**Marketing Innovation Awards 2012-13**

**Abertillery Library Work Club (Blaenau Gwent Libraries)**

**Introduction**

“Recognising that the best route out of poverty is through employment, we will continue to help people to improve their skills and enhance the relevance of their qualifications. We will also remove other barriers to employment – from practical barriers such as accessibility, to less tangible barriers such as poverty of aspiration – helping people to move on to and up the employment ladder”

**Tackling Poverty, 7th March 2012,**

**The Welsh Government**

Abertillery Library was awarded a Community Learning Libraries grant in March 2009, with the refurbishment work on the library being undertaken during the winter of 2009 and spring of 2010. The library reopened in April 2010, and it soon became apparent that a large number of people were visiting the library to conduct job searches and to either update or create CVs to assist in their job hunting.

Blaenau Gwent is an area that suffers from high unemployment and low literacy among its adult working age population - in February 2010, around 8.2 per cent of the working age population in Blaenau Gwent were claiming Jobseeker's Allowance. The equivalent figure for Wales was 4.6 per cent. Also, in 2008, around 65 per cent of working age adults were in employment compared with 71 per cent in Wales. Other worrying statistics show that in 2007, an estimated 20 per cent of working age adults in Blaenau Gwent had no qualifications - this compares with 15 per cent in Wales. Blaenau Gwent is also the most digitally excluded local authority in Wales.

From conversations that were held with the relevant customers, there seemed to be little or no support that was readily available to them. Library staff were able to assist with updating and creating CVs and were able to signpost customers to websites where they could conduct job searches, it was apparent that a wider network of support would be very beneficial to people.

An event was held in the library in April 2011 to celebrate the one year “anniversary” of the reopening of the library after its refurbishment, where a number of agencies were invited to be present. One of these agencies was Abertillery Communities First. An informal conversation with the staff of Abertillery Communities First showed that they had similar thoughts to the library staff about providing more structured support to those seeking employment, and also to those people looking to enhance or change their existing employment choices.

Meetings between Communities First and the library were held during the following summer which eventually led to a firm commitment to introduce a pilot project to assess the feasibility of a work club to be held in Abertillery Library for 3 hours every week, involving a range of partner agencies which could provide help and support for those seeking employment in the Abertillery area.

Abertillery Library Work Club began in early 2012, and is a collaborative approach between a number of organisations. Its main objective is “to provide a one-to-one service, offering a wider scale of support to improve peoples’ employability, confidence and to move them closer to the job market”.

**Partnerships**

It was recognised very early on in conversations that the Work Club was potentially going to be very demanding and quite intensive of staff time. A number of other agencies were approached over the course of several months about becoming involved in the project, many of which had limited experience of working with the library service. The agencies were very enthusiastic about the project, and the following have become fully involved in supporting and being part of the sessions along with the library service and Communities First:

* Job Centre Plus
* Careers Wales
* Want 2 Work
* TAFY
* Remploy
* Basic Skills Agency
* PrimeCymru
* QWEST
* BTCV
* BGEffect
* Morphious
* Bridges to Work
* School gates
* Blaenau Gwent Adult Education

**How it works**

The Abertillery Library Work Club offers help with:

* CV advice
* Job search
* Help with e-mail and internet
* Basic skills
* Training and volunteering

Sessions are held every Wednesday morning from 9.30-12.30 and clients can make appointments to attend or can simply “drop in” for advice and support. There is no restriction on client profile, and even people who are currently employed can access the Work Club. Appropriate assistance for individual needs is offered by the partnership agencies, and free printing is offered by the library service where required. Library staff hold a visible and practical role in assisting customers to set up email accounts and provide the initial greeting for clients. They also have an ongoing and visible role in identifying customers that may benefit from the Work Club, and refer them to the weekly sessions. Library staff also perform a connecting role as they are situated in an ideal position to provide help and support for clients outside of the formal sessions. This has also provided opportunities for referrals to the project around developments in Universal Jobmatch, the DirectGov website and the Government Gateway.

**Statistics**

* 787 visits have taken place to the Work Club sessions since the project has begun
* The gender of clients is 47% male; 53% female
* The age ranges are:

16-25 – 18%

26-35 – 21%

36-45 – 24%

45-50 – 12%

50+ - 25%

**Results**

* Approximately 50% of clients have registered with the library as a direct result of the Work Club. A large number of these new registrations are from what would be termed “hard to reach” adults.
* 12 direct referrals for follow up IT “taster sessions” with library staff (other clients have used the library’s People’s Network machines to develop their IT skills independently)
* 80 people have been referred for relevant training to partner agencies
* Verbal consultation indicated that 100% of those in attendance during September – November 2012 felt they had received the relevant advice, support and resources
* Verbal consultation indicated that 100% of those in attendance during September – November 2012 felt empowered about choices and options available
* Verbal consultation indicated that 100% of those in attendance during September – November 2012 felt their confidence had increased and they are more confident in applying for jobs.
* Seven people reported back that they had gained employment, although this is not a true reflection of the total number of people who have gained employment as some people will not have notified agencies of having gained employment.
* Want 2 Work have worked with three clients to support them in re-entering the labour market following long term reliance on Incapacity benefit/Employment Support Allowance
* There has been continued support to Remploy ex-employees, along with the coordination of a partnership funding bid to support ongoing work with TAFY, Careers Wales and WEA. To date, six ex­-Remploy employees have gained employment
* There has been continued support to Enterprise Facilitator to engage with clients. To date five clients have been referred to BG Effect for business start up support
* 12 people referred to “First Click” IT training in partnership with Communities 2.0, taking place in the library on a weekly basis
* 33 people referred to either Basic Skills Agency or Blaenau Gwent Adult Education to improve numeracy and/or literacy skills
* 5 people referred to agencies in the voluntary sector to gain experience in an interested work area

**Impact**

The Work Club has had an impact on Abertillery Library in a number of ways, some less expected than others. Apart from the busiest day of the week in the library quickly becoming a Wednesday(!), the library has seen an increase in library membership from a demographic group that has been traditionally been difficult to reach via traditional library services and promotion. Blaenau Gwent suffers from very low literacy levels, and is seen by many in the borough as being a “middle class” service. This project has helped break down those barriers, with the staff and services now seen as being very accessible.

There has also been an increased use of the Peoples Network facility in the library. Apart from the increased use during the Work Club itself, use has been increased outside of those times, with a number of clients visiting to undertake job searches, or in many instances, simply to improve their IT skills.

Some of this has come about through the increased contact with other agencies involved. These agencies have become much more aware of what a modern and contemporary library can offer and have encouraged people to visit and make use of those facilities. That can only bode well for future use and partnership working, even outside of the Work Club project.

We have also seen some unexpected results. One of these is that some clients took part in this year’s Six Book Challenge, which we were certainly not targeting when the project started!

During the project, a number of areas associated with health and wellbeing were identified, and clients were able to be signposted in relevant directions. Clients with issues around housing issues and homelessness were put in contact with Shelter Cymru. Also, issues around alcoholism were referred to the Crime Reduction Initiatives (CRI), and areas of financial inclusion were able to be signposted and assisted via the Smart Money Credit Union. Not only does helping and advising in these areas contribute to improving a person’s employability, it has a major impact on an individual’s health and wellbeing.

Finally, it was gratifying to know that the project has been hailed by Job Centre Plus as an example of “Best Practice”.

**Promotion**

Shortly before the launch of the project, a poster advertising it was placed in all Blaenau Gwent Libraries, as well as the majority of shops and businesses in Abertillery (see attachment)

The Work Club was also promoted on the Blaenau Gwent CBC’s website and Facebook account, as well as the Job Centre Plus Twitter account.

Partner organisations were very enthusiastic and promoted the Work Club internally within their organisations, leading to an immediate and positive response from clients to the project. Word of mouth also played a major role in promoting what was happening.

Information about the project was included in the Abertillery Communities First newsletter – *Community Update* (see attachment). This newsletter is distributed to every household in the Abertillery catchment area.

Two promotional films highlighting and advertising the Work Club are currently being produced in partnership with Red Slate Films. These films will be targeted at both customers and strategic partners, and will be posted online at [www.3VTV.co.uk](http://www.3VTV.co.uk) and at [www.redslatefilms.com](http://www.redslatefilms.com) (At the time of submitting the bid, these films have not been uploaded but are expected to be very shortly once final editing is complete). Once both films are complete, they will be shown on the Abertillery Facebook site as well as the previously mentioned websites, and will be broadcast across Blaenau Gwent.

**The Future**

The Abertillery Library Work Club has been very successful, and has far exceeded the initial expectations of it. There is an acknowledgement that more formal evaluation and assessment needs to take place. Certainly, more advocacy work needs to be done, and it is proposed that further monitoring and evaluation work will be undertaken, using Survey Monkey.

There is a possibility of some partnership work with a local youth club, using some of the current agencies to do some one-to-one work with young people. Some of the young adults are aware of the Work Club and are looking for some career advice but are intimidated by the number of adults in the library during the Work Club sessions. Because of this, there may be some opportunity for working with another traditionally hard to reach demographic group.

There is also the possibility that the Work Club could extend to a second weekly session because of the number of people attending the current session. Some very preliminary discussions have started about the best way to do this. A second session in Abertillery Library during the week could be introduced, but our main partner, Communities First, are looking to target the most deprived communities in the Abertillery catchment area. Because of this, it may be that we will look at developing a Work Club in an outlying community of the town. While this would take away a static library link, it may be an interesting opportunity to develop some work with the recently introduced Outreach team of the library service.

**Acknowledgements**

Thanks must go out to all the agencies involved in the project. Without them, the library service alone could not have undertaken what has become a quite intensive project.

However, special thanks must be given to Lesley Thomas, Senior Library Assistant, and Andrew Pugh, Communities First, for having that first discussion back in April 2011 about the need for something like this to happen, and for having the determination to keep wanting it to happen. Without them, this project may never have seen the light of day, and a large number of people would be less employable than they currently are.