



**ARTICLE NO: 1H**

**CORPORATE & ENVIRONMENTAL  
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE**

**MEMBERS UPDATE 2014/15  
ISSUE: 1**

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**Report of: Assistant Director Housing and Regeneration**

**Relevant Managing Director: Managing Director (Transformation)**

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**SUBJECT: WEST LANCASHIRE CHALLENGE PROJECT 2011-2014**

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Borough wide

## **1.0 PURPOSE OF ARTICLE**

- 1.1 To inform Members of the WL Challenge project, the activities the project has delivered and the outcomes achieved in the first three years.

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## **2.0 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 West Lancashire Challenge is an economic development and social inclusion project delivered by key partners including the Borough Council, West Lancashire College, Job Centre Plus and West Lancashire Council for Voluntary Services (WLCVS).
- 2.2 The project was initially a 2 year project having secured funding in 2011 from the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). The project employed one full time project officer and an apprentice within WLCVS and also one full time project officer and two apprentices within the Borough Council. In addition WL College provided a dedicated resource to support the delivery of the aims and objectives of the project.
- 2.3. In 2012 WLCVS secured additional funding from the LSP to extend the project into a third year, albeit in a reduced format which took the project to the end of March 2014. Alongside the WLCVS extension, the Borough Council committed additional resources to continue to support the business engagement theme of the project, which included a part-time officer and an apprentice for an additional two years up to summer 2015, together with funding to support other apprentices into employment across the Borough.

2.4 The project has essentially three core themes:

- 1) 1:1 support to individuals who have complex barriers preventing them from accessing training and/or volunteering opportunities;
- 2) Business engagement, apprenticeships and supporting people into employment; and
- 3) Community & social enterprise support.

2.5 Over the past three years the project has been extremely successful, key achievements to date include:

- Almost 300 apprentices into employment
- 383 individuals signed up to the 'Passport', a pathway into employment toolkit
- Over 50 businesses engaged with the project (since June 2013)
- 37 new board members recruited to support community & voluntary groups
- Over 800 individuals involved in health equality events, resulting in over 140 follow ups with specialised services
- 7 work experience placements in the Borough Council, including 1 Passport holder (since June 2013)
- 3 'Get Online Get Ahead' digital inclusion events with 160 unemployed individuals attending to access advice and support

2.6 Details of all the achievements are attached at Appendix A, which also highlights the overall diversity of the project in its aims and objectives.

2.7 Appendix B provides brief case studies on some of those individuals who have been supported through the project and whose lives have been transformed from the small interventions and support that has been possible through the extensive partnership network that this project has developed.

2.8 Appendix C provides brief details of the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) figures for West Lancashire as at April 2014.

### **3.0 CURRENT POSITION**

3.1 This project is unique and innovative as it not only works with the main project partners to provide individuals with 'wrap-around' support, but also involves other partners and organisations such as Lancashire County Council's Young Peoples Services, Library Service, Citizens Advice Bureau, social enterprise training providers and businesses. Officers are not aware of any other similar projects taking place across Lancashire that are tackling all of the issues that the WL Challenge project is.

3.2 The WL Challenge brand and image were purposely designed to be neutral, an approach that has worked extremely well, being recognised by all partners that some sectors of the community, both individuals and businesses can be switched off and get involved in a Council or Job Centre Plus-led project which in some cases can be a barrier preventing people from accessing services and support.

3.3 The Skills, Training and Employment Partnership (STEP) monitors the WL Challenge project on a quarterly basis, asking challenging questions and feeding in relevant activities from within their own organisations. Membership of the

STEP includes, Job Centre Plus, WL College, WLCVS, NHS Skills Academy, Young Peoples Service, plus others, and is Chaired and facilitated by the Borough Council. The project also has regular project meetings to discuss progress, next steps and ensures all partners remain engaged.

- 3.4 Since LSP funding ceased at the end of March 2014 this has affected WLCVS' ability to deliver the community and social enterprise theme and providing individual 1:1 support to people with complex barriers into volunteering or training. However, the business engagement and apprenticeship theme and supporting people into employment and training continues.
- 3.5 A new initiative under the project was developed towards the end of 2013 to support unemployed individuals to access training and advice around the digital agenda. An initial conversation took place with the Economic Regeneration Team and the Housing Tenant Participation Team as to how we could support tenants with training needs. This idea was further developed with Job Centre Plus who are the best placed WL Challenge partner with regards to the digital agenda and Universal Credit. These discussions resulted in the key project partners developing the 'Get Online Get Ahead' events with support from our Housing colleagues. The events have taken place in Skelmersdale during 2014 targeted at unemployed tenants and residents, with 75% of attendees at the last event reporting they found the event useful and informative.
- 3.6 The partners and agencies who have participated in these events have found them very useful and engaged with many of the attendees on the day and through follow ups after the events. Given the clientele targeted this is a fantastic result for all partners concerned.
- 3.7 During the initial development of the WL Challenge project it was identified that an evaluation at the end of the project would be important and a small budget was set aside to undertake this activity. WLCVS has led on this element and have recently appointed Preston City Council to undertake the work. A range of stakeholders are to be consulted and a sample of clients interviewed as part of the process. It is anticipated the evaluation will be completed by July 2014.

#### **4.0 FUTURE ACTION**

- 4.1 It is important that the partnership engagement developed through the WL Challenge project over the last three years is maintained, although funding is limited and proving difficult to secure at the moment. Activity on the project continues into its fourth year, predominately by agencies providing resources to work on joint initiatives such as Careers Fairs, interviewing sessions with targeted unemployed groups, young people events and the 'Get Online Get Ahead' events. As well as the business engagement element and apprentices as previously outlined.
- 4.2 As an organisation WLCVS continue to look for alternative funding streams and remain committed to the project. The Council also remains committed to the project and the Economic Regeneration team is continuing to investigate funding sources to continue to deliver the project.

- 4.3 As a project comes to the end of its predicted lifetime it is always useful to reflect on the project's achievements and whether it should continue in its current format. This process will take place once the results of the evaluation are known.
- 4.4 Government policies are also changing with a new emphasis on the digital agenda, Universal Credit and Universal Jobs Match, as well as changing the way businesses access funding for apprenticeships and training in the future. As of April 2014, West Lancashire had a total of 1,585 unemployed individuals claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), of those 54% are aged between 25-49yrs, 28% aged 18-24yrs and 17% aged 50+ yrs. Job Centre Plus' focus is also changing as they begin to challenge those individuals claiming Employment Support Allowance (ESA) (which replaced Incapacity Benefit) with a view to supporting an element of those clients back into employment.
- 4.5 The Economic Regeneration team needs to be mindful of the changing local economy and will continue to work closely with WL Challenge partners, in particular Job Centre Plus and WL College to ensure that we target our support appropriately and to enable us to tap into any funding opportunities that are available, in particular the forthcoming Lancashire European programme.
- 4.6 The West Lancashire Economy Study is almost complete, with the draft Strategy now in preparation. The Strategy will identify the key activities for the growth of Borough over the next 5-10 years, and alongside this, we need to reduce unemployment whilst ensuring the Borough has a skilled workforce available that has the relevant skills to meet employer demand, this will enable the borough to capitalise on the economic opportunities on our doorstep, including from major developments such as the Superport, Liverpool2 and those in Greater Manchester.

## **5.0 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS / COMMUNITY STRATEGY**

- 5.1 The WL Challenge project is all about supporting individuals into employment, training, work experience and volunteering opportunities, which are key to creating good quality jobs as identified within the Community Strategy.
- 5.2 In addition to waiting for the outcome of the evaluation, revisiting the aims and objectives as we move into a fourth year of activity allows the Borough Council to consider its Equality objectives, in particular those in the over 50 years age group identified previously, who are either currently claiming JSA or have been identified by Job Centre Plus as claiming ESA and needing additional support. The Council has committed to the Equality agenda and should the WL Challenge project continue in the future, the Equality objectives will be taken into account, and where appropriate activities delivered around this particular agenda.

## **6.0 FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 There are no additional financial implications for the Borough Council at the present time, although the current provision will cease in June 2015 and should additional funding not be secured, the future of the WL Challenge project will be in question.

- 6.2 The Economic Regeneration Manager is currently in discussions with partner organisations to secure funds that would enable the project to continue to provide the 1:1 support to 50 individuals up to March 2015, with the potential to bid for further funding in 2015.
- 6.3 In addition, the Rent and Money Advice Service Manager is currently in the process of applying for flexible grant funding to assist residents that are pre work programme JSA claimants, with the transition from legacy benefits to Universal credit. The grant funding will be to fund a full time post for 12 months to assist claimants during phase 2 of the UC roll out programme and link into the Councils work in developing its local support service framework. The project will focus on 2 keys areas:
1. Preparing financially – helping claimants with the transition to monthly benefit payments, including those with housing costs, to allow them budget effectively through 1:1 sessions. These sessions will focus on ensuring that they have a bank or credit union account prior to UC roll out, reporting changes in circumstances and completion of a ‘entitled to’ calculation to show what they would receive when they find employment.
  2. Improving digital access – this element will focus on clients that do not have internet access at home, advising where there is public access to the internet and where there is a skills gap appropriate service providers to help with improving these skills. The aim will be to encourage claimants to increase their job search activity, and allow the DWP to monitor their Universal Jobmatch account.
- 6.4 The new Lancashire European funding programme is expected to commence in April/May 2015, with Lancashire County Council looking for project ideas in summer 2014. If the project can secure funding during 2014 and 2015, this could potentially enable the project to be ahead of the game in terms of being one of the first projects to secure European funding in Lancashire. The programme is yet to agree its local outputs and outcomes, however if the WL Challenge project is deliverable and has match funding secured it is well placed for the new programme. It also has the advantage of having a strong track record and a well-established network of partners to ensure the project continues to succeed and achieve.

## **7.0 RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 7.1 This item is for information only and makes no recommendations. It therefore does not require a formal risk assessment and no changes have been made to the risk register as a result of this report.

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### **Background Documents**

\*There are no background documents (as defined in Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) to this Article.

## **Equality Impact Assessment**

The Article is for information only. Therefore no Equality Impact Assessment is required.

## **Appendices**

Appendix A - Details of all outcomes achieved for the WL Challenge project 2011- 2014.

Appendix B - Brief case studies of individuals who had complex barriers to accessing employment, training and/or volunteering opportunities, who have been supported by the WL Challenge project.

Appendix C - West Lancashire NEET (Not in Education, Employment, Training or Education) Figures