

Being Here

Rosemary Pennington



A youth-focussed arts project that took one young homeless woman off the streets and into employment has been hailed a success by the DCMS. Rosemary Pennington explains why 'Being Here' has worked so well.

The 'here' in Being Here is Southend on Sea and we are trying to prove that the arts really can change the lives of many young people at risk of exclusion.

Being Here is an example of how cultural activity can be used for regeneration and social inclusion. The project, which was a four year programme of arts and cultural activities in Southend on Sea, was managed by Momentum Arts on behalf of the Borough Council and Arts Council England East. It was a multi-agency partnership project providing participatory arts activities for young people aged 11 – 25 who faced social exclusion.

Southend on Sea Borough Council recognised that it was necessary to engage socially excluded young people more effectively. Being Here set out to reach looked-after young people, those at risk of offending, young parents and carers and other excluded young people. The project was commissioned to address drugs and alcohol misuse, teenage pregnancy and hate crimes, plus other community needs. The strategy was to develop good relationships, confidence and self-esteem and life skills. Opportunities for training and professional development were also extended to local artists, community workers and project co-ordinators who were contracted to work on the project.

Creating a newspaper in a day

Artists and project co-ordinators were contracted on a freelance basis to lead individual projects. The project's management group, which consisted of officers from Southend Borough Council, Arts Council England East and Momentum Arts met regularly throughout the project, and were able to challenge structures and practices, troubleshoot, make decisions and authorise project adjustments as required. Many local community groups ended up getting involved in the project, which comprised of over 40 individual projects and a total of 1,228 participants.

Much of the artistic content of the project

was young people led. Community workers and artists met with groups of young people early on in the project to gauge their views and to discuss what the young people would like to see come out of the programme. As a result a diverse range of projects was produced, which ranged from creating a newspaper in a day with young people in the High Street, public installations to drama and film pieces addressing issues of homelessness, bullying, drug and alcohol misuse, recordings, DVDs, DJ-ing, photography, filming, music and choreography were all part of the wider programme of events. A series of events took place throughout the four year programme, which included informal "sharings", exhibitions, performances and attendance at training conferences.

The range of organisations involved in the project included Theatre Resource, a county-wide arts organisation working in the areas of disability arts, The Youth Offending Team, Pupil Referral Units, family centres, community partnerships, young carers groups, youth and connexions and also schools and colleges were firmly engaged with the project. Events were free of charge to all young people to attend, and in many cases young people moved from project to project in order to extend their skills and experiences, whilst developing their own self confidence and employment opportunities. Some young people involved in the project also received leadership training which will enable them to set up similar projects themselves in the future. The artists contracted to work on the programme also received a programme of training and strong support throughout the project, not only in delivering their arts activities and community engagement, but also in the areas of monitoring and evaluation, disability and race equality, child protection and business skills.

Wrapped in a duvet

The funding for the project was secured from ACE as part of the Arts Generate Programme in Southend, with funding also from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the European Social Fund, two private foundations and Southend Borough Council. Funding conditions brought hard targets. These obliged the project to reach large groups of young people which was a

constant challenge. Some projects worked with small groups needing lots of support over a longer period of time, whilst others were shorter and reached larger groups with minimum support. An external evaluator was engaged to provide an independent and robust evaluation of the project.

As always with a project as this, participants were monitored and evaluated throughout. Many of the young people had extremely challenging backgrounds and situations, and the greatest of sensitivity was shown by artists and care workers when seeking their views on the projects. Of the 1,228 young people who took part, 645 attended more than five sessions in any one area. Over 60% of participants responded positively against a range of indicators, including the development of further life skills and enthusiasm for new projects. One said, "It was a great session. It kept me out of trouble and kept me calm and I am now getting fun as well. Love to do it again!". One worker said, "I know that at least one person we have worked with will now make different choices and not re-offend. I'm proud of being part of this from the start".

One young person began Being Here when she was homeless. Cajoled to take part, she attended her first workshop wrapped in her duvet. This person is now living independently and has a job. The programme was key to leading her to a more positive life situation. These are just a few examples of how Being Here has made a difference to young people.

Being Here finished in April 2006 and the project's evaluation is almost complete. Overall there is a strong pride and belief in its success from young participants to Council staff, care workers, project co-ordinators and artists.

The project was held up as an example of good practice by DCMS, and the case study has been published on the IDeA website. The final overview evaluation report will be published shortly. ●

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