the reader organisation
reaching out

Wirral Community Shakespeare

"Wirral Community Shakespeare was the best thing I've been a part of in years. After a long time spent stagnating on sickness-related benefits, it was wonderful to feel like part of a team and to have a purpose again. If only this sort of thing was offered as an alternative therapy on the NHS! My only regret is that I didn't do something like this years ago."

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Foreword

The Reader Organisation is building a 'Reading Revolution' - bringing books to life in various ways - mainly through the eighty-plus weekly Get Into Reading groups we run on Merseyside, many of which take place in Wirral. These are groups for anyone to join but perhaps especially for people who have forgotten (or, for one reason or another, never had) the pleasure of reading great books. When I started the first Get Into Reading group in 2002, one of the readers was Frank Smith, an ex-welder from the Cammell Laird yard. Frank asked if we could read Shakespeare. "Give us what the poshnobs have…" were his actual words and it started a tradition within Get Into Reading.

Shakespeare has often been on the menu for our reading groups and we read it in a very open and easy way, not at all like your memories of school; talking over the things we do not understand, trying to make the plays real to ourselves and having a good laugh along the way. Since 2002, many group members have said to me, "Wouldn't it be great if we could put on a play?", a suggestion I found attractive but easily resistible...the work! The organisation! The cost! Then, a couple of years ago, on a trip to New York, my son Ben and I found ourselves queuing for tickets in Central Park for the fabled free 'Shakespeare in the Park'. With 2008 on the horizon, we conceived the idea of bringing Shakespeare to Birkenhead Park - after all, this was the model for New York's Central Park. And so in August 2008 The Reader Organisation staged *The Winter's Tale* in Birkenhead Park. It rained all summer and as the show dates approached we feared a washout...but it did not rain on any of our five performances. That lucky break seemed of a piece with the whole project: as sometimes happens, lots of things fell into place, the right people, the right play, the right place...

The Winter's Tale is one of my favourite plays. It has all the seriousness of real life going wrong and possesses the amazing power of restoration that comes when we can put things right. It is a play about belief: "It is required you do awake your faith," says Paulina, at the play's astounding end. We certainly needed belief to get this show on the road but we did "awake our faith", and we made something amazing happen. Over 1500 people enjoyed the show, and 8% of that audience had never before attended any sort of theatrical performance: that was one of the amazing outcomes. But for me the smiles on the faces of Wirral residents who participated summed up the real outcomes: confidence, self-belief and something interesting and valuable to do.

I believe that Wirral Community Shakespeare can be a great thing for Wirral and its people, and I hope this evaluation will help to convince potential partners that it is project worth believing in and supporting.

Dr Jane Davis
Director, The Reader Organisation

Wirral Community Shakespeare

Introduction

> *"Wirral Community Shakespeare gave me the feeling of being part of something very special, like the birth of a new baby. Let's watch it grow."* Barry Powell, WCS cast member

Wirral Community Shakespeare was conceived as an eight-month long reading project culminating in a run of free public performances of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* over three nights in Birkenhead Park during August 2008. The play was to be performed and produced by a diverse and inter-generational cross-section of the community drawn from GIR groups and other agencies, who would work with some professional and experienced amateur actors, musicians and technicians. A community outreach programme would run alongside preparations for this central performance. Through artistic workshops, new members were introduced to Shakespeare and his work, as well as to new skills and an appreciation of their own social value. Hand in hand with this venture was the Young Summer Shakespeare project, working in co-operation with Wirral MBC Children's Service, with the aim of familiarising local Looked-After Children with Shakespeare.

But WCS was envisioned as much more than a three-day run of *The Winter's Tale*; it was to be an encompassing social welfare enterprise, the benefit of which was to be felt by as many as possible in the Wirral. At the very heart of the project was the understanding that, through common and ambitious artistic endeavour, the existing psychological health benefits reported by GIR reading group members could be amplified, and extended to a wider audience. The performances were to be of and for the local community, and were to showcase the benefits and learning opportunities offered by creative reading and related activities to Birkenhead and beyond.

Why Shakespeare?

Shakespeare is arguably the greatest writer ever to have written in English and yet for many people, perhaps for most people, the works of Shakespeare are inaccessible. Over the past five years the GIR project has worked with hundreds of adults for whom reading at all, let alone Shakespeare, is unimaginable. By the end of the project even the most reluctant readers amongst the WCS participants were Shakespeare converts:

> *"I will always smile like a Cheshire cat when anyone mentions the Bard instead of glaring and frowning as if all the world's problems are on my shoulders. I will never turn down an offer to see or do Shakespeare."*

'It is required you do awake your faith,' says Paulina, at the end of *The Winter's Tale*. The production is testimony to the self-belief of our GIR members, who awoke enough faith in themselves to step onto the stage.

Why Birkenhead Park?

> *"The park now belongs to the people again!"* Barry Powell, WCS cast member

Birkenhead Park was the first civic public park in Britain, and was the model for New York's Central Park, the venue of the world-famous 'Shakespeare in the Park' which provided huge inspiration for the WCS project. Following a lovingly attentive restoration, in which some cast members also played their part, the park is now a piece of local heritage of which Wirral residents can be proud. Local resident Kevin Pulford, who played the Gaoler and Court Officer, said:

> *"I worked on the redevelopment of the park following its decline in the seventies and eighties, and it's been wonderful seeing it return to its former glory. I am a regular visitor – I go there at least once a week."*

WCS represents a continuation of the public reclamation of the park, its resources, and its wonderful atmosphere. Many audience members commented that staging the play here *"is important for Birkenhead and the park."*

Who stands to gain from Wirral Community Shakespeare?

WCS beneficiaries came from a variety of backgrounds: adult users of the mental health service; people with learning disabilities; looked after children; long-term unemployment; those suffering

from social isolation, low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Such problems are symptoms of the Wirral's high level of deprivation, unemployment, and low education attainment. An economic snapshot of the area in statistics shows that:

- 38% of the Wirral population is economically inactive.
- The Wirral ranks 8th on the National Index of Deprivation Employment Scale.
- 21% of the working age population claims a key benefit, as compared to the 14% national average. [1]

The WCS outreach and production process provided a fruitful way of channelling time and effort, culminating in an achievement in which local residents could take justifiable pride. The initial aim was for approximately 500 local people to feel the benefit of the project: in the end, over 1,700 felt this benefit.

Community Health and Welfare

- 18% of the working age population suffers from a limiting long-term illness, as compared to the 13% national average.
- 12% of the population provides unpaid care for a family member, friend, neighbour or other due to a long-term physical or mental health or disability, or problems related to old age.[2]

[1] Source: National Statistics website: www.statistics.gov.uk. Crown copyright material is reproduced with the
[2] Ibid.

Such statistics correlate with recent figures gathered on the population of Merseyside, such as those presented in a recent report issued by the Health is Wealth Commission, a body established in March 2007 to examine the growing gap between the City-region's booming economic performance and its worsening public health status.[3]

At the core of the WCS project was the firm belief that cultural and communal activity has the power to make people feel better, and the acknowledgement that physical health, mental health and well-being are inextricably linked. As well as an artistic project in its own right, WCS was intended as a holistic intervention, with the potential to reduce the disabilities suffered by those with chronic illnesses, mental health issues in particular.

How the Project was Realised

The Reader Organisation approached the University of Liverpool who agreed to fund the project with £7000 from its Capital of Culture fund for 2008. With this money in hand we were able to approach other funders and partners in order to get the project off the ground.

Debbie Mayer, Mental Health Service Commissioner Wirral PCT suggested approaching NHS CSIP for additional funding, and we were able to secure and additional £10,000.

TRO Director Jane Davis chose *The Winter's Tale* as the play, and set up a community reading group in January 2008. She met with Neil Caple and asked him if he would like to discuss the possibility of directing a community production. Neil recruited designer Sophie Jump and the basic creative team was then in place. A part time project manager, Estelle Condliffe, was taken on in April. Estelle's knowledge of the Wirral community proved invaluable.

TRO approached The Aspire Trust and a partnership was agreed. Aspire agreed to fundraise towards an Assistant Director, a Music Director and two Visual Artists. These posts were all filled by disabled artists, a fact which brought new strengths to the project.

> *'I had no experience of working with a disabled artist and was daunted by the prospect of working with someone who was blind. My fear was that I would spend more time looking after her than I could afford. In reality she shared my workload and was invaluable to what we did, having a unique take on things which a sighted person couldn't offer. Her personality was a key element in what made the community gel. I will definitely want to work with her again'*. Neil Caple, Director

A monthly production meeting was set up, which became bi-weekly and then weekly as the show dates approached.

Amanda Boston brokered a vital partnership between the project and Birkenhead Sixth Form College, resulting in the College facilities, on the edge of the park, being made available to WCS throughout the summer recess. This gave the project a secure and spacious home for the summer.

[3] Health is Wealth Final Report, published in 08/2008 on www.healthiswealthcommission.org.uk.

Wirral Community Shakespeare: Project Aims	Aim achieved?
To produce a high quality cultural and artistic performance, produced within and as a result of the local community.	Yes
To give 200 GIR volunteers the opportunity to learn new life skills, helping to improve their self-confidence and well-being. These skills would involve: teamwork; event management; observation, analysis, and evaluation; marketing and communication; reading in public; memory skills; independent and workshop activity; and much more. Such skills would also improve chances of employability as well as encourage creative self-expression and personal and communal well-being.	55 volunteers gained new skills and experiences through WCS, as well as 150 community members through workshops.
To create the opportunity for GIR beneficiaries as well as the local community (approximately 500 people in total) to play a role in a creative community event in a safe environment, giving the community a cultural and creative dynamic from which they can develop and build on.	Yes
To provide, through common artistic endeavour, a creative forum that destigmatises perceived notions of members of society who suffer from mental health issues, chronic illness, and those recovering from addictions.	Yes
To amplify all the existing psychological benefits reported by GIR reading group members.	Yes
To promote collaboration between the creative industries and treatment alternatives, acknowledging that physical health, mental health and well-being are inextricably linked.	Yes
To provide community-based summer activity for around fifty Looked After Children.	16 Looked After Children participated in Young Summer Shakespeare Project.
To showcase to a wider community the benefits and learning opportunities offered by creative reading and related activities.	Yes
To improve local community morale, community identity and community networks.	Yes
To improve cultural and artistic identity and encouragement for further development.	Yes

Project feedback from Cast, Crew and Audience

"It was one of the best experiences of my life." Stephen Casey, professional actor.

Cast and Crew Feedback

The feedback gathered from those involved at all levels of this production has been energetically and voraciously positive. Common factors that shine through the feedback include:

- A sense of alleviation in those participants suffering from mental and physical health issues.
- 79% of participants suffering from such issues said that WCS and related GIR projects had improved their sense of wellbeing.
- Feelings of increased confidence and self-belief as a direct result of the WCS project.
- Great pleasure in the sense of community fostered by the production.
- Pleasure at the relationships that grew between the professional and amateur participants.
- 57% of the cast and crew had not visited the park in the last year, but were encouraged to reclaim this wonderful public space as a result of WCS.
- Enthusiasm for the production to be turned into an annual event.
- 100% of participants said that they would be interested in taking part in a project of a similar nature in the future.

The following excerpts from participant feedback give a strong indication of the positive effects that this project has had on the lives of the people of the Wirral, particularly in terms of improved health and wellbeing. This mass of support for the work shows how crucial it is that this project is maintained and developed.

Cast and Crew on improved health and wellbeing:

"I suffered a breakdown that took me four years to get over. I recognise the self-healing nature of participating in theatre. I saw many people in this production fight their demons by stepping onto that stage. It made us feel, some of us for the first time, that 'Yes, I can do this.'"

"Apart from many chronic illnesses I suffer from depression with sometime suicidal thoughts. I have been so much better since joining WCS."

"I had problems of anxiety and slight depression. It made me realise that I have a LOT to be grateful for and that nothing is insurmountable."

"As a child I was abused, suffered from a speech impediment, and later developed dangerous drug, alcohol and gambling issues and spent some time in prison. WCS helped me to be real, to be honest, and to experience the joy of opening up. There was no need to be fearful of people's reactions; people didn't run away from me!"

"Mental health issues are ongoing for me. Being involved in WCS has increased my awareness of other people's experiences, which is a comfort in that I don't feel as isolated."

"I suffer from depression, I had a breakdown at college, I'm a borderline alcoholic and have dreadful panic attacks [...] being with WCS helped me reach out and be reached. I felt loved and supported."

"From the position of someone who has suffered PTSD in the past, and as a mental health support worker for both challenged adults and young people with life issues, the benefits of involvement [for the cast and the reading groups] has been far-reaching and enormously therapeutic. I saw social interaction, determined goal setting and empathy building grow almost on a daily basis."

"Earlier this year I suffered a mental breakdown and was suffering from acute depression. WCS really helped me get my feet back on the ground: it gave me a focus, somewhere to go everyday, something to look forward to, routine, and built up my self-confidence and self-esteem knowing that I was going to part of this wonderful performance. My doctor says I'm doing a lot better."

Cast and Crew on increased confidence:

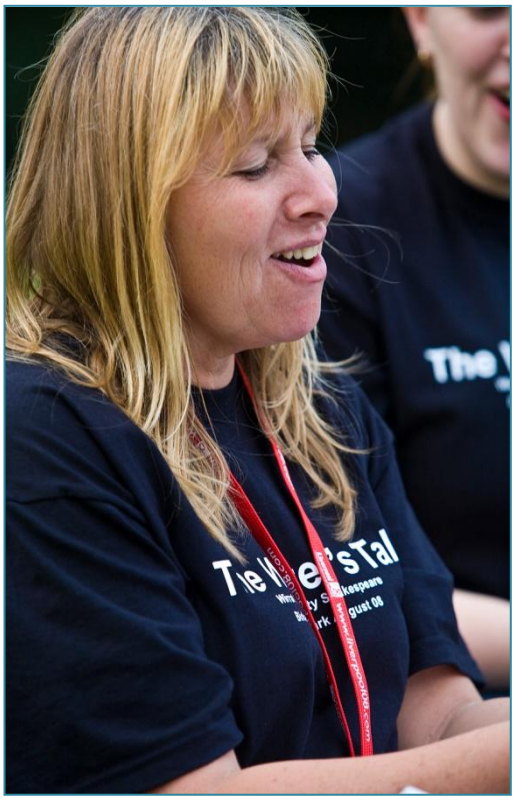
"My confidence was boosted tremendously and I was amazed that not only did I actually appear in the play, I looked forward to it [...] So many of the members of the group grew in confidence so much."

"I suffer from Schizoaffective disorder. Doing the play helped to boost my confidence."

"I'm completely different when I'm doing this."

"I have found that I have more confidence than I thought I had."

"Working together in a challenging yet supportive environment can really encourage people to expand their confidence exponentially. It was so wonderful to see members of the community who may not have otherwise had the confidence even to interact with other members of society [...] bond with new people and perform as a result of the project."



Cast and Crew on a sense of community:

"All the people involved were so lovely and kind; we've really bonded and it's lovely to see them again at the reading group. I've made some wonderful friends through the project; it's shown me that there's a world out there."

"Everybody to do with this production seemed to gel – the camaraderie was wonderful. I thank each and every one of them for their time and company."

"The atmosphere was fantastic! We were like one big family having fun, and taking part [myself] was the icing on the cake."

"I am very proud to have been a part of this project; the camaraderie between the professional and the amateur actors made for a wonderful environment."

"I think that the beauty of this exercise was that it came from ideas from the reading group. They clearly love to see the words brought to life."

Cast and Crew on reading and performing Shakespeare:

"If I had the opportunity to become an actor, I think I would only want to be a Shakespearean one."

"Like everyone else, I had been taught Shakespeare at school but had no real interest in it. Even at the beginning of this project, I had no intention of being on stage, but during the process I volunteered for a walk-on part and am so glad that I did. It was the way that they presented the play, it was so clear that even my seven-year old granddaughter could understand it, whilst pleasing the critics at the same time. If they want to teach Shakespeare to kids, this is how to do it."

"Prior to 'The Winter's Tale' my association with Shakespeare was only of schools and exams and therefore not particularly enjoyable. It seemed staid and only for the few. Now I can see that it can be for everyone [...] What a difference 'involvement' makes!"

Cast and Crew on personal development:

"I have learnt that everyone has problems or issues to a greater or lesser degree, but that however large they need not be an obstacle to participation."

"My learning curve just goes on and on. Shakespeare allowed me to step outside of myself and become someone else briefly. I am an ex-carer and being involved with this has helped me to make the move forward I was not able to make before."

"[WCS has taught me] discipline. After my husband passed away I was rather lost, but this project has made me feel independent again. I'm taking more of an interest in the things around me. There were three passions in my life that I let slip when I lost my husband: reading, music, and cooking. Thanks to Wirral Community Shakespeare, I'm taking them up again."

"I have always been a sensitive person, but the production drove home my wish to help others. Listening to other people's stories gave me a real sense of humility and, as they say, a problem shared is a problem halved. Often, it's easier to share difficulties with a stranger than a close friend or relative."

" [I have learned that] there are so many lovely people out there and that without organisations like The Reader there would be great big gaping holes in our society! There are also a lot of very talented people around, many who don't realise that they have so much to offer."

Audience Feedback

> *"The whole cast was overwhelmed by the response of the audience; we just could not get over how good people said it was. It made all the hard work worthwhile"*
> Alison Walter, GIR and cast member

The production drew a total of 1,500 audience members over the course of the run. This number smashed the initial estimation of 560 attendees, based on 10% of the audience figures for the New York 'Shakespeare in the Park'. So high was the demand for tickets that two additional performances were arranged, one on the evening of 28 August and another in the afternoon of 29 August.

The following statistics are based on a survey of audience members carried out by volunteers at a selection of performances.[4] They show that:

- 40% of those surveyed would not have attended a free Shakespeare performance staged at the Everyman or Playhouse theatres in Liverpool city centre. The importance of staging the play in Birkenhead Park as opposed to conventional settings was commented on by audience and participators alike. Cast member Kevin Pulford said that:

  "Being a local man, who has never moved away from Birkenhead, it was wonderful to see a production of this size and integrity being performed in my park. I worked on the redevelopment of the park following its decline in the 70s and 80s, and it's been wonderful seeing it return to its former glory."

- 8% of those surveyed had never attended a theatrical performance in their lives prior to WCS's *The Winter's Tale*. It is likely that the location and nature of the production contributed greatly to drawing such new audience members. This is a success on which WCS fully intends to build upon in future years.
- 76% of those surveyed would have attended the performance even had it not been free. Sums under £5 were the most commonly mentioned as acceptable amounts.

Informal feedback was also gathered by volunteering working on the book and refreshment stall set up on the grounds. According to Fran Carran, GIR member and WCS volunteer:

"Everyone I spoke to said it was brilliant. One lady saw it in the afternoon and came back again in the evening! [Audience members voiced a] mix of pleasure, pride and surprise: people didn't expect something that great to take place in Birkenhead."

[4] Based on a survey of 91 audience members on Friday and Saturday night performances.

Members of the YMCA GIR reading group who attended appreciated it that the performance was held *'in our own comfort zone'* i.e. in the local park, *'rather than being positioned'* in a traditional theatre setting.

Fran also reported that there was 'massive support' for the production to be an annual event, and that one audience member 'wanted the exact dates for next year!'

Angela Heslop, Culture Editor of BBC Radio Merseyside, was amongst the audience on the opening night. She wrote to Jane Davis to express her enjoyment of the evening.

> *"I thought last night was really good. Neil's direction was excellent and he really brought the play to life with such clarity. The cast were excellent, particularly Rebecca who gave a compelling and moving performance as Hermione. It was wonderful to see so many people from the Get Into Reading groups involved. An uplifting and highly enjoyable evening. Congratulations to everyone involved."*

Phil Davies, Councillor for Birkenhead & Tranmere, also attended the performance on the Friday evening. He said that and his family:

> *"[...] thoroughly enjoyed the performance. The acting was excellent and the venue was superb (helped by good weather!). I was very impressed with the organisation of the event, i.e. good marshalling, refreshments, bookstall, toilets, first-aid and even spare seats if people forgot to bring their own. I'm sure that the fact that tickets were free also encouraged people who may never have read or seen a play by Shakespeare to attend. All in all, it was a great night and I very much hope that other plays and performances can be staged in the park in future years."*

Some members of the Bebington Central Library GIR group also attended a performance, and according to group facilitator Carol Munns:

> *"[The group] would never have thought about watching a Shakespeare play before this and it was great to hear them so enthusiastic and enjoying every minute. They felt that it has opened up a whole new world and cannot wait to see another!"*

Such fantastic feedback has been an inspiration to the WCS team.

It is the intention for surveys of audience members to be more comprehensive in future. With the aid of volunteers to conduct such evaluations, WCS will be able to fully measure the success of the project in the key aim of reaching out to all members of the local community.

Statistical Evidence & Key Findings

What was delivered?

Activity	Number of Sessions	Numbers Involved
Performance: Cast & Crew	5 + rehearsals throughout July & August	52
Audience Attendance	5	1,500
Photography workshops	7	70
Photocollagy workshops	2	8
Film & Editing workshops	4	29
Confidence workshop	1	12
Adult Disability Centre Visit	3	35
Shakespeare Reading Group	Ongoing on weekly basis	22
Volunteering: Stewarding; Backstage; Stalls & Catering.	5 (backstage volunteers on daily basis throughout July & August)	30
Volunteering: Set Building; Prop Making; Wardrobe.	Daily basis throughout July & August	25
Total	**----**	**1783**

- Delivery of WCS came to £162.36 per head – £25.78 if audience members are included in the equation – providing excellent value for money.
- The indisputable and continued enthusiasm for Wirral Community Shakespeare, coupled with the benefits felt as a result of the project, has convinced The Reader Organisation that this needs to be an annual event.
- The extended run attracted a total of 1,500 audience members, smashing the initial expectation of 560, showcasing the benefits and learning opportunities offered by creative reading and related activities to a wide section on the public.
- 8% of audience members surveyed had never attended a theatrical performance in their lives prior to WCS's *The Winter's Tale*.
- 57% of the cast and crew had not visited the park in the last year, but were encouraged to reclaim this wonderful public space as a result of WCS.
- There is enormous scope within the programme structure for the inclusion of many more social groups and activities, particularly young people and NEETs.
- 100% of participants say that they would be interested in taking part in a similar project in the future.
- Clearer job roles and delegated responsibility will make WCS management more effective.
- Securing increased funding is essential for the future of the project.

Successes & Good Practice

"I thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience right from the start: reading and discussing the play; the rehearsal process; the friendliness and professionalism; the fun and laughter."
Pip Howard, GIR and WCS member

- Successful co-operation between staff, local community and key partners (University of Liverpool; The Aspire Trust; Birkenhead Sixth Form College; Wirral MBC; Wirral PCT) culminating in a high quality cultural and artistic performance, achieving the first of the project's key aims.
- Excellent feedback on all members of the administrative, creative and technical team:

  "It was an honour to work with the cast and crew. Neil the director has a real gift: I would stay in the rehearsals all day to watch him work." Juliet Broster, GIR and WCS member.

- New contacts and partnerships established throughout Merseyside securing a broader base for future co-operation and development, including Birkenhead Sixth Form College, the Tranmere Resource Centre, Wirral Council for Voluntary Service, VInvolved, Birkenhead Methodist Centre and BEANBAG environmental group.
- The Community Engagement plan successfully extended the project beyond the production itself and the established GIR groups heightening awareness and interest in the WCS project.
- Involvement of 55 volunteers from the local community, some with no prior connection to The Reader Organisation or Get Into Reading.
- The continuation of workshops and reading groups after the event ensures that participants were not left bereft after the project's intensity, as well as providing a foundation from which to assess their involvement and development.
- Successfully achieving project aim of de-stigmatising issues concerning mental health. Local actor Barry Powell commented:

  "I do not suffer from any [chronic illnesses] but I made friends with a lady in the cast [who does], and it was so rewarding to watch her grow and become more confident as the production progressed."

Lessons Learned

- Job titles and roles need to be more clearly defined. The Project Manager role needs to be a full-time position, with full use of office space and amenities.
- Management of a more precise and complete vision of the pre-production work is required of the Production Manager.
- It is important to avoid major changes in the rehearsal scheduling in future projects.
- A longer planning and rehearsal period is required.
- More comprehensive evaluative procedures must be incorporated from the very beginning, as detailed mapping of participants and audience members will aid future development. WCS staff is to be trained in the Substance evaluative computer package.
- All professional members of the staff should be based locally. If this is not possible, as was the case with designer Sophie Jump, a local assistant should be appointed.
- Clearer briefs and more detailed planning is required for community outreach workshops.

- Participants would like more themed workshops and activities before the production. A workshop on disability awareness has been suggested and will be considered for next year.
- Communication channels between WCS management and its community beneficiaries need to be reconsidered. Not all GIR beneficiaries wished to be involved in WCS, but it was difficult to gauge how many invitations had got through.
- Opportunities arising from new partnerships and contacts should be pursued to the full. For example, contact made with Birkenhead Sixth Form College would be an ideal way to get more young people involved in the project. Expansion of community engagement on all fronts will be a key feature of future projects.
- Additional funding must be sought for next year to cater for more post-production activities

Community Engagement

Workshops

"I enjoyed the enthusiasm of the community participants. I was amazed at the amount of time they were willing to contribute, and enjoyed seeing their creativity and skills. I liked the way everyone pulled together and tried to help each other, seeing people blossom and become more confident." Sophie Jump, Production Designer

Workshop Activity	Location	Sessions	Attendees
Photography	Birkenhead Sixth Form College; Birkenhead Park Pavilion & Park	7	70
Photocollagy	Tranmere Resource Centre	2	8
Confidence	Charing Cross Methodist Centre	1	12
Film & Editing	Lauries Community Centre	4	29

Work from these workshops will be showcased at an exhibition in Birkenhead Park Pavilion in October 2008. A DVD and booklet were prepared as a record of the project for all participants.

Surprise Results

The success of the WCS outreach programme can also be measured against unforeseen positive outcomes. The GIR group held in Liverpool's Blackburne House were so impressed by the project that they decided to take increased involvement into their own hands. As Pat Armstrong wrote, in a statement that was later included in the production programme:

> *"Following a discussion with people from the WCS production team, our Get Into Reading group decided to go out and locate the oak tree planted 150 years ago to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the birth of William Shakespeare. With the help of a detailed map and the park ranger we found the enormous tree [...] The whole group enjoyed a wonderful adventure, seeing the beautiful surroundings of the park and gaining an enormous amount of historical knowledge."*

GIR member Anne Jefferies' painting of the Shakespeare Tree was also included in the programme.

Young Summer Shakespeare Project

> *"Shakespeare is quite hard to read because there's some old fashioned words in there, but it can be quite fun in a group."* Child from the Young Summer Shakespeare Project.

In conjunction with the main WCS outreach programme, TRO ran a Young Summer Shakespeare Project in co-operation with the Wirral Children's Service. Project worker Sam Shipman worked on 'Get Into Shakespeare' with sixteen Looked-After Children between the ages on eight and sixteen over the six weeks of the summer holidays. The group would meet for a four-hour session once a week at the Tranmere Rovers Learning Centre to engage in the following activities:

- Read through an edited version of *The Winter's Tale* and, with the aid of props and costumes, perform extracts to one other;
- Work towards a short performance of a specific scene at the end of the project;
- Work through related literature, such as a short story of A *Midsummer Night's Dream*;
- Watch and react to an animated version of *The Winter's Tale*;
- Poster design and computer workshops;
- Film workshops, resulting in a short film on the Shakespeare project.

All project workers were impressed by the way the children engaged with the text, overcoming their *'almost ingrained hatred of Shakespeare'*. Through the fiction they were able to deal with issues that were pertinent to the reality of their own lives. The scene in *The Winter's Tale* in which Antigonus abandons Perdita was particularly significant, raising issues concerning fostering and child

care. Over the course of the six weeks, the group learned to listen to each other and were supportive of each other's efforts. As expressed by one of the young members of the group: *"I think the reading group is quite interesting and there are some really lovely people here."* As Sam Shipman describes:

> *'One boy, who had particular trouble with his reading, bravely struggled through his part. The other children, who would usually have been giggling, messing about or poking each other in the ribs, sat in absolute silence for him, and let him read.'*

Sam was also witness to the growth in the children's confidence and ability to take praise.

Suggested improvements for next year include:

- Increased focus on the interactive element of the project, through acting and script-writing workshops in particular;
- Forging a stronger link between the children's activities and the performance in the park, giving the project a more concrete focus and a greater sense of inclusion.

Budget & Funding

For a breakdown of the project budget please see the Appendix.

WCS was funded by the following external bodies: University of Liverpool; CSIP; GIRTY; The Lee Bakirgian Family Trust; Austin and Hope Trust; The Hemby Trust; The Roald Dahl Foundation; Wirral Partnership Homes; The Duchy of Lancaster Benevolent Fund; Mersey Travel.

The Aspire Trust contribution was funded by Merseyide Disability Fund and the Arts Council.

All additional costs were met by TRO.

Key Facts and Figures

- The full production cost came to £50,965.22
- The total amount fundraised for the project was £48,449.42.
- Costs met by The Reader Organisation came to £2,515.80.
- Cost met by the Volunteer Activity (bookstall) came to £1,575.52.

Reasons identified for WCS going over budget include the following:

- The management team did not fully anticipate the scale of costs incurred by such an event, and some costs (for example Security and Stewarding) were way over initial estimates.
- TRO staff members were unable to devote as much time as initially planned to the project following a significant rise in workload from January 2008.

Means of countering overspending in future include the following:

- Learning from experience, and anticipating all costs in advance of seeking sponsorship and the funding application process.

- Clearer definition of job roles and job budgets leading to more successful delegation of responsibility. This is particularly true of set building and production design.
- Making use of the small collection of costumes, props and set pieces that are now at WCS's disposal. Such pieces could also be hired out during the year to local companies.
- Income generation on the day through stall hire.

It is anticipated that the budget for next year's project will come to around £60,000, a figure based on the acknowledgement that a full-time Project Coordinator is required for all future projects. WCS 2009 fundraising begins in October 2008, and will channel its efforts toward the charitable sector and local businesses on the Wirral. Many associations, such as Friends of Birkenhead Park, have expressed enthusiasm to help in the fundraising process. It is very much hoped that local authorities and health trusts will make financial contributions.

TRO has already secured £2000 towards a 2009 project: we have won The Quentin Blake Award by pitching an idea for youth engagement in the Park.

It is absolutely essential that funding and sponsorship for WCS increases in 2009, not only to maintain the high standards set in 2008, or to expand our field of influence, but to secure the very existence and future of this important project.

Case Study

Louise Jones from 'Reading for a Healthy Mind' GIR group

Lousie Jones has been a GIR member since April 2007, and joined the Shakespeare reading group in January 2008. She has Aspergers Syndrome, which leads to a tendency to panic and to find some social situations difficult. Louise kept a diary of her whole experience with WCS, from the first reading group to the after-show party. The increase in her self-confidence and wellbeing, as well as a new-found love of Shakespeare, is here revealed in her own words. At the beginning her reading confidence was very low:

3 March 2008

My feet drag down the unfamiliar corridor to a room I never have been in. 85% of the faces I saw I did not know and I felt the panic rise [...] I must admit I am not one of Shakespeare's fans. I much prefer to be totally relaxed whilst reading. [When asked to volunteer to read] I look at the floor and pretend I am deaf [...] the only way I was going to open my mouth was if I was given a large amount of money and a house in Caldy, and even then I would have to consider it carefully.

Despite her misgivings, even at this early stage Louise viewed the project as something that she could take pride in.

3 March *2008*

I keep wanting for someone to ask what I'm up to, so I can say to them "Well, I go to Dickens on a Wednesday and study Shakespeare" and it will make me sound super intelligent but with odd socks on!

When, a few weeks later, Louise faces her fear enough to read a short passage of *The Winter's Tale* in front of the group, her reaction is ecstatic.

21 April 2008

I skipped home to my flat and literally could not sit down and twirled round like a drunken ballerina! [...] I always have great difficulty sleeping and today was no exception, but at least today it was because of happy thoughts and not my usual worry.

As the weeks went on she found herself being able to relate to the event of the plot, and make them relevant to her own life. The relationship between Florizel and Perdita is described *'like Prince William going out with a girl from the Asda, and disguising himself with the name Jason'* and when they are untied at the end they are *'very very happy, like Everton winning the FA Cup.'* Of Leontes' reaction to Polixenes' acceptance of Hermione's plea to stay, Lousie wrote:

10 March 2008

It's a bit like Chloe asking her friend Emily to go shopping in Chester but Emily says she is too busy, but when her friend Kate asks her to go shopping she agrees. Well, you would be miffed.

Her confidence came on in leaps and bounds during the rehearsal period.

7 August 2008

I went nervously to the 6th form college for my Bear debut. I dawdled around the shops before grasping courage and going in [...] I was totally enthralled watching Antigonus leave the baby Perdita behind on the island. My worries about the bear were completely forgotten [and I] felt loads more confident coming home!

Louise threw herself into the production process, and wrote long excited, nervous passages about the progress and problems along the way. Even during times of tension, she found support in the WCS group.

26 August 08

This is one of the main things I like about the Shakespeare group is the support you get; they support you without [making you feel] like an idiot!

When WCS drew a close Louise reflected on the lessons that she had learned during the project: her thoughts reveal a very different Louise to the figure 'dragging her feet down the corridor' a few months earlier.

31 August 08

Neil [the director] made a beautiful statement: "We bear no stars, we are a community, all together" which made my spine tingle and went up to could nine nine nine! I will try to remember that everyone is the same, whether they live in a mansion or a bedsit, in Rock Ferry or Blundellsands, is a TV star or on benefits: everyone has a heart and feelings.

Louise has gained new confidence through her involvement with WCS that will apply to

her life beyond the perimeters of the project. Of a canoeing trip to Wales that Louise took towards the end of the rehearsal period, Louise writes:

24 August 2008

I would normally shy away from any new experiences, but Shakespeare has made me see what the expression 'nothing ventured, nothing gained' actually means.

Vision for the Future

"*Whoever comes after us to perform Shakespeare in the Park, I hope the same magic will be in the air as it was for us.*" Winifride Cooke, GIR and WCS cast member

One of the most heartening features of the project's first outing is the enthusiasm and concern of all involved over the future of the project. Every single person involved, from the paid professional staff to the volunteers, has expressed a wish to be involved in WCS 2009. The Technical Manager has even expressed a desire to work his way through a Shakespeare text, perhaps even to attend the GIR Shakespeare group, in order to prepare for next year: how many theatre productions can boast such an accolade?

From the evaluative process and the Project Debrief meeting on 29 September 2008 in particular, the following has emerged with certainty regarding the future of the project:

- WCS will remain a free event for the general public for the foreseeable future.
- WCS will be an annual, long-term community initiative run as a branch of TRO.

- WCS will concentrate its efforts on developing as a flagship community outreach project, striving to include all members of Wirral society in its work, culminating in a week-long run every August in Birkenhead Park.
- WCS requires a physical centre of its own on the Wirral from which to channel this community support work throughout the year.

The sheer amount of suggestions for improvements and additions to the project is testimony to the passionate interest that has been invested in WCS by its participants. Amongst the suggestions that have been forwarded are:

- Incorporate a 12-week NEET scheme into the project, to include and encourage young people at the risk of offending to gain new skills, networks and aspirations.
- Increase participation from local young people, particularly young men.
- Develop the relationship with New York's 'Shakespeare in the Park'
- Develop further social connections, such as with the Job Centre Plus.
- Introduce an interactive element, such as volunteers in costume greeting the audience.
- Tour to different parks and venues in and around the Wirral and Liverpool city region.
- Develop the on-site stalls: deckchair rental; picnic lunches; hog roasts; TRO publicity.

The success of this project deserves recognition coupled with demonstrative and financial support by all those who care about the health and welfare of the people of the Wirral. What is needed, as stated by Dr Katy Gardener of the Health is Wealth Commission, is for local organisations to work in a 'joined up fashion' with WCS for the sake of the local neighbourhood. To paraphrase *The Winter's Tale*'s Paulina once again, it is required that funders, sponsors and society at large do 'awake their faith' in Wirral Community Shakespeare.

Appendix: Wirral Community Shakespeare Budget

		Actual
Income		
UoL		£7,000.00
CSIP		£10,000.00
GIRTY/Arts and Culture Fund		£5,000.00
MDF		£10,000.00
Lee Bakirgian Family Trust		£350.00
Austin and Hope		£3,000.00
Hemby Trust		£2,259.00
Roald Dahl		£1,528.00
Wirral Partnership Homes		£2,500.00
Duchy of Lancaster		£300.00
Arts Council (via Aspire Trust)		£5,000.00
Mersey Travel		£100.00
Refreshment Sales		£1,412.42
	TOTAL INCOME	£48,449.42
Expenses	Details	
Production		
	Sub Total	£35,098.72
Administration		
	Sub Total	£12,752.00
Workshops		
	Sub Total	£240.00
Youth Project		
	Sub Total	£374.50
Substance Evaluation Programme		
	Sub Total	£2,500
	TOTAL EXPENSES	£50,965.22
Over/Under		**-£2,515.80**