

Skills2Build

EVALUATION



BACKGROUND

Skills2Build (S2B) was established in 2007ⁱ by Big Life Employment in partnership with the Martin and Judith Ainscough Charitable Trust (MJACT). The project was established in Partington at a centre built by MJACT on land owned by Your Housing Trustⁱⁱ.

The objective of the project was to give people with multiple barriers to employment an opportunity to gain qualifications and work experience in order to enable them to move into sustained employment. We also aimed to benefit the local community which suffers from a high level of crime and anti-social behaviour.

The project aimed to set up a new enterprise that would offer employment to local people with multiple barriers to employment and which would become increasingly self-sustaining.

Partington

Partington is an area of the Bucklow St Martins Ward and is one of the most deprived areas in Trafford. The ward falls within the top 5% (2004) deprived wards in England using the index of multiple deprivation. The area is in the top 5% super output areas for crime. The area is on the outskirts of Greater Manchester but transport to and from Manchester is difficult. For example, buses to Manchester take just under 50 minutes and run every 30 minutes at peak times and hourly in the middle of the day. There is no train station.

Between 1991 and 2001 censuses, the population of Partington dropped by 15% reflecting a poor quality of life for local residents.

The Skills2Build project is headquartered at the Partington Jobshop on Wood lane where there is an IT suite with 10 PCs with internet access and a workshop and offices.

The business model and the programme model

S2B provides landscaping, fencing, cleaning and maintenance services. The services are provided either directly to the social landlord or via sub-contracts with main contractors. Ad hoc orders from local people and businesses are also undertaken.

The team was established with a Manager and a number of Supervisors. The Supervisors work with a team of Trainees to deliver the services. The main need for grant revenue, in addition to trade revenue, is the high level of supervision required in order to deliver the services to quality standards and time using inexperienced trainees requiring additional support.

Trainees are local people who have been previously unemployed and who have significant barriers to employment such as a criminal record, no qualifications, history of substance misuse or prolonged unemployment or, in some cases, no work experience at all. They are employed on fixed term contracts, usually for 12 months, during which they are encouraged and supported to obtain at least one qualification. They are supported to seek a long-term job at the end of their term at S2B.

“They told us.... It’s not a permanent job, it’s temporary, to get you into work. So they had us every Wednesday, they had us job searching. They’d make us ring it, in that place. If you saw a job, they’d say ring it, they’d say ‘do you know what to say?’, if you didn’t, they’d write down a couple of things for us to say, say this, if you need anyone to speak for you, we’ll do it.

“They’ll even help you with interview techniques here. Cause me, I don’t like interviews, I sweat up, I’m like that, I don’t like them. But these were giving me mock interviews so I got better and better at interviews. That’s what I mean, they give you the tools to go out and find a job, it’s whether you want that job to find.”

Trainee

There are three key features of the programme:

1. A three month settling in period in which trainees are allowed a number of breaches of contract rules such as unexplained absences, lateness or poor behaviour. The S2B response to such breaches is supportive and seeks to ensure that Trainees understand the rules and potential consequences whilst also providing support for the issues that gave rise to the breach, such as support to address addictions or housing problems.
2. Support to gain qualifications, including support with problems of literacy and numeracy if required.
3. Support to find employment at the end of the programme.

Supervisors are responsible for the delivery of the service to the time and standard agreed with the customer. They are also responsible for ensuring that Trainees develop appropriate skills and experience, work towards qualifications and operate within the prescribed Health and Safety policies and practices. Supervisors often act as mentors to Trainees.

“So if someone says to me now, ‘can you do this?’ Then yeah, I can do that... Like, lifting something. So say I was working in an office and they had a delivery and it was a desk in a flat pack, then I can build that. I can do that now. So if something’s broken, then I can fix it because I’ve done stuff like that now. Do you know what I mean? It’s not just around one job. It’s about anything... I’ve done things. Take painting. I’ve done painting on here. Everything, in my house from top to bottom I do and that comes from here.”

Trainee

“You can tell her anything. Anything you want to speak to her about and it’ll go no further. Obviously there are some things, major things, that she will have to write down but she will tell you when she’s doing that. I’ve had problems and I’ve gone to her and she’s been like come in here, into the room, and we’ve sat down and talked about it... and she’s helped me.”

A Trainee talking about his Supervisor

We have used the data from 35 trainees who started on programme between January 2009 and April 2012. Of these 35 employees, 16 had criminal convictions. The oldest was 46 when he joined the programme and the youngest was 19. The average age was 26. Although we encourage both sexes to apply, and one of the Supervisors is female, only one female trainee started on programme. The length of time unemployed varied between 1 and 7 years although a significant number had no work experience.

OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

The project has three key objectives:

1. To support people in Partington to move into employment by providing experience of work and an opportunity to gain qualifications.
2. To create a business that will become increasingly self-sustaining and benefit the local economy.
3. To support the local community by engaging with local stakeholders such as Police, Social Landlord, Probation and others with the aim of reducing crime and improving community cohesion.

Our hypothesis is that long-term unemployment and low skills are often both the cause, and the result, of other factors such as a criminal record or substance misuse. We believe that an opportunity to experience the workplace - with additional support - gives a person with little or no work experience the opportunity to overcome the challenges of settling into work. We also noted that many Trainees have no experience of the advantages of a regular income. In some cases in Partington, unemployment is widespread across families and multi-generational. We believed that experiencing the achievements of work, the advantages of a regular income and the increase in self-esteem from these experiences motivates our Trainees to seek and sustain employment.

“I’ve got meaning now, a meaning to get up in the morning... when you’ve got kids it makes a big difference to have a job... being able to get up in the morning. I’d normally be in bed now or eating a bacon barm. It makes you feel better. I used to go to bed at daft o’clock in the morning and get up at two or three in the afternoon... I’m hopeful. Everything seems easier when you’re in a job.”

“I couldn’t be out of work again – before I worked here it got to the stage where I was going down that hill thinking I’m never going to work again I don’t care anymore. They got me at the right time, if they’d got me 6 months later I’d have just said no I don’t want your job. Now if I don’t get a job before the end I’ll be putting in for jobs.”

“Before I worked here sometimes they turn around and ask well what does your dad do... well now they can turn around and say my dad’s a labourer or my dad’s just passed his exams at college or my dad does flagging and wears big boots.”

Trainee

However, lack of recent employment experience makes a candidate unattractive to employers as they have no references to evidence their ability to meet basic requirements such as timekeeping and team work. In addition to helping Trainees to become more motivated to work, we provide enough work experience to be meaningful to prospective employers. Trainees achieve industry recognised qualifications such as CSCS cards and NVQs, they understand toolbox talks and health and safety practices, and they have a reference from an employer who is known locally to provide services to normal contract standards.

“I was stood in my garden having a fag and I got this phone call and I answered it and it was Tricia from here and she said we’d like to offer you a job. I put the phone down and I couldn’t stop smiling and I was, you know; ‘someone’s taken a chance on me’ – I was buzzing I really was buzzing... I don’t want to leave here.

“I got 2 years, prison sentence, and when I got out, I applied for a job in Morrisons, Salford Quays, the new one, and they actually asked the Big Life for a reference for me, which I’m actually working at that place now, thanks to the Big Life for my reference.”

Trainee

We monitored our progress towards these objectives by reporting against a number of quantitative measures. We also use qualitative data, including stakeholder interviews, to generate case studies and video interviews. We commissioned an external review of the project in June 2012 to ensure that we had a unbiased response from trainees and supervisors and other stakeholders.ⁱⁱⁱ

The quantitative outcomes that we record are:

Objective 1: Support trainees into employment

Outcome 1.1: Total number of trainees who are recruited to the programme

Outcome 1.2: Number of trainees who complete the programme

Outcome 1.3: Number of trainees who move into employment within 6 months of completing the programme

Outcome 1.4: Number of qualifications achieved by each trainee

Objective 2: Create a self-sustaining business

Outcome 2.1: Turnover

Outcome 2.2: Grant support as a % of total turnover

Outcome 3: Improve community cohesion

Outcome 3.1: Number of local partnerships

Qualitative feedback from Trainees, PCSOs, Probation and other stakeholders can be found on our website at <http://www.biglifeemployment.co.uk/>

QUANTITATIVE OUTCOMES

Outcome 1.1, 1.2, 1.3

Number of Trainees started on programme (Jan 2009 – April 2012)	Number (%) of trainees completing programme	Number (%) of trainees who moved into employment within 6 months of completion
35	24 (69%)	20 (57)%

Analysis of reasons for non-completion	Number	%
Ill health/car accident	2	6%
Prison	2	6%
Failed to attend	5	14%

Outcome 1.4

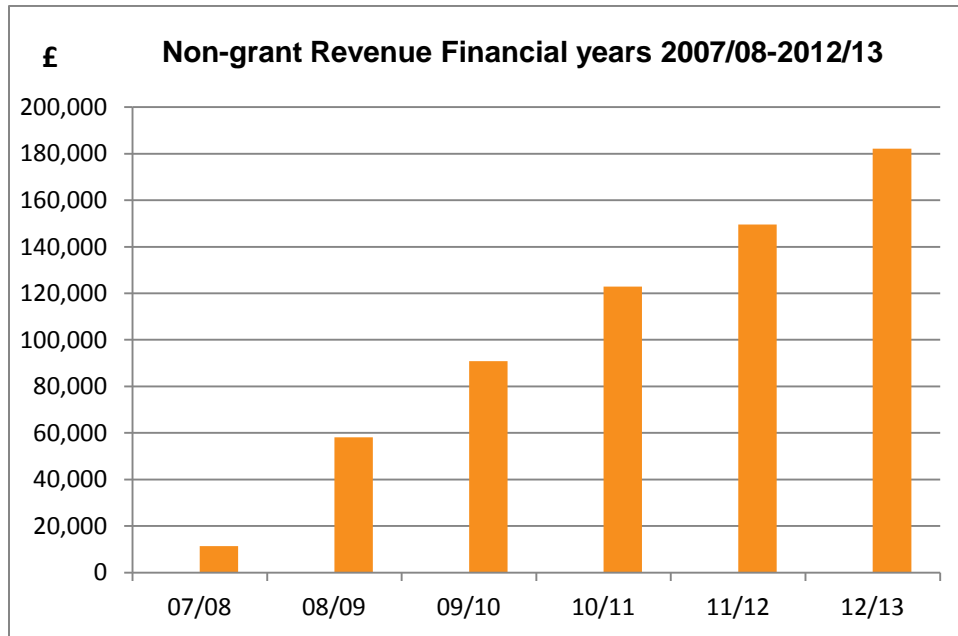
78% of all trainees leaving programme have secured at least one qualification, with over 50% securing at least two qualifications whilst on programme.

No of Qualifications	Number achieved	Percentage
1	28	78%
2	18	50%
3	7	19%
4	2	6%

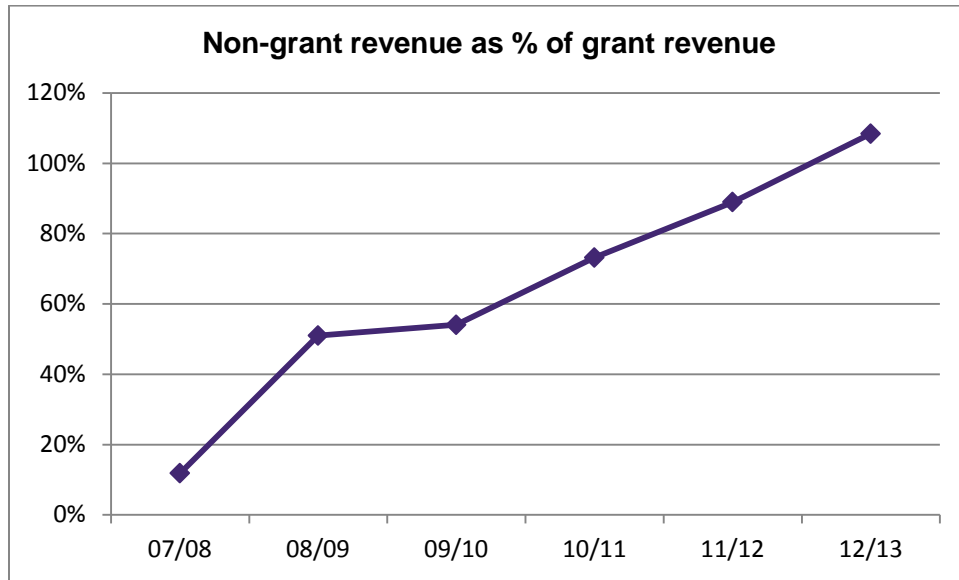
Outcome 2.1

Revenue from trading activity, or non-grant revenues, increased steadily over the six years of the project. It should be noted that in 2010, we expanded geographically and most of the revenue increase was derived from New Charter Housing Trust in Tameside who supported us to establish a second operation providing painting and decorating services.

This revenue was discontinued in late 2012 as, along with most social landlords, New Charter began to take more work in house.



Outcome 2.3



In addition to increasing non-grant revenue we have gradually improved on the ratio of trading revenue compared to grant revenue. However, we were still substantially dependent on grant revenue at the end of 2012. The challenge of making the business sustainable is proving intractable if we retain our model of working with people with significant barriers to employment using 12 month placements.

The high levels of supervision required and the reduction in productivity as each trainee leaves and is replaced by an unskilled recruit, sometimes with very challenging behavioural issues, makes it difficult to reduce costs to levels similar to commercial competitors. At the same time, we need to focus on relatively low skilled and, therefore, low margin work since trainees do well to reach a semi-skilled level within 12 months. The combined effect of low margin work and high costs led us to believe that this model, while highly effective in meeting our primary objective, is only sustainable with significant grant income.

Outcome 3.1

The number and strength of local partnerships, excluding trading partnerships with contractors, increased gradually over the six year project. In the early years, we worked well with the Harvest Housing Trust, Police and the local voluntary and community groups to develop a referral pathway for people who would benefit from a S2B Trainee job. In the final two years we have also hosted Job Centre Plus, Probation and The Careers Service. This has increased use of the IT suite and improved access to these services for the local community. Without our support, these services would be provided in Stretford. Stretford is only a few miles from Partington by road but takes at least 30 minutes in each direction using an infrequent and relatively expensive bus service.

VALUE FOR MONEY AND COMPARISON TO SIMILAR PROGRAMMES

Future Jobs Fund

Future Jobs Fund (FJF) was a similar scheme but accepted all young people rather than being focused on those furthest from the jobs market. An independent national evaluation by the Centre for Economic and Social Exclusion (July 2011) found that 43% of participants found employment beyond the FJF programme.

The cost of the programme was £5,600 per participant and the average benefit per job outcome was £9,296 whilst the benefit per participant who did not achieve a job outcome at the end of the programme is estimated at £1,885. Taking into account a “deadweight” estimate of 67% of participants who found a job but who would have obtained a job regardless of the programme, the net cost per participant is £3,946 which equates to a cost of £9,176 per job outcome.

Blue Sky

Blue Sky, part of Ground Work Trust, is a similar programme but with shorter (3-6 months) placements and aimed specifically at ex-offenders. In year ended March 2010, 102 new recruits started on programme and 46% of leavers found onward employment. Revenue was £1,038,742 of which almost half was grant income and the remainder project income. The cost per participant, therefore, can be estimated as the grant income divided by the number of new starts in the year or £4,509 per participant. The cost per job therefore is estimated (very roughly) at £9,802. It is difficult to estimate a “deadweight” percentage for this programme but it would undoubtedly be lower than the FJF figure of 67% given the additional barriers faced by job seekers with a history of offending behaviour and it should be noted that the benefits of reduced benefits claims are not deducted since the programme is short and often part-time making the estimates difficult.

Skills2Build

Skills2Build received grant income of £378,000 over the period for which we have recorded trainee outcomes. This equates to £10,800 per trainee and £18,847 per job outcome. Again, it is difficult to estimate deadweight for this group but given the multiple barriers to employment and local levels of unemployment, we would expect this to be very low. If we use the same estimates of benefit for participants with and without a job that were used for FJF, a programme of similar duration and structure, then we can estimate that the average benefit is £6,109. Assuming that the deadweight is very close to zero, the net cost per job is £12,738.

It can be seen that S2B has the highest percentage of job outcomes and the highest cost per job. This is consistent with the extraordinary challenges of Partington and the complex barriers to employment of many trainees.

An additional benefit, which we cannot adequately estimate here, is the impact on the community of the programme. The wages of the trainees and many of the costs of the programme are spent locally and therefore benefit the local economy. Trainees are role models within the community and encourage others in similar situations to seek help. This is evidenced by the long waiting list for trainee places on the programme, most of which are self-referrals based on contact with existing trainees.

CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

- The model is extremely effective in moving people with multiple barriers to employment into work.
- The cost per job outcome is higher than other similar schemes but this reflects the more complex issues addressed and the smaller scale of the S2B programme.
- A sustainable business, that requires no grant funding, is not possible without reducing the number of trainees on programme and/or working with trainees with fewer barriers to employment.
- The benefits to the community are significant: from partnership working to the role models provided by successful trainees.

The programme cannot be sustained in its present form since funding for the project is no longer available. However, by revising the model to offer apprenticeships rather than trainee places, we have extended the duration of the project. We hope to work out a way for the project to go forward as a small independent business although the programme of offering training placements to local people with multiple barriers to employment cannot be sustained in the future.

CASE STUDIES



1. Callum

Callum is 25 years old and a life-long resident of Partington. He speaks with pride and gratitude about the Skills2Build project:

“I actually cut the ribbon to open this place, it was me, ‘cause I was one of the first on here... I met Martin Ainscough who funds it. I met him. I met the mayor of Trafford and all that. I had to give a speech in here, I was sweating, bright red, in front of everyone... that’s a good achievement for a lad that grew up in a not good neighbourhood.”

Callum had not tried particularly hard in school and without any opportunities he increasingly found himself in trouble:

“I never really paid attention in school. Before I got on the Big Life, I was just in and out of trouble. Constantly. ... I just needed a job, something to keep me out of trouble cause I was close to getting an ASBO, I was in and out of trouble, I had no money, I didn’t really do good in school, I had no qualifications and obviously the Big Life took me on and changed me from there...”

Callum had developed a reputation for being a troublemaker in Partington and so when people saw him working on Skills2Build they assumed it was a community service scheme:

“Everybody thought it was community service at first, that’s what they were saying to me, I said no, it’s a job, because people maybe knew my face as a trouble maker around this community. That’s when I was younger. Now I’ve put a bit of pride back in my name. ... They took me on even though the housing had nothing but bad to say about me. ... They give everyone a fair chance, so even if you’ve got a bad name, and people saying don’t take him on, they’ll give you a shot. But if you mess them about, they’ll let you go, but you can’t ever say that you’ll not get a chance off them, cause they’ll give you a fair chance.”

Skills2Build helped Callum turn his life around. First of all working during the week helped him to stop behaving chaotically, getting drunk and causing trouble in his community:

“I used to hang around the streets a lot, and there was drinking on the streets and stuff like that but when I got into work I was just too tired at the weekends... through getting up at seven in the morning, that was new to me, and I was always tired, so I’d go to bed early. I didn’t really see my friends too much, then I started getting onto other jobs and I’m currently working now.”

Those working on the project gave him the right sort of support to keep applying for jobs despite the knock-backs:

“There’s a lot more freedom, they’re not pressuring you to get a job, they’re not on your back like the job centre ‘you’ve got to get a job, you’ve got to get a job, or this is going to get stopped’, they understand that you don’t get a job overnight, there’s a process in getting a job. It took me 2, 3 months, I was getting knocked back constantly, it kinda knocks a bit out of your confidence, and you’re thinking ‘I know what’s going to happen’ and these’ll install the confidence back in you... If you saw a job, they’d say ring it, they’d say ‘do you know what to say?’ If you didn’t, they’d write down a couple of things for us to say, say this, if you need anyone to speak for you, we’ll do it.”

After being on the scheme, despite a set-back, Callum has been determined to stay in work:

“Once you’re in a job, then you come out of a job, you’re used to that money, and that work ethic, so you want to get back into a job. I got that labouring job, on the Partington sports centre, I’ve worked in a warehouse, just picking and packing, and then after this, I got 2 year’s prison sentence, and when I got out, I applied for a job in Morrisons, Salford Quays, the new one, and they actually asked the Big Life for a reference for me. I’m actually working at that place now, thanks to the Big Life for my reference... Now I’m in a permanent one where my manager’s proud of me, like he’s trying to make me up to a supervisor, like all my store managers, they all know my name through my work. I just keep my head down and work, that’s all I do now.”

Callum’s life is now a lot more stable. He gets on much better with his family and is getting into less trouble:

“Yeah, it does keep you on the straight and narrow, it makes you think, do I want to go back to where I was, or do I want to stay where I’m at, and once you get a taste of working, money, you want to stay on that more, because you’re not getting hassled off anyone. I’m not getting in trouble. I’ve got my own money. I can do what I want. I can go to the pub with my friends, have a game of pool. You don’t want to go back, you’ve taken 2 steps forward no one wants to go 2 steps back, you always want to move on in life, and that’s what it does for you.”

His new-found maturity extends to his community, where he believes he is seen as a realistic yet positive role model:

“Once you’re on here and you start doing things like flagging, fencing, you come to appreciate what you’ve done. So then you look at your community different. Now, I’ve seen things that I’ve done that are still standing today. But if I saw someone young coming over, trying to knock it down, I’d say stop it, cause for one the resident won’t like it and second, you’ll get in trouble. I’ve been around and kids know who I am, I know who they are, they know where I’ve been, they know my name round here, so they listen to me.”

When asked what he would say to anyone who was thinking of funding the Skills2Build project Callum said:

“I’d just tell them about my life, how it’s helped me, how it’s changed my life, going from troublesome young lad to them putting me in a job, keeping me out of trouble, fair enough later on I’ve been in prison, it’s not something I’m proud of, but I’ve changed my life, from having a criminal background. I have a job, I’ve been in it eight months now, I’ve done my English, my maths, which I weren’t good at, just given me things that you need in life. I’d just tell them what this company did for me. And if they didn’t get funding after that, there’s no hope for nobody! People moan about crime and ‘The Youth’ nowadays, this is a place here to help people like that.”

2. Lisa

Lisa is 26 and a mother of Alex, her eight year-old boy. She joined Skills2Build as her first job when her son went to school:

“I didn’t have any GCSEs. I was a sod in school. I had nothing. I had no GCSEs. That’s obviously my own fault... after leaving school I did have a few jobs but I got pregnant really early. I got pregnant when I was 17. I had my son when I was 18 and there was five years between me having him and him going to school. That’s when I realised that I needed a job when he went to school, and I realised that I needed a job and I found it hard to get a job. But my brother had been in here the year before. I came in here to do some exams in English and maths and that.”

When she started, Lisa was the first woman to join, and the project had a bit of a ‘blokey’ image:

“They said there was a job going. I did have to put a bit of pressure on them to get it because, ya know, it was all full of men. But yeah they said come in and there was an interview and I got it.”

For Lisa, Skills2Build was a big challenge but it was the perfect opportunity for returning to work after having time off to raise her son:

“Obviously I hadn’t been in work for 5-6 years... and also it’s discipline. You don’t want to start off in a job where you’re sat at a computer all day. You want to discipline yourself to see how far you can go. [Here] You’re fencing, you’re flagging, you’re gardening. It’s not easy stuff, so I classed it as discipline. If you want a job, you start off the hard way... if you can do that, anything that comes after that isn’t going to bother you.”

Lisa remembers her first days on the project:

“Hard, really hard. I struggled at first to be honest with you. I’ll always remember my first day. The morning I come in and they told me all about it and in the afternoon I went out. I was in the garden and there was a group of lads and we were doing flagging and I didn’t feel comfortable being there. I thought to myself, I think I’ve made a mistake. But within two weeks I fitted in really quick, I picked everything up and I started to really enjoy it... you think that they’d undermine you and that but there was none of that. They were like ‘yeah, you’re a girl get over it. You applied for this job, so do it.’ We just gelled. We was a team. Even when you’re new, they treat you like you’ve been there for years, like they already know you.”

After years caring for her son, Skills2Build helped Lisa to realise that a lot of things she thought she could not do were possible. As she explained:

“You realise that there’s stuff that you can do that you never thought that you can do. This is where I was me. This was my ‘me’ time, do you know what I mean? I was Lisa here but mom at home. I feel like I got quite a lot out of it to

be honest with you... You get to do a lot of things that you didn't think you could do. So if someone says to me now, 'can you do this?' Then yeah, I can do that... Like, lifting something. So say I was working in an office and they had a delivery and it was a desk in a flat pack, then I can build that. I can do that now. So if something's broken, then I can fix it because I've done stuff like that now. Do you know what I mean? It's not just around one job. It's about anything. Take painting. I've done painting on here. Everything, in my house from top to bottom I do and that comes from here."

Not only did Skills2Build make Lisa more confident about what she could achieve, she was able to provide for her son while training:

"It made a lot of difference, with paying rent and everything. I don't even know how to word it. It made you feel like you're somebody not nobody really. Even when you're getting your rent paid when you're on the social, it's not a good feeling. You know that you're paying your way. Like when my son wanted something I could go out and get it for him. When you're living on job seekers allowance: it's £50 a week, when you've paid your gas, your TV and your electric there's nothing left. So if your son's got holes in his pants they're going to have to stay there. So he's getting bullied in school because of the state of him but when you was working there was none of that."

When asked how Skills2Build could be improved she said that the project could not provide anything more but then thought that more girls should be allowed on the scheme because, for many young women in Partington, the alternative was getting pregnant. To get more women involved in the scheme, Lisa suggested:

"I don't know, get them to come in for a day, do you know? Hammer a few fences with the lads and that and show em that it's nothing to be scared of and that they will help you and they'll go out of their way. Not just the supervisors but the trainees as well. They will go out their way to help you if you're struggling, and also, with that day teaching them to knock a fence together. Well they're going to think I can do that now, there's another thing they can do. They're probably intimidated as well, thinking that they can't do this. Cause a lot of people have said to me 'how do you cope working with a load of men?', but I just say to them, you're just one of them at the end of the day, you are one of them, that's how they treat you."

Apart from that, she finished:

"I've got no complaints about the place and if they put a contract in front of me now I'd sign it, I'm telling you. I'd come back here any day."

3. Dave

Dave is twenty years old and had lived in Partington all his life. He had come in to be interviewed on his lunch hour, while some sealant dried on a bath he was fitting. He spoke with a maturity and focus that suggested he had faced difficulties but found what he wants to do in life.

Dave joined Skills2Build when he was sixteen during what must have been a fairly trying time for him. Dave was raised by his granddad, who died just as Dave became a dad and started working at Skills2Build:

“I’d just left school, I was doing plumbing in college but I’d just had enough of sitting in a classroom... [I wanted] to get out working really, I’d already done my entry level but I couldn’t be bothered to sit in a classroom... I’d been working in the garden with him [his granddad] since I was about four, learning how to stack bricks when I was about six, I’ve always been out working with him.”

Starting a first job from school is an anxious time but Dave was made to feel like a useful member of the team at Skills2Build:

“Yeah, because you’re on, you know the lads who are working here cause they’re from the area, so that makes it a lot easier as well... when we first started, it was people like ourselves, who’d not really done much work, and stuff like that. So when we were doing those garage doors, we had someone come out to show us, and I actually went in the garage and he showed me. So then I showed the rest of the lads how to do the garage doors.”

While on Skills2Build Dave quickly gained a reputation for being good at his job and was put forward for an apprenticeship with a local housing association,

“I was on it for about four months. It was a six-month course but I was only on it four months, then I found a job... From just being on here, they was looking for someone and they went through who they were looking for, someone young who’s willing to work and could learn, and they [Skills2Build] put me forward and I got the job straight away then”

Although only with Skills2Build for four months, Dave gained both formal qualifications and a range of life skills,

“Well, obviously helping me get my CSCS, so I could go on site, learning my theory while I was working and earning money at the same time, plus it gets you into a routine, getting up and being at work on time, stuff like that... I guess it’s a different thing when you’ve got to get yourself up, then you’ve got a bit of money, so you go out, then you’ve got to get up in the morning, it’s a different world isn’t it? It teaches you really how to steady your money, cause you only earn so much and obviously you’re not on benefits or anything else, so you’ve got to make that money last you a month so it helps you manage money better.”

Since leaving Skills2Build, Big Life Employment have continued to support Dave in further skills development:

“Most of my courses are through them now. Yeah, I’ve done them on site, I’ve just done my City & Guilds level 2 construction, joinery. I want to do my plumbing but that one’s a bit too dear so I might have to go to night school and pay for that one myself.”

Skills2Build seemed to come along at just the right time for Dave, and he was clear about the benefits of the scheme:

“It’s good to get into work, instead of being sat there, on the dole, doing nothing, waiting for a job here, you’re looking as well as working, so it’s good in that way as well, plus you’re always learning as well. Like, if you only know a bit of painting and decorating, here, you’re doing flagging, gardening, cleaning and all sorts of other stuff that they do – fencing, you could learn a lot of stuff. And it’s manual labour as well, so it’s good, teaches how to graft, keep going throughout the day.”

His friends did not have the same opportunity and are currently not doing as well as him:

“Well, like the rest of my mates, would have finished my college, gas level 3, not had no money to do my driving, no licence and no jobs. My mate there’s fully qualified, Corgi registered, didn’t have no money to do his driving now he’s working as a mixer, wheeling wheelbarrows.”

Dave thinks that the project is good for not only the trainees that get taken on but for the wider community and especially the youth of Partington:

“When their contract here is ending, they’re leaving and going and getting work. You see them stood at the bus stop in the morning, lads from when I was here or who’ve come after me, they’re out working – it does work. Obviously they [younger people] see them going out to work every day, having money, getting nice clothes, they want that as well. So they’ll get out to work won’t they?”

When asked to sum-up Skills2Build Dave said, simply:

“It’s good for the community. It gets lads working.”

4. Neil

Neil is 22 years old and has been at Skills2Build for 11 months. His mind is focused on finding work when his time on the project comes to an end. It's clear that he is driven to find work.

Neil describes how he came to work on Skills2Build:

“All my mates worked here so obviously they told me about it, it's right on my doorstep. I tried three times, had three interviews, before I got this job... I used to come in every week and say 'any jobs going?' I used to pester them. That's the best way to get a job. Pester them. They get fed up of saying no and ask you in for an interview.”

He is overwhelmingly positive about his experience on Skills2Build:

“It's just made everything easier, having a wage. We're going on holiday in two weeks... taking my little lad to Ibiza for two weeks. I've not been able to do that for six years because I've not been in work... I got this job just before Christmas, which was a massive help. I could buy him what he wanted then. But we was always worried before about what we're going to do about this Christmas, birthdays or just day to day. We had a nice Christmas because of this place.”

Now, however, he is coming to the end of his time on the project, the staff at Skills2Build are helping him look for work:

“My CV when you first looked at it was all basic. Well he sifted through it all, put all the stuff in the right places. I was making mistakes, my phone number that was on my CV wasn't even my phone number. I put the numbers the wrong way around! He sorted that out for me... It looks mint now.”

Searching for a job is often a dispiriting experience:

“When I look for a job... sometimes I feel nervous and sometimes I feel disappointment even before I've sent it off because I've emailed people, sent them CVs and application forms they've never got back to me. Even if they said 'sorry, it was unsuccessful' I'd be happy with that but they don't get back to you at all and that frustrates me. I just think it's going to be another one that don't get back to me. If they just sent you an email back saying you're not successful then at least I'd known that they'd looked at it.”

There is only so much that Skills2Build can do when a trainee finishes their time on the project but in Neil's case he is going to do paid work experience at another company:

“There's one thing they did, you know Tricia? Because I've got my forklift truck... when you ring up jobs they say okay you've got the licence but have you got any experience, I can't get experience unless someone gives me a

job. The day I passed my driving test and Angela was driving back and we stopped off at Worley's where we get our concrete and stuff from she asked the boss there if I can work there for two weeks. So here will pay them for me working there. So they've got me free for two weeks and I've got some work experience on a forklift and he let me do it."

Looking back at his time at Skills2Build, Neil said:

"It is a good place to work, a really good place to work. Everyone's just friendly. I've never had a reason not to like it. I've never had a reason not to like it. I'm not a bad person, never been late, always done my work, so no one's had to shout at me... I describe it as a good place to work. It made me feel happy. It feels good to be able to come to work everyday. You come in every morning and everyone's just cheerful."

5. Pete

Pete was born in Partington but moved away when he got married. However he moved back to Partington when his mum got ill. Pete has eight children. Before he got the job with Skills2Build he'd been unemployed for six years. He describes moving back to Partington as 'a big downfall' because where they had lived in Warrington was near to the canal and several parks. He describes Partington as '*a little village in the middle of nowhere that's derelict – it's not connected to anything.*'

He is very grateful to the Big Life company for giving him a chance as after being unemployed for six years he had got to the stage where he was:

"Applying for about 12 jobs a week so every fortnight there was 24 jobs in the book that I took to the job centre but I was getting no come back all the time so I got to the stage where I thought sod it and I was going with a blank book and told him what's the point. Everytime I went for a job there was a barrier there, a block there – you've been out of work for six years."

He appreciates the fact that the point system that Skills2Build operate means that the longer you've been out of work and any criminal records you've got give you a better chance of being taken on. Before Skills2Build he felt that no-one would give him a chance.

He was delighted when he heard he had got the job:

"I was stood in my garden having a fag and I got this phone call and I answered it and it was Tricia from here and she said we'd like to offer you a job. I put the phone down and I couldn't stop smiling and I was you know someone's taken a chance on me, I was buzzing I really was buzzing... I don't want to leave here."

He feels that the company has been very good to him and provided him with a range of opportunities, all of which he has made the most of. They have put him through his CSCS card and helped him to study for and take his level 1 English and maths, in addition, to learning a range of skills for labouring work including:

"All aspects of fencing – how to dig a hole, how to make a mix, what size you need, how much for each garden... same with flagging you've got to know how to work out an area."

He is proud of all he's achieved and very grateful for the opportunities that he's been given by Skills2Build:

"I know how to do it all now there's nothing I can't do... everything they said that they'd give me they've given me and a little bit more."

Being in work has not only helped him to develop skills but has also helped Pete with his family relationships and particularly his marriage as having space from each other means they are always pleased to see each other at the end of the day. For his children he feels they can now hold their head up at school as:

“Before I worked here sometimes they turn around and ask well what does your dad do... well now they can turn around and say my dad’s a labourer or my dad’s just passed his exams at college or my dad does flagging and wears big boots.”

Pete said that he couldn’t imagine going back to being out of work:

“I couldn’t be out of work again – before I worked here it got to the stage where I was going down that hill thinking I’m never going to work again I don’t care anymore. They got me at the right time, if they’d got me six months later I’d have just said no I don’t want your job. Now if I don’t get a job before the end I’ll be putting in for jobs.”

He described the feeling of self worth that the job gives him, in direct contrast to recent media portrayals of the long term unemployed:

“It’s a nice feeling as well because I’m not sponging off the state I’m actually supplying for myself for my family. It feels good. Like when the kids ask for something I can say here you are... it feels good. In the morning I feel good putting my yellow jacket on I feel good cause I know I’m going out to work.”

Being employed has meant that he’s recently been able to buy a car and he is renewing his vows with his wife as:

“We’ve been through hell and back the last 11 years. When I wasn’t working we was very poor so it was just nip to the registry office and home for a sandwich – this time she can have what she wants because I’m working.”

He feels that the Big Life Company were clear from the beginning that the job was a 12 month contract intended to give people:

“A start, that chance that nobody else will give them and give them that confidence that there is a company that wants them and will help them to get on in life.”

He speaks very highly of all the supervisors who he says will help you out as much as they can with CVs and on the computer. Pete said that when a trainee is coming to the end of their contract supervisors make extra time for them and help them search for jobs. He also talked about the ongoing support that his own supervisor has offered him:

“He’s one of them supervisors I can go to him, I can talk to him and can tell him anything. I can confide in him and he’s always there for me. If I need help from him he will do whatever he can for his boys. If I ever need anything he’ll help us out. He’s always on top of everything, does appraisals every month, helping us to fulfil our targets.”

Pete loves the company and the work so much that he was hoping to be taken on in a supervisor’s job when his year finishes. Unfortunately, he now realises that this is unlikely.

Pete also feels that it is good that they are out in the local community doing the work and that this makes him feel good:

“It’s like when I’m out there and I’m doing some fencing or something and some friends walk past or some of my family you go look at me I’m working and it feels good. It makes me feel good about myself but I don’t want them to feel bad about it.”

He’s recommended the company to several of his friends who are unemployed because:

“... it is a good place to work, the environment is good, the way everything works is good. You get in there you get stuck in, you can have a laugh. It’s a good atmosphere. I’m happy in my job, I’d be happy here in 20 years if they kept me on, its work, you’re getting paid for it. The staff are brilliant, the lads are brilliant they can’t do enough for you.”

ⁱ The project was initially called “Giving a Lift”

ⁱⁱ Harvest Housing later merged with Arena Housing to become Your Housing Trust

ⁱⁱⁱ Skills2Build: “An opportunity for a push start” Helen Manchester and James Duggan, June 2012