

Evaluation of the Norfolk Community College Project

Part of the
Building Better Opportunities Programme

June 2023

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on behalf of East Coast College

1: Background

Norfolk Community College was launched in 2017 for an initial 33-month period. The project was funded by the European Social Fund and co-financed by the Big Lottery (now known as The National Lottery Community Fund) as part of their Building Better Opportunities Programme. As such, the project formed part of New Anglia LEP's European Social and Investment Fund Strategy.

New Anglia LEP and the Big Lottery ran a series of pre-engagement workshops for providers who were interested in delivering the Building Better Opportunities Programme. These were well attended by representatives from the local voluntary, community, and social enterprise sector. At the time, this marked a step-change in terms of VCSE involvement in ESF funds which were often perceived as being out of reach for smaller organisations. This was linked to minimum bid thresholds and payment in arrears.

During the engagement events, East Coast College were approached by several voluntary organisations to see if they would be interested in leading a partnership bid. Although the Lottery co-financed the project, the rules and regulations of ESF still applied. As such, the College was seen to have the scale and track record needed to manage the funds, and in 2017 they were awarded one of four available contracts. This would see them delivering employment support to unemployed or economically inactive adults in Norfolk aged 25 years or over.

By the end of June 2023, the College and its partners received £4,429,695.48 funding. This was allocated across three periods, with contracts 2 and 3 offered because of a) more funds becoming available and b) the impressive results achieved by the partnership.

Contract 1	£1,934,200	Ending December 2019
Contract 2	£1,934,200	Ending September 2022
Contract 3	£561,295.48	Ending June 2023

1.1: Some key notes on project development

When evaluating the Norfolk Community College Project, it is important to highlight some key moments from the development phase, as some of the impacts achieved by the project can be traced back to this period.

- The commitment shown by the Big Lottery and New Anglia LEP to reach out to the VCSE sector paid dividends, with new partnerships forming.
- In the case of Norfolk Community College, these dividends extended beyond the BBO programme with partners working together to apply for other funds.

- The decision to co-facilitate engagement events with the VCSE sector helped to spread the word. This led to good attendance from a wide range of groups.
- Applications were enabled by development grants which gave shortlisted applicants the time needed to refine their proposals and reduce risk.
- For Norfolk Community College, this development time was used to procure core delivery partners and to test ways of working with smaller providers. This led to the development and use of a Dynamic Purchasing System – referred to as the DPS, which was used in all 3 contracts.
- Running a well publicised procurement process helped to raise awareness of the project amongst strategic partners. This enabled the project to develop its place in the market and to recruit steering group members. Both factors appear to have reduced the project's need for expensive marketing and lead in time.

1.2: About this evaluation

The evaluation covers the entire delivery period. The evaluation is tilted towards high level impacts with day-to-day performance already covered within the project's monitoring returns. This approach provides information about key lessons and project legacy, with a view to informing future plans and efforts to secure onward funding. To do this, the evaluation has drawn upon several methodologies which are set out below.

- The evaluation has reviewed information from learning events over the last 7 years which have included interviews and workshops with project partners.
- The evaluation has brought this learning up to date by interviewing key project personnel during January and March 2023.
- These interviews have been supplemented by a review of outputs and results along with other project literature.
- The literature review has included external marketing materials such as those used on social media and websites.

To help make sense of a delivery period spanning 7 years, the report has used the project's three guiding principles. These were developed as part of the partnership's initial application. Despite not being widely advertised, the spirit of these principles can be seen in numerous activities.

The three principles cover the project's commitment to accountability, reducing social exclusion, and working in a sustainable way. Talking to those involved in the original application, the principles were designed to make an ethical statement about a) how the project would work with smaller providers, b) the role played by communities in achieving results and c) the need to reduce carbon use by sharing services.

Principle	Demonstrated by
1: Accountability to local communities	Building community resilience by investing in grassroots groups and having an elected governance group comprising 50% community representatives.
2: Reducing social exclusion.	Growing the social economy by bringing together employers from different sectors, helping to create accessible jobs for people who are long term unemployed.
3: Working in a sustainable way.	Investing in local assets by giving local employers the skills they need and by co-locating in communities to reduce the environmental impacts of long journeys.

The main objectives of this evaluation can be summarised as:

- A. Informing the current and future delivery plans of the College and its partners, using these to lever onward funds.
- B. Supporting the Big Lottery and their stakeholders to help shape future programme design.
- C. Sharing impact with key stakeholders to inform the development of local plans including those relating to UKSPF.

2: Getting Started

For the College, it was no mean feat getting a large-scale project off the ground involving partners who hadn't delivered a major ESF project before. However, it should be noted that some partners did have experience of smaller ESF projects, giving them prior insight into the reporting requirements. The development support provided by the Lottery helped to reduce some of the challenges associated with start-up. Examples of this included preparing the ground to recruit up to 20 staff from 5 different organisations.

Following completion of the procurement process, four core partners were chosen by East Coast College. All of these were local to the New Anglia LEP area.

Organisation	Project Role
Access Community Trust (main office in Lowestoft).	To employ two Skills Connectors in the West of Norfolk.
DIAL (main office in Great Yarmouth)	To employ two Multi-Disciplinary Workers located in the East and West of Norfolk.
Future Projects (main office in Norwich).	To employ two Employment Development Workers, supported by Trainees, and located in the East and West of Norfolk.
Voluntary Norfolk (main office in Norwich).	To employ two Skills Connectors in the East of Norfolk.
East Coast College (campuses in Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft).	To employ a Training Coordinator and an Employment Broker. The College also held project management roles.

To provide support across Norfolk, the project split the county into two principal areas. This was an oversimplification for a county with 7 districts, however, it made sense within the context of the delivery model and available resources. On paper, the delivery model is easy to understand and acknowledges the twists and turns of everyday life by providing different specialisms. Although this evaluation does not focus on day-to-day delivery, it is important to recognise that the inclusion of different roles was a key factor when it came to achieving results and fulfilling the project's principles. In very broad terms, and with all the caveats associated with linear pathways, the delivery model can be described as having four main steps.

Steps	Types of Activities
1: Outreach and Engagement	Skills Connectors and Trainees reach out to new participants by co-locating in community venues and by facilitating new groups and workshops.

2: Relationship Building	Skills Connectors draw upon support from Employment Development Workers (for participants who need support with life skills and wellbeing) or Multi-Disciplinary Workers (for participants who need money, debt, or housing advice).
3: Developing Confidence and Skills	Skills Connectors introduce participants to the Training Coordinator (for access to training and education) or the Employer Broker (for access to volunteering and work placements).
4: Progression	Participants are supported to become more independent. Their progression is tailored to their need and ranges from independent job search to finding a job.

2.1: What worked well at start-up?

- All project partners talk fondly of the decision to join up recruitment using a combined advert and interview process.
- This encouraged applicants to think about the job they were most suited to and to be considered for more than one role.
- Partners have referred to this period as setting the tone for good relations and demonstrating the maturity of the partnership.
- The decision to pool recruitment also helped to elevate the project brand, offering stakeholders a coherent message from the outset.
- This early messaging was reinforced by the project model which encouraged personnel to work together.
- Regular partnership meetings helped to iron out creases during start up and to provide guidance on meeting ESF rules and regulations.
- Partnership meetings were coordinated by East Coast College, whose leadership was valued by project partners.
- These meetings were often attended by senior staff including CEO's, and this level of buy-in was an important factor in getting the project moving.
- The College also brought together front-line practitioners to encourage partnership working on the ground.
- Other meetings facilitated by the College included the Steering Group where members used their knowledge to design calls for the project's DPS.

- The College's capacity to lead was assisted by regular contact with a named officer at the Lottery. This helped the College to keep partners up to date with programme developments.
- At a regional level, the New Anglia LEP also supported information sharing by convening meetings of BBO leads for Norfolk and Suffolk. This provided the opportunity of peer support in the early stages.
- Sharing information with the Lottery and other stakeholders was made easier by having access to an online data management system.
- Sourcing this system from within the partnership meant that the developer was already familiar with the project, reducing development time and cost.
- Implementing the project's management information systems at an early stage avoided the need to export large amounts of data to a new system.

2.2: What needed to change?

- Some of the frontline delivery roles were new and needed time to evolve and settle. Likewise, some of the triggers for making internal referrals needed to be established.
- Only a limited number of groups were responding to the DPS despite widespread promotion and a healthy number of registrations. As a result, more support was made available to help groups access the system.
- For those groups who did respond to the DPS, more support was offered at the contract award stage to help them understand ESF requirements.
- This extra administrative support was also applied to the wider project, with the College securing some changes to their original budget profile. This provided more support for core partners to complete their ESF reports.
- The Training Coordinator and Employment Broker roles were also adjusted over time in response to the needs of employers and local sectors.
- It also became clear that there was a risk of fatigue amongst employers from being approached by different projects. Gradually, these risks were reduced by linking into the existing employer networks of core partners and others.
- The database also needed time to develop and to respond to teething problems in the delivery model. This might have been more of a problem (and more expensive) if an external provider had been used.
- Some of the above snagging can be described as typical with new and larger projects. Less typical are some of the external factors that have been a feature throughout the project's timeline. Primarily, these have been:

- The EU referendum vote, which resulted in a need to reassure some stakeholders that the funding was secure.
 - The Covid-19 pandemic, which restricted the project's ability to co-locate in community venues.
 - The cost-of-living crisis, which along with the pandemic, resulted in more complex challenges for some participants including worsening mental health.
- As a result of these external events, parts of the project needed to remain flexible throughout the delivery period.
 - This flexibility included the need to move to remote support during the pandemic and supporting more people during the cost of living crisis.
 - The DPS was an important part of this flexibility, providing the opportunity to meet changing demand by increasing wrap around and specialist support.
 - However, doing this meant that there was less time and resources to invest in smaller community-led groups which was an original objective of the DPS.
 - To some extent, the lack of grassroots engagement in the DPS has been counteracted by the Trainee roles, which have directly involved local people in the delivery of the project.
 - However, the initial idea of recruiting one cohort of 12 Trainees proved to be too challenging and was later adapted to smaller cohorts with the option for Trainees to take on more hours.

2.3 What could have been done differently?

- Extending the New Anglia LEP meetings to include projects funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) might have helped to create more pathways into self-employment or business start-up.
- In addition, more links to ERDF might have supported the project's employer engagement work by raising awareness of existing networks. Along with more work placements for participants, this might have generated savings which could have been reinvested elsewhere.
- Although the Norfolk and Suffolk BBO projects came together during the early stages of the programme, they don't seem to have shared services such as marketing or referral systems. Doing this might have helped to raise programme awareness with key stakeholders and reduced the time and money needed for marketing and data management.

- Over the lifetime of the project, only 7 organisations delivered DPS contracts despite lots of interest in the early days. The DPS was hosted on a national tender portal which is also used by large public bodies. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that this portal was a barrier for smaller groups, who gradually stopped checking the system.
- With the benefit of hindsight, something like a small grant scheme might have been more appropriate to meet the community-led ambitions of the project. However, within the context of audit compliance, it is understandable why the project opted to use the DPS.
- The Trainee positions have shown the benefits of creating entry level jobs for people with lived experience and how these posts can flourish when hosted by VCSE organisations. On reflection, and given the success of the approach, the project might have wanted to do more of this.
- Looking ahead, and to make best use of the impact made by the Trainees, the project might want to propose a shared learning event with the Lottery and other BBO providers. This might focus on the merits of putting job creation at the heart of employment support with a view to shaping the design of future programmes.

3: Impacts and Themes

This section uses the project principles to assess performance including the capacity to deliver lasting change. This incorporates high level systems change relating to the design and commissioning of new services.

As stated in section 1, the project principles were not prominent within the project's marketing and publicity. Rather, they were embedded in the structures of the project, with some of this work made possible by the Lottery's development grant, providing time to research and test new approaches. The development of the project's DPS is one example of this.

The principles can be viewed as a framework for high level impacts underpinned by key themes such as building community resilience, growing the social economy, and reducing environmental impact. Alongside this, the project was also an early adopter of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. This evaluation has used 8 of the 17 goals to further assess the performance of the project. These have been chosen because they are within the scope of the BBO programme. Overall, the SDGs provide a recognised way to assess the sustainability credentials of the project, offering a more complete picture of how it has helped to achieve lasting change. A full list of the SDGs is shown below.

Goal	Assessed
1: No poverty	Yes
2: Zero hunger	No
3: Good health and wellbeing	Yes
4: Quality education	Yes
5: Gender equality	Yes
6: Clean water and sanitation	No
7: Affordable and clean energy	No
8: Decent work and economic growth	Yes
9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure	No
10: Reduced inequalities	Yes
11: Sustainable cities and communities	Yes
12: Responsible consumption and production	No
13: Climate action	Yes
14: Life below water	No

3.1: Performance measured by principles

Principle 1: Accountability to local communities.	
Theme	How has the project supported this?
Building community resilience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The high profile given to wrap around support helped people to overcome barriers, enabling them to build their confidence to access employment support. • This wrap around support was complemented by having good access to volunteering. The partnerships with local VCSE organisations meant that volunteering was part of the project's DNA. This ensured that volunteering was properly valued and more accessible. • The decision to work with existing community networks helped to widen the project's volunteer offer. This helped to raise awareness of the project and to improve access for disadvantaged groups. • Co-locating in community venues helped the project to reach out to target groups. This was further enabled by investing in peer support. • Working alongside communities was made more difficult during the pandemic, however, contact was maintained by supporting people and groups to use online technology.
Investing in grassroots groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ambition to invest in smaller groups resulted in a lot of outreach work at the beginning of the project. This led to a surge in registrations for the project's DPS. • Unfortunately, this initial engagement didn't translate into applications for funding, with the majority of DPS projects being delivered by more established providers. • The main reasons for this appeared to relate to the project's use of a large procurement portal which was off putting for smaller groups who were used to simpler grant processes.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Another barrier to the DPS was the level of paperwork required by the UK Government's ESF programme. To the project's credit, it tried to minimise the effects of this by providing additional support to applicants and DPS recipients. • The decision to work on a locality basis helped the project to identify other ways of supporting grassroots work. One example of this was working alongside food banks, which helped the project to respond to the cost of living crisis. • Although the DPS appeared out of reach for community groups, their experience informed the development of a new project (Inclusive Economy) which used a more traditional grant process. This led to more than 20 funding awards, whose recipients included smaller providers.
Community representation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project established its steering group during the development phase, and this remained operational until the end of the programme. • In its early days, the steering group included business representation and received in person reports from project personnel including trainees. • Thereafter, the group progressed mainly with public sector representation. Although narrower than first anticipated, its membership always included representatives from the local DWP and at least one local authority, although the extent to which this provided a pathway into local strategic plans isn't clear. • On reflection, trying to secure community representation from across Norfolk was probably too ambitious without access to some good quality community work, and it should be noted that this was at a time of austerity, with local authorities under pressure to review funding for discretionary services. Nevertheless, the project structure had a number of prepared workarounds, including the recruitment of trainees, which enabled it to directly involve people with lived experience.

Principle 2: Reduce Social Exclusion

Theme	How has the project supported this?
<p>Growing the social economy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project supported VCSE partners to deliver a high value contract. This helped to upskill organisations by meeting ESF rules and regulations, and in preparing for service audits. • As a result of their involvement, partners developed the confidence to apply for other high value work including additional ESF contracts. • Organisations who delivered through the DPS were invited to join the project’s development days, contributing to a one team approach. • Intelligence from the project added weight to emerging narratives, such as the importance of VCSE skills development, the sector’s capacity to create stepping stone jobs, and the interdependency between wrap around and employment support. • In 2022, the experience of the DPS shaped the allocation of £225,000 as part of the College’s Inclusive Economy Project funded by the Community Renewal Fund. These grants were aimed at VCSE development and growth where this could be linked to new opportunities for people who were long term unemployed.
<p>Bringing different sectors together.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project raised the profile of cross sector supply chains by procuring services from the local VCSE and private sectors. It also laid the foundations for working with anchor institutions as part of its separately funded Inclusive Economy Project. • The success of the trainee programme helped to demonstrate leadership when engaging with employers. Similarly, the project’s Disability Confident work showed the potential of the VCSE to support workforce development.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The engagement of employers was also enhanced by the offer of wrap around support as part of work preparation, which became especially attractive from 2020 as a result of labour market shortages and the impact of cost of living. • The early days of the steering group included representation from local businesses, and although this wasn't maintained, some of their role was taken up by the local DWP who provided the group with labour market data. • The DWP also worked with the project to promote recruitment fairs. This provided more opportunities for different sectors to come together, with some of these events hosted by anchor institutions.
Accessible jobs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In response to the pandemic, the project held a number of practice development sessions which provided partners with a forum to share intelligence about vacancies. Information from these, along with regular pulse surveys, helped to inform DPS calls including some sector specific training. • The trainee roles helped to raise the profile of lived experience as a transferable skill. Towards the end of the project, this theme was further developed by work to improve access to employment support for unpaid carers. • Over the lifetime of the project, the DPS funded extra support to help people overcome deep rooted barriers to labour market involvement. This included some targeted work with people at risk of homelessness and ex-offenders. • The project also helped people to maintain their employment by providing pathways into onward services. This helped to reassure people during the early phases of their employment.

Principle 3: Work in a Sustainable Way	
Theme	How has the project supported this?
Invest in local assets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project made a valuable contribution to wealth building by working with local VCSE organisations. This led to contracts where the vast majority of resources were reinvested in local people and suppliers. • At a community level, this type of reinvestment was exemplified by the commitment to run a trainee programme and to recognise the value of lived experiences. • The success of the trainee programme also helped to show the benefits of paying the Real Living Wage, which Future Projects were able to use in support of the campaign to make Norwich a Living Wage City. • As well as delivering the project, local organisations also supplied the project with its database, marketing and evaluation services. This cemented the project's status as a net contributor to inclusive and sustainable growth. • All of the project's DPS contracts were delivered by local VCSE providers, however, as already noted, these tended to be more established organisations rather than smaller community groups. Nonetheless, this helped to get more resources into communities with the DPS acting as a catalyst for other funding applications.
Developing the skills needed by local employers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The intelligence provided by the steering group was used to shape DPS calls aimed at connecting people to local vacancies. During the pandemic, this flexibility helped people to respond to labour market shortages. • Increasingly, responses to vacancy rates included connecting people to jobs in the VCSE and public sectors, who like their counterparts in the private sector, have experienced labour shortages over the last few years.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although the BBO programme wasn't able to fund staff training, the project did raise the profile of the VCSE sector as a training provider, with the potential to reduce barriers associated with more traditional learning environments. • Combined, these activities have created a space where the requirements of the private, public and VCSE sectors intertwine, with opportunities to build a more coordinated training offer.
Reducing carbon and waste.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project's way of working supported it to have a positive impact on the environment. One example of this was using existing infrastructure to remove some of the environmental costs associated with start-up. • This infrastructure included arrangements to co-locate in community venues, which helped to lower the project's carbon footprint. This was also supported by working on a locality basis, which reduced the need for people to travel long distances. • The project's use of online technologies increased during the pandemic, which also positively impacted its carbon use. • The cost of living crisis also saw the project develop new partnerships aimed at helping people to meet their basic needs. A byproduct of this was a focus on reuse and recycling, placing the circular economy within the project's sustainability plans. • Despite positive steps to reduce carbon and waste, some stubborn challenges remained outside of the influence of this project. These included problems linked to the availability and cost of public transport.

3.2: Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals

Goal.	Evidenced by
<p>1: No poverty.</p> <p>End poverty in all its forms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of wrap around support, supporting people to access money, debt and benefit advice. • Increasing the provision of this support using the DPS, helping people to meet their basic needs during the pandemic and cost of living crisis. • Embedding employment support in community venues including food banks and social supermarkets. • Valuing lived experience and paying the Real Living Wage.
<p>Goal 3: Good health and wellbeing.</p> <p>Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting new support groups, providing a safe space for people to share their experiences of being unemployed. • Recognising the link between mental health, social isolation and loneliness, and working with the VCSE to increase connectedness through volunteering. • Making the Employment Development Workers a fundamental part of the project model, giving them the time and space to develop trusted relationships. • Promoting the Disability Confident scheme to a range of employers with a view to making jobs and workplaces more accessible.
<p>Goal 4: Quality education.</p> <p>Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising lived experience as a transferable skill and making this a key tenet of the project. Demonstrating this by recruiting trainees with knowledge and experience of their local area. • Encouraging partnership work between project partners with a view to sharing training offers as part of their workforce development.

<p>lifelong learning opportunities for all.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawing on the experience of the project to inform adult skills training including the Multiply programme. • Incorporating training provision in recruitment fairs and developing tools and tips to help people deliver workshops.
<p>Goal 5: Gender equality.</p> <p>Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring that the steering group had at least 50% representation from women. • Using the DPS to invest in peer support and to tackle barriers which disproportionately affect women, such as the lack of respite care for unpaid carers. • Continuing to raise the issue of childcare amongst strategic partners with a view to influencing systems change. • Ensuring all new partners, including those contracted through the DPS, have up-to-date policies and practices relating to equal opportunities.
<p>Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth.</p> <p>Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawing on the project's experience to inform a new Inclusive Economy Project, with a focus on creating stepping stone opportunities for people who are furthest away from the labour market. • Providing traineeships to widen access to VCSE jobs and ensuring these are paid at the Real Living Wage. • Supporting trainees to move into more sustainable work, with the vast majority of them choosing to stay in the voluntary sector. • Using local suppliers and finding ways for different sectors to work together, facilitated by employment fairs.
<p>Goal 10: Reduced inequalities.</p> <p>Reduce inequality with and among countries.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with the VCSE sector to improve access to employment support for minority and disadvantaged groups including people at risk of homelessness. • Supporting regular meetings of the project steering group and enabling its members to shape DPS calls to meet gaps in provision.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working on a locality basis, developing the relationships needed to reach out to people who are disconnected from mainstream support. • Providing wrap around support to help people reduce their debt and increase their incomes, using back to work calculations to give people more control over their lives.
<p>Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities.</p> <p>Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing safe spaces for people to come together to share their experience and to develop mutual support. • Maintaining services during the pandemic by investing in IT skills, helping people to access online support. • Adopting clear policies for staying safe during the pandemic and joining local resilience groups to safeguard vulnerable people. • Supporting partners to share recruitment with the net benefit of more local people securing jobs on the project as a result of joint advertising.
<p>Goal 13: Climate action.</p> <p>Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritising locality working, reducing the need for people and services to travel long distances. • Sharing resources by co-locating in premises, reducing the need for new premises, and reducing energy usage. • Using local suppliers, helping to reduce the project's carbon footprint, and promoting reuse and recycling projects as ways to mitigate the cost of living crisis. • Building on the success of the trainee programme to inform the development of the Green Ambassador role as part of the College's Inclusive Economy Project.

4: Spotlight on Innovation and Partnership Work

As part of the evaluation, project partners were asked to identify three highlights linked to their involvement and delivery. These questions were directed at the lead and core partners. Action Community Enterprise (ACE) CIC were also included to reflect the high number of DPS projects they delivered. The questions were aimed at senior managers and delivery staff who had been involved in the project for a long period of time. During the same interviews, respondents were also asked if partnership work and innovation had been sustained across the 7 years and if there was anything they would do differently. From their responses, it was possible to identify some key themes.

4.1: Common themes

- The project actively created volunteer and job opportunities for people with lived experience.
- These opportunities helped to make the project more responsive to local communities.
- Partners used their experience on the project to inform other project work and to attract new funding.
- This new funding contributed to one organisation doubling its size, whilst another partner secured a £1.4m ESF contract.
- The project model was flexible enough to provide a whole person approach. This helped to raise awareness of wellbeing support.
- The pandemic led to the testing of new approaches with the DPS able to support some of these.
- Partners have mainstreamed parts of the project which has helped them to provide more efficient services.
- Several new partnerships and networks were started and there is an appetite to continue with some of these.

4.2: Highlights from Access Community Trust.

- The project has helped the organisation to bring together its employment and recruitment services. This coming together of different teams, including HR, has helped to make job opportunities more accessible, resulting in 32 participants moving into a variety of roles at the Trust. One area to benefit from this has been the organisation's Waterways Cafe Project. This was supported by the DPS to provide training and work placements for people who needed extra support. The cafe, which is part of a redevelopment on Great Yarmouth seafront, puts participants in a strong position to apply for other visitor economy roles.

- The organisation has used its experience of BBO and ESF to consider its own systems and controls. This has cut across a number of areas including how to achieve resource efficiency, digital innovation, environmental impact, and partnership working. Delivering through the DPS has also helped the organisation to demonstrate value for money and to build on pilot work. This has led to some mainstreaming and other funding.
- The project has breathed new life into partnership work by reducing barriers between voluntary organisations. Many people who have been employed by the project have used their new skills to advance their careers. This is providing a pipeline of new leaders in the VCSE sector who are passionate about partnership working. The result of this is more outward looking services with the skills needed to join-up and problem solve. The recruitment of people with lived experience is also helping to strengthen the bond between VCSE organisations and the communities they serve.

4.3: Highlights from Action Community Enterprise (ACE) CIC

- At the start of the project, ACE described themselves as being a small organisation. Since then, they have doubled in size, with BBO making an important contribution to this. Being part of the DPS helped ACE to develop its track record which enabled it to develop the evidence base for other funding. Their role on the project evolved from training provider to include greater amounts of outreach and engagement. This holistic approach means they can now offer a joined-up package to commissioners. This is helping them to compete for national programmes and to deliver a Multiply Project for Norfolk County Council.
- Their involvement in the DPS has given ACE the opportunity to test new ways of working with local prisons. Delivering ESF projects has given Ace the credibility to approach commissioners in the criminal justice sector with a view to delivering an end to end package of support – an approach they developed during their time on the DPS. Their work in prisons has involved developing people’s confidence and skills to improve outcomes for ex-offenders. Learning from this work supported ACE to secure a contract with New Anglia LEP as part of the UK Government’s Skills Bootcamps.
- The project has provided partners with the opportunity to reduce barriers to employment by providing tailored support. This has included helping people to overcome transport issues, setting up bank accounts, and gaining specific qualifications such as those needed to become a forklift driver. For their first DPS contract, ACE supported people to improve their wellbeing by giving people the confidence to manage their home life. This included helping a parent with the skills needed to get their child to school on time, which in turn, helped the parent to make their job interviews. The flexibility to take a holistic approach has been a key factor in the project’s success.

4.4: Highlights from DIAL Great Yarmouth

- DIAL was one of the first VCSE organisations in Norfolk to become a Disability Confident Leader as part of the UK Government's Disability Confident scheme. The organisation has used its accreditation to encourage other services to join the scheme. During its time of the project, DIAL have undertaken a Disability Confident assessment for East Coast College and recruited an Employer Engagement Worker to focus on inclusion. Their work includes supporting local employers to promote disability awareness and to develop more accessible work placements. This area of work has led DIAL to form a new partnership with Norfolk and Waveney Carers Voice which was aimed at improving access to employment support for unpaid carers. A pilot of this work was funded by the DPS towards the end of 2022. This demonstrated the project's ongoing commitment to innovation and partnership work.
- Over the 7 years of the project, DIAL's main role was to employ and support two Multi-Disciplinary Workers. Their work focused on providing wrap-around support to help people overcome low level money, debt, and housing issues. They also supported people to access more specialist support, and although this work wasn't new to DIAL, it allowed them to extend their support to a wider area. The success of this approach gave DIAL the confidence to take part in other Norfolk-wide projects, leading it to form a number of new partnerships. All of this has helped the organisation to become more resilient, with the networks and systems in place to maintain services during the pandemic.
- During the first lockdown, DIAL and East Coast College worked together to establish a new VCSE Group. This offered a virtual space for smaller VCSE providers to come together and share their experiences of Covid-19. At the start of the pandemic, the group met fortnightly. Since then, the group has continued to meet monthly, becoming a catalyst for partnership work which led to a new homelessness forum. The meetings are chaired by DIAL's CEO and attendance in the early days was supported by groups who were connected with Norfolk Community College. In March 2023, the group hosted its first conference with commissioners and funders, marking the group's third anniversary. Given the success of the conference, and its expanding membership, the group seems certain to provide a legacy for the Community College project,

4.5: Highlights from East Coast College

- During the 7 years of the project, the College was able to develop its role as an anchor institution to the VCSE sector. It did this by recognising the value of generous leadership, drawing on its experience of BBO to invest the time and skills needed to develop other ESF partnerships. It also used its leadership role to open up supply chain opportunities to the VCSE sector. This resulted in it procuring the project's data management system from Future Projects and investing more widely in the VCSE using the DPS. Although registration on the DPS could be quite challenging – the use of a public sector procurement portal added to this – there is evidence from providers, such as ACE, that this improved their chances of bidding for other contracts.

- The project also enabled the College to promote the role of anchor institutions to create entry level posts for people with lived experience. The traineeships developed by Future Projects were made possible by the College's commitment to view these roles as fundamental to the project. Over the course of 7 years, learning from these roles has helped to create traineeships in other projects including the College's Inclusive Economy Project. This was funded by the UK Government's Community Renewal Fund with the aim of creating stepping-stone opportunities for people who were disconnected from other programmes. The project was awarded more than £500,000, providing another example of the investment levered by Norfolk Community College.
- The last three years of the project were strongly influenced by external events. The availability of DPS resources gave the project the flexibility to take forward new ideas, helping it to respond to both the pandemic and cost of living. With regards to the former, this included the provision of more IT support, whilst the cost of living has seen a need for more money and debt provision. Bringing partners together during the pandemic helped the project to identify more substantial issues, including those linked to loneliness and isolation. This pooling of intelligence helped partners to create a gateway to support access for people who needed simpler referral routes. This went on to form part of the successful application to the Community Renewal Fund.

4.6. Highlights from Future Projects

- Throughout the delivery period, the work of Future Projects was supported by traineeships. For people with lived experience, these posts provided an opportunity to get involved in the delivery of the project, helping to keep it responsive to local people. Trainees were provided with a package of training and received mentoring from other members of the team. Trainees were paid the Real Living Wage which helped the project to set an example to other employers. Nearly all trainees moved into new jobs after their placements ended, with many taking up roles in the VCSE sector. Their successes contributed to the project's added value by enabling other organisations to recruit skilled and motivated staff. The traineeship model also supported Future Projects in their work to promote Norwich as a Living Wage City.
- Prior to the pandemic, the Future Projects team helped to set up a men's support group. The purpose of the group was to provide a safe space for men to share their anxieties around finding work. Topics discussed ranged from everyday matters through to coping with stress and improving wellbeing. The group was guided by Future Projects' commitment to group work and its potential to upskill and provide peer mentoring. During the first lockdown, the group was helped to move online, which resulted in more people attending. After the final wave of lockdowns, the group continued to meet with Future Projects staff who remained on hand to support any ongoing issues. The success of the group means it is likely to continue under its own steam when BBO comes to an end.

- From the outset, the Employment Development Worker roles were given time to evolve and find their place in the project. They were recognised as being more experimental with the flexibility to provide tailored support. This freedom allowed the workers to raise the profile of wellbeing services and to enhance the wrap-around support provided by the project. Critically, these Development Workers had the time to get to know participants and to build trust, helping them to identify the root causes of unemployment and economic inactivity. The workers aimed to co-develop plans with participants using a variety of tools including reflective journals. Future Projects continue to use this work to evidence the value of including wellbeing as part of employment support. They also use it to inform their wellbeing training offer to the VCSE sector and local employers.

4.7: Highlights from Voluntary Norfolk

- Voluntary Norfolk have mainstreamed some of their work on the project, adapting it to fit other ESF projects. This includes delivering a £1.4m employment contract for Norfolk County Council. They have also used their work to inform other applications, further contributing to the project's return on investment. Their involvement in the project has helped them to review some of their internal processes, leading them to develop a single referral system. The different facets of the project, including the provision of multi-disciplinary support, is something Voluntary Norfolk have championed when supporting the development of other employment programmes and strategies.
- As well as drawing on the project to inform their strategic work, Voluntary Norfolk have also used it to inform their frontline delivery. Their involvement in the Community College has seen them adopt quarterly client reviews in all their employment services. They also extended their group work to tackle issues of loneliness and social isolation, using the project to test several new approaches. These included the creation of employability packs with tips and tools for frontline staff. They also developed a coaching course to help people to deliver group work. Each of these examples show how the Community College became a test bed for new ideas, which enabled the project to remain fresh and responsive.
- During the pandemic, Voluntary Norfolk's Skills Connectors supported frontline staff come together using video conferencing. During their first year, these remote sessions were attended by approximately 40 people. Three years on, these meetings were still well attended by staff from a range of organisations including housing associations, NHS, DWP, wellbeing services, local authorities, and other VCSE groups. The networks perform a similar function to a project steering group with their focus on operational matters helping services to join-up on the ground. These meetings were effective in shaping local training and in reducing the cost of marketing by providing ready-made cohorts of learners. Given their popularity, these meetings are expected to continue in the future.

4.8: Value for Money and Local Multipliers

By achieving, and in some cases exceeding, its targets, the project clearly produced some very favorable returns on investment. The most obvious of these are the potential savings from helping people move away from welfare and into employment. These are straightforward VFM calculations that can be captured by projects and their funders providing there is reasonable agreement on how to develop, and then apply, certain values. Deciding how much of a value should be attributed to an intervention and for how long is a more complicated business which can lead to some scepticism about return-on-investment statements.

Accepting the caveats above, the project can still make some basic VFM calculations using average fiscal and economic values linked to welfare to work. However, these are just examples, which do not consider how much of the value should be discounted based upon other factors. Critically, these factors include the contribution made by individuals themselves towards achieving their employment outcomes.

The figures in the table below are taken from the cost benefit calculator developed by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority – a recognised source in this field. They are based on rates for 2017/18 which are the most recent figures available. The 366 number in the righthand side column represents the number of people supported into employment at the time of making this calculation (March 2023), which equates to 25% of all enrolments.

Value Description	Value per person £	Value based upon 366 participants £
Fiscal – savings to public sector agencies relating to public expenditure.	14,395	5,268,570
Economic value – savings to individuals, employers, or the wider economy.	19,812	7,251,192
Combined fiscal and economic values.	34,207	12,519,762

Taking the above figures at face value means that the project has generated a very positive return on investment which would increase if other results were included, such as the value of volunteering and training. However, as stated above, a proper analysis would look behind these figures and make reductions based upon contributions made by participants themselves and other services, with further reductions made for time drop-off. That would require a significant undertaking which is outside the scope of this evaluation. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to conclude that by achieving a 25% job conversion rate the project has made a valuable social and economic contribution to Norfolk's communities.

Continuing with the monetary theme, we can also make some projections about the amount of money put back into the economy because of interventions made by Multi-Disciplinary Workers. Reviewing their records for 24 months, these workers helped participants to successfully reduce their debts by liaising with creditors to reduce monthly outgoings and / or to write off debt. In total 82 people were provided with financial support resulting in £97,000 being written off in full and a further £72,300 saved by reducing monthly payments. They also supported people making the right claims for benefits, leading to £57,300 more income in the local economy. In addition, there has been a potential increase in combined incomes totaling £146,683 for people who moved into work following back to work calculations. There are some potential trade-offs linked to these figures where they increase public sector costs, as in the case of improved access to benefits. However, these are significantly outweighed by potential benefits, which in most cases we can directly attribute to the project as no other agencies were involved. In other words, it seems credible for the project to claim most of these values as they wouldn't have occurred without the specialist intervention of DIAL workers. Assuming this 24-month period was typical, it is possible to use these figures to estimate a value for 7 years. This results in a total value of £1,306,491 which, if anything, is likely to be a conservative figure given the extra demand for DIAL services caused by the rising cost of living.

In addition to the VFM example above, the highlights from delivery partners offer a more rounded understanding of value for money. This gives us an important insight into the multiplier effects of the project, which has enabled it to hold and reinvest more of the contract value in local economies. A summary of these local multipliers is provided below.

- The project gave partners the track record to apply for other funds including one partner securing a £1.4m contract.
- The project prepared the College and its partners to apply for other ESF projects, resulting in more than £1m of additional investment.
- The contracts held with local suppliers covering marketing, IT and evaluation helped the project to reinvest in Norfolk's economy.
- The use of a DPS helped to pilot new approaches, which have been mainstreamed by partners to improve efficiency.
- The success of the project helped partners to develop their inclusive economy work using £500,000 from the Community Renewal Fund.
- The support for new networks involving front line practitioners and VCSE groups reduced duplication and improved efficiencies.
- The progression of staff into more senior roles, along with the creation of trainee positions, supported innovation and skills in the VCSE sector.
- The project helped people to get through the cost of living crisis by providing donations of food, clothes and essential household items.

4.9: Community Benefit Statement

The table below shows an example financial statement based upon some of the community benefit achieved by the project (wealth building activities) compared to the initial outlay (funding awarded). It collates some of the examples from 4.8 into an easy to digest summary for community stakeholders.

Community Benefit Statement Covering the period April 2017 to June 2023			
	Description	Amounts £	Total income / expenditure £
Income	761 people into employment.	26,031,527	34,161,238
	900 people trained or into education.	603,000	
	Benefits of wrap-around support.	1,306,491	
	Other funding secured.	6,220,220	
Expenditure	Contract 1	1,934,200	4,429,695.48
	Contract 2	1,934,200	
	Contract 3	561,295.48	
Net Community Benefit: £29,731,542.5			

- The number of people into employment includes self-employment and considers outcomes achieved by BBO and 3 other ESF projects run by the College and its BBO partners. These have been included as the College applied for these funds as a direct result of their experience of running BBO. In other words, these outcomes wouldn't have been achieved without the initial BBO funding.
- The benefits of the employment and training / education outcomes have been calculated using the unit cost database of Greater Manchester Combined Authority. These comprise fiscal and economic values.
- The training / education figure is based upon the benefits achieved from supporting someone to gain NVQ Level 2 or equivalent. This has been taken to

represent an average outcome, although in practice, some participants will have progressed to a higher level.

- The wrap around figure is a conservative estimate as it only uses data from the BBO. This figure would be higher if it included the benefits of wrap around support as delivered by the College's other ESF projects.
- The figure for other funding is taken from projects that were heavily influenced by the experience of delivering BBO. This figure includes 5 College-led projects and one ESF contract which was secured by a BBO partner. Of the 5 College-led projects, 3 were supported by ESF. The other projects were funded by the Community Renewal Fund and Multiply.
- The community benefit statement offers a snapshot of the reinvestment work supported by the BBO project. The final net figure would probably be higher if additional outcomes were included, such as the wrap around support offered by other ESF projects and the new funds secured following DPS innovation.
- The statement restricts the employment and skills benefits to one year. Some people will continue to feel benefits for a longer period of time, however, tracking this was beyond the scope of the evaluation. Furthermore, it is likely that any undervaluing has been offset by the decision not to apply discounts. These discounts include the contribution made by individuals and other agencies, and in particular, this relates to the training / education and employment outcomes.
- Considering any methodological limitations, the community benefit statement is further evidence of how the project maintained its commitment to be accountable to communities.

5: Reflections and Next Steps

The reflections and next steps have been written with the report's main objectives in mind. To recap, these relate to a) helping partners to shape their current and future delivery with a view to informing onward funds, b) supporting the Lottery and its stakeholders to shape future programme design, and c) sharing impact with local stakeholders to inform strategic priorities including those relating to the Shared Prosperity Fund.

5.1: Key Reflections

- Norfolk Community College is a good example of how the VCSE and FE sectors can work together to achieve employment related outcomes. For the VCSE sector, these benefits include new skills as a result of the College's leadership, which provided the necessary scale to absorb risks. For the College, the benefits include strengthening VCSE networks to improve access to education for disadvantaged and minority groups.
- The decision by the Lottery and New Anglia LEP to invest in a series of pre-engagement events helped to raise the profile of the BBO programme, enhancing the amount of local knowledge available to inform the tender documents. The decision to co-produce these events with the VCSE gave local providers the time to consider partnership opportunities.
- The provision of development grants gave projects the time and space to test their proposals. For Norfolk Community College, this helped to cement the partnership which was supported by a shared recruitment process. It also put the project on the front foot by increasing awareness amongst strategic partners, helping to set up referral channels, and reducing the need for a protracted launch. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the time invested in pre-engagement and development directly contributed to the project's longevity.
- During the early phase of the project, and repeated at key intervals, the project made use of external facilitation to support practice development. This appears to have encouraged a 'one team' approach – especially pertinent for a project involving multiple partners. It seems sensible to build on this in future project design, which can help partnerships to maintain their core values as and when key personnel leave.
- It is commendable that the project maintained a working steering group throughout its 7-year period, providing a route to channel intelligence from practice sessions and to inform the shape of DPS calls. Nevertheless, the steering group's ambition to comprise 50% community members was never realised, and whilst this was a laudable ambition, it was possibly too ambitious on a county-level and unlikely to be well executed without some good quality community work.
- When it comes to community involvement, the project had more success with its day-to-day delivery. This included co-location in community venues and the recruitment of trainees with lived experience. The success of the trainee

programme appears to be one of the major highlights of the project with almost all of the trainees moving into further employment. In some cases, this included taking up Skills Connector roles on the project. These trainees offer a blueprint for breaking down barriers, by working with trusted members of the community to deliver authentic services.

- Although the steering group provided a place to consider internal performance and trends, it isn't clear how this information was shared with local policy makers and commissioners. On reflection, it might have been helpful if there had been a regional steering group with the remit to consider intelligence from each of the four NALEP-based projects. Such a group might have helped partners to inform and shape post ESF arrangements. Potentially, this could have reduced service interruption and ensured a legacy for local BBO projects.
- The project's employer engagement work is a good example of the maturity of the BBO approach, with the Lottery enabling the project to test, review and adjust its model accordingly. The project's initial plans for developing a new employer network were eventually put aside in favour of a more organic approach aimed at making best use of existing employer links. To supplement this, the project reached out to specific employers with high vacancy rates by providing its own version of sector-based work academies. This targeted approach was made possible by having unallocated funds which the project channeled using its DPS.
- Two examples of this more targeted approach towards engaging employers occurred in the latter stages of the project. These were linked to the promotion of the Disability Confident scheme by DIAL Great Yarmouth and support to raise awareness of carers involving Carers Voice. The high level of engagement achieved by the Disability Confident work confirms the persuasiveness of 'asks' when they are coupled with 'offers', and where they meet gaps in the current employer engagement landscape.
- The project also worked with employers in other ways. This included making procurement accessible to SMEs, with both the project's database and marketing provided by local organisations including a supplier from the VCSE sector. In addition, the challenges created by the pandemic and cost of living provided more scope to engage employers through the offer of wrap around support (reducing absenteeism) and by supporting recruitment for key sectors with acute labour shortages.
- The challenges of external events reinforced the value of having unallocated funds to meet sudden changes in demand. These funds helped people to improve their digital skills – essential during lockdown periods, and to provide enhanced levels of money advice including more help to undertake back-to-work calculations. Given the seismic shocks that have occurred over the last 7 years and the probability of things remaining unstable – including the rising frequency of environmental disasters, it seems sensible for funders to default towards flexibility when it comes to operational and financial modelling. Although deferring the use of third party providers can feel uncertain, the experience of Norfolk Community College suggests that when safeguards are in place, the benefits can far outweigh the risks.

- Although having unallocated funds helped the project to meet changes in demand, in the main, this wasn't achieved by commissioning smaller groups. Apart from the early days of the project, the majority of DPS provision was delivered by a small number of established organisations. To try and overcome this, the project offered extra support to encourage interest from smaller groups. Nevertheless, this issue remained sticky throughout the delivery period and was probably complicated by the decision to use a national tender portal. Initially, this was chosen to comply with ESF requirements, and although the system was robust for this purpose, feedback suggested that it looked and felt out of reach for smaller suppliers. It is arguable that a simpler platform would have provided a more manageable route into the project for smaller groups. This appears to be supported by the College's short term sister project – The Inclusive Economy Project, funded by the Community Renewal Fund, which received more than 80 responses from small and medium sized VCSE groups. This was achieved by one funding call based upon a more traditional application process. However, it should be pointed out that these grants were framed around organisational development where this could be linked to the creation of job opportunities. A review of these grants appears to confirm a strong causal link between development support and good performance.
- Similar to the experience of the steering group, the project still managed to engage smaller community-based groups despite the shortcomings of the DPS. In addition to the examples already cited, this included enabling peer support, such as a new men's group which was set up to provide a safe space for unemployed men to share their feelings. Other examples include the start-up of locality networks, including two district-based employability forums. These were very well attended by front-line practitioners, providing the opportunity for small and larger organisations to share their experiences.
- Despite the successes of Norfolk Community College and the wider BBO programme, some persistent problems remain, and overcoming these will require the support of policy makers. They include the availability of affordable childcare, the frequency and cost of public transport, and the difficulties faced by unpaid carers who are unable to find and / or fund respite care for their loved ones. Furthermore, the obvious mismatch between the demand and supply of mental health support means that services like Norfolk Community College are having to work with people who have complex needs for longer periods of time.
- Although challenges remain, Norfolk Community College has enjoyed some success in shaping local narratives and agendas, although this hasn't always been formally recognised. During its lifetime, the project has been a strong advocate for the VCSE sector including its potential to create stepping-stone jobs for people who need extra support. This narrative has been brought to life by the recruitment of trainees, along with the benefits of paying the Real Living Wage. The project also acted as a catalyst for some emerging work with anchor institutions, which was taken forward by its sister scheme, The Inclusive Economy Project. In addition to the trainees, there are also lots of examples from partners of where project personnel have progressed to take on other support roles. This is one example of how the project has supported the VCSE skills

agenda. Another example of this includes upskilling partners to meet ESF rules, standing them in good stead to deliver other large-scale projects.

- The BBO programme has provided a unique opportunity to partners by offering 7 years funding. This length of funding, without the need to re-commission, is almost unheard of within the VCSE sector, and there have been many benefits to providing this level of continuity. With this in mind, it's possible to argue that an opportunity has been missed to bring together the four regional BBO projects, with a view to creating a coherent narrative to support the development of post ESF arrangements. However, national policy is likely to remain in flux for the next 12-18 months, and it is within this space that partners can come together to share their collective experience.

5.2: Some Practical Next Steps

- There is an opportunity for Norfolk Community College partners to continue to meet to reflect on how BBO has positively impacted their operational landscape. This might include tracking the career advancement of project personnel including volunteers and trainees with lived experience.
- Following on from this, the College might want to convene a meeting of the regional BBO partners to consider their shared experiences and impacts, and to translate these into a combined set of recommendations, to support local policies and strategies.
- Where collaboration occurs, BBO partners might want to bring together their return on investment work to demonstrate the added value of the local VCSE sector. These benefits might include leverage of external funds, improving skills in the VCSE sector, strengthening local supply chains, and reinvestment of development funding to deliver innovation and sustainability.
- Where practicable, partners might want to consider how they can continue to support BBO networks and partnerships. This will help to bridge any critical gaps, providing some continuity for communities, and avoiding the need to reinvent these networks at a later date. Some ways of doing this might include sharing facilitation support.
- There is also an opportunity to hold a briefing session with local funders on the pros and cons of using a DPS, comparing this to the grant programme used by the project's sister scheme (Inclusive Economy). This would also provide an opportunity to discuss the merits of development funding.
- The partnership might also want to offer its support to the Lottery with a view to holding an online discussion forum, enabling BBO projects from across the country to share their experience of informing local policies and securing onward funding. Convening such a group in the summer / autumn of 2023 will ensure experiences are still fresh in people's minds.

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