

# External Evaluation of the European Social Funded Taith Newydd Project 2004 -2006



**Supported by the European Social Fund  
Objective 1**

**Prepared for NCH by**



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## **PREFACE**

Consultus Ltd are pleased to have been associated with the Taith Newydd project and wish the NCH every success in its mainstreaming of the Taith Newydd model post ESF.

The external evaluator wishes to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in the management and operation of the Taith Newydd Project for their kind cooperation and support in carrying out this evaluation work. Thanks is also expressed to the beneficiaries who gave up their time to meet with the evaluator and offered their invaluable support.

This final report is intended to progress the interim report provided to the project in September 05 and offers a final objective view of the projects developments, achievements and lessons learned enabled by the support of the European Social Fund.

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## **A Introduction**

### **1.0 NCH Organisational background**

NCH was founded in 1869 as the Children's Home which later became known as the National Children's Home and then simply by the acronym NCH.

NCH is today one of the UK's largest independent providers of childcare. The fundamental ethos of NCH is to help children achieve their full potential. In meeting this primary objective NCH deliver a range of services and support measures to some of the UK's most vulnerable and excluded children and young people.

An interview with a long standing member of NCH and a Taith Newydd steering group member articulated the work of NCH as” *The children, young people and families we work with face difficulties such as poverty, disability and abuses. Our purpose is to care for children, care for the most vulnerable. The basis of our services for children has a vision of “better care for carers, better care for children”.*

#### **1.1 Taith Newydd project background**

In furtherance of this aim NCH submitted their first European project for funding to the Community Programme New Opportunities for Women (NOW) in 1998.

The NOW project worked directly with parents to improve their chances of finding work and the project claimed many successes one of which was the involvement of personal development.

It was found that the support offered on a one to one basis and the courses delivered by NCH through the NOW project raised the confidence level and self-esteem of parents which led them to take ownership of their own career and self development and ultimately secure future employment.

This successful method and delivery of working led to the emergence and development of the current ESF project - Taith Newydd.

### **2.0 The project in context**

The current project has been viewed by the more established members of staff and steering group individuals as a development of the NOW project. The NOW project had used an operational model that rested at its core support measures for carers. This support was complemented by training activities that included informal confidence building as a means of developing and 'growing' foster carers, ultimately to underpin the vision of *“better care for carers, better care for children”* The lessons learned from this earlier operational model informed the design and delivery of the Taith Newydd project.

The Taith Newydd project sits well with the strategic emphasis of NCH. This has become evident by information provided at visits with staff as they explained how they have teamed up across different job roles to offer a holistic service to beneficiaries.

It was felt that a crucial element of the project aspiration was to get across the message that people can become foster carers, that equal opportunities is practiced - reflected in the diversity of carers, that people from non traditional roles can access the training offered by NCH and ultimately by raising awareness of these values it could attract a wider pool of potential foster carers. In essence this changing of public perception and image of foster caring is a feature of the Taith Newydd ESF project.

In equal terms the project underpins NCH's organizational vision of "better care for carers, better care for children". This has been translated in the bid as the development and delivery of a recruitment, training and support service to attract a new pool of foster carers; to offer training and upskilling; to provide a good foundation for caring; and to support carers in an attempt to sustain their services for the longer term. This observation was more generally underpinned in a perspective offered by a project worker whereby she describes the methods and processes used operationally as *"the aspiration of the project is to recruit as many beneficiaries as is possible (In line with project targets) I feel that we have recruited and are continuing to recruit good foster carers". "People living in areas they were born in and people who are from different walks of life, offer a diverse and good pool of carers to work with, this enables us to match the needs of the children"*.

NCH submitted the Taith Newydd project bid to WEFO for funding in 2003 Under priority 4 (developing people) measure 5 ***"improving the participation of women in the labour market by improving access to learning and removing barriers to employment"***.

The funding was approved in April 2004 and NCH recruited a Marketing Officer in September 2004 and a part time Administration Assistant in December 2004. A new member of staff was employed in an administrative role and two members of staff were deployed to work on the project. These posts became available from September 05 and were indicative of the momentum that had been built by the project. More specifically the appointments were a result of the level of new beneficiary starts that had been generated by the Marketing Officer.

Drawing from the above observations it is apparent that the organizational strategic and the project operational elements dove tail and fit well in terms of reaching higher numbers of carers; offering training and support to better train a pool of carers; and in so doing develop and 'grow' carers to meet the present and future needs of children.

Therefore, Taith Newydd's expressed objective as stated in the application *'Taith Newydd targets people from non traditional backgrounds, providing*

*training, new skills and qualifications to work with children and young people*'. This underpins NCH's organizational objectives and relates to the Wales Regional perspective for foster carers "***the need for a rise in the number of foster carers and a development of skills is a researched and identified need***".

## **2.1 Overall aim of project as stated in the bid submission**

The overall aim of the bid was to improve the participation of women in the labour market by improving access to learning and removing barriers to employment". This overall aim was translated to a series of key actions

- Using innovative recruitment methods to target and attract the appropriate beneficiary group
- Exploring and using training delivery methods that remove barriers to learning and increase participation
- Increasing skills development through accredited training programmes and courses
- Setting up a steering group – composition "wide and varied" (stated in 1<sup>st</sup> quarterly report)

Each of these key actions has been explored in an attempt to explain the processes and methods used that translated '*bid stated actions*' to delivery practice.

## **3.0 Background to evaluation**

The external evaluator was commissioned in November 2004 and evaluation activities began in late November 2004. The aim of the evaluation was to comment on the management of Taith Newydd project and its progress towards the specific objectives and outcomes as outlined in the proposal. Additionally, the evaluation was to comment and explore the added value and benefits of the project for beneficiaries "caring through NCH" This involved examining the **Intention** – the intention of the bid, **Conduct** – the way in which the project was carried out to meet its' objectives and the **Progress and Impact** of the project to NCH both in terms of strategic direction and operational practice

The interim report focused on the project during the period of November 2004 to September 2005. This final report complements these early findings by revisiting staff and members of the steering group to express their views on how the project has met their aspirations and expands the evaluation activity to follow three beneficiaries through the stages of the project.

### **3.1 Evaluation activity**

The evaluation has been evidenced from a number of sources. During the evaluation period the evaluator attended steering group meetings, met and engaged in formal and informal discussion with members of the steering group and all key project staff (individually) and has met with the project manager at least four times to discuss the progress of evaluation. The evaluator had access to a range of project documents and reports throughout the evaluation process and maintained regular contact with the project activities.

Additionally, a cross section of project beneficiaries were interviewed via one to one semi structured interviews. The purpose of which was to gauge a view as to how they felt the project had been delivered: the interview questions were framed around: marketing and recruitment methods, delivery and usefulness of the training and how this had increased skills. In addition beneficiaries were asked if they had been informed about the contribution made by ESF to the project. They were asked about what they felt the good points were and what they would like to see done differently, if anything, next time.

### **3.2 Evaluation activity 2004 to September 2005**

The evaluator took the opportunity to observe a panel meeting in July 05, which proved to be beneficial in developing a deeper understanding of the processes that beneficiaries are required to engage in. In the latter part of July the process of arranging meetings with beneficiaries began and the evaluator met with a sample size of seven beneficiaries to informally discuss with them their experiences of the project. The sample was drawn from a selection of beneficiaries at different stages of the process for example: those who had completed the skills to foster course and were going through the assessment process; those who were at panel stage; and those who had completed the panel stage and were waiting for a placement.

The following section structures the above key actions and intersperses the beneficiary perspective within the report to develop a view of project delivery through the experiences of the beneficiary.

### **3.3 Evaluation activity September 05 to March 06**

The evaluator revisited project staff and members of the steering group individually, to gain their perspective of how the project had progressed to achieve its aims and objectives. The opportunity was taken up to revisit two of the seven beneficiaries interviewed at interim report stage to highlight their experiences within the final report.

Drawing on the above experiences the report will begin by describing the operational activities during the projects duration, beginning with a summary of the interim report findings and progressing to elaborate on the achievements of the Taith Newydd project from inception to sustainability.

*Please note direct quotations in the following pages are shown in italics and quote marks.*

## **B Operational activities and delivery 2004/2005**

This section offers a summary of the findings of the interim report and progresses to explore and report on the operational activities delivered by the project from inception to completion.

### **4.0 Summary of interim evaluation findings - operational**

#### **Summary of observations as presented in September 2005**

*The interim evaluation concluded that 'At this stage of the project it would be inappropriate to make any definitive judgments about the outcomes of the project. However a general, summary of observations may be offered about what has been achieved so far, as well as suggested areas for further development in 2005/06'*

**Management and administration** – the project had some difficulty in recruiting staff early on, however, this did not have an adverse impact on delivery as existing NCH staff were deployed to the project which enabled the project to operate from day one.

The project was supported by CRED in an external project managers role – their attendance at steering group meetings and the project work they engage in was seen as valuable in supporting the monitoring (both statistical and budgetary) of the project.

**Marketing and networking** – the decision to employ a Marketing Officer had clearly paid dividends in developing local links. Consequently and as a result of the Marketing Officers work at grass roots level, beneficiaries had been attracted to the project from a wide and diverse range of backgrounds.

The project staff expressed their experience and knowledge of recruiting foster carers. Suggesting that targeting of beneficiaries has been conducted through various methods. The lessons learned were that large advertising campaigns and 'one size fits all' do not necessarily work when seeking to target this projects beneficiary group. It was found to be more advantageous that personal contact by a project worker, offering a one to one service answering specific questions and providing empathy on an individual basis worked far better than blanket or generic targeting.

The project's Marketing Officer (MO) took a central role in the targeting of beneficiaries for the project. The MO worked with the Local Authority in the first instance to identify the need for carers in the area and then secondly became actively involved in raising awareness of the project through a variety of marketing exercises. For example: in addition to the traditional posters and leafleting, presentations and talks to local groups and community

Organisations were undertaken. Additionally, the Marketing Officer took part in promotional events and networked extensively with other local projects.

These efforts of getting to know the community worked well in gaining the all important first contact and face to face meeting that the project staff were keen to engage with.

This process of initial contact and one to one meetings has been viewed as valuable by project workers as it was felt that it enabled individuals to make an informed choice about fostering.

The beneficiaries interviewed were asked how they had heard about the Taith Newydd project and all had stated that they had seen local adverts. As an example: people had seen posters in the local library, adverts in local paper and word of mouth. Only one beneficiary had used the Yellow Pages telephone directory. It would therefore seem that the method of targeting at a local level has reached the audience and target group required by the project.

**Promotional work** – the project highlighted and promoted the contribution made by ESF through a presentation at every training session. This has resulted in beneficiaries becoming fully aware that they are part of an ESF project.

**Pre –training support** – The process used by the project enabled potential foster carers to meet with the MO and talk on a one to one basis. Occasionally, the potential foster carer would decide that this was not a viable option for them.

In the case of the potential foster carer deciding that foster care is not what they are really looking for (does not meet their perception and aspiration) the project worker offered alternative options. This process often materialized as a signposting service. In these cases individuals were signposted to other sources of training and self development that may have been more suitable to their needs.

It may be noted that these sign posting outcomes were not necessarily recorded. This was primarily due to the fact that signposting was not a stated outcome of the project and therefore not a specific target requirement. However, it is also worth noting that this process of signposting and supporting individuals to attain their career aspiration could be documented as 'distance travelled' and ultimately, an outcome for the project. It may be justifiably argued that had the individual not accessed the project they may, in the worst case scenario not have accessed the information required to progress their development, or in the best case scenario accessed the required information in the longer term.

It would seem that the project support offered acted as a catalyst in supporting personal development and whilst the project staff recognized that there was a value in recording these 'soft outcomes' there was no mechanism in place to do so.

The 'soft' outcome results would probably not have been envisaged when the project was designed, suggesting that this has been an emerging facet of the project, a development to meet the needs of the target group.

**Training** - the intensive training and support measures offered to beneficiaries had added value in enhancing the provision of NCH services.

At this stage of the evaluation the demonstrable measures as expressed by beneficiaries were:

- Flexible approaches to training in order to meet the needs of the individual.
- The range of training opportunities offered to beneficiaries for further personal and career development.
- The accreditation of training courses – develops and increases the validity and credibility of fostering as a career.

**Numerical targets-** the project had, at this stage, almost achieved the numbers stated in the application and given that there was still approximately six months to project end the interim evaluation offered the view that *"it may be stated with a degree of confidence that the numbers will be achieved"*. Suggesting that the area of focus for the remaining project period is the achieving of the training outcomes and again, the observation here was that these will not present unnecessary concern to the project as they too had almost been met.

At this point a high drop out rate had been reported by the project (22 early leavers) this was not viewed as having a detrimental effect on the numerical targets. Discussion with staff pointed to this as a positive experience and in an attempt to articulate this statement it was highlighted that a degree of credit could be attributed to the project training, in that it meets the objectives of the foster carers by defining the role of fostering. The training was seen as a means of alleviating the misconceptions that may be preconceived by individual fostering aspirations or personal motivation.

This positive angle may be taken a step further in suggesting that the project (through training and support) may field people that are more suited to the role and are therefore more likely to be sustained as foster carers in the longer term. This is further discussed with staff during the second stage of interviews and will be reported upon in a later section.

#### **4.1 Beneficiaries' perspective**

The beneficiaries offered their views through semi structured interviews on the reasons why they had chosen to work with NCH rather than another provider, their experience of the training delivered by the project:

their perspective of what the 'good points' have been, what can/could be done differently: their concerns and their aware of European Social Fund support?

## **4.2 Why NCH?**

It would seem that the historical perception of fostering with Local Authorities had had a negative impact. People interviewed felt uncomfortable with Local Social Services Departments. They felt that the support they may require would not be readily available and that not enough information would be passed to them about the child. As one beneficiary stated *"When we first thought about fostering we thought about Social Services but had heard some negative feedback ...we spotted an advert for NCH and decided to give them a call".....we have been told that NCH always give the background of the child and are always there to support".* A second beneficiary offered the view *"We did look at the local council fostering service ..... we mentioned it to someone who had worked in fostering with the local authority and they were not happy..... We saw an advert for NCH and decided to give them a call...they were really quick in responding and the next thing we knew we were on a skills to foster course"*

These points of view were offered by beneficiaries, however this report is unable to validate these claims as further exploration or investigation of these statements and comments are beyond the remit of this report. It may also be noted that whilst beneficiaries mentioned Social Services as 'the' alternative provider of foster care no other agency/provider was mentioned.

## **4.3 Training**

The project offers skills to foster courses which are attended by all prospective foster carers. The course runs over a three day period and is highly promoted by the Fostering Association. A recent development for the course has been the accreditation of the course modules by NOCN. This development has been spearheaded by NCH and more specifically it has been the project that has adapted the programme to gain new accreditation status.

Feedback on the skills training was very positive. All the beneficiaries interviewed felt that the training was very well done; it had in many instances exceeded their expectations as one beneficiary suggested *"it had been illuminating"*. The course had presented a real understanding of fostering and had challenged preconceived ideas of what fostering would be like. One of the beneficiaries felt that his original idea of fostering had been totally different – *"the course put things in perspective and enabled me to recognize that there would be good days and not so good days"*. It enabled him to gain an understanding that children will come from a variety of backgrounds and will have had different experiences some of which may not always be good and as such could reflect in their behavior.

*Another beneficiary stated "I didn't know what to expect from the children and although a lot of what was delivered was common sense it did enlighten me and I felt it was and will be very useful"*

This clarity of understanding what the role of fostering is has been echoed amongst all of the beneficiaries interviewed.

At least 50% of those interviewed offered the view that they had questioned many times after the training whether fostering was for them. *"I questioned myself – can I do this.....I now understand that I need to get my family involved for the support"* Another beneficiary put it into context by suggesting *"it really makes you think about things"*

The project offered opportunities for skills development which had been demonstrated through the varied courses offered and the take up of courses by beneficiaries.

#### **4.4 Delivery of training**

The training was delivered in a flexible way as one beneficiary explained *"due to my work commitments I was not able to attend the day sessions. In order to complete the training NCH provided one to one training sessions at my home at a time convenient to me"*. Other comments made about the delivery of training offered the view of how people felt for example the training environment and ambiance resulting in a range of comments: *"Made to feel very welcome"* *"Got to know people straight away"* *"Very relaxed atmosphere"* *"Very supportive- staff and peers"*

When asked if beneficiaries were involved in the design of the training a number of beneficiaries suggested that they were not whilst others suggested that they were *"we were asked for feedback - they wanted to take on board what we thought"*

#### **4.5 Usefulness of training**

All of the beneficiaries interviewed felt that the training had been very useful in raising their awareness of fostering and in developing skills and confidence. Equally, all of the interviewees expressed that they felt they would continue to draw from the training programme in the weeks ahead and particularly when they begin working with a foster child.

In many cases the training had enabled the trainees to explore their own preconceived ideas and in so doing they had learnt about themselves. The training offered a clearer understanding of fostering; and it had raised questions in their minds as to *"is this the right option for me?"*

One beneficiary summed up the training as *"a very good training programme that supports you to work through things. This is done through videos, discussion groups....exercises that helped people to move on...there are also opportunities to do further training. It was, and is a very good training course"*.

#### **4.6 What have been the good points of this project?**

- Adapt training to the needs of the individual
- 24 hour after care support
- Confident in asking questions (it seems no question is stupid)
- Certificate for completing courses
- Ongoing training – the option for individuals to engage in further training.
- The support offered by NCH staff
- The variety of courses offered
- The quick process from registration to training
- Project staff and all involved in the projects delivery were praised by all beneficiaries.

One beneficiary summed the good points up by stating *“they are professional, they make you feel very comfortable, they understand fully what it all means and they make you feel like an individual. When you get stuck they help you, they help you open up...they want you to achieve”*.

#### **4.7 What could be done differently?**

##### ***Processes***

- Process can be slow i.e. CRB checks and procedures

Whilst there seemed to be an understanding and an acceptance by beneficiaries that these procedures do take a long time, it was stressed by one interviewee that the long period of time with no information was worrying.

The suggestion offered was that contact between the project and the beneficiary should be maintained even though that may mean that often no new information is available from the project to the beneficiary. The ongoing dialogue would be useful.

##### ***Training and support measures***

- The impact of fostering and the number of people who will call - *“home becomes an open door”*

It was suggested that it would be useful to have a clearer idea of who will be calling once the fostering work begins. As an example one beneficiary listed a host of people who would call and felt that this should be highlighted at an early stage so as they would have fully understood who would call and why.

- Attending a panel meeting was a concern to one beneficiary

They offered the suggestion that as part of the fostering course maybe there could be a role play session on ‘attending a panel meeting’.

- Peer support and mentoring from the outset of the training

It was felt that whilst mentoring support was available at a later stage in the process - mentoring would be useful from the outset. It was suggested *“someone that had been through the process and could offer their support when and where needed”*.

#### **4.8 Beneficiary concerns**

Beneficiaries were asked if they had any specific concerns about the way in which the training and the project had been delivered. A small number of concerns were offered and these have been transcribed for information. It may be that the concerns are more a feature of the unknown rather than concerns with the project and its delivery but, nonetheless the views of the beneficiaries are worthy of discussion and may feed into any future review or adaptation of the training courses to incorporate and cover these areas of anticipation in the future.

- Additional support for male foster carers

A male expressed his concern about the possible problems that may arise if left alone with children and suggested that additional support/information would be useful.

Other useful comments and views from beneficiaries included a:

- Suggestion that the 1<sup>st</sup> foster child should not be long term – this will enable foster carers to adapt and build up confidence gradually.
- Another beneficiary stated *“I don’t want to do anything wrong”*

#### **4.9 Had beneficiaries been informed about ESF contribution?**

Only one beneficiary had difficulty in recalling whether they had been informed of ESF contribution. All other beneficiaries explained that a presentation is conducted on the first day of training, it is explained why records of hours need to be kept, and where the project money comes from. One beneficiary went on to describe a slide presentation with a pie chart but could not articulate fully what the significance of this was, other than it was to do with ESF.

#### **4.10 Observations drawn from interviews**

All the beneficiaries interviewed highly commended the staff of NCH across the board. They felt that staff provided them with the necessary support to take them through the processes and procedures that are required in order to become foster carers.

The feeling that came through very strongly was the element of trust in NCH or more specifically in the methods used to ‘grow’ foster carers. Beneficiaries felt that they trusted and were comforted in the approaches that were used. They expressed this by offering their views as *“support offered exceeded expectations”* and *“they will always give the background of the child and are always there to help”*.

These comments were offered by beneficiaries who had not started fostering i.e. did not have a placement, therefore, the comments offered have been in isolation of practice. It stands to reason that without first hand experience of the level and degree of support offered by the project and NCH the comments cannot be validated.

Overall the observations of the evaluator were very positive in terms of the project delivery methods. More specifically, the project in its first year of operation had successfully targeted and engaged people from local communities and from a diverse range of backgrounds.

The project offered a range of training and development courses that had been well received by the beneficiary group and beneficiaries showed great interest in continuing their own development through further training and up-skilling courses.

In summarizing these observations it may be noted that the intensity of support offered by the project has added value in enhancing the provision of NCH services. This has only been possible through the support of ESF in terms of additional staff, additional training options and additional marketing strategies.

#### **4.11 Emerging issues and areas for development**

Here the interim evaluation offered some thoughts on the findings with particular reference to soft outcomes. It felt that elements of “added value” although recognized by staff were not being captured in records and might be missed. It was felt that the project offered a wide selection of courses to beneficiaries and it would be worth exploring methods in which to record their usefulness.

*“There exists an opportunity for the project to explore the recording of “core soft outcomes”. The project may wish to take guidance from a report developed for ESF projects ‘A Guide to Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Traveled’. (Interim report Sept 05)*

A strong emphasis was placed by the project staff on careful guidance and provision of pre-training for example: time and effort invested to support potential carers to make a decision that is right for them.

In some cases beneficiaries completed the core foster training and dropped out, in other cases beneficiaries decide early on in the process that fostering was not for them.

In both scenarios an element of guidance and signposting took place and recording this information proved complex.

This was found to be in part due to the nature of project work for example the length of time in which funding is available for project work which constrains a longitudinal survey.

## **C Operational activities and delivery 2005/2006**

### **5.0 Operational activities and progress post interim report**

As a direct result of the interim evaluation and the ongoing dialogue with project staff the final evaluation undertook 'case study' type interviews centred on particular themes that may be broadly described as 'successes' of the project in recruitment of carers from non traditional backgrounds and 'recruitment' lessons learned. These will be used to explore in more detail the development and 'growth' of carers.

#### **5.1 WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?**

The first study is one used to offer a view of a successful placement through the project process. Success may be defined by way of having completed the model/process adopted for this project from recruitment to placement. Here is an attempt to describe the elements of the process which is by no means exhaustive:

- **Targeting and recruiting** – from non traditional backgrounds
- **Training** – skills to foster course and other relevant job training
- **Assessment** – the assessment process is an in-depth structured methodology of ascertaining if potential carers are appropriate i.e. in terms of background, intention, conduct and behavior to become foster carers.
- **Matching** – the process of matching a foster child to a foster carer is dependant on a number of factors:
  - a) A placement is available from the local authorities.
  - b) The foster home is considered to be appropriate for both the placement and the carer and there are minimal risks to natural children
  - c) That the match is suitable in terms of geography and age to meet the needs of the foster placement and the carer.

##### **5.1.1 Case study A**

Case study A Mr and Ms Y expressed *“we have a grown up daughter and would have liked more children. We thought about fostering for a long time – someone said we were too old and that put us off for a while. We saw an advert for NCH and decided to explore this further”*. From this point things were very quick for the foster carers, they attended the skills to foster course and progress was made to the point of their first placement.

The driving motivation and aspiration of this foster couple as expressed by them was *“to offer a child a happy and contented life, to support them to like their life without being threatened, to support them to develop their skills and aspirations and offer them a background to run their own home”*.

The benefit to the foster couple came across as *“to come back and visit us with their children”*. They added *“we had no career intention or aspiration we wanted to give something back”*.

The current placement has been agreed as long term and the young person will be with them until the age of consent. They felt that this placement was fully meeting their expectations and offered the view that *“there has not been any negative impact on our lives. This placement is more than meeting our expectations”*. The enthusiasm came across quite strongly as the couple began to share with me the various activities that their placement was getting involved in for example: the gym, helping out at a local farm etc, etc. They complemented the support that they had received and the level of support that is offered by NCH and stated *“we have had excellent support... our social worker is always there if we need him”*. I asked how they knew this and they gave an example of having tested this statement. They had a question and telephoned their social worker for support – they added *“we know he is there when and if we need him”*. They offered the view that being new to fostering the initial support is very important, often it was a case of *“check things out”* more of an assurance of having followed the correct guidance. They were also keen to impress the importance of support from peers and they talked about the opportunities that were available through NCH to maximize on peer support. This was demonstrated by the events and meetings that NCH promote to encourage networking and peer support.

The final views offered on the experience of fostering through NCH were *“everybody we have had contact with at NCH can't do enough for you. Fostering has more than met our expectations, everything has changed. We have new friends and networks, we have opportunities for continual training, and things are so different than what we had originally expected or anticipated. We wish we had done this years ago”*

## **5.2 LESSONS LEARNED**

The second case study presents a view of lessons learned in recruitment. This is more about knowing the needs of the local authority rather than the individual carer.

Local Authorities are the purchasers of the service therefore they are, in this instance, the drivers for demand in terms of the service offered by NCH. Local Authorities have their own registered carers and there is a tendency to allocate placements to their own carers before purchasing care from outside providers (of which NCH is one) The foster placements that are increasingly being offered to providers were explained by one of the Taith Newydd project staff as *“the children are more challenging between 9-14 years old with many having challenging behavior. The types of carers we need are those that can work with this referral group”*.

An analysis was undertaken by the project manager to assess and categorise the types of requests for placements from Local Authorities in past six months.

It was found that eighty three referrals had come through various local authorities, of these over 70% were aged 12 to 16 with the majority aged 14 and 15yrs. 67% were males and overall 59% had aggressive/violent behavioural difficulties which had been sighted as the main issue for referring of which 50% were being referred because of previous placement breakdown

This analysis of referrals has supported the future planning of recruitment and training provision. Having learned what the purchaser requires and recognized the need for a “*type of carer*” that will provide the service the project team have changed the processes of assessment. A staff member offered their view on the changes that have evolved since the project started *“What we do now is more specific. The process has evolved due to a background of knowledge and experience that has come about because of the ESF project – there was a slow growth to start and we learned from this. “we now send a profile of carers to the Local Authority which supports our matching process”*. It was felt that in using this method i.e. recruiting the “*right type*” of carer to meet the demand/need of the purchaser, introducing the processes developed through the project (model of training); offering the purchasers a pre-placement profile of carers, based on the assessment, will in total better support the matching process. A further view on the subject was offered *“the project has gone well, what we have found is that we are not matching with couples who have birth children... primarily due to referrals being more challenging..... We have put a hold on recruiting people who have birth children. This has been a learning experience for the project”*.

Case Study B attempts to offer a view from a beneficiary perspective with the beneficiary having completed the project process and not as yet having a placement.

### **5.1.2 Case study B**

Ms X has a background in care work and was working in the care sector for a number of years but found that the requirement of working unsociable hours was having an impact on her family life. Wanting to spend more time with her young family Ms X took on two part time jobs which equated to 30 hours per week. The new working hours are more suitable to her requirements meaning that weekends are now quality time to be spent with the family. As a working mum Ms X juggles her working life around her daughter and suggested that her husband, an industrial worker is also able to, and does contribute to the care of their daughter around his working day.

The family had talked about fostering for a long while; the original idea came from the youngest member of the family when she asked “*what happens to abandoned children*” and whilst mum and dad had given a number of responses to this question it did not seem to fulfill the young persons’ question. Inevitably, the question kept arising – to the point when the young person themselves suggested that as the family had a spare room they could offer this to a child. Following this suggestion the family discussed the option over a period of time.

Another deciding factor was that Ms X could give up her one part time post and take up fostering as a new career move. The options appealed to the family and eventually after much deliberation the decision to foster was taken one step further.

The family saw an advert for NCH. Ms X explained *“we were out for lunch and whilst in the café I visited the ladies, as I was drying my hands there was a poster for NCH”*. She added *“it was a very nice 1920’s style up market café. I took the telephone number and called them the next day. “I was sent the information and we were told that a follow up call would follow in about 2 weeks, it didn’t happen, so I rang them and next thing we knew we were on a skills to foster course”*

The course was attended in October 04 and the assessment process began in January 05 the couple went to panel and were approved in June 05. Ms X recalled the process in some detail and offered the feelings felt whilst going through the different stages of assessment and finally the attendance at a panel meeting when the decision of acceptance or not is being reached was described as *“scary”*. With a warm smile she offered the view that *“everyone is really supportive in the way in which the whole process had been conducted. It was in my opinion very planned and faultless and the team kept stating not to take things personal, but we had spent 6 months going through an in-depth assessment how could it not be personal”*.

After seven months the couple had not had a placement Ms X describes the feelings of having gone through the process and having incurred expenditure to redecorate a bedroom and still waiting for a placement as *“very frustrating”*. She validates this by stating when people in work ask how things are going with the fostering *“it’s like ‘twisting the knife in the wound”*. Whilst she is aware and appreciative of the reasons for not yet having a placement she stated *“I wish they had told us in the beginning that they would not have a child for us”*. A clear understanding was also expressed here that the reasons for not having a placement was that there was not one to have and that no element of sense of blame was directed to the NCH project and the following statement validated *“I can’t fault NCH for the training, support and friendliness I would have just liked children (a placement) from the start”*.

The long term concern that came across was the sustainability. The families intention was to embark on a fostering career, if a placement was to happen in the next month or so would there then be a placement to follow? The lack of an appropriate match had highlighted the issue of a sustainable career in fostering.

This was a real dilemma for the family as there seemed to be no immediate solution Ms X stated *“we thought there were lots of foster children around. I remember attending a training session and my husband commenting” “watch you don’t come back with a foster child”*. *“We were expecting to have a placement within a short time after the assessment and training. Clearly, this is not the case”*.

*The issue of matching emerged as a concern during the project delivery phase – it is fully acknowledged by staff who have implemented measures to prevent this situation reoccurring.*

The family is now re-evaluating their position. They are keen to go forward with fostering as a career and have decided to remain with NCH for another month or so before making any final decision.

The bottom line seems to be that if a placement does not materialise in the next month they will follow up with the Local Social Services and register with them.

## **6.0 Management of the project**

A steering group was set up to support the project in delivering its objectives. The group had evolved from the past ESF project run by NCH and at least one of the members was a prior steering group member of the NOW project which ran in 1989.

The composition of the steering group was made up of 'project focused' bodies for instance representation from JobCentre Plus, CRED (External Project Management) NCH, a project beneficiary and a member of the community.

The steering group had adopted a strategic role and also offered practical suggestions, solutions and support on emerging delivery issues as and when required. In this respect the steering group became a valuable resource enhancing the operational elements of the project. The external Project Manager commented "*I like the way that they have brought people from different areas to contribute strategically. At one meeting a beneficiary attended to brief the steering group on a best practice model.....there is a commitment to the project from the group and continuity of attendance*".

The steering group had also benefited from the NCH "core funded" Media and Communications Officer for Wales, who was keen to link the project with the organisation's core work. This was an invaluable mechanism for driving forward the integration of the project alongside the core activities of the organisation and contributing to mainstreaming and sustainability.

In observing these meetings the evaluator can express the view that the members of the group demonstrated full commitment to the success of the project and have supported the project to develop a framework from which to operate.

### **6.1 Structure of meetings**

Meetings were held on a quarterly basis where a project progress report was delivered by the project manager with input from key staff. For example, the Marketing Officer who provided the delivery perspective of the project contributed and participated in each of these meetings.

An observation made by the first six monthly evaluation report suggested that the steering group *'may benefit from wider participation'* – in response to this suggestion a steering group member offered the view *"that participation from agencies has historically been low and, that this may be due to demands on people's time rather than a reluctance to get involved"*. However, as an example of the steering group's participative role in the project and the steering groups' commitment by interim report stage a new member had been invited to join the group.

The venue used was the Taith Newydd base in Newport which seemed accessible to the attendees, the minutes and agenda were distributed generally via email with copies of relevant papers available on the day. Meeting dates were set in advance and the general administration of the meetings worked well.

## **6.2 Management in practice**

As mentioned earlier in this section the project benefited from external project management support. This resource had been valuable in supporting the development of systems for administering ESF, the collection and collation of evidence to support the claims, support in constructing the interim claims and ultimately the project closure report (PCR) and the role of 'risk assessment' in terms of active participation at the steering group to comment on ESF and support in maintaining the focus of the project bid.

The external project manager offered the view that *"based on experience the project had been managed well"* this had been levelled at the effectiveness of both project staff and NCH. There had been one occasion when an interim claim had been delayed (August 05) the manager added *"this was due to a change of auditors rather than any project delay"*.

## **6.3 ESF Project compliance**

Within the resources and scope of this external evaluation it was not possible to undertake a review and reconciliation of ESF financial project compliance. However, the evaluator can confirm the existence of ESF project files holding various ESF beneficiary records and can also confirm that descriptions of systems have been discussed at various times during project staff and external managers' interview. Additionally, budgets, control procedures and compliance are standing agenda items at steering group meetings. As an observation and in drawing from the above it would seem that systems and procedures are in place and that these are being followed.

## **7.0 Project staff**

Meetings with all key project staff enabled the evaluator to gain a perspective on how the intention of the project had been translated and transferred into key priority areas of work for project staff.

These meetings were also beneficial in allowing the evaluator to gain a view of the project workers aspirations for the project, how it was progressing in terms of what was stated in the bid and how they themselves (project workers) had perceived the added value of the project.

All project staff were interviewed twice: at the outset of the external evaluation and at the final report stage. The following offers both sets of views to gauge how the project staff initial aspirations, targets etc materialised.

### **7.1 First round of interviews**

The project on initiation had been met with great enthusiasm and positivity. It was strongly felt that the project was offering “added value” to NCH core activities.

Members of staff had highlighted the ways in which the project offered additional support to beneficiaries for example allowing more time for the process of fostering which resulted in foster carers being enabled to make informed choices, receive additional training, and understand the matching of foster child to foster carer both in terms of geography and suitability and the ‘growing’ of new foster carers.

The Project Manager expressed the added value of the project in terms of *intensity of support offered to beneficiaries and the additional training elements that the project was able to offer.*

An early observation from the evaluation interim report stage suggested “.....from these project interviews what came across strongly was the enthusiasm of the project team both on an individual basis and also as a group. They have individually and collectively driven the project forward with clarity and focus and are delivering the stated objectives, outputs and outcomes with great enthusiasm.”

It became evident that the prime driver for both project staff and NCH staff was that of working in a holistic approach to support the children and families in their care, one of the project staff explained “***the level of support offered is specific to the project. The luxury of time to reflect, examine and support the placements adds value to the process***”

### **7.2 Second round of interviews**

The views of the project team had not changed substantively, the enthusiasm and dedication was there and if any significant comment was to be made it would be that the project team had matured and gelled as one project worker put it “*the project had in the last 12-18mths built momentum*”. *The team is gelling nicely and we are clearer on the sort of carers we are looking for and how we can support this through the assessment process*”

NCH has been able to employ a highly skilled team to develop a model, test it through practice, adapt and refine it, to the point of sustainability.

It was clear the project had offered an opportunity to develop, test and adjust a model for attracting, developing and supporting foster carers.

The model has worked and was now sustainable as validated by a project worker *“The project has gone from strength to strength and is now financially secure. ESF money has enabled us to get to this point and also to set up new initiatives – for example: we are producing a DVD. There is an existing video entitled ‘the children who foster’ but this does not meet the needs of our children so we decided to do our own”. And the rationale for producing a new DVD “it has come about as there is nothing available to show birth children – we wanted some of the children who live in natural families to speak and say what it was like (their perspective) this helps as a promotional tool”.*

### **7.3 Changes in practice as a direct result of the project**

The view offered by a project worker was *“the project has gone well, what we have found is that we are not matching with couples who have younger birth children”*. As highlighted in case study B the matching process did offer a learning curve for the projects team, this was acknowledged and addressed by taking the following remedial action *“putting a hold on recruiting people who have natural children ..... the referrals we are getting are more challenging and this has an impact on placements”*. *“This has been a learning experience for the project as our referrals are troubled children”. ....”A positive aspect is that we can be selective”*. This view, I took to suggest that whilst referrals were not driven by NCH and therefore, there was no element of control on the type of children needing accommodation - recruitment of foster carers was, and as a consequence NCH could adapt their recruitment and assessment process to align it with the ‘needs’ of children requiring support. *“We can and have reviewed our processes; the project is very fluid and deals with things as they come up”*. There was a strong feeling and ethos that *“setting up children to fail and issues of attachment”* were taken very seriously. The matching process was seen as a crucial element within a holistic process of fostering and project workers concurred that in order to achieve successful and sustainable placements this holistic approach requires the support of a group of people to ensure the matching is right for both foster carer and child. As the staff suggested in using this holistic approach breakdowns are minimized.

Another example of changes in practice given was the support group. It had become apparent that carers required support/network meetings to be flexible. This was addressed by facilitating evening group meetings for carers. A further example given was a new development of an all male support groups {this was highlighted in the interim report} there will now be a support group for males.

The project team have developed a duty system *“one of us is always around at all times to take on any issues – we became aware that at times only office staff were available to take calls and we felt that this was not fair or appropriate so we came up with the system that ensures that a member of the team is always at hand. Foster carers know that there is always one of us around”*.

Additionally, a new area of development has been the setting up of a youth group to bring together challenging youth to undertake specific work over a six week period to support and enhance relationship skills, team working and social behaviour.

The first of these specific work groups used the medium of creative art to develop and enhance skills. The group has created ceramic work which will be ultimately displayed in a public theatre. As one of the project workers summed up eloquently *“the project has given us the space and time to develop new initiatives, this would not have happened without ESF support”*.

## 8.0 The project numerical targets

In more quantitative terms the ESF bid estimated that the Taith Newydd project would involve a total of 60 beneficiaries.

### Beneficiary profile

Target	Numbers	Achieved	Ethnicity target	Achieved
40 females	30 unemployed 10 employed	43 enrolled of which 16 were unemployed and 27 employed	51 White British	68 White British
20 Males	10 unemployed 10 employed	25 enrolled 10 of which were unemployed and 15 employed	6 Mixed * Black	0
Disabled	9	9 people have self identified as disabled	3 Mixed Asian *	0
Non Disabled	51	56 non disabled		

**NOTE:** \* Mixed black figures refer to 2 white and Black Caribbean, 1 white and Black African, 3 black or Black British.

- Mixed Asian figures refer to 2 Mixed White and Asian, 1 Asian or Asian British

### Outcomes

Course Title	Target number	Numbers achieved/completed	Variance	Achieved awards
Skills to foster course OCN level 2 = 3 credits	55	65	+10	65
NOCN Communicating with children with profound difficulties	15	20	+5	20
Managing emotional abuse and neglect	40	40	0	40
NOCN Listening to young people	40	65	+25	65
IT training	30	65	+35	65
First Aid Training	40	40	0	40
BBC web wise training	40	65	+25	65
Safe lifting and handling	10	28	+18	28

**Note:** IT training and BBC Webwise training and listening to young people have been added to the skills to foster course. Safe lifting and handling is delivered to foster carers who express an interest in working with disabled children

## Employment outcomes

Outcome	Expected target	Achieved
Self employment	40% (24)	100%
Volunteer work	6% (3)	0
Further education or training	2% (2)	6

### 8.1 Analysis of targets against outcomes

#### Beneficiary profile

#### 8.2 Target numbers

The project target number of 60 beneficiaries was acknowledged by the project staff as a realistic and achievable number. The project began to register/enroll people as project beneficiaries after initial contact and once a visit was made with a commitment of interest from the individual. It was found that this project criterion of registration would exceed the target number of beneficiaries on the project but would not necessarily achieve the number for training outcomes.

The project took the view that it would be more appropriate in terms of achieving the training numbers to register beneficiaries after they had made a firm commitment to attend the skills to foster course. It was felt that in changing the beneficiary priorities for project registration it would enable the project to meet both its beneficiary profile target number and its training outcome targets.

#### 8.3 Recruitment from ethnic backgrounds

There has been difficulty in recruiting beneficiaries from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The project manager suggests that this is in part due to the demographic make up of the communities being targeted in Objective 1 areas. Where the populous of the area is predominantly white, ethnic groups are not highly representative of the local communities. The Marketing Officer offered the view here that "*in general the ethnic population was made of businesses*" and it would be highly unlikely to find representation of traditional families living in the Valley areas.

There is a tendency (*statistical information available*) for ethnic communities to be far more prominent and concentrated in the larger urbanized areas of South Wales which are not Objective 1 and are therefore not eligible for targeting within this project.

The concern of recruiting beneficiaries from ethnic backgrounds has been a continual issue for the project; the Marketing Officer elaborated on this concern at second interview stage, stating that a specifically targeted event in Caerphilly only managed to attract women of ethnic background from Cardiff who worked in Caerphilly.

At this event the Marketing Officer asked for the attendees' thoughts on fostering and their advice as to how best to target and attract this group. The Marketing Officer relayed the response *"they said it would be difficult to get Asian families to foster....they look after their own. It is not culturally acceptable for women to make decisions "*.

Added to this and the earlier comment of the number and composition of ethnic groups living in the Objective 1 areas compounds the difficulties faced by this project to engaging ethnic groups in fostering.

#### **8.4 Early leavers**

The project has had a high drop out rate at the early stages of delivery. The interim report stated that *'22 people had left the project after completion of courses (22 early leavers)'* the high level of drop out rates was attributed to a number of factors one of which was highlighted as *'the early perception and expectations of foster care which may have led to misconceptions about fostering'*. As the project has built momentum the drop out rate has decreased and that may be attributed to fewer number being recruited as the bulk of recruitment occurred at the start of the project – there was a tapering of new people coming on board towards the latter stage of the project. It would suggest that it is not a change in practice but a change in the volume of people being recruited.

#### **8.5 Outcomes**

The interim report offered the view that achieving the projects numerical targets is an important objective for ESF, however, equally important is the **'soft skills'** development and **'distance travelled'** of individuals. Empirical research classifies soft outcomes as two distinctive groups: core outcomes and target group specific. Core outcomes are likely to be more relevant to the Taith Newydd project as these relate to generic skills development of key work skills, personal skills and practical skills. Techniques for measurement of core outcomes vary and there is scope for further developing and implementing soft measure indicators.

The project recognized that individuals benefit from training that raises self confidence and enhances skills levels. Anecdotally, this element of work may be a contributory factor to early leavers' success in re-entry to employment. However, attributing the successes of early leavers to the training courses offered by the project presents some complexity.

In instances where individuals leave early they become difficult to track therefore these outcomes may prove difficult to monitor or to validate.

The additional research for the final report can offer no further progress on the above findings but can offer a flavour of what happens to early leavers as described by project staff who have recorded these destinations *"two of our early leavers have moved away and are fostering for a different provider in a different geographical area. We had two early leavers who had a poor CRB return and two further early leavers who had decided that fostering was not for them"*.

## **8.8 Employment outcomes**

The project has exceeded the employment outcomes stated at bid stage. The expected target was stated as 40%. It may be noted that of the project completers 100% have entered self-employment as carers.

## **8.7 Voluntary work**

There has been no voluntary work outcomes reported

## **8.8 Education further training**

The project has exceeded the reported bid stage targets of two. The achievement has been that six carers are now working towards NVQ level 3 health and social care award.

## **8.9 Training hours**

The project had achieved its full bid stated objective of 17,000 training hours

## **9.0 Summary of achievements**

This final section of the report attempts to consolidate a brief summary in bullet form of project achievements.

**9.1 Management and administration** – the project has evolved to become an integrated part of NCH. The support by core staff, for example NCH core marketing section, has supported the process of integration and has contributed to the view of the ESF project as part of the organisation and not as a bolt on extra.

The steering group has been an effective driver for both strategic and operation support.

Project staff have been involved and committed to the project from the outset and in many instances the staff have had input in the delivery mechanisms.

The project has from the outset underpinned the strategic vision of the organisation.

The processes, systems and control procedures for administering ESF have been treated with respect and although the evaluation has not audited the project, the procedures have been an integral part of the project management agenda.

The support of an external project manager with a high level of ESF experience has enhanced the delivery of the project in terms of keeping on track and of supporting the systems, procedures etc from an ESF perspective.

**9.2 Marketing and networking** – The decision to employ a Marketing Officer specifically for the project has been of benefit. All the staff interviewed expressed that the role has been invaluable. Dividends of this post have been evidenced by the breadth and depth of the work undertaken by the Marketing Officer.

**9.3 Promotional work** – the project highlights and promotes the contribution made by ESF through a presentation at every training session. This has resulted in beneficiaries becoming fully aware that the activities they are participating in have been supported by the European Social Fund.

Project documentation carries the appropriate logo and in general the project promotes the support offered by ESF. The lost opportunity is the ongoing and recognized issue of Taith Newydd not having the jurisdiction to add the appropriate ESF logo on to the website. The matter had been taken up by project managers and staff on several occasions but to date it remains a lost opportunity for promoting ESF support on the National NCH website.

**9.4 Training** – the intensive training and support measures offered to beneficiaries has added value in enhancing the provision of NCH services.

The measures offered by Taith Newydd have been demonstrated in their:

- Flexible approaches to training in order to meet the needs of the individual.
- The range of training opportunities offered to beneficiaries for further personal and career development.
- The project acquired new accreditation for training courses – which have developed and increased the validity and credibility of fostering as a career.
- Beneficiaries have been involved in the design of the training and their views, comments and feedback have been respected and acted upon.

**9.5 Numerical targets-** The project has achieved most of the numerical targets and in many instances has exceeded the statistics in its application for funding. Additionally, a number of outcomes for example: employment and further training have also been exceeded.

*A final summary provided by a project worker sums up eloquently “We have achieved the targets and have achieved the targeting of a diverse range of carers ie single parents, people with different skills and backgrounds, people who have no qualifications and those who have and are re focusing their careers. We have had people with no experience taking on some very challenging children and they have done extremely well. This is in part due to the training and support. This is a flexible organisation and we move to meet the needs of the children and carers”.*

**9.6 Sustainability and mainstreaming** – the project has validated through practice a model of fostering that is financially sustainable. The strategic focus at the outset of the project was to develop a model that would ‘grow’ carers. The project has fully achieved this and in so doing has validated its inception and existence.

**9.7 What next** –The next steps for NCH were viewed positively with staff offering suggestions as to where they would like to go next: These views are expressed here for further consideration as possible new initiatives:

*“I would like to see us bottle this and replicate it in other areas. I would like to see expansion of more programmes and a continuation of the current work in the Valleys of Wales”*

*“We should approach the National Assembly for National funding, we know this model works and with a shortage of 600 carers we can expand the model nationally”.*

Specialising in specific areas of work was also seen as a possible plan for the future *“development of an agency providing specialized services”* for example short breaks services for disabled children, young people and their families.

## **10 Evaluators closing remarks**

This project in the view of the evaluator has presented itself as a valuable use of European Social Funding. This statement is made against a backdrop of evidence that validates the project through the perspective of beneficiaries and staff.

ESF was used as *“pump priming”* money to develop, test, evaluate and refine a model that would engage carers from a diverse background to meet the existing and future needs for fostering.

The project has developed an economically viable service that will now continue as part of NCH core business. It has provided self-employment opportunities for 100% of the completers which will have a positive economic impact and it has provided skills and personal development for a diverse target group in Objective 1 areas.

Consultus welcomes comments on its work.

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