

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL ACTION – 20 YEARS ON THE AINSLEY TEENAGE ACTION GROUP



“Without the group I would probably have ended up in prison.”

This is a comment from a former member of the Ainsley Teenage Action Group, recalling his involvement in one of the earliest social action groups to be established, which first got going on the Ainsley council estate in Nottingham in July 1979.

The Centre is collaborating with Joan Arches, an Associate Professor from the College of Public and Community Service at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, on a programme of evaluation of Social Action work from different stages of the Centre's past life – its earliest project, a youth consultation from five years ago and another currently in progress.

Joan is on sabbatical at De Montfort University and is interested in learning more about community-based practice, work with youth and social exclusion issues in this country. The Ainsley estate project is the first one of the three to be investigated.

Twenty years on, the Centre wanted to find out what had happened to the

Ainsley group and what impact this experience had had on their subsequent lives, and whether the learning and skills had been of use with their own work and families.

To contact any members of the original group who might still be in the area, an appeal was made on local radio in Nottingham, the local newspaper ran an article and the Ainsley estate was leafleted. A number of members still had family on or near the estate and some were still living there. A meeting was arranged that reunited a few of the original group members with the three social action workers.

A second meeting followed, with Joan facilitating a focus group of 8 former members and the workers, exploring what they had found most meaningful about the experience and what they had carried with them through the intervening years.

The Ainsley Teenage Action group came about through an initiative by Colin Butcher a probation officer, Mark Harrison then a voluntary sector youth worker and Dave Ward a social work lecturer, who set up a pilot social action group on a council estate in Nottingham, under the

auspices of the probation service intermediate treatment programme. They shared a common philosophy on the best approaches to work with young people at risk and in trouble, and wanted to develop a project in which young people would set the agenda and be facilitated to take action for themselves, rather than participate in activities organised by others.

Young people from the Ainsley estate were contacted and an initial group of around 20 aged from 13-18 formed. Some of them had already had court appearances. They decided to plan a campaign to attain their own youth club on the estate and over the subsequent months acquired support from their local community and county councillors, organised a petition, fund raised and got media support. They eventually achieved their goal with the provision of a portable building as their youth club and were actively involved in its running and maintenance. During the group's first year police arrests, prosecutions and court appearances on the Ainsley estate reduced dramatically. They also successfully challenged methods of policing on the estate and won over the chief inspector of police as an ally.

Some of the people, now mature adults, were very clear that involvement in the project had kept them out of trouble when they were younger. In addition, membership of the group, learning to act collectively and other skills acquired such as friendship and negotiation were of

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later use in bringing up children and enabling people to be self assertive. One former member who was actively involved in the organisation of the youth club went on to train and then became a youth leader. Another, when his son got into trouble with the police, was able to talk to him about the situation and eventually resolve it, in a way his father, in similar circumstances, could not. Other people commented regarding the group "we owned it" and "no matter what happened we were able to look back on what we achieved." As well as the group reunion, individual interviews have been conducted with some of the former group members, adult workers who had been involved and parents. All the professionals involved with the group said that it had had a lasting effect on their practice.

Joan comments "the work that was done 20 years ago has been very influential, both in ways predicted and ways not expected. There are obvious lessons to be learnt and it has been moving to hear people reflect back and share their thoughts."

An evaluation is also being made of other Nottingham youth projects from the same era, including a group for young women with children, an Asian young women's group and other groups run by Nottingham Young Volunteers and Nottingham Youth Action.

There are plans to put together an evaluation pack providing guidelines on conducting similar longitudinal studies of the impact of project work and enabling workers to learn and reflect and look at what works and what doesn't. ■



SOCIAL ACTION PRINCIPLES UPDATED AND RENEWED

Perhaps the most significant development of this past year was the decision by the Centre to reword and change the order of the social action principles. The process was carried out in consultation with our close colleagues in the UK, Ukraine and the USA.

The principles evolved over a period of time in the early 1980s through the contribution of a network of people in the social work, probation, youth work and voluntary sector fields in the Nottingham area, who had similar philosophies concerning work with young people. The Centre for Social Action adopted the principles when it was formally created in 1989 and a new version of them, widening their application to service users and community members, was developed by Audrey Mullender and Dave Ward in their book "Self Directed Groupwork" published in 1991, which then became the generally accepted version.

The principles encapsulate a set of beliefs about the unrecognised skills and capacities of people who may be marginalised by the wider community and asserts their right to determine

their own future, the inherent power of collective working and the ethical principles that should inform professionals working with groups such as these.

The decision to go through a process of revising and updating the language of the principles was taken for the following reasons:

- participants in training events consistently found fault with the old wording, though not with the ideas, finding it archaic and out of keeping with the vocabulary currently used by social action workers;
- current key words and concepts were absent from the old version e.g. social justice;
- we wanted to own the principles as social action workers and let people know that this is how we work and this is what we do;
- we wanted to modify the tone of the old version by stating how we go about things, without telling other people that this is what they should do;
- we wanted them to be more clearly understood by colleagues and community members of all ages, status and ability;
- we wanted them to be more user-friendly in a training and consultancy context.

The meaning of our principles remains the same, but the language in which they are expressed will, we hope, speak more directly to contemporary social action workers.

The first change we made was to re-write the old sixth principle and make it the first principle, an over-arching concept for all that follows:

- **Social action workers are committed to social justice. We strive to challenge inequality and oppression in relation to race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, class, culture, disability or any other form of social differentiation.**

Social action is about fighting for fairness, equality and justice and this needs to be stated clearly. We recognise that injustice, discrimination and oppression exist and take a stance against it, in all its forms, in all our work

- **We believe all people have skills, experience and understanding that they can draw on to tackle the problems they face. Social action workers understand that people are experts in their own lives and we use this as a starting point for our work**

Our job is to help uncover what is already there, to encourage people to use the insights and knowledge they possess to bring about changes in their own lives.

- **All people have rights, including the right to be heard, the right to define the issues facing them and the right to take action on their own behalf. People also have the right to define themselves and not have negative labels imposed upon them.**

Ordinary people's right to be involved in the changes that affect them, to have a voice and a stake in the society they live in, is fundamental to social action work. The right to "name their world", to define themselves and the world around them is something we insist on. Too often people have to contend with labels imposed upon themselves or the places they live for the ease of policy-makers and professionals.

- **Injustice and oppression are complex issues rooted in social policy, the environment and the economy. Social action workers understand people experience problems as individuals but these difficulties can be translated into common concerns.**

Social problems need to be tackled socially. Sharing experiences and problems in a group builds confidence, solidarity and community.

- **We understand that people working collectively can be powerful. People who lack power and influence to challenge injustice and oppression as individuals can gain it through working with other people in a similar position.**

Oppression is maintained through isolation and division, though it is experienced by the majority. Our job is to bring people together so that they can share their experiences and pool their resources and skills to fight injustice. Finding common cause may give individuals the will and power to tackle more complex issues than they might have dared on their own.

- **Social action workers are not leaders, but facilitators. Our job is to enable people to make decisions for themselves and take ownership of whatever outcome ensues. Everybody's contribution to this process is equally valued and it is vital that our job is not accorded privilege.**

Social action workers value all skills and knowledge equally, making no distinction between experience and formal qualifications. Our job is to work alongside the group, resisting the temptation either to become a group member or a group leader.

TRAINING

NEW MULTI-AGENCY SOCIAL ACTION TRAINING IN NORTHANTS

Northampton Lifelong Learning Service has commissioned the Centre to provide joint training and consultancy in social action methods for youth workers and community police officers, with a view to establishing social action projects on estates in seven different areas throughout the county of Northamptonshire. These are areas where there is concern about the current activities of young people.

Ian Boulton and Jennie Fleming have run a weekend residential course on social action methods for police officers and youth workers currently involved in work on estates in Corby, Wellingborough, Daventry and Northampton.

Mark Harrison and Ian Boulton will run a similar course for workers from the three remaining areas at the end of January. It is the first time that these particular professional groups have trained together.

The intention is for joint police and youth worker teams to agree action plans for their estates and work with young people using social action methods over a 12 month period. Jennie, Ian and Mark will provide monthly consultancies for each group to review progress and offer support. A third residential will be held at the end of the project and details of the process and outcomes will be written up at the end of the initiative.

NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT TRAINING FOLLOW-UP

Jennie Fleming and Ian Boulton ran a workshop on social action methods at the United States National Writing Project annual conference in Milwaukee in November. They were also able to offer a follow-up session for some of the NWP project workers who took part in the social action training during the summer, and plans are at an early stage for a further two-week training course in America in July 2001 with different groups. It is also likely that they will offer some additional consultancy to the NWP group in California who are using social action methods in their work in schools. Staff from the national office of NWP will be visiting England in March to continue discussions about future collaboration between the two agencies.

The Centre is hoping to develop social action projects in schools in the Midlands and will be hosting a meeting in January with representatives from Lifelong Learning Services, Youth Offending Teams and Education Action Zones from Birmingham, Nottingham, Leicester and Northampton to explore possibilities.

LIFELONG LEARNING

The Centre will be running five separate day training courses on social action methods for members of the Nottingham Learning Partnership in January.

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▲ YOUTH AGENDA

Mark Harrison, Alison Skinner and Professor Dave Ward attended the official launch of the Youth Agenda booklet in the House of Commons on November 20th. This was a joint presentation by Lady Douro Chair of the Guinness Trust and Lord Judd, Patron of the Centre for Social Action.

Mark Harrison and Louise Wilcox ran two successful well attended residential training courses in Brighton and Blackpool in October and November based on the Youth Agenda booklet. A number of staff teams have requested direct training on social action methods and this can be provided on demand.

A further residential Youth Agenda course will be run in Blackpool on March 19/20. The booklet has been well received in the field and there is a steady demand for copies at present.

RESEARCH

RESEARCHING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The Centre has been awarded a £50,000 contract to work with Nottingham Social Action Research Project (SARP) on a 15 month project.

SARP is an action research project, funded by the Health Development Agency, which aims to explore whether there is a connection between social capital and health. There is a similar project in Salford. Social capital is the term used to describe the networking, support and feelings of trust that exists to a greater or lesser extent in all communities. The aim of the SARP is to work with local people and workers to find ways of increasing social capital in the communities.

In its first phase, SARP has developed groups in each of the localities of St Anns and Clifton in Nottingham, made up of local workers and people and has carried out some baseline survey work in these areas using local people as researchers. Information has been collected about demographic and socio-economic characteristics, health status and indicators of social capital such as social connections, feelings of trust and safety, political participation and community reciprocity.

As part of its second phase SARP put out a tender for an Action Research Development Team to train and support the projects to develop, plan and evaluate their impact on social capital. This will involve identifying how

indicators can be developed by local people and workers to evaluate and research their services and examining ways of evaluating mechanisms that increase social capital.

The Centre's community oriented research approach is very compatible with the overall direction of this project and it will be refining and developing a methodology to achieve the desired outcome in close association with the commissioners.

NEW EVALUATION WORK IN MACEDONIA

The European Children's Trust commissioned Mark Harrison to carry out an evaluation of the Macedonian Parents' Association Voluntary Leaders Project, at the end of last year. This is a scheme funded by the National Lottery International Programme whereby parents run services such as day centres for their disabled children within state run kindergartens. This took place from Dec 11-16, during which he was based in Skopje for a week and visited groups and talked to the various stakeholders. The group has formed itself into an organisation called MESSAGE and Mark was asked to assist them in developing an organisational strategy, including a vision/mission statement, organisational objectives and strategies for implementation.

INVOLVING YOUTH RESEARCHERS IN BRAUNSTONE

The Centre has been commissioned by the New Deal for Braunstone in Leicester, to carry out a six-month project to involve young community members in carrying out research and development work, so that the Braunstone Partnership can decide exactly how its funds for youth provision should be used.

The Centre has recruited a small team of youth leaders/researchers aged 18-25 who live on the estate and provided some training in social action methods. An initial meeting with selected young people from local schools, facilitated by Louise Wilcox and Ian Boulton, has provided insights into young people's views on life on the estate and existing youth facilities.

The Centre will support the youth leaders in making contact with a wider range of young people to gather their views. They will also help the youth leaders provide support and encouragement for individual young people who have ideas of their own on this theme they wish to research and develop through a range of methods including photography, video and posters.



▲ COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

The Centre recently completed a consultation in the Belgrave area of Leicester to discover the views of the local community on the proposed development of a community resource centre. Local residents were trained and supported by the Centre to act as information gatherers who then went on to interview 600 people, in a range of different languages, in a very short space of time. As part of the process the Centre also facilitated a community consultation day during which five focus groups were run to obtain detailed feedback from the perspectives of families, women, elderly people, disabled people and young people. The work was commissioned by the local community group, *Belgrave Behano*, who will use the information to feed into their proposal to the Millenium Commission for funding for the resource centre.

NEW FOSTER CARE RESOURCE CENTRE

The Centre has been offering a consultancy to Birmingham Foster Care Association for a number of years. The primary purpose of this consultancy has been to develop BFCA's ability to influence change to the fostering service in Birmingham. A proposed Foster Care Resource Centre is the culmination of three years campaigning. A Resource Centre will be able to offer a range of practical support functions to foster carers as well as aiding recruitment.

Birmingham Social Services Dept are providing resources for development work on this new project from their Quality Protects budget, including funding some workers to carry the work forward to implementation stage. The Centre has recently supervised a research project into "Contact in the Foster Home" carried out by BFCA. The Centre trained the researchers who are all foster carers. One of the recommendations from the research is the development of one or more contact venues with dedicated workers to facilitate contact. A contact centre is part of the Foster Care Resource Centre proposal.

The Centre is continuing its support to the association to ensure that the proposed resource centre, which may be unique in England, fully reflects the needs and aspirations of foster carers.