



CENTRE BACKS MORE IMAGINATIVE APPROACHES TO SOCIALLY EXCLUDED YOUNG PEOPLE

"It's been fun, friendly, informative and happy, happy, happy!"

That was the verdict from one of the 60 young people, aged 17-25 who took part in a two-and-a half day workshop in Nottingham, sponsored by the Nottingham City Council and Greater Nottingham Learning Partnerships during March 21-23, facilitated by the Centre for Social Action.

They had been brought together as a group of young people who had had complicated lives that had impacted on their schooling and were subsequently finding it hard to re-engage with the education and training opportunities on offer to them. The learning providers wanted to understand the needs of these young people and examine ways in which they could start to address the concerns being voiced.

The group was made up of young people accompanied by their support workers from the Learning Gateway. Most of the work was done in small groups using social action methods and exercises to explore issues such as good and bad learning experiences, how they learnt and who they learnt from,

barriers to learning and the characteristics of a good learning environment.

This helped to create the right conditions in which the young people could feel safe about reflecting on their past and present educational experiences and contribute constructive ideas about how they might be helped, or how existing provision could be made more responsive to their needs.

The groups, who called themselves the Short Sighted UFOs, the Cosmic Enthusiastic Minds United, The Private Crew and the Gift of Life, to name but a few, worked well together, sparking ideas and jokes off each other, but also allowing everyone to have their say. They used posters, role-play and brainstorms to get over their ideas and opinions.

Young people had a number of messages they wanted to give learning providers about what they needed.

These included:

"We need support when we go back to learning and someone to talk to about things."

"Support that is young people leading young people, not a teacher."

"Need for non-school-like learning environment."

"Less formal structures, more flexibility and no talking down to us."

"Help with money, bus fares, lunch etc."

For the majority of the young people this was the first time they had been asked questions that valued their first hand knowledge and experience of a learning process, instead of being merely judged as successes or failures in relation to it.

While in one case the whole exercise generated a response from one young person of feeling *"exasperated at a lot of things,"* some of them went away from the sessions with new ideas and determination to do something about their own situation.

Shashi Chopra, Lifelong Learning Development Officer with Nott'm City Education Department commented *"The event was intended to feed the views of young people into our Lifelong Learning strategic plan and into provider plans and we are trying to make that happen. They could also inform the Learning and Skills Council strategies. We will certainly be looking at user-led models of learning and the delivery of learning in the future. If we are going to talk about widening the participation of marginalised groups then we need to find a strategy to engage with these young people. If we are genuine about this aim and want to really make a difference and build up the social capital of our young people and communities, then we have to look at ways of doing so such as social action. We also have to recognise that a method*



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During the past six months, Centre staff have been involved in pieces of work that have taken them to new areas of the Russian Far East and the independent state of Kyrgyzstan. They are also preparing to take part in a major new health programme in Ukraine. The following pieces describe in more detail the content of this work and the issues arising from it.

WORKING WITH SENIOR STAKEHOLDERS IN UKRAINE AND RUSSIA

Much of the Centre for Social Action's work in Ukraine and Russia involves training practitioners who work face-to-face with children, young people and other community members to develop user led work or promote user involvement. In many ways this is familiar work with recognisable issues arising, although the practical difficulties facing workers in these countries are very different to those of social workers in, even hard pressed, social services departments in Britain.

Another strand of our work however involves engaging with stakeholders who are not practitioners, but who may be politicians, managers and regional policy-makers. They also need to understand the philosophy of our work and create the kind of policies and structures that are supportive to their practitioners and reflect in their language a commitment to participative approaches. This can be hard to achieve though, with groups who may have very different agendas and assumptions.

Work with young people in schools

As the fourth initiative of this programme of work, the Centre is exploring with Consortium members the possibility of identifying schools in the Midlands area who would be willing to take part in an experimental social action initiative with young people at risk of exclusion. This would be designed to replicate more directly the kind of work carried out by teachers in America, supported by the National Writing Project, and would involve the training of school staff in social action methods to enable them to run programmes which would address the needs of disaffected young people.

During the last week of January, he ran two sessions in Magadan for staff members in a project concerned with the development of foster care. In the one designed as a team building session, to help develop a sense of identity and vision amongst the staff team, members of staff were asked to introduce themselves by drawing a picture of themselves as children. This led to a discussion about children's

for working together, will have an effect on these issues which it is not possible to predict.

It is anticipated however that there should be some changes noticeable at the local level. This could include changes in attitude on the part of both adults and young people, changes in the way the two professions of police and youth workers are viewed in the community and more evidence of young people engaging with issues affecting them in these communities. This will be demonstrated through a number of activities, events and programmes

Fostering greater understanding and team work between youth workers and police officers, who have traditionally viewed each other with some suspicion, has taken time, but some productive alliances are now being formed. The police have done their best to attend their consultancy meetings but can sometimes be overtaken by events. An unexpected outbreak of lawlessness in Towcester one Friday night, led to somewhat intermittent attendance at the scheduled meeting on the part of the police officers involved, with bouts of practical policing interspersing the social action discussions.

from each area reach agreement on the next steps to be taken. These teams then meet with a consultant from the Centre once a month for a year. There will then be a second residential for all parties to reflect on the experience and to assess the impact of the project.

Teams from four of the areas had their residential training in November 2000 and agreed to find a way of working together. A range of different activities are being tried out. In Daventry, the team has planned a research exercise with young people to find out more about what is going on in their area. In Corby, the team is concentrating on young people's views on the adults that work with them. In Wellingborough, youth workers and police have identified a group of 15 13-16 year olds for targeted work, one session a week. In Briar Hill, a system of referral to detached work teams, when the police are called out on juvenile nuisance calls, is being tried out.

Teams from the other four areas attended their training courses at a later date in January 2001 and are at various stages of developing their activities.

In Kettering, youth workers have used detached methods to engage with a particular group of young people on the street and plan to hold a social event with the police later on. This work has been delayed due to police operations in the area. In Rushden, the team is conducting face-to-face work with a group of young people. In Towcester, the team are planning a residential for young people, youth workers and the police entitled "What Matters Most".

This project is not target or outcome-based and it is not an attempt to reduce crime in the community, by a certain percentage, by a certain date. Rather, it is based on the belief that true co-operation between the two professions, with a clear methodology



so it is underused as a resource by other agencies. It is proposed to train staff in social action methods so that they can offer the young people a more dynamic programme that will engage their energies and interests more directly. Once potential referring agencies have more confidence in the value of the resource, it is anticipated that numbers of young people attending will increase. The project began in March 2001 and will run for twelve months.

The project will be monitored by the YOT and will be evaluated by CSA. The monitoring will focus on outcomes for young people including attendance, reintegration into mainstream education, involvement with careers preparation unit, employment or training and offending/re-offending.

The evaluation will focus on qualitative measures of young people's perceptions of their involvement in the scheme and the impact this has had on their lives. This will include issues around empowerment, community involvement and family life.

Work with young people in the community

Consortium member Northants Lifelong Learning Department has formed a partnership with the Northants Police and the Centre for Social Action, to develop an innovative social action project operating throughout Northamptonshire. Funded by Lifelong Learning, the project is based on the idea that youth workers and police officers working together, using social action methods of engagement with young people, can form a powerful combination for change in communities.

The project came about because of the growing instances of juvenile nuisance in the county and the acceptance that traditional responses to these matters were failing both older community members and the young people themselves.

The project is taking place in seven areas in Northants-Daventry, Briar Hill, Wellingborough, Corby, Towcester, Rushden and Kettering.

The framework for the project is that representatives from the youth service and the police force in each area attend an initial two-day residential social action course facilitated by workers from the Centre. At the end of the training, teams

practice immediately. They felt there were a number of ways in which the approach could be implemented in their own practice in schools, which would give young people an increased sense of ownership and participation in the learning process.

Since both agencies share a common understanding of the needs of young people on the margins of the school system, it was decided to try and develop some British examples of practice to match the American projects. The Centre has brought together a consortium of agencies in the east and west Midlands who are interested in exploring new ways of engaging with young people, currently on the school/community boundary, and seeing what social action has to offer both young people and practitioners. As well as the Nottingham work, two other pieces of work are currently in progress.

Work with Birmingham YOT

The Centre has formed a partnership with Birmingham Youth Offending Team, who are part of the consortium, and has received funding from the Government Office for the West Midlands to develop a pilot project using a multi-agency approach to youth crime prevention. Under the auspices of the Birmingham YOT South team, the aim is to bring the agencies concerned with young people in the area together to form a stake holders group, who will act as the steering group for the project. Agencies involved so far include Careers staff and computer outreach workers, Police, GPs, Youth Service, Barnardo's, Bournville College, Birmingham City Council Regeneration Team and two local schools. This group will take part in social action training so they have an understanding of the underlying philosophy of the project.

The proposal is to build on and extend the structured day scheme for 12-17 year olds, not currently in school or employment, provided by Birmingham South YOT. The scheme offers two half-day sessions to young people identified as needing daytime support to prevent further re-offending and is also offered as part of a bail support package. It is run by a project worker and a group of sessional staff and funded through the YOT.

The content of the programme does not have a very clear focus at present and mainly consists of recreational activities,

like social action takes time, effort and cost to achieve and the Learning and Skills Council will have to take account of this in their funding of user-led programmes of learning."

Working on the School/Community Boundary

The Centre for Social Action is concerned about the significant numbers of young people who have ideas, skills and talents to offer society, but who find that the current school environment does not offer them the right conditions or ethos, to enable them to enjoy learning and feel a sense of achievement. Such young people are often excluded from school by the authorities if their boredom and frustration is expressed in a disruptive manner, or they may absent themselves for long periods of time. Once out of school, young people can lose self-confidence and face considerable barriers to getting back on track. Without purpose or structure to their lives, they are then at risk of involvement in crime and substance abuse that can further hinder their progress.

The Centre believes that involvement in social action can provide these young people with a focus for their energies and rekindle their interest in learning and acquiring skills.

The Centre asserts that the key to engagement with these young people lies in allowing them to set the agenda and work on issues that are of immediate interest and relevance to them, alongside trained social action workers, acquiring skills and expertise along the way. This is not always the easiest option, but it may have more far-reaching results in the long run and it encourages an innate sense of self-reliance, which is not dependent on the continued presence of charismatic youth workers, or a programme of activities for success.

The Centre's partnership with the National Writing Project, based in the University of California, Berkeley in America has provided some cross-cultural confirmation of these ideas. NWP provides support for dedicated teachers, who work on literacy projects with young people from communities experiencing poverty and minority ethnic groups. Centre trainers who ran training courses on social action for teachers in four American cities last year, found that they connected with the theory and

needs and how the purpose of fostering was to help meet them more effectively than through residential care. The team then carried out a visioning exercise to identify the three principal aims of the project. They then looked at their strengths as a team and the challenges that faced them. This led to an identity exercise in which the team was asked to examine their strengths and devise a name for the project.

Ian felt that the team worked well together and found it easy to devise a vision and identify strengths that they had. They also had a realistic view of the challenges facing them without allowing them to become overwhelming.

Similar training sessions were held with practitioners in Chenigovka and there was direct work with around 40 older teenagers in Ussurisk, which modelled a social action approach that could be used by staff on a regular basis. Two of the sessions involved other stakeholders and presented different challenges.

The tone of the meeting was set on the first day by the deputy governor of the Oblast, who came in at the start of the event and was asked to make a visual representation of his job in ways that a five-year-old could understand. He duly drew a picture of his job and there then followed an examination of each department's responsibility for vulnerable children, using role plays and case studies.

On the second day the group examined the strengths, weaknesses, skills and experience of each department and how they could best co-operate together. On the third day they wrote the strategy which included the following collective statement:

The Parasolka Group believes that:

- The community can change its understanding of vulnerable children.
- Every child deprived of a family should have the experience of family life.
- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should be widely known and upheld.

- There should be no children begging or homeless.
- All departmental barriers to effective joint working can come down.
- All children can go to school.
- A comprehensive social service for children can be devised.

This is now a serious working document and the group will continue to meet on its own without external facilitators.

The experience has raised a number of issues about working with other stakeholders that Ian now reflects on in answer to questions.

The involvement of stakeholders, other than practitioners, in ownership of the work in which we are engaged is clearly very important and you have had two contrasting experiences during the last six months with politicians and senior managers in Russia and Ukraine. What do you think the Centre needs to learn from your experience?

Using social action methods to work with politicians and policy makers affords them the opportunity to think afresh about the problems facing them and helps them find a way forward with discussions that have come to a standstill. Too often, they concentrate on what they disagree about and take up intractable stances against their colleagues, rather than focus on common ground and the creation of movement and momentum. This is particularly true in the former Soviet Union. Social action introduces notions of compromise and democratic discussion and decision making that, once embraced, can be a breath of fresh air for those in power.

Working alongside community members, practitioners and policy makers together brings different challenges. On the one hand, social action levels the playing field and allows the less powerful to operate in meetings as effectively as the politicians. On the other, it is important for long term change that the policy makers do not feel undermined and are

taken seriously and treated with respect. This is a difficult area and one that we do not always get right.

What have you found to be the most successful approaches for working with these particular stakeholders?

We have found that, amongst their peers, policy makers are very happy to join in, draw, try something different, but they may be reluctant to do so when faced with a group of social workers or parents. This is not always the case and many senior policy makers have used the round tables to demonstrate that they are progressive, open-minded and good sports. But the opportunities to work with those people whose support is essential for effective deinstitutionalisation must be treated with care. There are more important things at stake than the success of a workshop.

On the whole, our work has been most successful when working with politicians on their own in groups of six to ten. The Strategy document for Lviv Oblast, written during and after a three day residential with all Heads of Department in the region, is testament to this. The round tables in the Russian Far East acted more as an opportunity for practitioners to express their views to policy makers, demonstrating that they felt comfortable with the social action method. This can be useful but is not necessarily the most effective method of bringing about structural change.

HIV/AIDS PREVENTION WORK IN UKRAINE

The Centre for Social Action, as part of a British Council led consortium, will be taking part in a major HIV/AIDS Prevention and Awareness Programme in Ukraine, funded by the EC/US.

Ukraine is a society in transition following the break-up of the former Soviet Union, with its citizens experiencing considerable hardship in the shape of poverty and unemployment, as well as challenges to traditional norms and values. This has led to a large increase in risk-taking behaviour such as intravenous drug abuse, casual sex and prostitution, which has resulted in huge increases in cases of HIV/AIDS. Economic migration has also increased the risks of spreading the disease, while reducing the capacity of the health system to respond effectively. The epidemic is currently concentrated



within the recognised high-risk groups of intravenous drug users and commercial sex workers, with young people under 30 considered the most vulnerable age group. Beyond the groups of young people who are already involved with drugs or commercial sex however, there are also other socially marginalised young people, such as school drop-outs, the unemployed, homeless, or those involved in the penal system, who are in need of appropriately targeted intervention programmes. While a number of preventative programmes are currently being funded, they are not covering all the target population and have not been effectively integrated into an overall strategy.

To address these needs, the EC is funding the development of the Oblast Youth Prevention Programme Demonstration Project. Five oblasts (regions) will take part in the project.

The activities undertaken will aim to ensure that:

- young people in the recognised risk groups receive information, appropriate supplies and support to reduce harm to themselves and others;
- young people who are vulnerable to HIV infection receive appropriate prevention education;
- the general population of young people such as those in high schools, colleges, universities and the military receive the education and information to enable them to avoid the risks of HIV infection;
- young people have access to good quality, low cost or free condoms and "youth friendly" sexual health services designed to meet their needs;
- those with a responsibility for providing education or services to young people receive appropriate

training so they can meet the real needs of young people;

- parents, administrators and those working with young people across the Oblast are aware of the risks of HIV and how they can contribute to preventing the spread of the epidemic;
- a model for the development of integrated planning and delivery of services is developed for dissemination to other Oblasts. Local non-governmental organisations are better funded and trained and therefore better able to provide frontline support to those at risk from HIV/AIDS.

Centre for Social Action workers will co-train Ukrainian youth workers, alongside trainers from the Centre for Social Action, Ukraine to deliver preventative services to young people in a variety of settings, drawing on a range of existing good and effective practice in Ukraine.

The Centre will also use social action research methods to develop sexual health services. Selected members of the Planning Groups and other Oblast structures will be trained in social action research methods and supported through the research process. There will be an initial process of investigating what services exist and what use young people make of them, which will inform the next stage of working alongside young people and health professionals to identify gaps, redesign existing services and design and develop appropriate and relevant new services. The emphasis will be on recruiting and training young people, particularly those from the "at risk" groups to work alongside health and other professionals, using peer to peer education methods.

MICRO-CREDIT EVALUATION IN SOUTHERN KYRGYZSTAN – MAY 2001

Jennie Fleming of the Centre for Social Action, recently travelled to Kyrgyzstan, once part of the former Soviet Union but now an independent state, to take part in a training and evaluation programme with local people. She gives her impressions in the following piece.

In May I travelled to Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan to run a two day training seminar on participative evaluation, and then support two participants in undertaking an evaluation of a micro-credit scheme. The micro credit scheme provides financial support for women to develop small businesses and so increase their families' income. By western standards the amounts of money lent are very small indeed – the first loans being 400 som (less than £6) over four weeks, increasing to 4000 som (about £50). Most women use this money to buy goods (clothing, food, soap etc) which they resell for a profit in local bazaars. The women in this scheme are considered to be particularly vulnerable and as well as receiving training and support for their business they are also allocated a social worker.

The micro-credit scheme is part of a three sided agreement between the European Children's Trust (who commissioned the Centre for Social Action to undertake this work), a Kyrgyz micro-credit organisation – Ak Maral, and the international non-governmental organisation, Mercy Corp International.

The aims of the training were to explore participative and qualitative evaluation, develop participants' skills in evaluation and develop the outline evaluation plan for the micro-credit scheme. There were a total of 19 participants from ECT, Ak-Maral, local social protection offices and MCI, all of whom had knowledge of and different levels of involvement with the micro-credit scheme. The seminar worked in three main languages – Kyrgyz, Russian and English.

The training was based on a participative approach, and was done

through a series of experiential exercises and discussions that considered the stages of participative evaluation. The learning was intended to be both in the content and the process of the seminar.

People worked very hard and all joined in and contributed their ideas and opinions. Throughout the two days, participants actually created the framework for the evaluation of the micro-credit scheme. A considerable amount of materials about evaluation were created during the training and will be typed up and sent out to all participants.

After the training the 'evaluation team' – Mariza Nazarmotova, Timur Jusupov, myself (for the first part of the evaluation) met to decide an action plan for the evaluation. The plan used the framework established in the seminar, but adapted it to fit within the time and resources available. We devised a 'guided conversation schedule' (a list of topics for discussion) on which all conversations would be based. For three days the team travelled to Noorkat and interviewed a number of people (including women who have loans, those who had refused loans, their husbands, some children, the credit officers, the Oblast Minister for Social Protection, social workers and village leaders).

The final afternoon was spent considering how to analyse the information collected, the format of the draft report and the feedback meeting to the bigger group. The evaluation team planned how they were going to complete the information collection and the writing of the draft report.

Undertaking the supported evaluation was a fascinating experience. Obviously, it was not finished by the time I left Osh, but some things were beginning to become clear. The micro-credit offered some women a real opportunity to provide for their families in a way that was not possible without the small loans. Their children were better fed, had suitable clothing and many were attending school (which involves money

for reasonable clothing, shoes and books). Some had even managed to do repairs to their houses including fitting windows. Some women were making a real success of their businesses and were ready to move on to more commercially based micro-credit schemes with larger loans. The legacy of the Soviet Union of education and high literacy seems to be an enormous asset in this. However, some of the women, particularly the single parents, did say that though the quality of life for their children had improved as a result of the loan, they were worried about the extra responsibilities their children had to take on and the amount of time they spent away from their children in the bazaar. One of the things the evaluators intended to do was to talk with children to get their perceptions on this.

For other families, perhaps the most vulnerable ones, they found the idea of a loan of even 400 soms just too frightening to consider, doubting their ability to pay it back. Other mothers found it impossible to keep the produce for sale from their children and one told of how in the last week of the first four week loan, she had given the food to her children and not resold it and so defaulted on her final payment.

Whilst overall most people were very satisfied with the micro-credit scheme, the respondents spoken to so far also had many suggestions for how the scheme could be made even better.

After the evaluation is finished a draft report and summary of findings and recommendations will be presented for discussion with the participants of the training. After this, a final report will be produced including all the recommendations.

Micro-credit is an important strand of the anti-poverty policies in southern Kyrgyzstan and the report from this evaluation is hopefully going to play a part in ensuring it meets the needs of vulnerable families.