

# **Redressing Under-representation through Re-skilling and Active Liaison (RURAL)**

**A Report on the RURAL Project developed by Agoriad Cyf, Gwynedd,  
North Wales**

**1<sup>st</sup> January 2007 to 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2008**

**Mark Kilsby (PhD)**

## **Introduction**

RURAL was funded through the Ireland and Wales Interreg programme and run in joint collaboration by Agoriad, based in Bangor, Gwynedd North Wales and an Irish Partner. This report covers the Welsh arm of the project. It pools information from an interview with the key (personal) Liaison Officer, an Excel database and Exit Questionnaires completed by the main beneficiaries upon project completion.

RURAL aimed to enable those considered furthest from the labour market living in Bangor area of Gwynedd and Anglesey, to re-engage with and play a more active role in local career and learning opportunities. The target groups were adults aged 18 or over who had learning disabilities, severe physical disabilities, mental health problems, those with a dual diagnosis, and people who have become disengaged with local education community and employment services. It therefore fits well with a number of national and local initiatives aimed at finding effective procedures for progressing these groups towards greater financial and social independence, with clear cost saving implications for local service provision.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>

This is important because these individuals often require additional tailored support, that extends beyond the scope of mainstream generic employment and local authority provisioning. RURAL also fits well with National Regeneration and Employment initiatives, that encourage localised planning between statutory, private and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector services and businesses, that is sensitive to local needs and circumstances.<sup>4</sup> In Gwynedd and Anglesey, this means a bilingual

---

<sup>1</sup> National Audit Office, (2005). Gaining and retaining a job: the Department for Work and Pensions' support for disabled people. Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC 455 Session 2005-6, 13 October 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Health, (2001). Valuing People – A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, London: HMSO.

<sup>3</sup> Learning Disability Advisory Group, (2001). Fulfilling the Promises: Proposals for a Framework for Services for People with Learning Disabilities. Welsh assembly Government, Cardiff.

<sup>4</sup> The Department for Work and Pensions Public Consultation Document: 'Helping people achieve their full potential: Improving Specialist Disability Employment Services' A response from the British Association for Supported Employment

population, relatively high rates of unemployment, and a changing urban/rural economy due to the decline of traditional industries and a rise in local leisure and tourist industries.

### Key Features

The project team consisted of 2 full time project liaison officers, to seek and develop local employment contacts, provide consultancy and support for the beneficiaries, and liaise between the employers and the beneficiaries. RURAL also employed a project co-ordinator (8 hours per week) to interview clients at entry stage, liaise with social services and employers and maintain the project budget.

The Liaison Officer was key to the project, being responsible for actively encouraging the participation of employers and to develop with them, opportunities specific to the diverse needs of the target groups. This necessitates knowledge pertaining to the needs of local employers and businesses and the benefits of RURAL to their business. RURAL was marketed to employers in terms of positive public relations, the potential increase of their customer base, and in terms of a sense of being able to contribute to local community development. The role also required an understanding of the needs of a diverse range of people, and be able to provide them with support and encouragement at a personal and practical level.

A second key feature of the approach was the development of a 'Training Package'. This comprised of the development of work based learning opportunities, a first aid course, a work skills course and the potential to obtain a qualification accredited to level 1 through the Open College Network (OCN). A primary aim of the project was to develop beneficiary work skills, including punctuality, instruction following, getting on with co-workers and a sense of responsibility and pride for the work they undertake.

The advantages of workbased learning are well documented. They can provide valuable experience in 'real' work settings, to help people develop their career choices, a CV and gain an understanding of their marketable work skills. Although work based learning opportunities are provided through mainstream sources (eg, the local college), many within RURAL's target group have no access to them because of low societal expectations, people with learning

---

disabilities, for example, are labelled as being ‘incapable of undertaking paid work’ at age 19. Similarly, there is heightened perception of risk involved in employing people who are, or have been, drug or alcohol dependent. Mostly, there is a lack of expertise and willingness to explore how these opportunities can be extended beyond only the most typical members of our communities for the want relatively small investment.<sup>4</sup>

Work based opportunities, therefore, provide a relatively sheltered environment for these groups, where the emphasis is on re-engagement, confidence building, and finding out about oneself, rather than just their performance on the job. The opportunity to obtain a qualification lends itself well to those seeking re-assurance of their abilities, and for those who prefer to avoid more formal accreditation settings.

### The Beneficiary Groups

Table 1 shows that 34 beneficiaries were recruited onto the project. Sixteen of these were from Anglesey and 18 from the Bangor area of Gwynedd. Table 1 shows the beneficiary groups, as defined through their primary condition, although, as shall be discussed, many people had dual diagnosis. It shows that 23 of the beneficiaries were men (68%). To some extent this may reflect the higher prevalence of males who experience mental health problems and learning disabilities within the local community,<sup>5</sup> and the traditionally perceived roles of males as ‘workers’. However, it also suggests the need to develop referral procedures that encourage more local women to engage in future projects of this type.

Table 1 shows the average age of the beneficiaries was 32 years (range=19 to 62 years). On average the group had been unemployed for 6 years and 8 months (denoted hereon as years/months) (range= 1 to 22 yrs). The final column represents the proportion of time the beneficiaries had been unemployed since age 19, taking into account only the latest bouts of unemployment within the groups.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that on average the beneficiaries would have spent over half their post 19 lives out of work.

---

<sup>5</sup> Emerson, E., Hatton, C., Felce, D. & Murphy, G. (2000). Learning Disabilities: the Fundamental Facts. The foundation for People with a Learning Disability, London.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore, this calculation is more accurate for younger beneficiaries, but underestimates the proportion of unemployment for older ones.

**Table 1: Beneficiary Group Characteristics**

<b>Group</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Unemployed</b>	<b>% &gt;19</b>
Stress/Anxiety/Depression	9	26	40 19-62	7-2	6:8 1-20	46
Learning Disability	9	26	23 19-32	3-6	5:6 1-14	100
Drug/Alcohol	5	15	30 20-41	4-1	6:0 2-20	47
Physical Disabilities	5	15	40 27-47	4-1	8:7 1-22	46
Schizophrenia/psychosis	2	7	21 19-23	2-0	1:6 1-2	75
Other	4	11	29 23-43	4-0	4:0 1-7	62
<b>Totals/Averages</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>- 100</b>	<b>32 19-62</b>	<b>23 11</b>	<b>6:8 1-22</b>	<b>51</b>

Table 1 also shows that over a quarter of the beneficiaries were suffering from stress, anxiety or depression (26%) for some the result of alcohol dependency or the extent of physical disability or injury. Table 1 shows that on average this group were aged 40 (range=19 to 62yrs), and had been unemployed for an average for over eight and a half years (1 to 20yrs). This suggests that on average, those in this group have been out of regular paid employment for nearly half their adult lives. Indeed two people from this group aged 38 and 39 had been unemployed from ages 19 and 18 respectively.

Table 1 shows that 26% of the beneficiaries were labelled as having a learning disability. This was a relatively young group, averaging just under 23 years of age (19 to 32). However, on average the group had been unemployed for five and half years (1 to 14yrs). Given that most people with learning disabilities do not leave school until age 19, then this entire group has been unemployed all their adult lives.

Five of the group (15%) had drug or alcohol related problems and had on average been unemployed for over 6 years (2 to 20yrs). This group had an average age of 30 years (20 to 41yrs). A further 5 beneficiaries had physical disabilities (15%) (average age=40, 27 to 47yrs) and had been unemployed on average for over eight and a half years (1 to 22yrs). One person in this group aged 40 been unemployed since they were aged 18.

Of the remainder of the group, 2 people aged 23 and 19 suffered from schizophrenia and had been unemployed for 2 and 1 year respectively. The remaining 4 beneficiaries (12%) had epilepsy, Asperger's and chronic fatigue syndrome, with the remaining beneficiary having an eating disorder. The

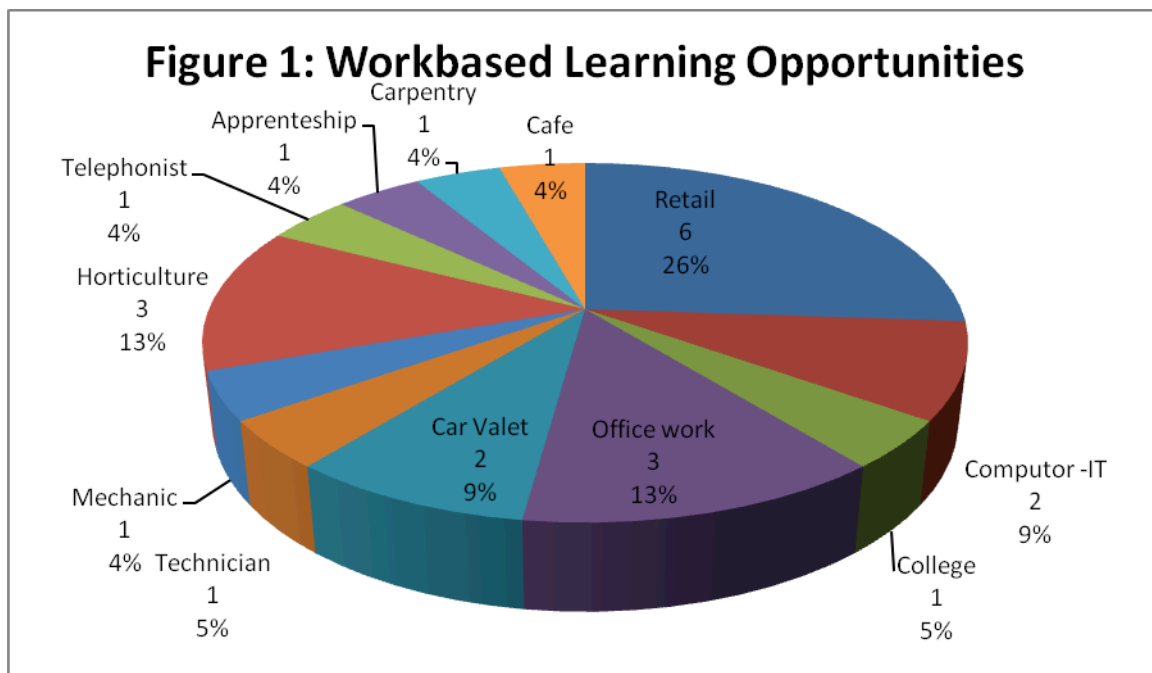
average age of these 4 people was 29 (23 to 43yrs) and had on average been unemployed for 4 years (1 to 7yrs).

From the above it is clear that enabling re-engagement and progression for these groups represents a significant challenge. It contains many of those considered to be high risk, people with a long record of unemployment or (especially people with learning disabilities), no previous employment history at all.

At project start, 17 individuals were claiming Incapacity benefit, 13 were on income support and a further 4 people were claiming job seekers allowance.

### Work Based Learning - Employer Characteristics

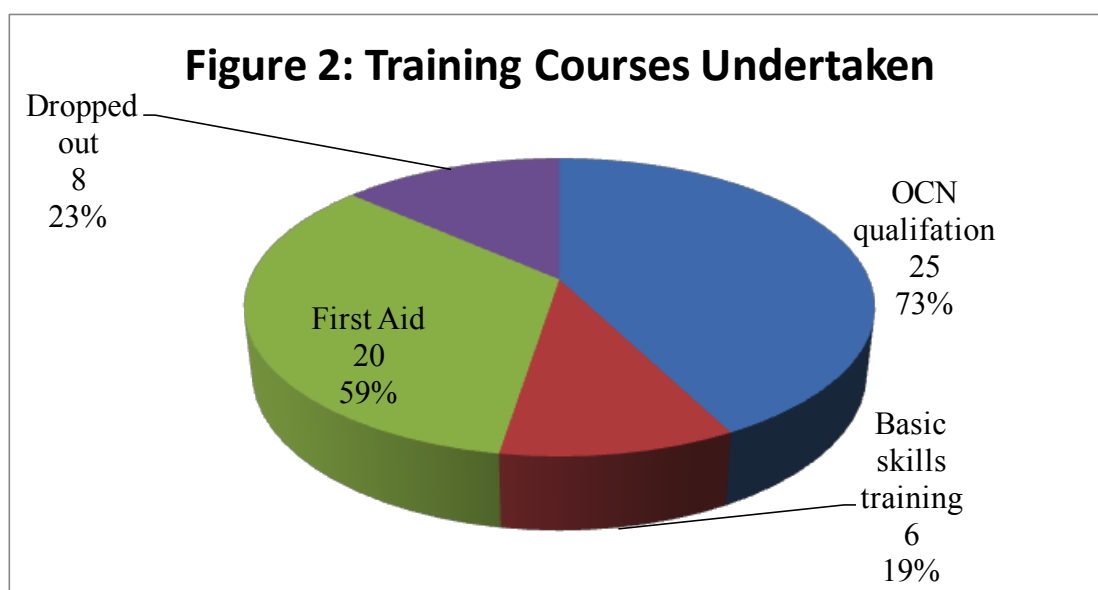
In total over 80 employers were contacted by the Liaison Officer through a mixture of cold calling, leaflet distribution, meetings and presentations. 30 employers signed up for the project, generating 23 work based learning opportunities. 29 of the 34 beneficiaries undertook work-based learning. Figure 1 shows that these occurred in a variety of settings with the highest proportions being in retail and office work (26% and 13% respectively. They also spanned a variety of locations including the British Heart Foundation, Debenhams, a Florist, Tescos and Superdrug. All bar three of the work placements were in typical work settings, offering excellent physical and social integration potential.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Lagomarcino, T.R. & DeStefano, L. (1989) The Employment Integration Index. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Champaign IL.

This is an important factor, research has shown that many work-experience placements developed through local authorities for these groups, tended to take place in congregate, segregate<sup>8</sup> settings where the job demands and social environments associated with paid work are absent. Research also shows many of the placements offered do not accurately reflect the types of jobs that are locally available. Unsurprisingly, few people progressed into paid work as a consequence of these congregate services. Three of the 23 work based opportunities were situated in Agoriad, these being sheltered workplaces placements involving Carpentry, Horticulture, and an Office work.

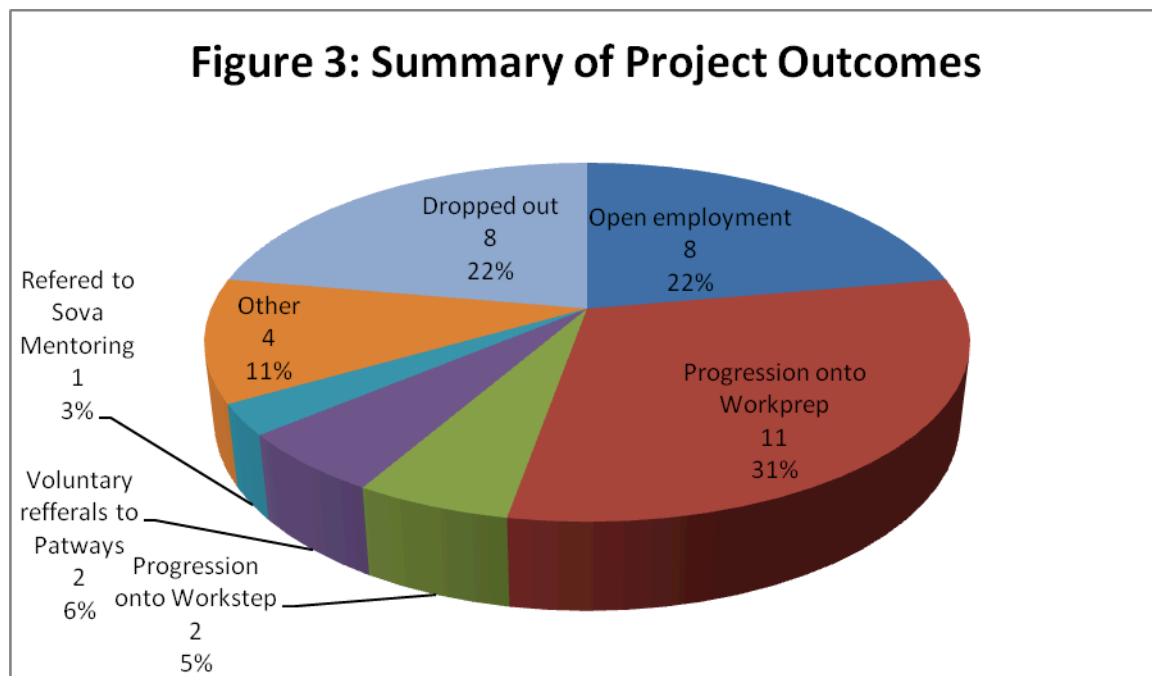
Figure 2 represents the distribution of courses undertaken by the beneficiaries. It shows that 20 of those who started the project (59%) undertook the First Aid course, and, encouragingly, 25 beneficiaries obtained an OCN qualification, this representing 73% of all beneficiaries on RURAL. Six beneficiaries undertook a basic skills training course alongside their OCN qualifications. It is a testament to the project team, that they managed to engage so many of the group in these courses and for many, it can be seen as a first step to progressing towards a paid job. Figure 2 also shows that 8 of the 34 beneficiaries (23%) dropped out of the courses, mainly due to the severity of the client's illnesses'. Given the complex nature of the groups, this was predictable, and it is important to follow-up with these individuals to ensure they supported to re-engage when they feel more able to in the future.



<sup>8</sup> Eg, people with learning disabilities grouped together (congregate) in non work based environments (segregate) such horticultural projects and cafes set in the grounds of a day centre.

### Progression Towards and into Paid Employment

Ultimately, the success of RURAL depends not only on enabling people to progress towards employment, but also on the numbers who actually progress into paid work. Figure 3 represents a summary the project outcomes. It shows that 26 of the beneficiaries had made progress towards work.



Eleven people had progressed onto the Work-preparation programme, run by Job centre plus, two people had moved onto the government's workstep programme, and there were two voluntary referrals to the Pathways to Work Programme. One person had been referred to SOVA<sup>9</sup> to be paired with a mentor.

Very encouragingly, Figure 3 shows that 8 RURAL beneficiaries progressed into paid employment during the project undertaking an array of jobs. This included, Admin work in a College, self-employment as a Car Valet, retail work in Debenhams, self-employed Carpenter and, impressively, one client had obtained a job as an Aircraft Engineer in RAF Valley in Anglesey.

<sup>9</sup> National Volunteer Organisation – 'Strengthening Others through Volunteer Action'  
(<http://www.sova.org.uk/>)

**Case Study 1: Male Aged 34 years**

*When client C came to Agoriad in July 2007 he had severe substance abuse problems and was still taking methadone, and was also living in sheltered accommodation. As a result of the substance abuse and associated physical/mental health issues he had not worked for 16 years.*

*The client settled very well into the project and was able to take up a Work Placement. Upon completing the project it was felt by all parties that the client would benefit from the Work Preparation Programme which he again was very successful on. Upon completion of the Work Preparation Programme the client was still not ready for Open Employment but has moved on extremely well with his life.*

*The last contact with Agoriad was in June 2008, the client having moved into Independent Housing, carrying out voluntary work, and had a much better quality of life.*

Prior to employment, these 8 adults had been unemployed on average for the previous 6 and a half years (1 to 20yrs), with 4 of the new employees having been unemployed virtually all their adult lives. As case study 2 indicates, one new employee, aged 51, had moved into their first job following twenty years of unemployment. These outcomes are impressive given the severity of issues facing people and the historical background long term unemployment and ensure the financial cost benefits of the programme.

**Case Study 2: Male Aged 51yrs**

*When the client came to Agoriad in February 2007 he had been dependant on alcohol for many years and subsequently had been unemployed for over two years. The client has previously had work placements with other providers but had never been able to move forward. The client had confidence issues and found it very difficult to mix with other people without having the stimulus of alcohol.*

*The first two weeks at Agoriad were difficult and it was doubtful as to whether the client would continue with the project. With the client's determination and Agoriad's help, the client went on, not only to finish the project, but to gain an*



*OCN and First Aid Qualification, and also to have a very successful Work Placement.*

*Upon completing the RURAL Project the client moved onto another Project under the Agoriad umbrella – Work Preparation Project. From there he moved into Open Employment and now runs his own antiques business. The last contact with Agoriad was August 2008 and the client was still dry, spending quality time with his family, and moving his business forward.*

**Case Study 3: Male 39 years, single with a young family**

*When the client came to Agoriad in February 2007 he had been living with severe depression and as a result had not been in paid employment for 20 years. The client had major confidence issues and found it very difficult to even enter Agoriad's premises without someone he knew waiting for him. To assure him, as he suffered panic attacks, a 'Quiet Room' was found and used by the client. If a situation became too stressful for the client, he was able to go to the 'Quiet Room' to recover and then to return to the group.*

*The client quickly gained confidence and soon felt able to undertake a placement which was very successful. Upon leaving the project the client moved onto Work Preparation and from there into Full Open Employment as an Aircraft Technician. The last contact with Agoriad was in September 2007 and the client was doing well.*

Additional analysis shows that 7 of those obtaining work were men, again highlighting a gender imbalance. Seven of those progressing into paid work had mental health problems, such as alcohol dependency, depression, stress and anxiety and Asperger's syndrome. Only one person with a learning disability had progressed into work through the project, a 31 year old man with hydrocephalus.

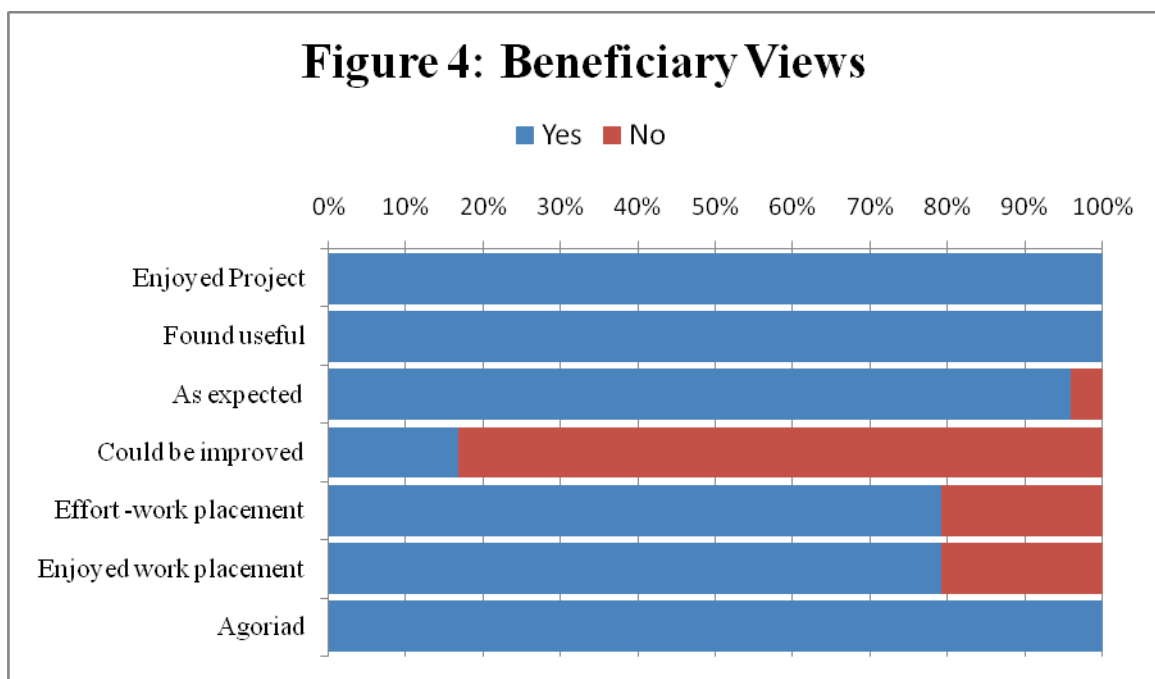
The underrepresentation of people with learning disabilities progressing into paid work could stem from a number of factors. First, research has identified that this group require greater amounts of time to develop their work preferences and identify their marketable skills. It also shows a necessity for specialist support in finding jobs that suite the specific requirements and skills of this group, and an initial investment in supporting the new employees to learn the skills of their jobs and get on with their work colleagues. There is a real danger that without this extra support, those people with learning disabilities,

referred to mainstream government programmes through the project, will not progress beyond the work preparation stage. Similarly, there is a need to ensure that those who have progressed into paid work receive the on-going support they require to stay in work.

### Beneficiary Views

A total of 24 (71%) of the beneficiaries provided their opinions about the project on the Exit Questionnaire. Figure 4 shows that all of those responding stated that they had enjoyed the project and had found it useful (100% each question). The beneficiaries explained that they had learned new skills, met new people, had increased confidence, and encouragingly, had a clearer idea of what careers they wanted to pursue.

*“I have learned a lot about myself and how to use the skills I have to find work.”*



Twenty three of the 24 respondents stated the course was as expected, with some commenting that it had exceeded their expectations. One person responded no to this question indicating that they had been disappointed that the work experience they had undertaken had not been followed up and turned into a work placement. Figure 4 shows that 20 respondents felt the course could not be improved. As one beneficiary put it:

*“No – I believe it offers the support and encouragement anyone needs to and helps in many ways”*

**Case Study 4      Beneficiaries A & B Aged 48 years and 40 respectively**

*A married couple with a large family. Both came to Agoriad in January 2008. Client A had a terminal illness and all the problems associated with it. The client had been unemployed for 9 years. Client B had numerous physical problems and associated Mental Health problems. Both had also lost a child in the past.*

*From the start of the relationship with Agoriad it was obvious that there were numerous problems which had to be addressed. Firstly, it was evident to all parties that Open Employment for either one of the clients was going to be a large leap. Therefore, small steps were taken to give each of the clients the confidence to act independently.*

*Both reacted very well in a classroom situation and it soon became obvious as to their individual strengths.*

*Although Client A was never put into a Work Placement, his empathy for the group and people with a wide range of disabilities shone through, and it was thought that his skills could be put to good use with another Service Provider acting as a Mentor. Client B showed an exceptional artistic talent.*

*A Work Placement was found in a Florist which was very successful. Upon completion of the Placement, both of the clients’ commitments, to both spouse and family were too great to enable them to take up Open Employment.*

*Their work and attitudes however, were so exemplary, that the Employer decided to make a private arrangement with Client E to work, when and if they could, to suit all parties. This was a great confidence booster to the client.*

*Last contact from both Clients with Agoriad was in August 2008. Client D’s health had worsened, but client E was still receiving ad hoc work from the employer. Both clients praised the Project and had taken a lot away from their time with Agoriad.*

Four beneficiaries felt the course could have offered more group discussion and a greater follow-up to find job placements.

*“I was late getting my work placement”, it seemed like no effort was made.”*

When asked if they enjoyed their work placements, 19 (80%) of the respondents gave positive replies. Typically as one beneficiary reported:

*“the placement was ideal for me because I enjoy working outdoors, and getting to know the head gardeners”*

Those answering negatively to this question had not had placements and in one instance in one instance the employer had changed their mind about taking at the client.

*“Unfortunately RURAL was coming to an end and the tutors had not had enough time to finding a suitable placement”*

## **Conclusions**

- 1) This project worked 34 beneficiaries with a wide range of problems including those suffering from stress and anxiety, people with learning disabilities, those with mental health problems and people with drug and alcohol dependencies. Ages ranged from 19 to 62 years, and on average they had been unemployed for 6:8 years with some of the younger beneficiaries being unemployed all their adult lives. This demonstrates that the project hit its target population, being those people that were furthest from the labour market, who required tailored support for reengagement.
- 2) Over one fifth (22%) of the beneficiaries obtained a paid job via the project, which merits praise for those who delivered it. For one beneficiary, the project had ended 20 years of unemployment. A further three fifths had moved onto employment reengagement projects, including Workstep, Workprep and Voluntary activities. Only 8 beneficiaries left the project, representing a surprisingly low drop-out rate, compared to most mainstream education and training courses.
- 3) This indicates that the package of support comprising employer liaison, basic skills training, workbased learning, first aid courses and individualised counselling/support was effective at reengaging many of the beneficiary group. Seventy three per cent of the participants gained an OCN qualification through the project, representing tangible recognition and reward for the beneficiaries' efforts.

- 4) There is little doubt that the role of the co-ordinator and liaison officers were central to the success of this project. Their roles in gaining employer commitment to, and inclusion in, the project, and in providing one-to-one support for the beneficiaries to help them overcome obstacles and barriers, was key independent variable. The extent of progression for the beneficiaries in this project constitutes a better return than many specialised supported employment agencies achieve in their first year of operation.<sup>10</sup> The project also offered a significant improvement in the quality of lives for many beneficiaries, compared to those offered through traditional day service activities.<sup>11</sup>
- 5) The beneficiaries who completed the course stated unanimously that they had enjoyed the course and had found it crucial to their reengagement in the employment market and with the wider community as a whole. However, some beneficiaries felt that the project could be improved with greater follow-up on the work-based learning programme, indicating that for some, that they would have benefitted from more discussion with the project delivers re the their experiences in work placement and in developing their career aspirations further.
- 6) The underrepresentation of beneficiaries with learning disabilities progressing into paid work represents a challenge for future projects of this nature. It may highlight a need for input from specialist support employment provision that incorporates vocational profiling, job carving, job matching and a systematic approach to skills training. Clearly, the underrepresentation of female beneficiaries also needs to be addressed, maybe through adjustments to the recruitment and referral procedures.
- 7) Sustaining short-term funded projects such as RURAL beyond the funded period is consitantly problematic. However, there is a strong cost argument supporting the case for continued funding for this project. It makes sense financially to enable job seekers to regain access to the support they require, rather than allow them to fall out of the programme and back onto welfare

---

<sup>10</sup> Beyer, S., Goodere, L. & Kilsby, M. (1996). Costs and Benefits of Supported Employment in Britain. London: The Stationery Office.

<sup>11</sup> Beyer, S., Kilsby, M. & Lowe, K. (1994). What do ATCs offer? A survey of Welsh Day Services. Mental Handicap Research, 7, 16-40.

benefits.<sup>12</sup> Freud showed that significant savings accrued when people are supported into work and there is now a convincing body of evidence in the UK<sup>13</sup>, USA and Australia<sup>14</sup> to demonstrate the cost effectiveness (both human and fiscal) of the supported employment approach in enabling people with higher support needs to obtain and hold down paid jobs. Given the extent and duration that this beneficiary group had been unemployed, and their reliance on local day and health service provision, it can be confidently predicted that the longer term financial benefits derived from this project would significantly outweigh any investment costs made from the public sector purse.

---

<sup>12</sup> Freud, D, (2007). Reducing dependency, increasing opportunity: options for the future welfare to work. DWP, HMSO, St Clements House, 2-16 Colegate, Norwich NR3 1BQ.

<sup>13</sup> Beyer, S, Goodere, L and Kilsby, M, (1996). Costs and benefits of supported employment in Britain. London: The Stationery Office, London.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, G, (2003). A comparison of Supported Employment in the USA and Australia. Key note presentation – 8<sup>th</sup> European Conference of Supported Employment – Helsinki.