

YOUTH SOCIAL ENTERPRISE: CASE STUDY SUNDERLAND VOLUNTARY SECTOR YOUTH FORUM

Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum is a registered charity looking to represent the voluntary youth sector in Sunderland. The Forum was formally established in its current charitable form in 2002 and seeks to support voluntary youth work agencies across the City of Sunderland to provide facilities and opportunities that will advance the education, social welfare and recreational interests of young people across the City with the objective of improving their conditions of life. The Forum represents the interests of youth work organisations with a series of partners, including the City Council, the Connexions Service, Connexions Tyne and Wear and also has a seat on the local Children's Trust Board. The Forum was set up because there was not a recognised umbrella organisation which provided a strategic voice for the voluntary sector in Sunderland in terms of youth work delivery.

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About the organisation

Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum offer support, guidance, advice and learning opportunities for a range of voluntary youth work organisations across the City of Sunderland. A number of these voluntary youth work organisations are responsible for developing and delivering public sector contracts across the City related to young people. The Forum represents these member organisations on several key statutory sector led bodies as well as sitting on Sunderland's Children's Trust Board. The Forum also guides organisations as to changes in policy likely to impact their organisation and seeks to link the work of youth services in the City to other partners working on issues such as crime and housing. As well as representing the youth sector in local areas, the Forum also represents the needs of the individual and collective youth organisations at the city, sub regional and regional levels. The onus of the Forum is not only on supporting individual member organisations but also utilising the network of organisations to participate in joint activities and events.

There are two categories of membership to the Sunderland Independent Youth Forum. Full membership consists of well established youth organisations operating on a not for profit basis. These organisations often have a track record of positive service delivery for young people and are often contracted to the City Council to deliver specific youth services. The organisations also work with a range of statutory bodies to deliver contracts. Secondly, the Forum also has a number of associate member organisations. These are organisations which have an interest in youth work and deliver other community based services but are presently not commissioning specifically youth work services.

The Forum itself is funded by a range of sources from the statutory and voluntary sectors to support its everyday operational costs. These include funding from: Youth Development Group; Neighbourhood Renewal Fund; Northern Rock Foundation;

Change Up; European Regional Development Fund; and Included Communities Fund. A range of further sources of funding are currently being investigated including the Big Lottery Fund and the Coalfield Regeneration Communities Trust, as well as a further round of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding.

The policy context and devolving youth services in Sunderland

In the last 2-3 years central Government has begun to implement a range of policy agendas driven solely at children and young people and improving all aspects of their lives. Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum have a key role in ensuring the key points of these policies are filtered down to the local level and in particular their member organisations. The emerging policy agendas include:

- Every Child Matters – released 2003 aiming to reform the delivery of services for children, young people and their families;
- Youth Matters – released 2005 setting out proposals for engaging, encouraging, informing and providing support for teenagers;
- Higher Standards, Better Schools For All – released 2005 aiming to transform the schools system in England so that every child receives an excellent education regardless of their background and where they live;
- Development of Children’s Trusts – aiming to bring together all services for children and young people in an area to focus on improving outcomes for all children and young people. The aim is for joined up and integrated services.
- Extended Schools – aiming to provide a range of services and activities, beyond the school day, to help meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community.

Looking at the Extended Schools agenda in more detail, there is evidence of member organisations of Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum becoming actively involved in this agenda. For example, Oxclose and District Young People’s Project work with Barmston Village Primary School to provide a range of extended school activities including:

- A Youth Club/Drop-in facility;
- A Sports Club;
- Holiday Activities;
- An employment and training project.

There are a number of advantages of schools working in partnership with voluntary sector youth projects to deliver Extended Schools programmes. Primarily the youth projects have strong community roots ensuring that as organisations they are able to identify and address emerging needs and gaps in provision. They also have existing partnerships with a wide range of statutory partners and agencies including Connexions, Youth Offending Service and Health Agencies.

In order to attempt to complement these policy agendas and deliver joined up and integrated services, Sunderland City Council has begun to commission the delivery of youth service provision. The voluntary sector have been the key benefactors of this commissioning process, a process that involved putting out to tender the services to the public, private and voluntary sectors. The commissioning has involved dividing the City into 12 different areas, allocating a pot of funding to each area and then contracting individual organisations to deliver the services. Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum has played a key role in supporting member organisations in the change from Service Level Agreements to commissioning. Each contracted voluntary organisation is working towards four youth targets set by the National Youth Agency. The targets surrounded the number of young people contacted, participation of young people, recorded outcome and final outcome. The new system of commissioning youth services to the voluntary sector give voluntary service providers in Sunderland greater financial security and lengthened contracts as opposed to the previous method of annual Service Level Agreements. The three year commissioning plus options for a further two years provides greater benefits than the year to year Service Level Agreements.

The relationship of Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum with the local authority and other umbrella/development organisations

The contracting out of youth services in Sunderland and the development of a Children's Trust has led to a key opportunity for the Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum. With a place on the Children's Trust board the Forum has the opportunity to represent the viewpoints of its member organisations as well as helping to shape the future for voluntary sector engagement. Involvement in the city wide Change Up Consortium also allows Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum the opportunity to interact with other voluntary sector development organisations such as the CVS and the Community Development Network. Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum recognise that whilst a Community Empowerment/Development Network is a good idea in rhetoric and an opportunity for members to be involved with wider activities across the city, in reality the forum and their members have struggled to get their foot in the door. With the Community Empowerment/Development Network also having representation on a number of the theme boards of the LSP and involvement in the Local Area Agreement, representation is something, which the forum is actively seeking to be involved in, especially around issues relating to children and young people.

The lack of a clear citywide infrastructure of the voluntary and community sector is of real concern for Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum, especially in their dealings with the local authority. They argue that with such a hierarchical local authority, there needs to be a range of themed infrastructure bodies that operates on behalf of the sector as a whole. Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum are actively involved in and understand the importance of involvement with Social Enterprise Sunderland. Although the majority of the forums members are purely youth work organisations, the forum recognises the importance of the social enterprise agenda for their organisations and the broader community. The Forum believe that the neighbourhood based and local people management approach of their member organisations contributes effectively to the social enterprise agenda.

The members of Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum and their services

The Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum currently has twelve Full Member organisations and six Associate Member Organisations. Information about four of these organisations are highlighted below:

A690 Youth Initiative

This initiative based within the Sandhill Centre and established as an independent charitable organisation provides youth provision for young people within the areas of Farringdon, Plains Farm, Springwell, Thorney Close and Grindon. The initiative provides two centre based youth clubs five nights a week. The key to the success of the project is to involve young people within the initiative and to link with other groups responsible for youth service delivery in the area, including the Sports Complex, the local Comprehensive School and the local Library.

Hendon Young People's Project (HYPP)

This initiative launched in 1979 caters for over 500 young people aged 5-25 throughout the Hendon and Sunderland East End areas. The initiative provides a series of traditional youth services but also tries to link youth service provision with other sectors such as health and employment. For example, the initiative has a number of daytime projects based around inclusion work, including focusing on youngsters who are excluded or self-excluded from school. The initiative also runs a number of employment related services, including Life Skills and Connect which are geared towards building confidence and employment opportunities with practical elements such as employer visits. The project is also running a number of community cohesion based initiatives with the aim of integrating young people from different cultures into local communities.

Pennywell Youth Project

This project based in the Sunderland West area is about youth involvement and youth ownership of projects. The project set up in 1979 offers a broad range of social, vocational and recreational activities for young people under 25. The success of the project over the years is reflected in the opening of new premises in 2003, one of the first purpose built youth facilities buildings in Sunderland. The design and delivery of the new facility was driven largely by the young people themselves through a Youth Committee. A further example of the partnership work deployed by the project is that with the police in the Chain Reaction Scheme. This cycle workshop not only encourages young people to get involved in a constructive, practical project, but also enables them to deliver results and output.

Young Asian Voices

This project set up in the early 1990's in the Hendon area of Sunderland caters specifically for young members of the local Asian community, many of whom do not find it easy to access mainstream youth projects. The aim of the project is not just about providing services for young Asian people but also encouraging young people of all cultures to integrate. The work of young

Asian voices cross-cuts several themes and works in partnership with other initiatives across Sunderland.

Other members of the Forum include: Barnardos; Blue Watch Youth Centre; The Box Youth Project; Commercial Road Youth & Community Project; Easington Lane Community Access Point; Herrington Burn YMCA; Lambton Street Fellowship Centre; Oxclose & District Young Peoples Project; Pallion Action Group; Salvation Army Youth Project; Southwick Neighbourhood Youth Project; Sunderland Catholic Youth Centre; Sunderland North Community Business Centre; Sunderland Young Carers.

Benefits of social enterprise, voluntary and community sector service delivery

Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum highlighted that the key benefit of their member organisations delivering public service contracts was the fact that many are already strongly linked to the communities which they serve. Many have built up their relationships with a range of partners in their areas over a number of years. The attachment to an area or community also means the greater likelihood of accessing further external funding on top of existing contracts. The Forum believes that the greater number of contracts that member youth organisations deliver and meet targets for, the more issues will be dealt with locally. The Forum also believes that the more contracts the sector delivers the more opportunities there are for further skills and learning. They also believe that the pooling and quicker resourcing of budgets leads to improved services and outcomes for young people.

Barriers and hurdles Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum have had to overcome

Member youth work organisations of Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum face a number of barriers in their everyday operations. These can be summarised as:

- **representing the views of members** – the forum has faced a key barrier in working with the varying viewpoints of the member organisations. Whilst maintaining an objective to represent the collective viewpoint of the youth services, the forum must also take into account the varying individual organisation strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, personalities, history and ethos. Whilst seen as a barrier to effective delivery, the integration of these organisations also highlight the strength of the Forum;
- **matching the voluntary and community sector climate** – the forum recognise that they need to breach the barriers faced by the sector as a whole. The forum therefore needs to contribute towards securing funding streams, being able to access funding that comes from a single source rather than a multitude of sources and recognising that the uniqueness of the voluntary sector needs to be maintained and built on without having the constraints of over burdance and bureaucracy;
- **stabilising funding** – another barrier is the ability for the forum and their member organisations to access new sources of funding and stabilising existing sources. The forum is actively seeking funding from the National Lottery in the forthcoming 'voluntary community sector' round and the 'community funding' round;

- **the commissioning process** – the last couple of years has seen a change in the focus of the voluntary and community sector from one dominated by grants to more of a contracting and commissioning process. The decision to commission services is a big one for voluntary and community sector organisations and has left some of the forum members in a quandary. The change to commissioning and competing to deliver services changes the nature of organisations and the nature of relationships with partner organisations. Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum has found that commissioning has raised a number of crucial issues for their member organisations. Some of the organisations that did not go for commissioning felt that firstly it would be taking their organisation away from what they were originally set up for and secondly felt that taking on a larger geographical area would undermine the localness of their organisation.

Contracts to grants: challenges for the Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum

The change in culture from contracts to grants and the extended role of the voluntary and community sector in service delivery has left the Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum and its member organisations with a number of core challenges, including:

- **funding staff** – the Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum currently uses Change Up money to fund the employment of a development officer. A key concern of the forum lies around sustaining this money and ensuring that staff promoting the work of the forum are sustained;
- **skills** – with a contract driven culture comes a raft of targets to be met. There is therefore a requirement for the member organisations of the forum to learn new skills around monitoring and evaluation. Therefore a second key challenge is around workforce reform and having enough emphasis, time and opportunity for staff training and development;
- **accessing opportunities** – a key future challenge surrounds the forum working with its members to access opportunities in terms of commissioning and external funding. In order to do that a key challenge of the forum is to have the capacity to offer direct support in funding and joint funding bids;
- **understanding not information** – a key challenge surrounds the voluntary and community sector contributing to policy changes rather than just being informed of it. A key example of this surrounds bidding for National Lottery Young People's Fund which is an area where Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum feel they are not able to maximise opportunities. Whilst the lottery are willing to provide workshops around funding opportunities, they are often not prepared to work strategically with the voluntary and community sector. Similarly with Local Area Agreements the voluntary and community sector in Sunderland have been informed about the policy without really detailing how they can effectively work with the agreements and how they can benefit the organisations which are members of the forum and the young people that these organisations serve.

The impact of Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum

Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum has three strategic aims. This section outlines findings from the most recent evaluation of the forum against the three aims:

Aim 1: to act as a representative body for the voluntary youth work sector in Sunderland in order to ensure that voluntary youth work provision is adequately represented in new developments and existing structures

The Forum is involved in and represented on a number of groups and committees at the city, sub-regional and regional levels including: Children's Trust Board; Connexions Tyne and Wear Board; Extended Schools Strategic Partnership Board; Youth Development Group. Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum has been particularly strong in influencing the commissioning process with regard to the youth service provision funded by the City of Sunderland's Youth Development Group.

Aim 2: to promote and encourage effective operational practices within the Sunderland voluntary youth work sector

The Forum has been particularly effective in facilitating the development of new skills amongst their member organisations. Areas where support has been particularly evident include: financial management; funding; committee development; and project management. The Forum is also involved in providing training around issues such as Drugs Awareness and Teenage Pregnancy.

Aim 3: To enable the Sunderland based voluntary youth work organisations to undertake collective initiatives on a citywide basis

Having a core membership of organisations has enabled the forum to effectively join up projects and services for the benefit of young people across the city. For example, the forum has hosted a citywide event for young people looking at issues facing young refugees and asylum seekers.

Concluding points

Sunderland Voluntary Sector Youth Forum is an umbrella organisation with a number of member organisations that deliver services for young people across the City of Sunderland. Whilst not delivering public sector services itself, the Forum has been responsible for much of the strategic thinking behind the commissioning of youth services for its member organisations. Many of these organisations are well established and have been delivering youth services for many years. However the move to commissioning has enabled the organisations to deliver a wider range of services and reach a wider cross section of young people across the City. The Forum does have a number of concerns for the coming years, predominantly around the development of voluntary and community sector infrastructure bodies. The Forum is also concerned about maximising opportunities with regard National Lottery Funding, and particularly with the pooling of budgets and the move towards Children's Trusts. The Forum also indicated that any emphasis on commissioning the voluntary and community sector to deliver youth work services must match with workforce reform. The sector must have access to the same delivery and evaluation training that local authority officers receive.

