

**Active Learning Companies  
Project Evaluation**

**Final Report**

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# 1 Introduction]

## 1.1 The ALC project

The Active Learning Companies (ALCs) project was set up in January 2005 as a three year programme funded by the Big Lottery and Sport England. It was led by Warwickshire College working in partnership with Greater Warwickshire Sport, Crystal Presentations and BBC Coventry and Warwickshire.

The aim of the project was to encourage employers in the West Midlands to adopt a 'work/life balance' approach to workforce development by focusing on their employees' health and fitness as learning and personal development issues. Apart from improvements in individuals' fitness and health awareness, the intention was also to prove the business benefits of such programmes by sponsoring them in the workplace.

Participating companies were identified by their location in areas (rural or urban) where there was limited access to leisure facilities. Key criteria also included staff profiles, targeting those in sedentary occupations (many of them women) or in groups who show relatively low participation rates in physical activity.

The original intention was to offer companies the services of a physical trainer and learning mentor on site.<sup>1</sup> Their job was to customize a blended physical activity/ learning programme for each workplace. Key individuals were identified in each company and offered training to act as Active Learning Representatives.

Regular checks were made of each employee's level of fitness and wellbeing - the first one conducted as soon as possible after people registered for the programme and then again (in practice, usually no more than once) at defined intervals thereafter. Results were fed back to participants, along with further one-to-one advice on diet, for example, or exercise routines. A record was made of their progress in individual log books, with additional notes setting out an agreed personal action plan, covering either health and fitness goals and/or progression on to further learning. Learning advisers were also available to help those who might acquire an interest in further learning to take the appropriate next steps, such as improving their study skills or gaining vocational or work-related qualifications.

A distance learning pack call **LEARNINGWELL**, containing four learning modules (Move Well, Eat Well, Be Well and Do Well) was sent to all participants, supported by access to interactive materials on the project's website at [www.learningwell.org.uk](http://www.learningwell.org.uk). Topics covered included the importance of a balanced diet, becoming and remaining active, personal wellbeing, and setting and achieving goals. When each module had been worked through, learners were invited to complete a multiple choice questionnaire which provided evidence towards the award of a national (OCN) qualification. Where participants successfully completed 10 hours of activity in the project (e.g. by completing their first two learning modules), they would qualify for the award of 1 unit. Completing 30 guided learning hours including all four modules would earn 3 units.

Where appropriate and possible (so not in all cases), a short series of exercise sessions was organized by ALC fitness instructors, either at or close to the workplace. These might include walks at lunchtimes, mini-circuit training sessions or exercise bike rides, sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> Fitness instructors who were employed directly by the College to deliver the project were also encouraged to undertake NVQ Level 3 training in adult information, advice and guidance (IAG). This was designed to equip them to play both a fitness and learning advisory role.

linked to in-house competitions (e.g. team races to clock up the exercise bike miles it would take to cycle from London to Brighton, or walking the furthest at work in a week, or beating own best times). Using equipment loaned by the project (exercise balls and bikes, pedometers, etc.), these sessions encouraged employees to put the theory they were learning into practice. Small prizes were offered to participants in some of these schemes as well, as modest incentives to help them keep going, and to recognize and reward their efforts.

On average, each company committed to the programme for 12 weeks, allowing ALC instructors regular access to employees for fitness checks or exercise sessions. Some employers offered such access during working hours, others during lunch breaks, and others again immediately before or after shift changeovers.

Another part of the original thinking behind the project had been to use it to establish links with local leisure service providers, such as gyms and fitness centres, located closer to participating workplaces. It was hoped that some of these providers could be 'subcontracted' to deliver the programme on behalf of the College, acting almost as franchisees. Some would also be able to offer individuals the chance to continue once the ALC element ceased.

Overall, therefore, our understanding of the original ALC concept was that it should:

- Offer a flexible and tailored health and fitness programme designed to broaden the scope of existing workforce development activities by establishing an extra 'work/life balance' dimension.
- Introduce employers to the business benefits of active employee participation in healthier lifestyles.
- Introduce employees to the personal benefits of such activities.
- Encourage employees to progress into further learning, with either a health and fitness focus or wider interest.

By October 2007, a total of 50 companies from across the West Midlands (with a particular concentration of firms in Coventry and Warwickshire) had agreed to participate in the ALC project. Of these, 27 had completed the programme, six were part way through it and 15 were in the planning stages. Only two companies dropped out in the two and half years that the programme had been running at the time of writing this report. As a result, the ALC has so far helped over 300 people complete two physical fitness checks, start regular exercise and achieve a qualification. A further 200+ have taken advantage of the physical fitness checks.

## **1.2 The evaluation – focus and methodology**

The main focus of this evaluation has been to assess:

- The impact of the ALC project on *individual learners/* participants (for example, in terms of their commitment and progression on to further learning/ personal development activities).
- Its impact on *employer attitudes* to workforce/ personal development in the workplace.
- The impact of the ALC approach on *business performance* (including 'soft' measures and other perceived impacts e.g. on absenteeism and sickness rates, employee retention and motivation).
- Opportunities to '*mainstream*' the ALC product, either as a stand-alone commercial service or as an adjunct to other funded delivery.

We initially selected a small sample of companies that had already completed or were close to concluding their involvement in the project. They included:

- Data input and customer care centre - with 330 employees.
- A national food distribution centre - with 500 employees.
- Service call centre - with 300 people employed on site.
- European retail distribution centre - 350 employees.
- Construction equipment supply hub - employing 450 people locally.
- Direct mail facility - employing 120 people.
- Residential care home - with 50 people employed.
- A children's nursery - with 75 people employed on six sites in the area.

Between them, these eight companies employed over 2,000 people at sites in the project area, working in a range of sedentary, warehouse/ distribution and caring occupations. As can be seen, the sectors covered by these companies also varied, ranging from industries linked to financial services, domestic appliances, construction and food processing, through to health and social care.

We interviewed eight managers from these firms, most of whom had an HRM or team leadership role. Interviews were carried out face-to-face and lasted, on average, around 75 minutes. The format and results of these interviews are described in section 2 of this report.

The occupational groups represented in this sample of employers fitted the ALC criteria quite closely as well, either because they were in jobs that demand very little physical exertion (e.g. call centres) or, where the work was physically more taxing (e.g. lifting children, moving pallets, etc.), the people employed tended to be in socio-economic and demographic groups that were thought less likely to be engaged in healthier lifestyle activities in their own time.

We conducted face-to-face interviews with 26 ALC project participants. This group represents just under 10% of the 296 employees from the eight companies in our sample who participated in the ALC programme. The format and results of these interviews are described in section 3 of this report.

Employees were drawn from almost all levels within their respective organisations, including everyone from senior managers to cleaning staff. This, in itself, reveals something that may be unique about the ALC programme – the fact that it managed to attract and retain the commitment of a broad cross-section of employees from within the same organisation. This is an unexpected initial finding, perhaps, and quite unlike the profile we might expect from samples of employees involved in other workforce development programmes. In evaluations of workplace learning programmes conducted elsewhere we tend to find status distinctions and occupational hierarchies reflected fairly clearly in the types of learning opportunities being offered to and taken up by staff. The ALC seems, on the face of it, to be far more inclusive and 'democratic'. From a team building/ corporate identity point of view alone, this might be seen as a plus point.

In the early phase of the evaluation we consulted with an ALC Development and Evaluation Group set up specifically to guide our thinking on future mainstreaming opportunities. We also attended a number of main project steering group meetings and liaised with other project partners (including trade unions and employers) to explore opportunities to roll out the ALC 'product' as a stand-alone commercial programme/ and or a complementary learning activity that contributes to other funded delivery. Our view of the potential of the ALC offer as a business idea, and the conditions that such an offer would have to meet to be successful, is outlined in section 4. Section 4 also touches on the service providers' point of view and experiences, including those of frontline fitness instructors and project managers.

Finally, we draw together our main conclusions and recommendations, outlining our view of the strengths and weakness of the project and suggesting opportunities for future development or 'mainstreaming'.

## **2 Employer engagement, impacts and outcomes**

Interviews with company representatives took place at a variety of management levels – some very senior and others closer to the 'shop floor'. It soon became clear that the personnel suggested to us for these interviews were identified more for their working knowledge of the ALC programme than as representatives of 'corporate policy' as such. They had almost all taken part in the programme themselves, had clearly in some cases helped influence their company's original decision to participate and, in effect, acted as internal ALC champions, either in recognised 'learning rep' roles or in less formal ways. This meant that we often found ourselves discussing things they as participants would like to see their companies taking forward in future, but at some distance from the actual decision-makers.

We used an initial 'topic guide' to help structure these discussions. This probed:

- What had prompted the company to get involved.
- The number and types of employees who participated.
- How employees were encouraged by the company to get involved.
- Their view of the individual and business benefits of the project.
- Any downsides to the programme.
- The impact, if any, on the company's attitude to workforce development in general and on their longer-term commitment to ensuring the physical well being of employees.
- Finally, the extent to which the company might buy into to such a programme on a more commercial basis in future, and the conditions that would attach to such a proposition.

### **2.1 Getting the company involved**

The companies interviewed as part of the evaluation exercise had found out about the ALCs project through a variety of channels, including:

- Attendance at business network meetings, where a representative from the College had been invited to speak about the project.

- Direct approaches from the College to individual firms.
- ‘Happy accidents’ – getting to hear about the programme almost incidentally, sometimes through a chance remark of a colleague at work.

It is clear that most of the firms involved came to hear about the scheme because they were already ‘plugged in’ to local networks with like-minded businesses or had long-standing relationships with the College. These links made it more than likely that, at some point, news of the ALCs idea would filter through. There seems to have very little ‘cold calling’ from the College to companies they did not know at least something about beforehand, either directly or through other local networks. This approach appears to have been a deliberate (and relatively successful) part of the marketing strategy.<sup>2</sup>

Having said this, of course, the key to winning active commitment to such an initiative lies, ultimately, in how inclined these target companies are to hear the message and respond positively. In all cases, we found that employers felt the ALC had struck a chord with them. It was an idea whose time had come for most of them. Some were already aware of the importance of the physical and mental wellbeing of their staff as a good thing itself and had started to do something about it, albeit in an *ad hoc* kind of way:

*“We’d had the odd staff health check done in the past, but nothing very organised. And we’re aware of the need to keep our people fit and healthy. After all, you can lose a lot of days through sickness.”*

*“This can be a very stressful place to work, with customers shouting down the phone and getting very irate at times. We’ve had massage sessions in the office before now - anything that takes some of the stress out of the work.”*

Others said they saw the ALC as another string to their bow as an employer – as a competitive advantage, adding to the range of benefits they could offer to attract and keep good people: *“It was an extra benefit for us to offer our staff”* said one, and several companies echoed this view, including one who said: *“It was free and it was a great idea! It was another way for us to show staff that we cared about them. So it was a no-brainer for us!”*

Another said: *“We were looking for something different to do during our Health and Safety week and the Active Learning project came along at just the right time. Brilliant!”*

The important thing to emphasise here is that, as far as we can tell, participating companies were amenable and open in some way to the idea to start with. In some cases, they were already actively looking for new ways to engage and motivate staff, so that in one business the ALC project was seen as: *“... a perfect fit for us.”*

Personal as well as corporate factors also played an important part in motivating these companies to get involved. In almost every case, we found that the lead contacts and ‘champions’ of the ALC idea within the company turned out to be active participants in sports or in health and fitness activities of one sort or another in their own time. They included people who were part-time fitness instructors, for example, squash fanatics, football coaches, netball players, and keep fit club and gym members.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the earliest approaches to potential client companies had been by ‘cold calling’, such as at Stoneleigh business park. But these contacts had proved especially difficult to convert into ALC participants.

Studies of innovative workplace learning and development projects elsewhere<sup>3</sup> show that the role of these internal champions is likely to be critical both to the initial acceptance and ongoing success of new initiatives. And the most effective of these people tend to be in positions of some influence within the business who have a personal passion for the thing being promoted.

Overall, it seems that the ALC was very effectively promoted through the exploitation of existing networks and relationships, for the most part, using an enthusiastic sales team who adopted a very professional approach. Companies will not buy into projects simply because they are free, although that is clearly a consideration. Overriding all other factors from a business point of view has to be the crispness and relevance of the 'sales pitch' that is made, on the one hand, and how accurately the sales team has read each firm's readiness to hear their message.

## **2.2 Motivating the workforce**

Once senior management had bought into the ALC proposition, the company had to sell it to its employees. Most found this surprisingly easy, with internal publicity campaigns being met with considerable enthusiasm. Internal communications in all these workplaces are well-established, tried and tested, as might be expected in branch operations of some of the largest businesses in the UK (as well as in much smaller, stand-alone organisations who nevertheless pride themselves on the quality of their internal communications). Posters, emails, management and staff briefings and individual targeting all served to get the message across.

In many examples, the advance publicity was designed to drum up interest in lunchtime fitness 'taster' sessions being run on site by tutors or instructors working for the College. Canteens and other public spaces in the workplace were transformed briefly into mini-fitness studios. Blood pressures and body fat ratios were measured, questions answered and information handed out about the programme, with people being registered on the spot for their first full fitness check. ALC reps at these 'road show' events also handed out eye-catching 'freebies' which were designed to capture people's attention and draw them in – such as pedometers, sports caps and gym bags. A strong emphasis on having fun whilst getting fit worked well, (including in at least one case the opportunity to enter into a free raffle to win a leisure voucher worth £10).

The precise method of recruitment varied from one company to another and, indeed, changed over time. This was deliberate. A distinctive and planned feature of the ALCs approach was to work with each employer individually to determine what would best suit their particular types of employees, shift patterns, working conditions and other local requirements. Tailoring provision in this way was seen by the companies involved as a particular strength of the programme:

*"They listened to us from the beginning and tailored what they did to fit in with us – all very good."*

Promotional activities also changed over time, as the College team learned more about what worked best.

Some employers went to considerable and quite imaginative lengths to encourage participation, as the example below from one company illustrates. This is an internal (animated!) memo sent to all staff by email. Customising the offer to each workplace

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<sup>3</sup> Evaluation of the Workplace Essential Skills Project, UKRP Ltd, January 2007; The Workplace as a Learning Environment, UKRP Ltd, 2005; the Business Benefits of Workforce Development, UKRP Ltd, 2002.

depended, as can be seen here, on sharing ownership of the programme as far as possible with the internal champion, such that the project came to be seen as a partnership activity by many rather than an externally delivered and pre-packed service.

The example below also makes reference to the use of fitness instructors from a local gym. Part of the original plan had been to deliver the programme through local providers rather than a central College fitness team. As we shall see later, this 'franchise' model proved more difficult to manage, and more expensive. It was therefore dropped altogether towards the end of the project (in mid-2007) and brought entirely in-house.

If you are a member of the Active Learning Club, you'll be pleased to know that our first 'Exercise Programme' starts on Thursday 4th May. Learning Partnership Manager, Sheila Grainger has contacted the [...] Church, just down from the side entrance [...], where we will be able to run a variety of classes on a regular basis. We have also linked up with [a local gym] who have agreed to support our Active Learning Club and will be providing a designated fitness instructor to lead the classes and carry out regular on site physical fitness checks.

**NON MEMBERS:** If you haven't already signed up for the Active Learning Club but would like to attend our exercise programme, you will firstly need to complete an initial physical health check with a Cannons Fitness Instructor who will be available from 11.30am in the ground floor meeting room on the day of 4th May. This should only take up to 10 minutes of your time but is essential before you start participating in any of the classes.

**REMEMBER!** You don't have to be super fit ! The whole idea is aimed at encouraging individuals who do not already take part in physical activity to be aware of the benefits of engaging in sport and adopting a healthy lifestyle.

**SO...** if you would like to take part in either one or both of the classes on Thursday 4th May, please email your name to [...] before Wednesday 3rd May. The first class will be a gentle dance fit session, starting at 12.15pm and lasting for half an hour, followed by a gym ball workout at 1.15pm, again lasting for half an hour.



The initial results of all these efforts were very positive. Large numbers of staff registered in most of the workplaces we sampled, ranging from 10 in the smaller establishments to 70+ in the larger ones, all representing a significant proportion of the total number employed on site:

*“The College expected to get maybe 30 people signed up at most, but we knew we’d do better than that. As it turned out, more than 70 staff - that’s around 15% of the entire workforce at this site – registered for the programme. But we weren’t really all that surprised - we knew they’d go for it!”*

In one quite exceptional example, over 60% of employees signed up, and 91% of these people completed their ALC fitness checks and modules.

We mentioned earlier in this report the unusually inclusive nature of the programme from a workplace learning point of view. This is borne out in our sample, where we were told of company directors, line managers, staff from different departments, shop floor workers and cleaners all joining the programme. The age, race and gender mix achieved was also very positive, with 20 to 55 year olds, White, Black and Asian British, and a fair balance of men and women (though mostly women) taking part. This pattern of mixed participation was not untypical overall, with only a few exceptions.

Exceptions, though, are said to prove the rule and are worth noting because of the lessons that can be learned. The attrition rate in one workplace, for example, was very high. From a start-up number of around 60 people signed up from across a range of departments (office and operatives), participation in the project dwindled fairly rapidly to just a handful of office personnel. Part of the problem, we were told, was that the internal ‘partnership’ required between section heads and the learning reps responsible for organising the programme internally was weak from the outset. It was then fractured completely by a temporary breakdown in communications when a key figure went away on holiday. By the time he came back to work, section leaders elsewhere in the plant had started to tell their people they could not take time out to join the fitness programme and would not be offered the chance to work more flexibly to make up for lost production.

Our conclusions at the end of this report will refer to the primary importance of maintaining clear and consistent communications, both internally within companies and externally with the project delivery team. These initiatives are very easily knocked off course by unforeseen events in busy workplaces, where the priority at all times must be to meet production and service targets. Any hiccups in communications can throw things into confusion and lose people’s interest quite quickly. The quality of support offered to participants by fitness instructors is, of course, critical. But so too is that of the in-house active learning reps, whose job is to communicate, counsel and cajole, as well as to administer paperwork and juggle the logistics of different shifts and lunch breaks. The lesson here is that the best organized companies will derive the greatest value from ALC-type opportunities.

The final key to engaging and sustaining employee interest in such programmes from the employers’ point of view lay in how flexible the company was in allowing time ‘on the clock’ for fitness checks and other activities. Most of those interviewed for the evaluation had offered staff something like a ‘50:50’ deal. This allowed staff some time during working hours to participate in ALC activities (in some cases up to half an hour), but required people to use part of their own unpaid time to match this commitment. A minority, though, saw it as a perfectly legitimate ‘perk of the job’ to provide access to the programme on a flexible basis, and by prior arrangement with line managers, during office or works hours:

*“We couldn’t expect people to do this in their own time – that would be a slap in the face. You can’t give with one hand and then take away with the other.”*

### 2.3 Individual benefits

We asked managers and team leaders to describe what they saw as the benefits, if any, of the programme to individual participants. Interestingly, most were able to comment on this question from a personal as well as company point of view because so many of them (as we have seen) had participated themselves.

The reported individual benefits were noticeable, certainly, but somewhat muted:

*“A couple of people have joined a gym, I think, and a few others say they’re more active in general. It has certainly encouraged more of them to take a first step into a healthier lifestyle.”*

*“We know that quite a few hadn’t done anything since leaving school, so this was a bit of a wake-up call for them”*

*“They are definitely eating and drinking more healthily at lunchtimes – we’ve noticed less fizzy pop and pies in the canteen! And they’re talking to each other more about healthy living and what they’re doing to keep up the exercise at home.”*

Others mentioned quite specific benefits, such as people stopping smoking and losing weight. Several also thought that employees’ awareness of the importance of diet and exercise for their general health and wellbeing was much higher since taking part in the project. However, almost all thought that the benefits would be very difficult to sustain once the programme ended:

*“The key lies in how you take it forward, because it only lasts as long as it lasts”.*

Sustainability is the crucial issue here. We shall see in the next section, which reports on individual participants’ experiences and views, that it is extremely hard for many people – especially those with families (“... my other full-time job”) – to sustain their commitment to new health and fitness regimes once the discipline and routine of a *work-based* programme disappears. One employer told us:

*“This is a very personal thing but it’s also a social thing. Once you’ve built up a rapport with your fitness instructor it becomes something between the two of you and you don’t want to let them down. Your mates at work put you under pressure to keep going as well. So it’s easier to stick to it if you’re doing it at work with colleagues and if you’ve got to show some results to your instructor at the next fitness check.”*

The team spirit which such an activity can engender is an undoubted personal benefit, but also a plus point for the business, as we shall see below.

### 2.4 Business benefits

As we saw earlier, the ALC project was widely seen as something that added to the attraction of working at a place where health and fitness were on the employer’s agenda:

*“It was a bonus for the business from a staff recruitment and competitiveness point of view”.*

Apart from this, the other most common view of the business benefits related to the impact on staff morale, motivation and the ‘feel-good’ factor at work:

*“There was a real buzz about the place while we were all involved in the active learning project.”*

This 'buzz' is thought to translate into a greater likelihood that people will take fewer days off, will want to stay in the job, and will find other employment options less attractive. But any direct, measurable, 'bottom line' business benefits, we were told by one employer, were "... *light and slight.*" This view reflects a hard core of opinion within our sample. This view holds that, without quantifiable measures of reductions in sickness levels, for example, absenteeism or staff turnover ratios, it is impossible to attribute anything other than a general level of corporate benefit to initiatives such as the ALCs project. The hope is that anything that signals increased concern for employees' welfare is good for morale and therefore the business. Anything that shows that management care about their people and will do something to prove it is, at best, a positive thing and, at worst, harmless:

*"If nothing else, this will look good in the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) section of our next Annual Report."*

Against this rather hard-headed view, a minority see the ALC as a clear source of improved business performance:

*"Fit people are more productive and motivated. If they are feeling healthy, you'll reduce staff turnover and absenteeism. You can see people adopting a more positive personal attitude and this has a positive effect on their performance at work."*

Another said:

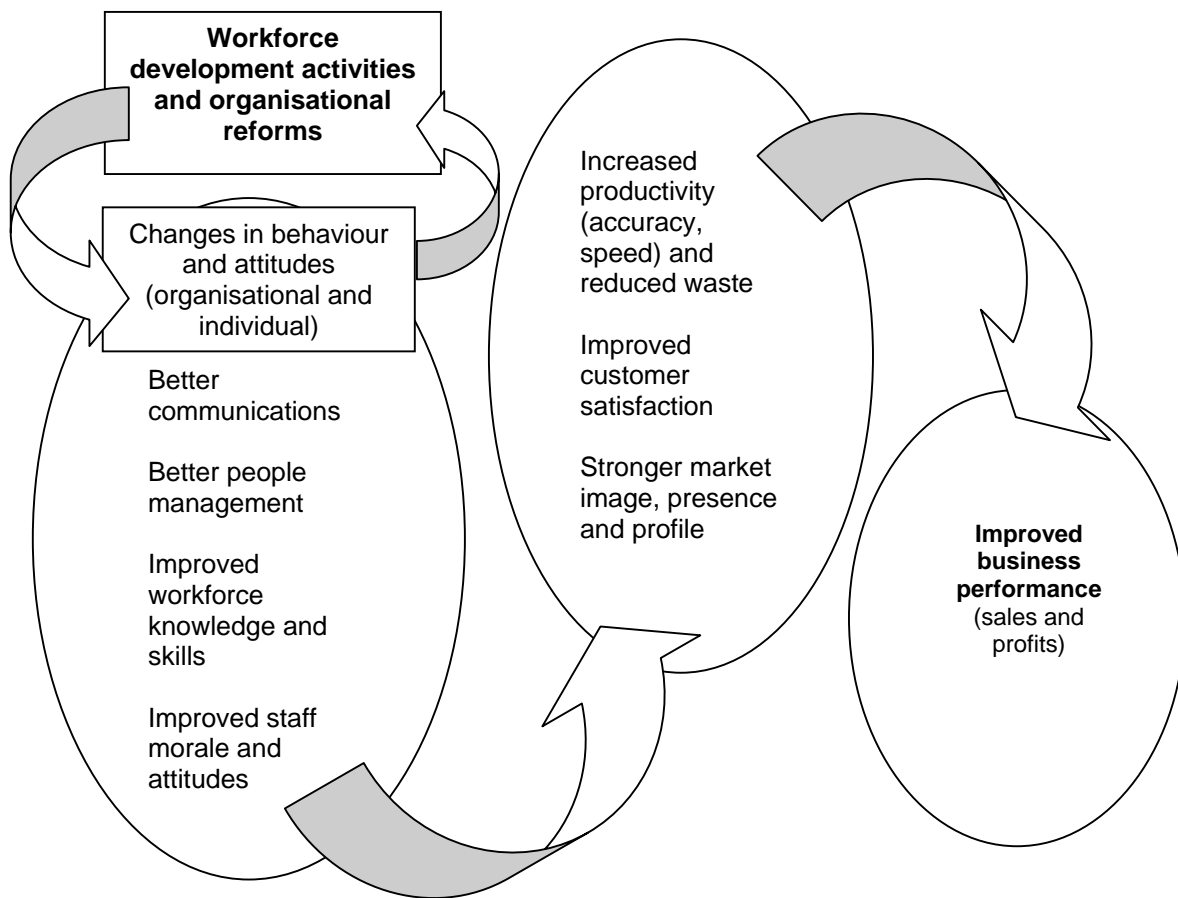
*"We are totally committed to this kind of thing and clearly see the business case for doing it. Learning Well extended our commitment to the well-being of our staff. Happy and healthy staff provide a happier and healthier service to our customers."*

It is noticeable that, relative to others in the same industry, these firms saw themselves as exceptionally aware of, and committed to, their social responsibilities as employers. Evidence of this uniqueness was put to us in one case in the form of a staff 'wellbeing strategy', and in another in proactive policies on sourcing 'fair trade' supplies from the third world.

According to this (albeit minority) business model, the effects of programmes such as the ALC are not seen as dramatic but as cumulative – as adding to the stock of positive messages about what their *people* are capable of achieving, which translates for them into what the *business* can achieve. For these companies, the decision to get involved in 'active learning' was a conscious and strategic choice, not just a 'nice to have' option. Their analysis of the relationship between ALC-type activities and commercial outcomes suggests a kind of business benefits 'flow chart' which connects improvements in staff morale, their sense of self-worth and growing commitment to the workplace to real gains in business performance.

The graphic below is taken from previous analyses we have carried out of a wide range of studies showing the business benefits of workforce development. It summarises and illustrates the case put to us by a number of employers during this evaluation for investing in workforce wellbeing and development programmes from a *business* point of view.

**Figure 1 The business benefits flow chart**



- Starting in the top left-hand corner of the model, the commitment to learning within any organisation can be seen as both the result of and a stimulus to changes in the behaviour of the people involved – starting, crucially, with senior management, but building also on the attitudes and motivation of employees. Where the commitment to *positive change* is shared by management and workforce – such as through organisational reforms like team working and quality circles – the commitment to *learning* is also likely to be strong.
- Learning changes the people involved and the systems they use to relate to each other, notably their communications. The change process that learning can kick-start is likely to surface not only in improved workforce knowledge and skills, but also in different, more positive views of the workplace and the job.
- These changes in attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills and behaviours will translate into other business benefits in the medium to long term – notably, into productivity gains and improved customer satisfaction. And these changes can secure a new place and prominence for the business in its target markets.
- Assuming that everything else remains equal (especially in the macro-economic environment), then improved sales and larger market share are both possible and likely outcomes. Add to these positive benefits increased productivity and lower costs, and bottom line improvements are bound to follow – that is, in profits and profitability.

Source: *The Workplace as a Learning Environment*, UK Research Partnership Ltd, for the Inclusive Workplace Partnership, February 2005

Finally, a number of employers reported recent improvements in staff sickness and absence rates. But they were quick to point out that they could not attribute these improvements to the ALC alone, or to any other single cause. The point they wanted to make is that any and all improvements in staff morale, motivation and workplace incentives are likely to make a positive contribution to overall performance levels. The ALC project was undoubtedly valuable, but in the context of a basket of other organisational and behavioral changes, much as the illustration above suggests. The last word on this topic goes to one of the most hard-nosed business managers we interviewed. He said:

*“The Learning Well project was a definite benefit and without doubt worth continuing”.*

## **2.5 The downsides**

Most of those questioned were keen to congratulate the project on the professionalism of the delivery staff involved, especially the fitness instructors. They were universally applauded for their sensitive approach to some of the personal issues raised during one-to-one fitness checks, reviews and advice sessions and for pacing activities to suit each individual:

*“They put people at their ease, were very supportive and non-threatening - excellent! It wasn't easy for some of our people to put themselves forward for this, but the instructor soon re-assured them and started to build their trust and confidence. This was essential for the whole thing to work.”*

On top of this, almost no one felt the admin side was over-complicated or especially burdensome. Taken together, therefore, both frontline and back-office teams were seen as efficient and, for the most part, responsive.

Concerns were raised by a significant group, however, about occasional breakdowns in communications, either with their instructors or with the College admin team. For example, one company complained that their instructor had not turned up for one session or had cancelled without giving sufficient notice. Others were reportedly late, or had forgotten to bring the necessary equipment with them. In at least one case, all contact with the instructor was said to have suddenly ceased and, with that, the project came to an abrupt end - again without any apparent warning or explanation. Notably, these complaints all appear to have been levelled at instructors who had been subcontracted in from local gyms, not core staff members from the College.

On the admin side, the greatest frustration seems to have been with getting timely feedback on the multiple choice modules that participants were completing in their own time. Long delays can be damaging:

*“This can de-motivate people very quickly, you know. You have to keep up the momentum, otherwise people will drift off and it's hard to get them back again.”*

Perhaps the project's sternest critic also turned out to be one of its greatest enthusiasts. This company was worried about what they saw as a mismatch between the initial sales pitch made by the College and the reality of what was on offer once they had bought into the programme:

*“We were given a very misleading impression of what the Learning Well project entailed when we were first told about it by the College. For example, they led us to believe there would be free equipment, but there wasn't any when it came to it. They kept moving the goal posts. We think the offer was overstated at first in order to get us on board. And then for some reason it all stopped. We no longer had access to our instructor (who was brilliant, by*

*the way) and this left people feeling really dispirited. I still don't know why it all suddenly ended and it has never been explained to me."*

Apart from feeling let down and frustrated by the occasional lapse in communications, the key message to note here is that the project left people wanting more. The majority wanted the ALCs programme to continue. It was too short for some staff who would have liked to continue with the personal challenge to achieve even better long term results. And by coming to an end, other employees were being denied the chance to get involved.

Overall, the 'negatives' emerging from this feedback are all very instructive and can therefore be turned into positive lessons for the future. For now we should note that projects of this kind need to be:

- Very clear from the outset about what is on offer.
- Consistent, clear and responsive in all their communications.
- In control of the messages being delivered to the customer.
- Efficient in gathering information and receiving feedback from the customer, and swift in processing that information/ closing the feedback loop.

## **2.6 Attitudes to workforce development in the longer term**

It should be clear by now that all of the companies interviewed for this evaluation had an established track record in workforce development. None of them was approached 'cold' with the ALC idea. All were known at the time to be active in identifying and meeting staff training needs and aspirations, and all were striving, within commercial limits, to encourage their people to develop professionally and personally. Our sample of ALC employers was not, in that sense, altogether typical of the wider SME community as a whole.

It should come as no great surprise, therefore, to find that the ALC project had not so much changed as reinforced their view of the value of workforce development in general:

*"This is a professional, career-oriented company. We encourage everyone who wants to, regardless of where they are in the organisation, to move on and move up. Workforce development, training or whatever you want to call it is at the heart of that commitment."*

Another manager said:

*"Training is a serious built-in part of what we do here. Everyone has to do 6-8 hours training a month! So the Learning Well programme totally reinforced our commitment"*

Significantly, a number of employers argued that the project had not merely reinforced their already positive view of workforce development but added something to it:

*"This has added another string to our bow."*

*"There's the seeds of a new idea in this active learning companies thing. It's certainly given us an awareness of what else is possible."*

*"We are unusual in our industry for the effort we put into keeping our staff happy. In the past we've won awards for this and been short listed for various awards; we've been on TV and all sorts. But the Learning Well project made us realise the value of not just the spiritual wellbeing of our staff but also the huge importance of their physical wellbeing too."*

In so far as these companies have deepened their commitment to workforce development and broadened their horizons as a result of their involvement in the project, the ALC has plainly had a noticeable ‘cultural’ impact. But its practical longer-term legacy is not so much in evidence.

Respondents were asked to describe any ongoing or longer term commitments they might have made to continuing ‘learning well’ activities. Most began by saying that they would have liked to simply carry on with the Learning Well programme itself and that not a great deal of thought had been put into what might follow on once it finished:

*“We haven’t really done anything else since it finished, to be honest. It depends quite a lot on the personal commitment of people like me to carry on with it and take it forward, and I just haven’t had the time.”*

Nevertheless, a number of possible avenues have been opened up by the project, including:

- Corporate membership of local gyms – taken up by at least two of the companies interviewed and being actively considered by one other.
- Plans to set up in-house fitness facilities – being actively investigated by one employer (depending, though, on the hope that ‘the project’ would be able to help with equipment). The mini-gym idea also appears on a number of other firms’ wish lists, but only if and when they can find the space. The lack of room is seen as a major drawback and, in any case, something that would have to be won as a concession from senior management in competition with other demands being put on the available space.
- General encouragement to employees to ‘keep up the good work’ – with some companies helping out by providing healthier canteen options, for example. Where there is already a tradition of running things like a work’s football or netball team, firms are encouraging more people to get involved. And one was sponsoring a series of stop smoking workshops to take place in the office as day and evening shifts were changing over.
- Serious consideration being given to buying in to a continuation of the project on a private basis – an option being considered by at least one of those interviewed, subject to agreeing terms. This company had gone as far as surveying staff to see whether they would like to carry on with something similar and, if so, what they would like to do.

None of this follow-up activity can really be described as a Learning Well ‘legacy’, as such. This is partly because all those interviewed said how difficult it was to sustain such initiatives at either a company or individual level without the discipline and routine imposed by a formal programme.

The extent to which companies would be prepared to buy into such a programme in future on a more commercial basis is explored below.

## **2.7 Commercialising the ALC offer**

One of the central tasks of the evaluation has been to assess the viability of sustaining the project as stand-alone (including commercial) proposition. We therefore asked employers to comment on whether, in principle, they would consider paying for such a service in future and, if so, under what conditions.

All of those questioned said they would, indeed, be prepared to consider paying for such a service in future. This, in itself, is a ringing endorsement of the Learning Well project, which was described by one senior manager as “.. an amazing idea!”

The conditions attached to the commercial proposition, though, are both predictable and exacting. Employers would consider paying for an ongoing programme on the following conditions (mentioned in one way or another by all those interviewed):

- **Proving the business case** – supported by case studies showing how the project can impact on business performance. These would need to be drawn from a range of comparator companies so that prospective customers could identify with firms in the same sector. And they would have to demonstrate measurable improvements in things like sickness and absence rates, staff turnover and shop floor morale. The proposition has to be sold on the basis of ‘What’s in it for you’.
- **Making a professional sales pitch** – using members of the fitness team that presented the original project idea to firms in the first place: people who come across as confident, knowledgeable, personable and clear. The pitch would stress the individual tailoring of the programme, even in the context of group sessions, its flexibility and responsiveness. It would also provide an option, though *not* a requirement, to pursue individual learning modules as part of the programme, but pitched at an appropriate level of difficulty (“*We have quite a lot of graduates working here and the Learning Well modules seemed a bit too elementary to many of them – a bit of an insult actually.*”)
- **Getting the price right** – either on a fairly low per capita basis or at a group/ sessional rate. The programme would have to compare and compete with what it might cost to take out corporate gym membership, for example. Costs would most likely be shared with individual employees rather than being covered entirely by the employer. It was acknowledged that price sensitivity might make it an unviable proposition for providers. On the other hand, some companies would not want to see a public institution (e.g. a college) making a profit out of such a venture.
- **Offering economies of scale** – being able to accommodate sufficient numbers of employees in each programme to reduce unit costs and maximise benefits.
- **Providing a clear set of individual performance indicators or ‘metrics’** – offering each company regular feedback on participants’ baseline performance and progress over time. These would underpin and support overall business improvement measures. The basic requirement is to be able to show material results of one sort or another.
- **Providing access to suitable venues and facilities on-site** – many firms simply cannot find the space required for on-site exercise sessions, for example, or mini-gym facilities. How would the project solve this problem? One idea might be to supply a ‘fitness bus’ that travels from site to site, offering either single company or joint membership to clusters of firms who have no access to such a space themselves. This has obvious capital cost implications: “*But a fitness bus could attract corporate sponsorship to fund it*”, suggested one manager.
- **Lean delivery and administration** – companies want to buy into solutions, not problems. The service has to be administratively very lean, responsive, open and communicative, with a strong customer focus.

In our conclusions and recommendations, we return to consider some of these themes further and suggest the pre-conditions for making a stand-alone option work. The following section explores, contrasts and compares individual participants’ experiences and perspectives.

### 3 Employee engagement, impacts and outcomes

Our sample of 26 Learning Well participants were all interviewed face-to-face. Interviews included one 'focus group' meeting with three staff from the same organisation, whilst all the others were conducted individually. We spent an average of 15-20 minutes with each employee exploring their reasons for joining the programme, their main likes and dislikes and what they felt they had achieved and wanted to achieve in the longer term. We have already seen that the employees who participated in the project were drawn from a wide spectrum of industries, occupations and levels within each workplace. This diversity is reflected in the profile of respondents interviewed as part of the evaluation, in terms of:

- **Different occupations** – including senior managers, team leaders and supervisors, admin and office staff, nursery nurses, warehouse and process operatives, and cleaners. This spread is reflected, too, in what we know about their educational backgrounds. Around a quarter were graduates. Some had previous professional experience in quite different industries from the ones they now worked in (e.g. a time-served engineer working in food distribution, and a qualified nurse employed as a warehouse operative). And most of the others had left school with modest or fairly low qualifications.
- **The gender balance** – with around 75% of our sample being women, where women were identified as a particular target group for the project. By the same token, of course, this means that 25% were men - quite a high proportion, given the assumed tendency of men to prefer team sports rather than individual 'keep fit' activities.
- **The ethnic mix** – with two fifths from white ethnic origins and 20% Asian or Black British.
- **A range of age groups** – with over a third (the largest single group) in their 20s, a quarter in their 30s, two people (c.10%) in their 40s and another quarter in their 50s.
- **A stable workforce** – amongst whom almost 70% had been with their current employer for at least two years (and most of these had served for 4 years or more).

The fact that the project managed to engage with such a wide range of people is an achievement in itself.

#### 3.1 Motivation

People's reasons for joining the programme fell into a number of categories, not all of them mutually exclusive. Apart from being encouraged by their line managers (in most cases very actively) to attend Learning Well road shows and taster events, employees tended to be one or more of the following types:

- **Re-starts/ returners** – people who had once been physically active but had fallen by the wayside: *"I used to be a member of the gym and was pretty active but I'd let it all slip, what with the family and everything."*
- **Top-ups/ boosters** – already actively involved in a gym, keep fit class or team sport of one sort or another and who saw the LW project as a bonus: *"I've always liked active things and I wanted to stay active".* Another young man said: *"I go to the gym four times a week as it is, so the project was a great opportunity to do something at work - not to be missed!"*
- **New starts/ first timers** – often already thinking about doing something to change their lifestyles (*"...somewhere at the back of my mind"*), by losing weight, for example, changing their diets and getting fit: *"I didn't want to be fat and forty, so it was very well timed for me."* Others echoed this view, adding that what they saw as the rather impersonal and

intimidating atmosphere of gyms had deterred them in the past: *"This fitted my needs perfectly. I'm a quiet a big lady, as you can see, and a diabetic, so I really needed something that I was comfortable with. Doing it at work with colleagues was just right"*.

- **Learners** – individuals who were as attracted by the prospect of learning more about their own bodies as by the opportunity to do something about keeping fit and healthy: *"I really wanted to know more about my own fitness and I wanted to get out of the rut I was in."*
- **Stress relievers** – including a number of employees who mentioned how stressful work could be (and/ or tedious) and who welcomed the chance to get away from their work stations: *"... even for just 10 minutes. It takes the pressure off and makes things a bit more bearable."*

On balance, our sample included a significant group (close to half of all those questioned) whom we would classify as 're-starts' or 'top-ups' – i.e. people who were already aware of (and in some instances actively pursuing) the benefits of a healthier lifestyle. But their underpinning knowledge in most cases had not matched this level of awareness or activity. In this respect, therefore, the Learning Well project added an extra dimension to participants' lifestyle choices, by providing them with new knowledge and a deeper understanding.

### 3.2 Pros and cons

When asked to comment on what participants liked most about the LW experience, we encountered almost universal praise and enthusiasm. Focusing in particular on the professionalism of the fitness instructors who delivered the programme, participants said:

*"Jo was wonderful, absolutely brilliant. We couldn't have done it without her."*

*"Keith was superb – a real professional."*

*"Couldn't fault them."*

Responses again fell into a number of distinct themes. They include people who said they especially valued one or more of the following things:

- **The personal support** – the individual, one-to-one nature of the advice, feedback and activities suggested or provided: *"It was all done at your own pace - no pressure to compete with anyone else. The instructor was so positive and encouraging and this really rubbed off on you."* Another said: *"This is the best thing that's happened to me, with all that support behind you!"*
- **The physical activity** – the 'doing' aspects of the project, especially for those who were able to take part in fitness sessions at work: *"I really enjoyed the exercise sessions we did, like the measured walks and the aerobic tasters."* The variety of activities made available at some workplaces was also cited as a real positive: *"We did all sorts - Tai Chi, a bit of Yoga, I think, and something called 'Pilates' (which I didn't like much!)"*.
- **The new knowledge** – the 'learning' aspects of the project, achieved either through the fitness checks (*"I loved doing those fitness checks – I learned so much about things like the body fat index that I'd no idea about before."*) or, less frequently mentioned, via the learning modules (*"I liked the formal paperwork side of it most. Very interesting"*). Most participants mentioned how much they valued what they had learned from the project, although a clear majority attributed this to 'learning by doing' rather than by studying: *"I had no idea before"'. By establishing personal health and fitness benchmarks through such*

measures as the fitness check and personal diaries, the project provided a strong incentive for people to carry on and to improve on their personal best scores: *“You were competing with yourself really, not other people.”*

- **The fun** – to be had by joining with others and doing something different at work. The importance of the **social side** of the experience should not be underestimated. A significant proportion of all those interviewed said they had particularly liked doing it with other people: *“We had such a laugh doing it and we couldn’t stop talking about it in the office. So it was a great social thing too.”* A desk-bound admin worker said: *“I really enjoyed it - and it’s so important to remind people how important it is to keep fit and healthy, especially in this environment.”*
- **The opportunity at work** – the fact that the programme was available at or near the workplace was probably the single most important factor in engaging and maintaining people’s interest. Every respondent except one (which is 96% of all those questioned) said that, had the project *not* been available at or very close to work, either during or close to their shifts, they would probably not have participated: *“I wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t available at work.”*

Despite these generally very positive comments, and after thinking quite hard about anything they had *not* liked about the project (*“Nothing”* was a typical reply, and another said: *“I liked everything about it.”*), a number of criticisms did begin to emerge. The most frequently voiced concern was that the programme had to finish:

*“I was disappointed when it stopped. We were just getting started really and wanted it to carry on. It’s very difficult to keep going on your own.”*

We have already suggested that this is one of the key lessons from the evaluation. The sustainability of such programmes, either at a corporate or individual level, is fragile when it depends so much on the uncertainty of externally funded provision. We shall see later in this report that very few participants felt confident that they could maintain the same level of personal commitment – especially to new exercise regimes – on their own. Indeed, many, with the exception of those who were already physically active, admit to having ‘lapsed’ since the project ended.

The question of ongoing commitment and the importance of continuity of support was raised by employers in the previous section. Individual; participants shared this concern:

*“It just stopped all of a sudden, so I suppose the fitness instructor must have lost interest. They’d also turned up late for a few sessions before. This was quite de-motivating for us.”*

Although rare, this kind of breakdown can damage the reputation of the whole programme if it is not quickly and effectively remedied. Without a swift resolution of such problems (in this case, something that seems to have been beyond the control of project managers at the College), participants will lose interest and feel let down. In another company, communications with the instructor failed when a key member of staff, the LW rep at the firm, went on holiday. Other staff managed to retrieve the situation, but by then people had begun to drop out, did not return and so failed to complete the programme.

Another problem for some, though by no means all, was the requirement to complete the learning modules. Opinion on this question is clearly divided between ‘the learners’ and ‘the doers’. The former relished the chance to (re-)engage with some kind of structured learning, notably a number of people who had left school with no or low qualifications and who were now *“... hungry to learn anything new.”* Amongst latter group, ‘the doers’, however, the

greatest attraction for them had been the physical aspects of the project: *“I don’t have time at work to do these modules and I don’t want to do it when I get home.”*

This seems to us to be entirely a matter of personal preference. From a project provider point of view, the key question must be what they, as a College, most want to achieve out of such a programme: is it to set people on a path of lifelong learning or to teach them how to improve their health and fitness? Clearly, the College had wanted to encourage LW participants to derive personal lifestyle benefits from their involvement. But they had also hoped to inspire more adults to return to learning in some way. Our view, as we shall see below, is that both outcomes are possible but that the project can be deemed a success if it achieves either one (and not necessarily both) of these objectives.

### 3.3 Benefits

If the success of the LW project can, indeed, be judged by the learning and/ or lifestyle benefits attributed to it, then it has been very successful. Participants’ views on the personal benefits of the programme divide broadly into at least three main categories:

- **Physical wellbeing** – in which participants ascribe weight loss, improved all-round fitness and stamina to the LW programme. Most of those mentioning any kind of benefit cited examples of improvements in aspects of their personal health and fitness (if only for the duration of the project): *“One girl here has lost two stone and she’s really happy now”.*
- **Mental wellbeing** – relating to people’s state of mind/ composure, self-esteem and outlook. A number of respondents said they felt better about themselves while they were on the programme and that this had impacted on their attitude to work: *“I liked coming into work feeling better about myself and better about the job.”* Another said: *“It’s been good for me and good for the company – I’m more alert, I can concentrate more and get more done while I’m here.”* One call centre worker said: *“I’m sleeping better, I’m less tired, calmer and I deal with stress a whole lot better.”*
- **Improved knowledge and understanding** – listed by about a third of all those questioned as the chief benefit to them. A self-confessed fitness ‘fanatic’ said: *“It’s really improved my knowledge and provided me with an objective set of measures. So I’m much more focused in my sessions at the gym now.”* A fitness ‘first timer’ added: *“I have much more knowledge now - things I just didn’t know before.”*

Finally, a few people returned at this point in the interview to something they had mentioned earlier but wanted to drive home – that is, the *collective* benefit derived from the project as a result of colleagues working through it together:

*“It made a real difference to our morale. It sort of broke the ice at work and made it OK to talk about these things to each other. We all got a lot out of supporting each other.”*

### 3.4 Lifestyle and learning impacts

The other ‘acid test’, we suppose, is to assess how far people’s involvement in the project has actually changed their attitude towards lifestyle and learning beyond the life of the project itself. We asked people to say whether, in their opinion, the LW project had increased, decreased or made no difference to their personal health and fitness routines, first of all, and then to their interest in other learning.

Well over 80% said they had definitely increased their physical fitness activities or were resolved to do so since finishing the project. Of these, more than a third had joined or re-joined a gym, another third were taking regular walks, runs or bike rides, and the remainder had invested in (or dusted off) exercise kit they could use at home. Almost all of them

bemoaned the fact, though, that it was difficult to keep to the same level or regularity of activity as they had achieved while on the LW programme:

*“It’s so hard to get up and do something after a hard day at work, getting the kids’ tea and doing all the other things you have to do when you get home!”*

Nevertheless, some had managed to maintain fairly rigorous new fitness regimes under their own steam:

*“You should see N now. She hated gym at school but she goes loads now. She’s a real fanatic!”*

Others have been aided and abetted by family members who have been “roped in” to do the same. A number of people said they had been working on their partners and/ or “the kids” to do more exercise. In this way of course, consciously or otherwise, respondents were recreating at least one of the key drivers that had kept them going at work – peer group pressure and fellow-feeling.

A significant minority had also made what they hoped would be permanent changes in their diets: *“No more fizzy pop for me!”* Once again, this had an impact on the family through new shopping and eating habits. Indeed, the success of this lifestyle change is likely to depend in the long term on the family’s continuing support.

This finding underlines the *social* significance and context of making such lifestyle changes and their ultimate dependence on the support of other people. And it is this aspect of the workplace as a *social* entity as well as an economic enclave that gives it such potency as an environment in which new learning and behaviours can be acquired and sustained. That is why, when it is done well, workplace learning works so well. But these new habits of thought and action have to be reinforced if they are to be sustained, which is where the LW project may confront its limitations in the long run.

Any wider impacts on participants’ interest in learning in general are much more difficult to demonstrate. It would seem that the more lasting (though fragile) aspects of the project are almost exclusively confined to health and fitness issues. About 70% of those questioned said that the LW programme had not changed their current thinking or aspirations in relation to other learning.

For some, a sizeable minority, their interest in learning was already quite clear and strong. They had found the LW another useful string to their bow rather than an introduction to a new perspective on learning:

*“I’ll take up opportunities to learn new things anyway.”*

*“I’ve always had a thirst for learning, and the company’s willing to help people with personal development if they can.”*

*“I’m already fully occupied with workforce development things here.”*

For most of the others, the LW project met a specific need or interest but did not spill over to stimulate any immediate interest in other learning, partly because people are so busy:

*“There’s no time for anything else, to be honest. But having said that I am much more interested in learning now than when I was at school.”*

*“I’ve got enough to be getting on with, but I’d love to train as a fitness instructor if ever I get the time!”*

This last comment is worth noting. A small group of participants said that, although they were not likely to look into other learning opportunities as a result of their involvement in the LW project, they would like to deepen their knowledge of health and fitness-related issues at some point. For example, one nursery nurse said she would like to learn more about nutrition, both because of her growing personal interest and also to help her in her work with young children.

It should be clear by now that the evidence suggests a fairly specific learning gain associated with the LW project and one which is really only sustained during the life of the programme. More durable changes in people’s learning and lifestyle choices may well be achieved by some individuals. But most appear to need the support, discipline and incentive which access to a professional service at or close to the workplace, preferably involving work colleagues, can bring. The question of how far participants would welcome such support is dealt with next.

### **3.5 Ongoing commitments**

We saw in the previous section on employer impacts that very few had given much thought to continuing with LW-type activities after the project came to an end. Most would like to, but almost none could see where the time, space or funding to do so would come from.

Their employees would very much like the same. When asked what, if anything, employers had done to maintain Learning Well activities beyond the end of the project, most employees said that nothing appeared to have been done, notwithstanding the goodwill generated by the experience and some talk about what might happen next. Some mentioned the healthier food options that were now being made available in their canteens. Others reported plans to create an office netball team, and one firm was said to be toying with the idea of setting up a mini-gym in an old smoking room, although there was no money for equipment and competing claims on the space. Another was asking staff what they would like to do and, as we saw earlier, talking to a private provider about what this might cost.

Everyone agreed, though, that ideally there would be a Learning Well facility of some sort at their workplace. Moreover, 90% said they would be prepared to pay for such a service if:

- the price was right;
- the employer made a matching contribution;
- it was provided at work;
- it carried on where the original LW project left off, giving people who had already made a start the chance to progress;
- it was made available to all staff – office and shop floor;
- it was graded in some way to meet different levels of physical fitness (as before) and also different levels of learning (so not ‘one size fits all’).

As one respondent said:

*“The point is you’re not having to go out of your way to do it if you set it up like Learning Well. It’s just part of everything at work, sort of thing.”*

Assume for argument’s sake that the resources could be found to deliver such a service as a rolling programme in future (a very big assumption!). Apart from resources, it seems to us that the key to success, both now and in the future, lies in the fact that LW was somehow

*embedded* with work routines *in the workplace*. The question now is this – could such a programme be delivered on a more or less commercial basis, or as an adjunct to other funded delivery? Our concluding section draws out the main lessons to be learned from the project and offers some thoughts on a way forward.

## 4 Learning the lessons - conclusions and recommendations

This evaluation has identified a number of key lessons to be learned from the experience of running the ALC project so far – lessons that can now be used to adjust, enhance and maintain the offer on a more commercial or stand-alone basis in the longer term.

We have already seen that the employers with whom we spoke all agreed, in principle, that the ALC ‘product’ would be worth buying into, provided programme managers could:

- **Prove the business case** – by demonstrating measurable improvements in things like sickness and absence rates, staff turnover and shop floor morale and answering the question: ‘What’s in it for you?’.
- **Make a professional sales pitch** – by stressing the individual tailoring of the programme, its flexibility and responsiveness.
- **Get the price right** – either on a fairly low per capita basis or at group/ sessional rates that compare and compete with what it might cost to take out corporate gym membership, for example.
- **Offer economies of scale** – to accommodate sufficient numbers of employees in each programme to reduce unit costs and maximise benefits.
- **Provide a clear set of individual performance indicators or ‘metrics’** – by offering each company regular feedback on participants’ baseline performance and progress over time.
- **Provide access to suitable venues and facilities on-site** – one idea floated during employer interviews was to supply a ‘fitness bus’ that travels from site to site.
- **Promise lean delivery and administration** – by making the programme administratively very low maintenance from the company’s point of view, responsive, open and communicative, with a strong customer focus.

Individual participants have also commented on their longer-term view of the viability and potential of such a workplace programme. They, too, would be willing to pay for such a service, but this would be conditional, again, upon:

- the **price** being right;
- the employer making a **matching contribution**;
- the service being **provided at work**;
- carrying on where the original LW project left off, giving people who had already made a start **the chance to progress**;

- making it **available to all** staff – office and shop floor;
- **grading it** in some way to meet different levels of physical fitness (as before) and also different levels of learning (so not ‘one size fits all’).

Front-line delivery staff and project managers also have a view of what is needed both to improve and sustain the programme as a distinct ‘product’. These views, of course, are based on their direct experience of running the project over time. Many of their ideas were progressively incorporated into the programme as it developed. So what they have to say at this stage is not so much a retrospective account of what worked and what did not as a live record of their learning in action. The critical success factors they have identified and tried to implement as the project progressed are highlighted in boxed text below.

Paramount importance must be attached to delivering a **quality service**. This rests almost entirely on the quality of the **front-line staff** employed to deliver the programme as an **integrated service**, offering both health and fitness instruction and adult learning IAG in a single team or even in the shape of the same person. These people, in turn, depend on **effective administrative support** from the back office, especially in maintaining **good internal and external communications** between team members and project managers, for example, and with individual participants and employers. Establishing early and positive links with internal **learning champions** who will help to ‘navigate’ the programme through the company is also essential.

All of this effort needs to be focused on maintaining **continuity** of service delivery and personnel, avoiding the ‘chopping and changing’ that appeared to blight some participants’ experience of the project in the early days. This principle applies, too, to the swiftness and accuracy of **follow-up** offered to individual participants at the end of the programme and to their employers. Many participants told us they would have liked to continue, either with another fitness programme or (less often, it must be said) with further learning, and usually with something more challenging. The opportunity to plug people into the project’s own **interactive learning** website is an obvious candidate for this kind of progression.

Ultimately, the delivery of the project as a fully professional service which everyone involved can understand and trust will depend on the degree of **control** that project managers exercise over a logistically complex programme. Once central oversight and management are lost or weakened, especially where key (front-line) staff are not directly employed by the project, the risk of communications failing, of continuity being lost and quality being compromised is considerably heightened. This is where the **reputation** of the product is either made or tarnished.

Our overall conclusion is that the ALC now needs to spell out what each side in a kind of **contract** is required to commit to and is entitled to expect in return. This is no more and no less than any other commercial arrangement would require and is worth considering as an explicit part of the terms agreed with prospective customers (at company or individual employee level).

It must be obvious that all of the above conditions must be met if the ALC project has any chance of surviving as a wholly, or even partially, self-financing proposition. Recent events suggest that a number of employers and funders are prepared to buy into the ALC offer on what has been described as a ‘mixed economy’ basis. This envisages every effort being made to:

- sell the product at full cost to employers who are willing to pay (at around £75 per head), and/ or
- offer Learning Well as a blended, accredited programme with 10 guided learning hours which attracts mainstream LSC funding, with an assumed fee element paid for by company or employees, and/ or
- offer the Learning Well programme as a vehicle for embedded Skills for Life materials (for example, as part of Skilled for Health, the joint DIUS/Department of Health lead national strategy for integrating health and learning skills).<sup>4</sup> This would allow the Skills for Life content to be fully subsidized and reduce the overall fee element for those who are eligible.

The success of the ALC project proves that highly innovative workplace programmes can be made to work. Their impact on employers' commitment to workforce development in general is very positive in terms of reinforcing existing learning and employee welfare cultures. Individual participants, too, have welcomed the ALC as a life-enhancing and, for some, life-changing experience. The critical test now will be to see how many companies can be persuaded to 'repeat buy', and how many can be sold the idea afresh.<sup>5</sup> This evaluation has begun to distil what is needed to achieve such results. But it is now up to the programme's managers to use this experience to take the project to its next level.

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<sup>4</sup> The ALC project team at Warwickshire College are already working with the Skilled for Health Team and Royal Mail and are planning run a pilot along these lines early in 2008.

<sup>5</sup> In the course of writing these conclusions we heard that the LSC's West Midland regional office had agreed to pay for all its staff to participate in the programme, following a presentation at an Away Day for 400 LSC employees.