

Pennywell Neighbourhood Centre Community Education Programme

This report concerns a grant of £13,895 from the Strategic Initiative Budget to support the development of Pennywell Neighbourhood Centre's Community Education Programme.

How the money has been spent

The grant was awarded in October 2006 and was primarily a contribution towards the salary costs of the Programme Co-Ordinator, with small additional elements for transport, external room hire and training. All expenditure except for a sum of £100 for training has now been completed.

Outcomes of the project

The aim of this project was to employ a Co-Ordinator who would consolidate and develop the Centre's learning provision which was just becoming established and to enable us to access matched funding to secure future sustainability. The overall aim of the education programme is to engage hard to reach and vulnerable adults, including those with physical or learning disabilities in informal learning opportunities that will promote personal development and the acquisition of practical life skills.

The project has extended its outreach to its target groups by working with partner agencies, holding taster events and undertaking promotional activity. One example of partnership working has been with Nookside, a day centre for people with disabilities which was planned for closure. Staff there were keen to link their users into community provision, and after briefly offering a cookery class within Nookside itself the group transferred their learning to our Centre. Building on this success we have continued to provide classes for people with disabilities, and are receiving self referrals as well as referrals from carers and other agencies. Some of these learners have also joined other classes alongside local residents and in this way we have promoted social inclusion and a better understanding of disability. Over the last twelve months 26 learners [24%] have had disabilities. Two of these people have joined our management committee.

We wanted to extend our programme to more residents from the Ford area as we were conscious that this estate has very little community provision. We felt that this could best be achieved by working with another community based organisation, and we organised a taster day with St Luke's Neighbourhood Project which was attended by thirty six people and led to two classes being offered at that location. We have also participated in other promotional activities to raise awareness of our programme, for instance some of our learners took part in two events organised by Family, Adult and Community Learning at the City Library. At the Neighbourhood Centre taster sessions in water colours has led to a painting class being offered this term.

Recruitment and retention of learners is a key part of the Co-Ordinator's role. She is present throughout many of the classes to offer individual support and mentoring, and to encourage progression. Over the past year 40% of learners have continued to a second activity but other forms of progression are also evident with some learners

acting as volunteers, gaining qualifications or employment, or becoming able to take a more independent role in their family life.

We have also encouraged participation by placing a strong emphasis upon celebrating achievement. In September 2007 we were one of the winners of the Premier League's Creating Chances competition, and won a player appearance. The captain of Sunderland AFC attended our celebration evening to give certificates of achievement to our learners. This event received press and media coverage and meant that the learners could share their success with their families and wider community. This year we are holding a similar event with the Mayor as our guest. One of our learners was also a runner up in the community learning category at the City of Sunderland Learners awards.

We have increased the range of activities that we offer by working with free lance tutors and with provider agencies such as the WEA, Beyond Learning, and Gentoo, with whom we were able to offer a DIY course. Each term we have offered nine or ten activities weekly, some of which have continued in holiday periods. Topics have included cooking on a budget, home baking, sugarcraft, edible crafts, decoupage, yoga, painting, textiles and literacy. Most learning has been unaccredited but courses in first aid and food hygiene both held over two half days provided learners with a qualification.

During the early part of 2008 our Co-Ordinator had a period of sick leave and during this period we arranged for an external evaluation of the programme. Using questionnaires or through group discussion learners were able to comment on all parts of the programme including recruitment processes, skills gained, personal benefits, and course delivery as well as making suggestions for future activities. The outcomes of this exercise were very positive. At present we are developing other ways for people to provide feedback through photographic evidence which is being compiled into books for display purposes..

Other funding

At the time of receiving SIB we had been turned down for a grant from the Big Lottery although we had obtained three year funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for tutors and materials. We matched the SIB grant with a contribution from our own reserves to meet the Co-Ordinator's salary. With the support of these funders we were able to resubmit a strengthened bid to the Lottery demonstrating the need for our work, and increased partnership working. In the autumn of 2007 this was successful securing the sum of £114,000 over three years for salary costs and other key components such as room hire, transport and childcare.

Other sources of funding that have since been secured include £1,000 from the Bunny Hill and Learning Communities project, and £2,585 from Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities which has allowed us to offer some accredited courses, and £2,000 from the Premier League which when matched with separate SIB grant facilitated the installation of an inclusive kitchen, with special adaptations for disabled learners.

Key lessons and issues from the project

One of the key lessons has been the importance of being able to build the project gradually and to be flexible with regard to the pace of recruitment, group size and teaching styles. The project originally grew out of two pilot activities, one of which was a relaxation group for women with mental health problems offered in partnership with the local CPN, which later continued as a support group and is now the textile class. The other pilot was a child development course funded through Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities, which ultimately resulted in the learners gaining level two certificates and in some cases entering work. In the case of classes for disabled people, who are attending with carers, groups are necessarily small, but in other classes too it is often beneficial to be able to start with small numbers and build gradually, giving time for interest to become established and learners to gain confidence. Sometimes personal circumstances can make attendance erratic. Relatively small scale funding which allows for work to become embedded without proscriptive conditions is invaluable.

A second key lesson has been the value of partnership working. The Neighbourhood Centre has always had a strong track record in this respect, and in the course of developing this project working with established and new partners has undoubtedly maximised our ability to meet local needs, and to offer a more extensive and varied programme.

Future planning

Consideration is already being given as to how the project can provide progression routes for its learners. For some the natural progression is to work and for the year ahead we already have funding to allow us to provide several courses that will provide generic qualifications that will build individual portfolios such as health and safety and food hygiene, and there may be other topics that could be added to this menu. Some learners have a need to improve basic skills and gain know how in how to seek work and in the term ahead we hope to be able to address these issues by working in partnership with Job Linkage who will provide a sessional tutor to offer advice and guidance. For other learners progression is through gaining practical skills that allow them to live more independently or to make improvements to the lifestyle and well being of their family. There are also areas of emerging need that we would like to address. For instance our work with disabled people has brought us into contact with carers who may wish to gain skills related to their role or have an opportunity for learning for leisure. In the term ahead we are piloting one such activity in partnership with the WEA. We are about to receive the final year of funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and therefore must identify alternative sources to continue to fund our tutors. Having already accessed some funding through Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities we will look further into opportunities that are offered through the Learning and Skills Council. It may be that there will be a need to further build the capacity of the organisation to maximise the possibilities that exist and the Centre's manager has been successful in accessing a LSC mentoring programme to assist with this.

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18.9.08.