you instantly feel at ease*

Housing manager

*They are relaxed and informal ... this is why they are so successful and popular with people, because it doesn't feel like a pressured, official environment.*

Local community service organisation

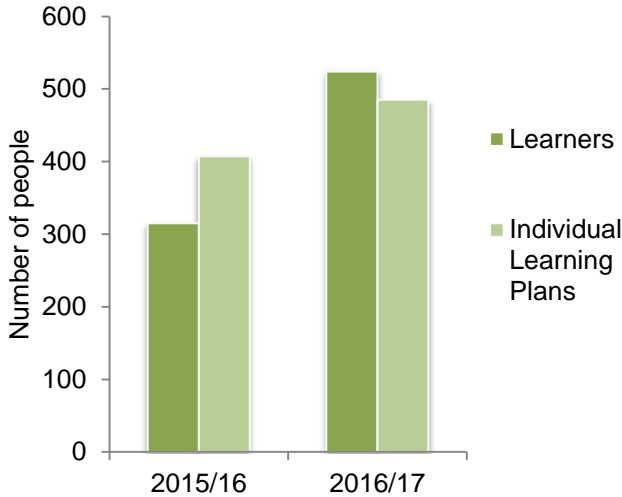
*In a time when so many services are being cut it is one of the few places left where people can get local help and advice, where they do not feel pressure from the Job Centre Plus.*

Local community service organisation

*If they weren't here, we'd be knackered!*

Learner

# Impact at-a-glance



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



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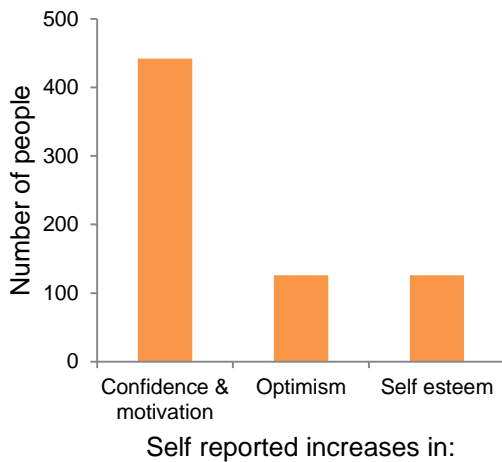


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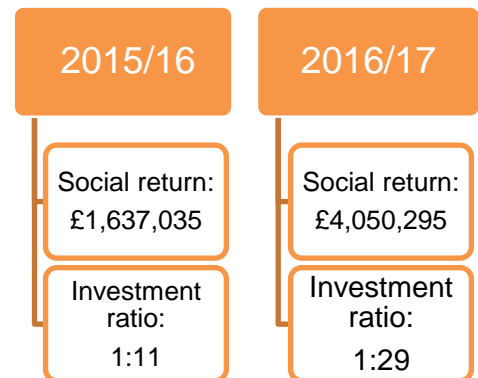


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## LEARNER OUTCOMES A.

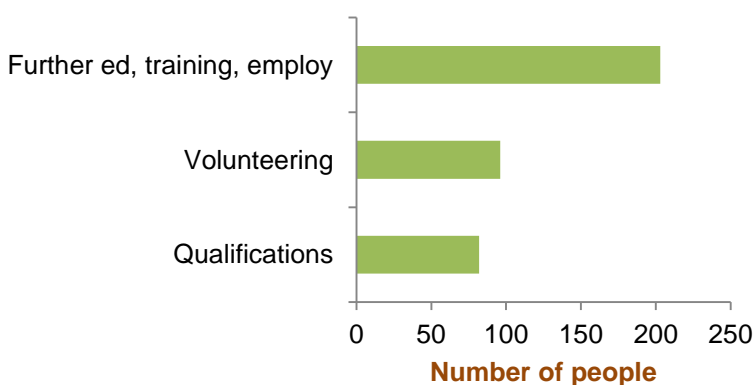


## SOCIAL VALUE



## Customer satisfaction:

## LEARNER OUTCOMES B.



Not satisfied

7%

Very satisfied

93%



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## 1.0 Introduction

This is the year two evaluation report for the National Lottery funded Learning Hives project, which focuses on progress to date and learning for project development. It represents an important reporting point in both the project and its formative evaluation, as we review the impact of the first two years and look forwards with proposals for project development. As well as analysis of the first two years' output and outcome project data and learner characteristics, we carried out a programme of group stakeholder consultation. This consisted of a presentation of project evaluation data, followed by a reflection from each stakeholder perspective about the first two years of operation, an examination of impact to date and a discussion about future need (see appendix one for consultation schedule). The purpose of this was to examine the need for continuation, expansion or reconfiguration. For a background on the Learning Hives, a description of the project's configuration and a detailed discussion on evaluation methodology, see year one evaluation report, available upon request (see back page).

Figure 1.0 The Learning Hive brand



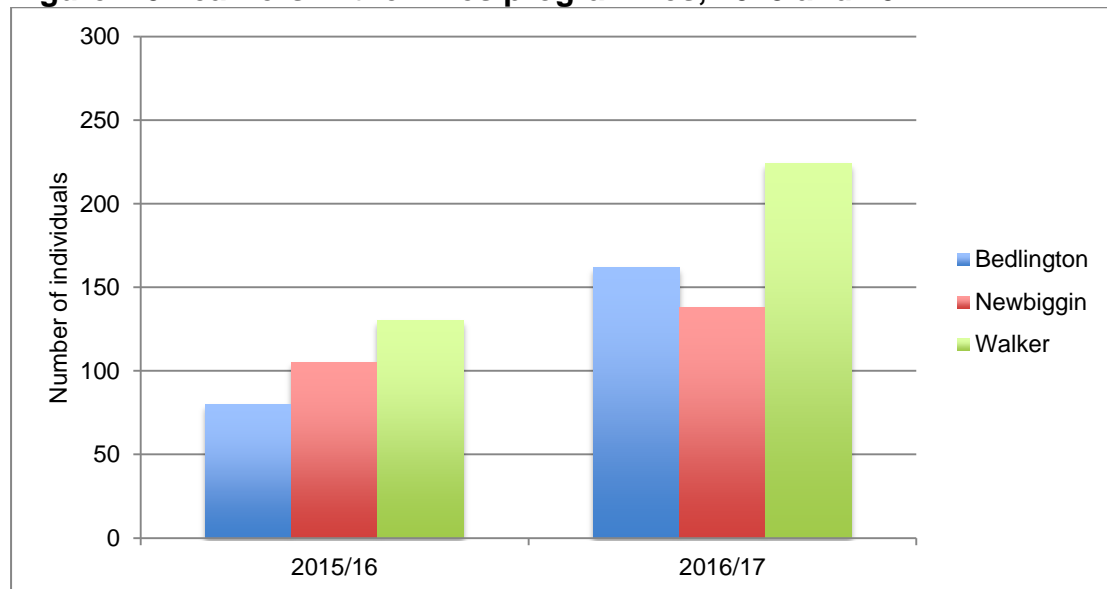
## 2.0 Headline Data

This section presents output and outcome data. 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)<sup>1</sup>; and geographical spatial data (on learner locations).

### 2.1 Outputs

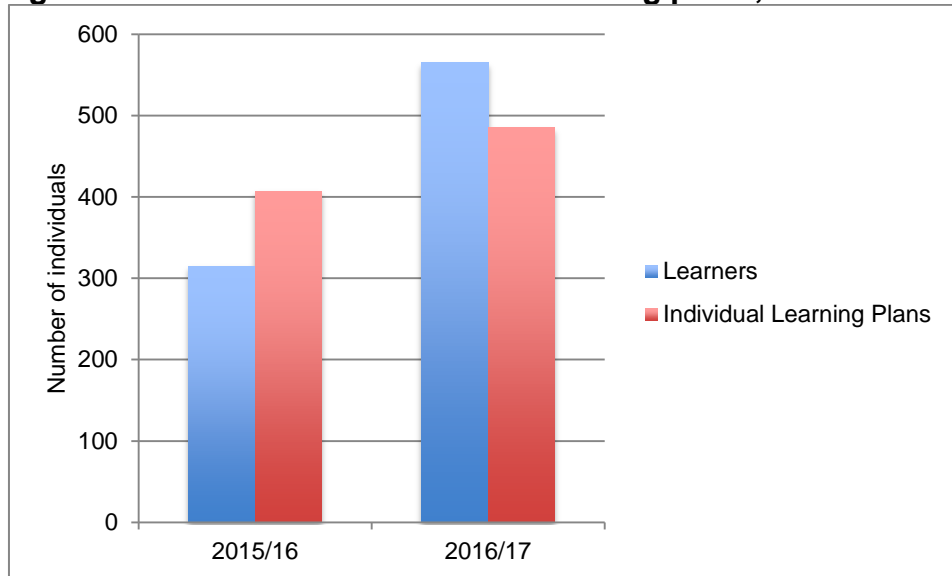
**The project has worked with a total of 565 learners** this year and created 485 individual learning plans, representing an increase of 79% on the first year's figures. The biggest increases have been seen in Bedlington in Northumberland and Walker in Newcastle. Interestingly, there were more female learners (55%) than males (45%).

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



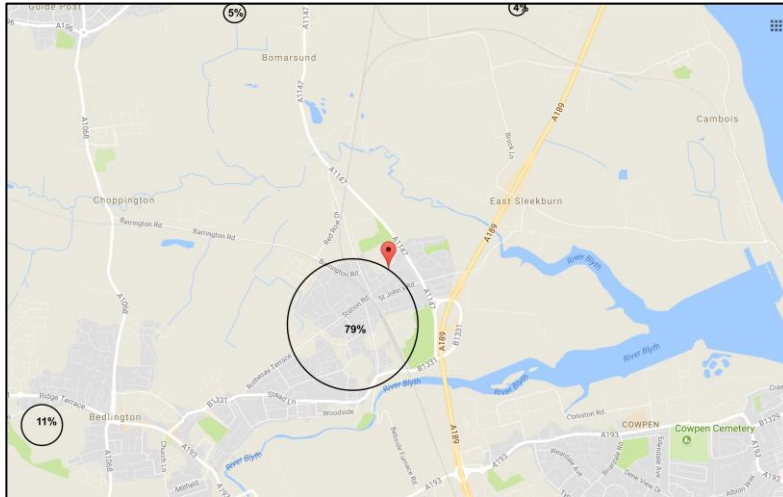
<sup>1</sup> Law, D. 2013, Goal Based Outcomes, London, CAMHs Press.

**Figure 2.1 Learners and individual learning plans, 2015 to 2017**

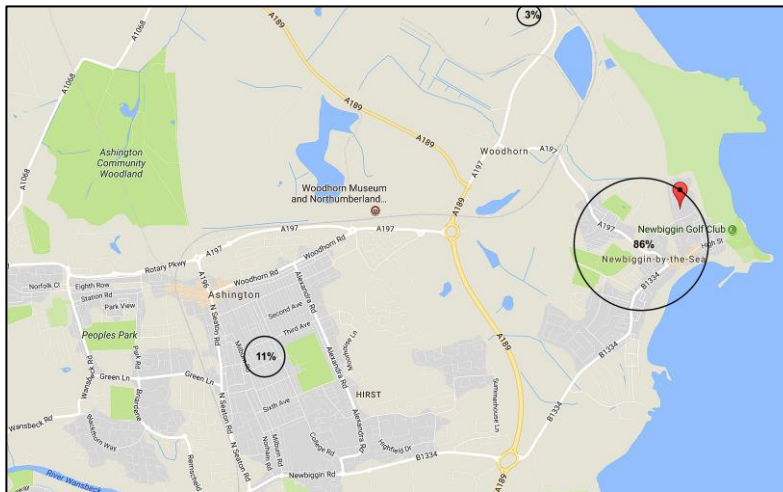


The reasons behind the increases were reported to be an improved knowledge amongst the community about their existence and the services they offer and also an increase in referrals. There is also an increase due to the disappearance of other community support services which has occurred as a result of austerity. The next three figures overpage show the areas where the learners live who use the Hives. As can be seen, the majority come from the estates around the Hives. Walker has the most dispersed learners with numbers coming from different areas including the west of the city, most likely to be due to easy transport links. The patterns shown on the maps have not changed significantly from those found in 2015/16; they show a continuing sense of localism.

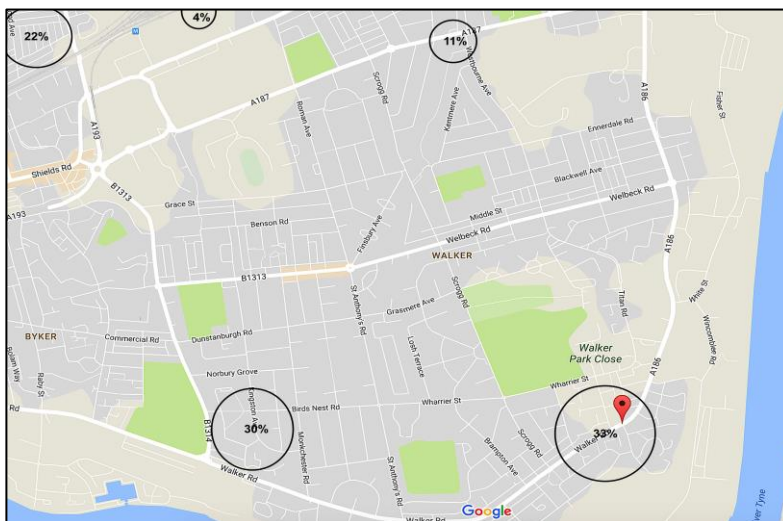
**Figure 2.2 Bedlington: where learners live, 2016/17**



**Figure 2.3 Newbiggin: where learners live, 2016/17**



**Figure 2.4 Walker: where learners live, 2016/17**



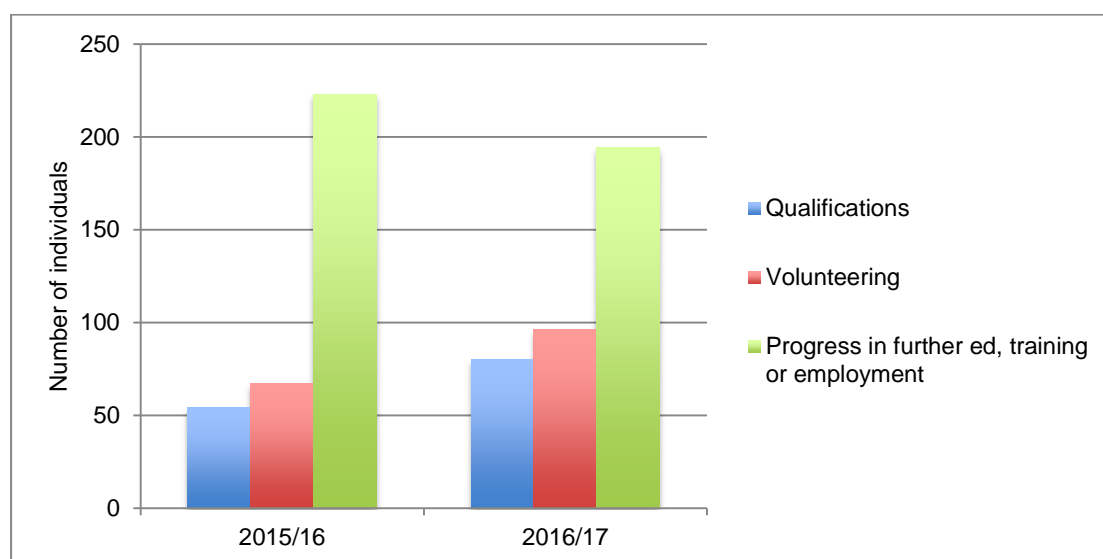


## 2.2 Outcomes

From the evidence produced during the evaluation, we make the following findings:

**Learner progression has been good:** it is clear 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. This has increased from the numbers in 2015/16, as has the number of volunteers. The numbers of learners who have made progression towards and into further education, training or employment outside of the Hives remains high, if slightly lower than the previous year's total. **In 2016/17, a total of 78 learners found a job and 116 progressed onto further education or training outside of the Hives.**

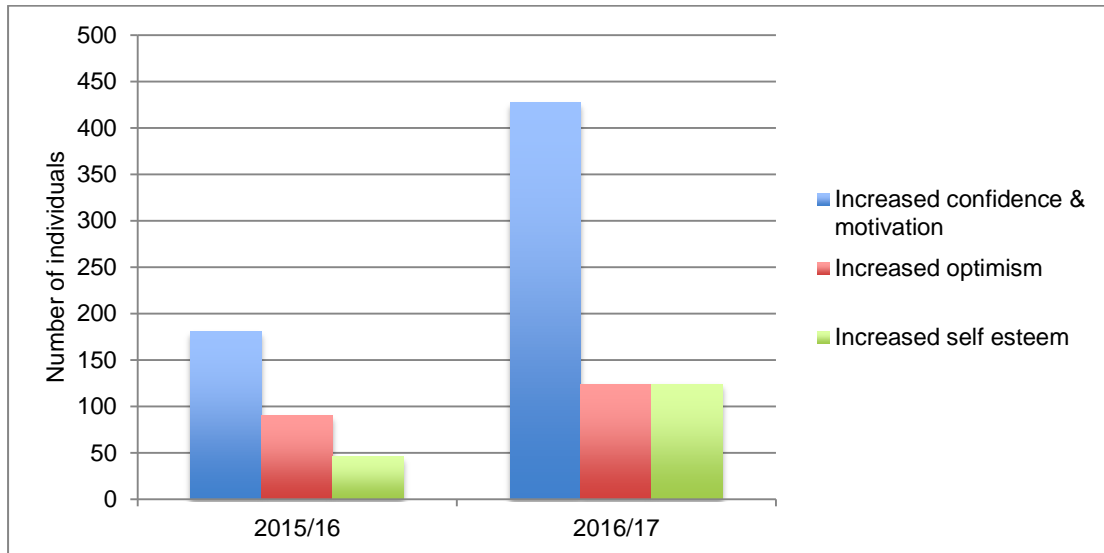
**Figure 2.5 Learner progression, 2015 to 2017**



**Learning outcomes have increased since last year:** there are several unconnected datasets which demonstrate improved learner outcomes. 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,

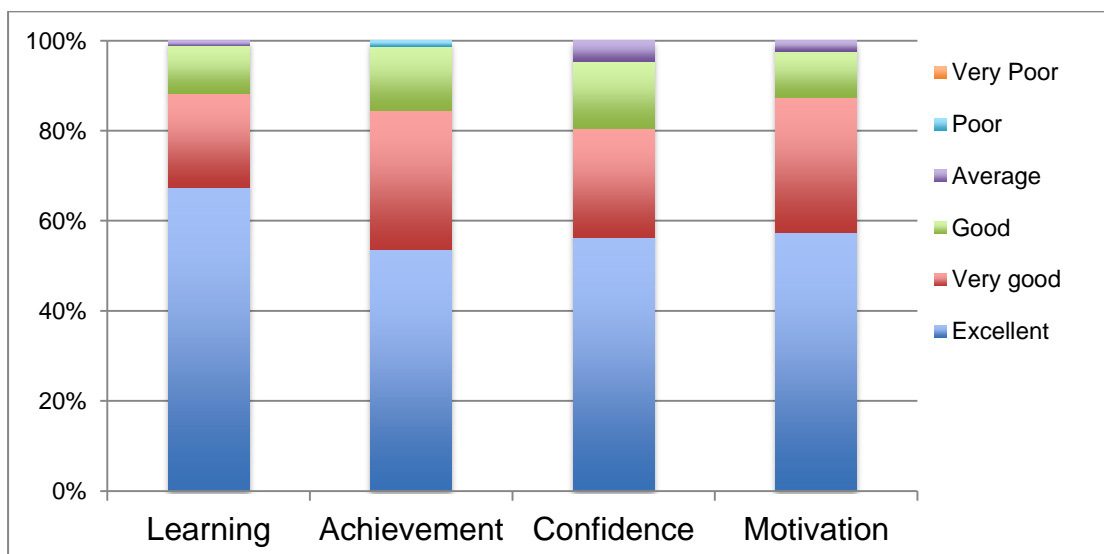
as well as increasing levels of optimism and self esteem. The results demonstrated by project data are backed up by self-reported learner outcomes, shown in figure 2.7.

**Figure 2.6 Learner outcomes, 2015 to 2017**



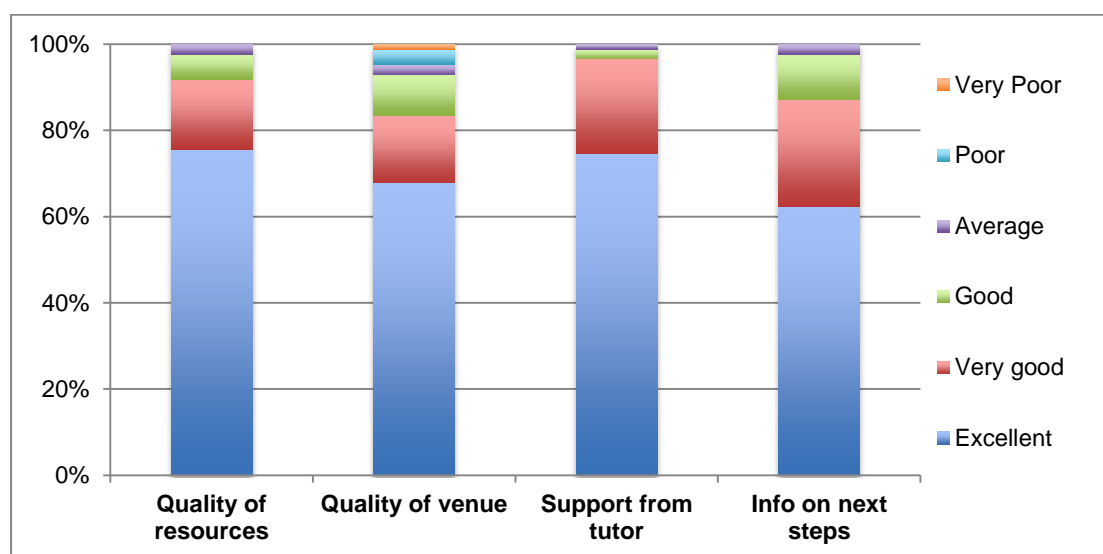
The next figure presents self-reported data on the overall learning experience, the degree to which learners' targets have been achieved as well as increases in learner confidence and motivations. As can be seen, learners have rated these areas as very good or excellent in a range from 81% to 89%.

**Figure 2.7 Self reported experience and learner outcomes, 2017**



**Customer satisfaction is 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 2.7 Self reported customer satisfaction, 2017**



## 2.3 Social value

The objective of this exercise is to demonstrate the social value of a Hive located in an area of disadvantage. HACT<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup>.’*

<sup>2</sup> www.hact.org.uk

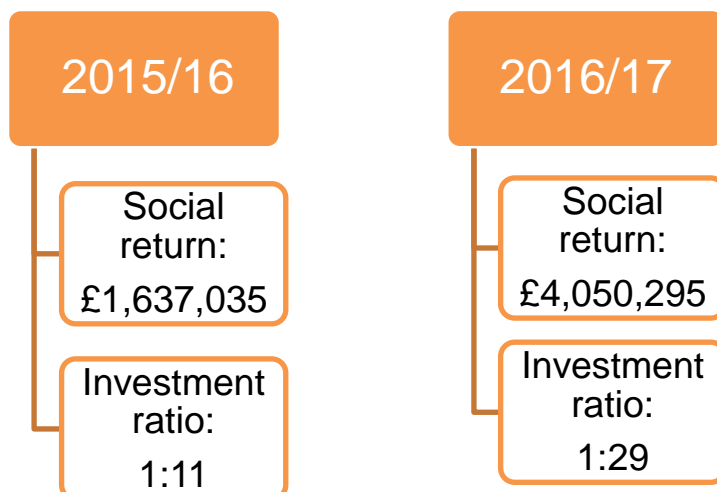
<sup>3</sup> Trotter, L., Vine, J., Leach, M. and Fujiwara, D. 2014 Measuring the Social Impact of Community Investment: A Guide to using the Wellbeing Valuation Approach, HACT: page 25.

In order to arrive at a social value in monetary terms, we are using the HACT evidence based values; HACT is the housing support agency which provide the industry standard in calculating social impact and value. 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. This year we will use the metric that reflects the main outcome attributed to participation in the Hives by all stakeholders (see following section); that of increased confidence. HACT has placed the financial value of £13,080 of confidence in an adult. This year, a total of 427 people reported that the confidence has increased due to their participation in learning at the Hive; this is an increase from the year one figure of 181. Using the HACT figure minus a 25% deadweight figure (this is a reduction to allow for the possibility that the outcome would have happened at some point without the intervention of a particular service), we arrive at the following figures.

**Table 2.0 Calculating the Social Impacts of the Learning Hives**

Date	Annual budget	Outcome	Evidence	Average value	No. learners	Total value	Minus deadweight & costs
Sept 2016	138,575	Increased confidence	WEMWBS & GBOs	£13,080	181	2,367,480	1,637,035
Sept 2017					427	5,585,160	4,050,295

**Figure 2.8 Social value of the project 2015 to 2017**



## 3.0 Consultation and critical reflection

In this section, we present the results of a programme consultation and critical reflection that took place at the end of the second year of project operation, as explained in section 1.0. The stakeholders consisted of: learners; project staff; operational staff from community-based organisations; and strategic professionals. We asked all of these groups to think broadly about the impact of the work and how it related to them as a group. The first of these stakeholders are learners, who were engaged in a focus group discussion at the Newbiggin Learning Hive.

### 3.1 Learners

#### Impacts of the Learning Hives on the local community

Learners were extremely positive about the presence of the Hives in the community, and talked about how difficult it would be for them if they did not exist. As one learner said:

*“We’d be knackered without it! There is nothing else like it around here.”*

Learners reported the Learning Hives had a number of impacts on the local community including:

- **Raising people’s confidence:** this was the dominant response from learners when questioned about impact. All learners said that as a result of coming to the Hives and engaging in learning, it improved confidence and self-esteem. As one learner said:

*“It makes you feel better about yourself.”*

People expressed that this was very important as many people

experienced low confidence and self-esteem, were isolated and some suffered poor mental-health. Another said:

*“I am much more confident now after doing courses, people can really tell a difference in me.”*

Learners explained the increased confidence gained from the Hives had considerable impact in other areas of their lives. This included contact with other services and their relationships with other people, such as friends, family and other community members.

- **Safeguarding household income:** it was explained that as a result of the support provided and access to IT and the Internet, members of the local community were less likely to be sanctioned by the Job Centre Plus, as a result of providing access to resources that they need in order to demonstrate that they have been actively looking for work. The locality of the service also saved people money, as one learner said:

*“It costs £5 on the bus to get to Ashington [where people can carry out job search on the computers at the Job Centre Plus], I couldn’t afford that everyday and on Universal Credit you have to be looking for jobs everyday, so they [Learning Hives] save me money.”*

- **Employment:** learners said that they knew a number of people that had gained employment as a result of their coming to the Hives. This was due to both encouragement from the tutors, increased self-confidence and the qualifications gained. One learner said:

*“[name] has a job because of coming here, it has totally changed his life.”*

- **Strengthening the social fabric of the community:** learners said that the Hive was a friendly place, enabling people to develop relationships

with others, which they would not have previously done. This contributed to increases in confidence and wellbeing and also was felt to bring the community closer together by providing a focus and opportunity to meet. As one learner said:

*“Now I talk to people who I never used to, although we have been living next to each other years, it’s really good.”*

- **Introducing an educational resource into the community:** people thought that the presence of the Hives encouraged people to think more positively about education. It was reported that the Hives provided an option that was previously not there, so if they wanted to do something of an educational nature, or make an enquiry about learning, they could. As one learner said:

*“It gives you possibilities, gives you some choice. Like my daughter wanted to know about hairdressing courses, so she came here and asked.”*

### **Good things about the Hives**

Learners expressed a number of positive elements about the Hives, including:

- **A welcoming and friendly atmosphere:** *“You are always made to feel welcome and see a friendly face.”*
- **Support:** *“You need someone to help you, to show you ... I didn’t know anything about computers, not even how to turn one on. People assume you know something, but you don’t know anything.”*
- **Flexible and accessible learning:** *“It is always open and you can come when you want.”*
- **It is free:** *“It’s important it’s free because people have no money around here.”*
- **Interesting and engaging courses:** *“Lots of people have done loads of*

*courses, they're really good."*

### **Improvements to the Hives**

Learners generally felt the Learning Hives were of the highest quality and little could be done to improve them. However, they did suggest an **increase in staff** because the tutor was always very busy and sometimes an additional part time person would help to take the pressure off. There was also a suggestion that **more employment related courses** could be delivered, such as qualifications in hospitality and retail. When we suggested an introduction of a digital resource or online learning, they were unenthusiastic as they said a key problem was access to computers and the Internet in the home and that many people they know, do not know how to use computers.

### **Differences to other services/activities in the area**

Learners said that there were no other similar services in the local area. They said they had seen other services come and go and although there were partial services, such as in the library or YMCA in Ashington, they did not provide support. As one learner said:

*"They closed the library down and moved it to the sports centre, but nobody will help you there, you can just get on computers for a bit."*

People said that they needed a level of support and without it, at least at the beginning, they would be unable to progress. Learners also said that the Hives were unique because of the way the service was provided; in a non-judgemental, friendly and open way.

### **Future developments**

Learners were enthusiastic about the idea of creating a service user voice group, which could feed into the work of the Hives. They said that the creation of such a group, that met regularly could improve the service for local people.



For example, they said that they could develop work experience for community members who were interested in particular employment areas, such as youth work and beauty, who would appreciate the ability to undertake work experience or shadowing, to see if they would like to pursue a qualification; they also said that they could express the community reaction to universal credit. In other words there were both content and voice issues that they felt a service user group could become involved in.

### **3.2 Project staff**

The research team engaged with all of the Big Lottery Fund's Community Learning Tutors during a focus group discussion at Northern Learning Trust's headquarters in Newcastle.

#### **Impacts of the Learning Hives on the local community**

Local people were felt to have trust in the Learning Hives and the staff that worked there. This was an important precursor to the impacts and roles in the local community.

There have been many impacts on the level of the individual learner and their families and these include:

- Increased confidence: engaging in learning was said to improve people's cognitive skills, which in turn made them feel better about themselves.
- Increased resilience: after experiencing a problem or a shock, people were reported not to fall so low and recover much quicker.
- Increased motivation: people were said to be engaging in purposeful activity and being motivated to get out of the house.
- Increased health: both mental and physical, as they are less likely to choose harmful relaxation/life approaches

These have been a product of engaging with learning in a supportive local

environment.

*“We are working with people who have lost all confidence in themselves”*

The Learning Hives were also felt to increase the contact of other community-based organisations with local communities. These organisations included the police, housing agencies and welfare rights based agencies.

Staff could not comment upon a broader impact of the Learning Hives across the community as they saw their direct impact on individuals, which they felt was significant.

### **Good things about the Hives**

These were the good things that were described:

- Flexible learning: people could engage in education at their own pace and do as much as they wanted, when they wanted.
- Comfortable and safe: a locally accessible and appropriate venue providing a learning environment where local people feel at ease.
- Based on personal relationships: this was felt to be key in the overall community-based learning approach, i.e. that the development of personal relationships between tutor and learner were a prerequisite of success, and was something that Northern Learning Trust was good at doing.
- Delivering educational outcomes: these included qualifications, progression through different learning options and leading to employment. These were felt to have transformational impacts on those individuals.

### **Improvements to the Hives**

Improvements could be made in the following areas:

- **Improved signage** outside of the Learning Hives including timetables: this was felt necessary to increase community awareness about the Hives and the work they do as there was some confusion.
- **Minor alterations to the branding:** this reinforces the above point of clarifying the purpose of the Learning Hives. In one that was close to a children's centre and school, it was felt the bee logo gave the idea of a children's nursery and there had been feedback that it was thought not to be connected to learning. It was suggested that perhaps a book could be introduced into the background or something to refer to learning/community education.
- **Increase capacity:** staff reported they were constrained by a shortage of human resource capacity which hampered project development and reduced impact. There were a series of related issues, including:
  - Insufficient holiday/sickness cover.
  - Insufficient time to conduct educational resource development work.
  - Insufficient time to carry out network development and engage with stakeholders, e.g. employers.
  - Difficulties in fulfilling the roles of the tutor e.g. running a class at the same time as dealing with enquiries.
  - Volunteers can only partially fulfill this requirement as there are some volunteers who are able to conduct such duties and others who require considerable input from the tutors; the former tend to be short lived, "*the good ones leave*" as one tutor said (as a result of finding employment or completing their studies).
- Increase opportunities to engage in continuing professional development, to nurture and grow the tutors.

The response to these issues was to hire an additional part-time tutor per Hive.

## **Differences to other services/activities in the area**

Northern Learning Trust provides community education which is not available from other organisations. Unlike others, they provide services which are:

- Bespoke and tailored to the needs of individual, including providing exams when people are ready.
- Delivered to the individual, often on a one-to-one basis.
- Locally accessible and near to where people live.
- Free, where many other places charge.
- Informal and engaging.
- Providing ongoing support to vulnerable individuals, which is often the only support they are receiving. Some learners will have been excluded from many local services, as one tutor said “*we are the last chance saloon for some.*”
- Provide progression routes, which are accessible and relevant to the individual.

## **Future developments**

Staff had the following proposals:

- Provide an increased selection and higher levels of qualifications, e.g. those required by local employers, such as in retail.
- Increase the profile of the Hives amongst the local community and relevant services.
- Change the target outcomes collected to better reflect work and impact, e.g. present footfall as well as individual learners, allow additional learning courses per learner to be collected and presented (currently only number of people achieving qualifications is recorded), allow 12 monthly renewals for individuals counted. Further discussion needs to take place with the staff team surrounding this topic.

### **3.3 Strategic professionals**

This stakeholder group was made up of representatives from the Department of Work and Pensions, and the social housing companies, Bernicia and Your Homes Newcastle.

#### **Impacts of the Learning Hives on the local community**

There has been a unanimously positive experience of the Learning Hives to date, a high level of satisfaction and a good appreciation of the impact. They were satisfied with the numbers of learners and usage figures of the Learning Hives and the outcomes that were demonstrated by the self-administered questionnaires. As one representative said:

*“We have been impressed.”*

Another commented:

*“The feedback I have had from customers has been very positive.”*

They were confident in the relationship they had with Northern Learning Trust. They said that the Trust was reliable and that they always delivered; they were a good organisation with whom they have an enduring relationship.

#### **Good things about the Hives**

The services were described as: flexible; focused on individual needs; free; supportive; proactive; professional; locally relevant and accessible; and encouraging progression. The Learning Hives were described as being welcoming and having supportive environments. One agency representative commented:

*“I have found them to be delivering a good service ... I have seen some of the courses they run and I have witnessed their interaction with customers and have found them to be very supportive.”*

They continued:

*“They have provided a very warm welcoming environment and helped customers gain useful qualifications to help them into employment. They have also helped customers improve their confidence.”*

### **Improvements to the Hives**

There was little in the way of suggestions to improve the Hives (other than improve data links and expand provision), there was simply a desire to see their service continue. It was identified that the Hive in Walker (which is in a church hall) was not as suitable as the other Hives, which are the housing companies' properties ( i.e. converted houses)

### **Differences to other services/activities in the area**

There are the following options for learners in the local area: libraries that provide access to computers; and specialist providers such as Bric who are part of the Bridges Project (a Big Lottery Fund and European Social Fund employability project). However, the latter have certain referral criteria, e.g. lone parents, young people, unemployed for 12 months and are time-limited, i.e. a six week course. There is no other comparable service to that offered in the Learning Hives. One agency representative commented about the differences:

*“The Hives are different in that you can simply drop in and instantly access support, which is great for people who prefer a more informal environment. It is very relaxed and learners can develop at their own pace.”*

## **Strategic drivers and the Learning Hives**

Both organisations strategies were closely aligned to the objectives of the Learning Hives on a series of levels; from investing in local communities, getting people back into work and improving support to vulnerable people. For example, one housing agency said:

*“Our strategy on the Employability team is to maximise tenant employment, and the Hives complement our own offerings perfectly. We can refer any tenants within those postcodes to their nearest Hive and it is a service that fits in well with all the other offerings we have as part of our employability provision.”*

They continued:

*“The main strategic driver is ‘enabling’ as the Hives are very much about enabling people to do things for themselves and to ultimately be more financially independent through employment.”*

## **Future developments**

The DWP was interested in improving/creating feedback/data links between the Learning Hives and their local offices to enable their work coaches to better understand the support received and activities of their clients. Whilst it was appreciated that there were issues relating to confidentiality, it was felt worth exploring. It was felt that learners may be interested in highlighting to the Job Centre Plus the type of activities that they are involved in.

There was an aspiration to have more Learning Hives in more localities, especially in Ashington and Berwick. There was felt to be a need across Northumberland in disadvantaged communities and in the rural areas. As one housing agency said, they would like:

*“Ideally to have more Hives in other areas ... It would be great if we could direct every customer to a Hive close to them.”*

There was a proposal to explore digital online expansion/provision.

There were several drivers, both current and in the future, that could impact on the Learning Hives. The first of these was the incoming Full Service Universal Credit which will come to Northumberland in July and September 2018. The advent of this will create additional pressures on disadvantaged communities, such as increased need for employment-related support, higher numbers needing digital online access for job searches, increased numbers of tenants with rent arrears. The housing agency in Newcastle where Full Service has already been in operation for 12 months said:

*“The main thing we have seen [from the effects of Full Service] is that the collection rate is lower for Universal Credit claimants, so naturally rent arrears have increased.”*

Another issue to come into force in 2019 was the arrival of the Local Housing Allowance, which will replace Housing Benefit. Among other things, this would see under 35 year olds only able to receive costs to cover one single room in a shared house. This will produce more pressures on local communities where high numbers rely upon benefits.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is currently focusing on getting people with long-term health conditions and disabilities back into work following on from the recent Work, Health and Disability Green Paper. The Job Centre Plus has employed Community Partners to build capacity of Workforce Advisors by linking them into support services in the community. As a result of the client group, i.e. including vulnerable people with complex problems and high support needs, there may be an associated increase in referrals to Learning Hives. This may have implications on service delivery.



## 3.4 Operational staff

### Impacts of the Learning Hives on the local community

Operational staff from community-based organisations identified a number of impacts including:

- Improving confidence: through access to learning and the support afforded by an increased social opportunity.
- Improving employment prospects: through providing local opportunities to gain qualifications and support which leads to employment.
- Improving household income: by assisting local people to comply with benefit-related conditions, such as job search and access to IT equipment.
- Improving community cohesion: by providing social opportunities for local people.
- Improving decision-making and choices: through the provision of information, advice and guidance.

As one representative said:

*“A great asset for the community and valuable resource for many vulnerable people.”*

### Good things about the Hives

Operational staff identified the following positive aspects of the Hives:

- High quality staff and service: *“The excellent staff and the wide range of learning opportunities are great ... it offers a very relaxed atmosphere.”*
- Provision of, flexible, one to one support: *“The personalised support. tailored to each individuals needs.”*

- A comfortable and local, accessible venue: *“A friendly but professional atmosphere that people can access services in their own neighbourhoods.”*
- The ability to support vulnerable clients: *“They are willing to support anyone even those with more complex needs/health issues.”*
- Learning which is appropriate to local people: *“Courses that are relevant to the needs and wants of the community.”*

One local organisation representative said:

*“I think the way they are placed right in the heart of local communities and are based in houses is excellent. It makes it less daunting for people to access. Also, the staff are skilled, compassionate and practical. The volunteer scheme is also very good and I know that several people return to the Hives to volunteer after originally accessing it for support.”*

### **Improvements to the Hives**

Frontline staff identified the following improvements that could be made:

- Increased human resource capacity: *“Provide more than one tutor at each Hive ... the single tutor is stretched balancing day to day assistance, set tutorials, events and general administration.”*
- Increased opening hours: *“They could be open for longer to make it more accessible.”*
- An increased variety of courses: *“More basic courses like food hygiene. CSCS training and other entry level opportunities in the local community.”*

There was also a common call for a continuation of service.

## **Differences to other services/activities in the area**

An important difference that was identified was simply an existence of the Hives, in the face of a declining number of other community support organisations. Their flexibility, informality, locality and bespoke nature was also identified as being different.

Comments included:

*“They seem more relaxed and informal ... I think this is why they are so successful and popular with people, because it doesn't feel like a pressured, official environment.”*

*“They are in the heart of the neighbourhoods that serve their beneficiaries. They often support people in a number of ways in addition to their primary purpose.”*

*“What makes them different is that they are very tailored to each individuals needs, with great support for those who are not able to attend group training courses and that they are good for vulnerable customers.”*

## **Future developments**

Most of the responses from operational professionals reflect those given under the heading of improvements to the Hives, i.e. more capacity, longer opening hours and an increased variety of courses. Although, again the dominant response was the need for a continuation of service.

## **3.5 Consultation summary**

There were several common themes which run through all of the different stakeholders reinforcing their importance as key indicators of impact and

change. There are certain themes, such as the impact on building confidence and a supportive environment, which are reinforced from other data sources, including the wellbeing scores and learner questionnaires. These are presented in the following table.

**Table 3.0 Recurrent themes from the consultation**

Area	Common theme
Impacts on the local community	Confidence Employment Household income Strengthening social fabric
Good things	Flexibility Tailored to individual needs Support vulnerable residents Free Accessible and welcoming
Improvements	Increase human resource More selection of courses
Differences to other services	In existence Open to all
Future developments	Continue and expand provision

## 4.0 Conclusion and recommendations

### 4.1 Conclusion

There has never been a more relevant time for Learning Hives, as deprived communities seek a way out of disadvantage and an escape from the biting impacts of austerity. The operational context is one of dwindling community resources and services, limited social welfare provision and increasing benefits sanctions<sup>4</sup>. This impacts on the full range of community groups, from the most vulnerable and those with complex needs, lone parents, younger and older people to those who may be experiencing work poverty in part-time employment<sup>5</sup>. The dominant response to these poverty related issues from the government is a drive to move people off benefits and into work, including those with long-term health conditions and the disabled. Whilst there is some investment in this area from charitable and European sources, such as the National Lottery's Building Better Opportunities, the interventions tend to have referral criteria and the interventions are time-limited. What is clear from our research is that demand outstrips supply, especially for criteria-free, open access and appropriate community support.

During this evaluation, we have seen that the Learning Hives are responsible for a number of important impacts including: contributing to household economic security through maintaining minimum income; improving confidence, motivation and self-esteem; bringing people closer to the jobs market and in some, leading to further education and employment; and providing a route into volunteering. In many ways they are an effective response to the problems caused by austerity and disadvantage; providing a subsequent reaction to the government's actions. We also see a close relationship that has developed between the Learning Hives and social

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<sup>4</sup> Asenova, D., McKendrick, J., McCann, C. and Reynolds, R. 2015. Redistribution of Societal Risk, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

<sup>5</sup> Zipfel, T., Tunnard, J., Feeney, J., Flannagan, A., Gaffney, L., Postle, K., O'Grady, F., Young, S. and Bennett, F. 2015. Our lives: Challenging attitudes to poverty in 2015, Newcastle Council for Voluntary Services.

landlords because the work of the Hives is closely aligned to the policy objectives of the housing companies. This has resulted in the Northern Learning Trust receiving financial, operational and strategic support for existing Hives and discussions about new Hives.

A central part of this evaluation has been a consultation and critical reflection with all key stakeholders, looking back over the first two years of operation and sequentially looking forwards. As well as identifying impacts mentioned in the previous paragraph, a number of which were common to all stakeholders, there was a unanimous call for a continuation and expansion. When we talked of the project being two thirds of the way through the current grant period, there was worry expressed about its possible end, typified by the comment on page two. On the subject of strengthening the project, beneficiaries wanted a more formal mechanism for learner involvement, which is something we propose in the next section.

## 4.2 Recommendations

On the basis of the research, we make the following recommendations:

- **Increase human resource capacity:** there was evidence to suggest that adding staff time to the Hives would increase their efficacy, impact and developmental potential.
- **Increase number of courses:** there were proposals for increasing the selection on offer to include employment ready/focused courses. This would also improve the potential for learner progression and attracting new service users.
- **Adapt outcome measures:** the current range of metrics does not totally capture and reflect the impact of the work, and needs to include annual number of learners (existing learners cannot currently be counted) and footfall figures. Consideration should be taken as to whether the number of qualifications gained should be the measure and not the number of people gaining qualifications.

- **Create a service user group:** this would respond to the request to create a more formal and fundamental opportunity for learners to become involved in the work of the Hives. Such groups often meet once every six to eight weeks and it is good practice for them to be independently facilitated. The feasibility of having a group per Hive, having one for all or for each region needs to be explored and costed.
- **Seek continuation funding:** the Hives have become well established in their own areas and are increasing beneficiary number and impact. From conversations we have had during this evaluation we would expect the withdrawal of the Hives would have damaging impacts on community life and morale. Therefore we strongly recommend they are continued. We also recommend the expansion of the Hives; the North East has a number of communities with very similar socio-demographic characteristics which also have a need for Learning Hives. Proposals could be made for new Hives to charitable trusts and foundations, social landlords and other statutory and non-statutory welfare and employment-related agencies.

## Appendix 1. Consultation schedule

In the light of the data presented and your own experiences of the Learning Hives, we would like to ask you some questions:

For strategic professionals: Review and sustainability planning

1. What has been your experience of the Learning Hives
2. What have they done well?
3. What could they do better?
4. How are they different to other providers in the area?
5. How do your strategic drivers connect with the learning lives?
6. Thinking of the next three years, what developments should take place to improve delivery and impact?

For operational professionals

1. What have been the impacts of the Learning Hives on the local community?
2. What are the good things about the Hives?
3. What could the Hives do better?
4. How are they different to other services/activities in the area?
5. Thinking of the next three years, what should the Learning Hives do differently?

For learners

1. What have been the impacts of the Learning Hives on the local community?
2. What are the good things about the Hives?
3. What could the Hives do better?
4. How are they different to other services/activities in the area?
5. Thinking of the next three years, what should the Learning Hives do differently?

For staff

1. What have been the impacts of the Learning Hives on the local community?
2. What are the good things about the Hives?
3. What could the Hives do better?
4. How are they different to other services/activities in the area?
5. Thinking of the next three years, what should the Learning Hives do differently?



# UNDERSTAND

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