

WIRRAL CHILDREN'S TRUST BOARD – 28th May 2010

EXTERNAL MONITORING OF THE ACTIVITY FUND REPORT

1.0 Background

This report has been prepared following the monitoring of the commissioned activities funded through the Positive Activities element of the Area Based Grant. The report identifies areas of good practice and makes recommendations for future development.

2.0 Recommendations:

2.1 That Wirral Children's Trust Board note the report.

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External Monitoring of the Activity Fund

A Report to Wirral Children's Trust

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1. Background Information

According to section 507B of the Education Act 1996, amended by the Education and Inspection Act of 2007, local authorities have a statutory duty to secure access for young people to a sufficient local offer of positive activities.

In 2009 Wirral Council invited eligible organisations to tender for funding from the 'Activity Fund' to provide activities in order to respond to the needs of young people who are vulnerable or at risk, at times when they would most benefit from these activities.

This initiative was intended to;

- support the implementation of the Integrated Youth Strategy through developing multi-agency or partnership approaches.
- work within and contribute to the 'Every Child Matters Framework' by targeting at risk or vulnerable young people.
- assist other services in meeting the key priorities of 'Wirral Children and Young People's Plan i.e. Teenage Pregnancy; risk taking behaviour; to reducing the numbers of NEET young people; to support young people at risk of becoming homeless or at risk of offending.

Commissioned activities are intended to increase partnership collaboration, identify new providers and extend the range of opportunities within the districts.

They are an enhancement of the current Youth Offer in respect of:

- providing activities at weekends on Fridays and Saturdays.

- financially supporting collaboration with arts, sports and cultural organisations thus increasing participation in those organisations and extending the range of opportunities in the Youth Offer.

Three organisations were successful in their tenders and accepted as approved providers for activities:

- Birkenhead Youth Club.
- Blossom Inspiration.
- Wirral Youth and Play Service and Partners.

Together they have been commissioned to set up a range of activities which would be responsive to local need; address strategic issues in Wirral and be attractive enough to encourage sustained participation and involvement by young people.

Activities funded by the Activity Fund include:

- Two Big Nights in each district e.g. band nights, disco's large youth arts/sports evenings. These events can attract young people from a wider area and break down territorial barriers.
- Two Sit Off Nights per district to provide attractive meeting places for young people where they will feel safe, meet others and engage in social and emotional skill development.
- Specialist Youth Support to work in collaboration with a range of agencies to provide support for the most vulnerable or at risk and break down barriers to engagement.
- Participation Worker to work alongside other partners in support of the implementation of the Council's programme of participation activities at club/project, district and Council levels.
- Cultural/Specialist Provision. Collaborative projects which will attract young people to achieving success in specific activities e.g. youth arts, D.J activities, canoeing, outdoor education.

1.2 The external monitoring report and the monitoring process on which the report is based has ;

- applied the Framework for Assessment of Commissioned Youth Services to information gained from monitoring visits to provide information to drive forward improvements.

- highlighted the strengths of activity programmes identifying factors that contribute to effectiveness for wider dissemination.
- identified areas for development for providers which might have implications for resource allocation and form part of an action plan to improve delivery.
- developed further the monitoring process for 2010/11.

1.3 Using the Framework for Assessment of Commissioned Youth Services the monitoring process has paid particular attention to the extent to which Providers have produced evidence of:

- strategic planning to contribute to the Integrated Youth Support Strategy.
- involvement in area forums and collaboration with district partners in identifying unmet needs at local level.
- involving young people in the design and delivery of programmes.
- making provision at weekends from 7-11pm and weekdays from 7-10pm.
- the provision of stimulating programmes across a range of activities which attract and ensure young people's participation, active engagement and provide positive outcomes e.g. new skills, accreditation.

In addition, monitoring visits have checked that Providers are complying with Wirral's regulations in; ensuring the Safeguarding of Children and Young People; ensuring all staff have current enhanced CRB checks; that Risk Assessment and Health and Safety procedures are adhered to in the delivery of services.

2 **Executive Summary**

2.1 All providers visited demonstrated a clear understanding of the underpinning legal requirements for the delivery of services. Procedures about Safeguarding Children and Young People, Risk Assessments, Health and Safety requirements and enhanced CRB checks were understood and adhered to by all staff. Across the range of provision visited, effective administration and communication of these procedures was demonstrated. Evidence from monitoring suggests that Wirral is already meeting Standard 6 of the new Standards for Positive Activities.

- 2.2 Providers were able to demonstrate how the activities provided fitted with strategic issues in Wirral. Those commonly mentioned were, social inclusion, avoidance of risk taking or anti-social behaviour, offering opportunities for fun and participation and making young people feel valued. This corresponds well with the target groups for the Activity Fund being young people who are vulnerable and at risk.
- 2.3 The provision commissioned and monitored by the Activity Fund related directly to local needs. This was evidenced by the feedback from young people attending the activities and from the reactions of local people e.g. In a Hip Hop activity in a voluntary youth club neighbours came to commend the workers on how well they were running the activity in conjunction with Police activities in the park. In a field on a social housing estate a multi-agency team including sports development, youth service and participation workers had set up sports activities and community members had noticed that there was less trouble from the young people in the area. Of particular interest was the involvement of small voluntary community organisations in larger collaborative bids. These small community and voluntary organisations are located in areas where there is little other provision. The organisations are often established in response to local needs and are very well attended.
- 2.4 Integrated working was viewed very positively by all staff involved in commissioned activities. Staff felt that by working together they could provide more attractive and diverse activities which more fully met the needs of vulnerable and at risk young people. A church youth club was able to combine with the Youth Theatre to provide a very exciting 'band night' which they could not offer on their own. A voluntary youth centre was able to bring in advice and guidance activities to help with personal and social issues amongst young men and women. Attractive planned provision to meet both local needs and Wirral's strategic aims had forged new partnerships and engaged staff interest in working together to develop more multi-agency projects.
- 2.5 The Framework for the Assessment of Commissioned Activities provides good evidence that the commissioning process is improving the quality and range of Wirral's Youth Offer more equitably across districts. Organisations have been required to consider Wirral's strategic issues, and assess needs and gaps at the local level in consultation with young people, the community and other agencies. In drawing up plans they have had to consider who they need to build partnerships with and what roles each agency will perform within the partnerships. This has led to more effective planning and delivery of the new activities which has led to an improvement in the range and quality of the provision, particularly in relation to more sports, cultural and skill activities.

3. **Wirral's local response to National Agenda.**

The forward to the DCSF document 'Positive Activities', Good Practice Guide' (2010) stresses the importance of how young people's participation in Positive Activities can help to ;

- Develop their social and emotional skills.
- Reduce their involvement in anti-social behaviour as victims or perpetrators.
- Impact positively on their resilience and outcomes in later life.
- Improve relationships between young people and the adults in their communities.

'Aiming High for Young People'- three years on (DCSF.2010) provides evidence of how participation in Positive Activities can produce beneficial outcomes in social and emotional skills, previously called non cognitive skills, that provide the foundations to remain engaged in learning and which are beneficial for good adult outcomes or active citizenship. These social and emotional skills include:

- Social skills e.g. interpersonal skills, empathy, tact, building rapport.
- Self regulation e.g. developing a personal locus of control in relation to emotions, aspiration and motivation.
- Self efficacy e.g. ability to carry out actions to achieve personal goals; application and persistence.

These are skills that employers are increasingly demanding from labour market entrants. These skills are also understood to support the development of cognitive skills and to discourage participation in risky behaviours.

In the development of the Principles of Operation of the Activity Fund, Wirral has put these social and emotional outcomes at the centre of their requirements of Provider's of Activity Programmes. A focus on these outcomes for young people was noted by the External Monitoring as being evident within their observation of young people and staff and volunteer's behaviour during monitoring visits.

4. **Creating a Participative Evaluation Process through External Monitoring.**

The aim of the external monitoring process was to design with partners a robust, transparent and user friendly quality assurance system to monitor programmes of activity commissioned by the Children's Trust through the Activity Fund.

The monitoring process had a particular focus on the fact that the purpose of the Activity Fund was to enhance Wirral's existing Youth Offer, in order to respond more effectively to the needs of young people who are vulnerable, at risk or in communities or social groups where access to activities has been limited.

In line with Wirral's commitment to Partnership working and involving young people in decision making, a participative evaluation method was devised and facilitated by the External Monitor. This process ensured that data and feedback was collected from all those involved in designing, delivering and participating in activities supported by the Activity Fund i.e.

- Commissioning Officers.
- The Link Forum.
- Partners providing activities.
- Young People.

The interactions of these partners in the design and implementation of the monitoring procedures ensured all partners were able to learn from the process and to apply their learning in relation to collaborative working, strategic planning, assessment of local needs and involving young people in the design and delivery to make continued improvements to the enhanced Youth Offer in Wirral.

4.2 Process.

4.2.1 Meeting of the Collaborative External Monitoring Group to consider and agree procedures and schedules for monitoring visits e.g. sample visits in each district; timetable of visits; assessment tools recording processes.

This meeting also planned for incorporating young people's views in the monitoring process and made plans for an open consultation meeting with Partners to engage their trust and confidence through openness and transparency.

4.2.2 Meeting of Collaborative External Monitoring Group with Partners in open consultations on all matters relating to the monitoring process. Partners were able to ask questions, raise issues and develop a shared understanding of the aims and methods of the monitoring process were established.

4.2.3 A schedule of monitoring visits were carried out by joint teams of external monitors. External monitors ensured that baseline regulatory procedures were in place. Discussions were held with staff from different agencies involved in the project about how needs were assessed; what were the intended outcomes for young people; how young people were involved in the design and delivery of the project and what opportunities there were for young people's acquisition of skills, progression and accreditation.

Joint monitors consulted young people about their involvement in planning, opportunities for new experiences and what they valued about their particular projects.

From the evidence collected, the joint external monitors gave feedback to staff and young people together, highlighting good practice, issues to address and opportunities for further development.

This, on the spot reporting back system was very much appreciated by Partners staff and young people involved in the project. Partners in particular felt it confirmed the transparency of the monitoring process promised at their briefing session. Young people reported that they felt valued and engaged in the process and this encouraged them to take on more responsibility within their projects.

It was also noted that by using this process Wirral is already largely complying with Standard 4 of the new Quality Standards for Positive Activities (DCSF 2010).

5. Findings of the External Monitoring Process.

5.1 Evaluation Measures.

Joint teams of external monitors agreed a schedule of visits with Providers that would provide evidence across a range of activities, geographical districts and types of organisation e.g. voluntary and statutory.

Visits were conducted using the Framework for Assessment of Commissioned Youth Services applying a Red, Amber, Green visual measure to the evaluation of each project. Results of this evaluation were given with feedback to Providers, Staff and young people at the end of each visit of the twenty two Activities visited.

- 20 were awarded the green measure having satisfied all the criteria and demonstrating good practice that could be incorporated into the Integrated Youth Support Strategy.
- 2 were awarded the red measure because they had not been able to attract young people to the activities they provided or because they did not have the full organisational capacity to implement their plans. Discussions are already taking place with these organisations.

5.2 Examples of Good Practice.

5.2.1 Big Nights.

One Big Night was planned for each district. This is a major event that would attract and involve young people from across a district and contribute to the menu of opportunities available at club, project and area level.

The Big Night visited as part of the monitoring process was a Talent Contest in West Wirral. 'West Wirral's Got Talent' was the finale of the contest which had its auditions in each of the districts of West Wirral over a number of months. The whole process had been operated along the lines of 'Britain's Got Talent' with large numbers of young people, their families and supporters attending the audition stage in each of the districts.

The Finale was sophisticated and highly impressive. The building had been transformed into a theatre with professional lighting and sound mixing together with excellent organisation of the programme for the evening. The atmosphere was electric as the acts put on their performances with their supporters roaring support. A very mixed audience attended the event but many more young people had been involved in making all 4 events a resounding success. The joint monitoring team felt wider dissemination amongst the wider Integrated Youth Support Team would stimulate and encourage more exciting and creative events to attract the engagement of young people on the Wirral.

5.2.2 Sit Offs.

This provision is intended to offer safe space for young people to develop social skills and social competence by mixing with their peer groups on Fridays and Saturdays. Funding was offered to rent or make available attractive places where young people would feel comfortable. There was

some evidence that Providers were not sure how to use this idea and were using their normal youth club provision of providing a place to meet but on Friday and Saturday. There is some merit in this in offering services when young people need them but joint monitoring would assert that engaging young people more fully in their plans may stimulate more exciting opportunities.

An example of good practice in developing Sit Offs was a voluntary youth project in South Wirral which developed a Sit Off night for young women on a Saturday night alongside its horticultural project. The young women planned and prepared food for the evening and then set down for a meal together discussing issues, concerns and having a good time together. The agenda for the Saturday night Sit Offs was developed by the young women and attendances were growing as members brought along their friends. On each Saturday night activities were reviewed and plans made for the following week. Members are developing plans for expansion of the project.

5.2.3 Cultural, Sport and Specialist Activities.

This category of activity opened up a range of new opportunities for young people that had not been available before e.g. fishing; Hip Hop D.J. activities; music technology and performance; motor bike maintenance; art work; sports development and training in a range of sports; urban adventure; dance and advice and guidance.

This category of activity also stimulated the largest amount of collaborative projects where experts in the specialism worked with voluntary and statutory youth services, participation workers and of specialist youth workers to meet the needs of those most at risk. These collaborative arrangements promoted both the acquisition of skills and involvement of those young people whose behaviour is not always able to be catered for within a single provision.

Examples of good practice in this category:

- A voluntary organisation working with a Further Education tutor to provide motor bike skills and maintenance in an old warehouse on an industrial estate in Birkenhead. Monitors noted members interest and skill development, the value they attached to their tutor's knowledge; being involved in an activity that was professionally organised even down to wearing overalls and having formal break times. Young people said they felt valued and this was a really interesting way to spend their time, "where they were learning stuff and able to look after their bikes".
- A voluntary church youth club offering inclusive activities in Birkenhead worked with tutors from the Youth Theatre to provide band and performance nights. This became a very inclusive project where those

who had their skills developed assisted other young people with learning difficulties to have a part in the performances on Saturday nights. The young people were very involved in the organisation of the events and had lots of ideas for future development.

- Advice and guidance in a voluntary club focussed primarily on sports activities. The female guidance staff worked through dance and performance activities to build relationships with young people which then led to personal and social development 'Talk in' session. Again young people particularly valued the expertise and positive relationships with the workers.
- In a collaborative sports development project, on a field in the middle of a disadvantaged social housing estate, Monitors noted the sports workers developing the skills of young people who might not normally be engaged in sport in school. Two of the young people progressed to league teams. Specialist support and participation workers supported the initiative by engaging and building relationships with young people who 'hung around the activity'. Monitors noted the good practice of a sports worker taking time with a young person to look at self regulation of his emotions and behaviour which were currently a barrier to the young person's achievement.

5.2.4 Contribution by small voluntary and community organisations.

The tender by Wirral Youth and Play Services and partners is an example of good practice in collaborative integrated work. It is a very complex bid in attempting to integrate the work of statutory youth support services and recognise the contribution of local voluntary and community organisations to personal and social development. In doing so, this bid has enabled the Trust to meet one of its targets i.e. that of identifying new providers that make a significant contribution to responding to local needs. These organisations were characterised by:

- direct response to observed local needs of the communities of which they were a member.
- a strong focus on community engagement and identity with young people in the community and with the community as a resource e.g. fundraising and volunteering.
- creating a sense of 'belonging in communities' in line with the DCSF Standards for Positive Activities (DCSF 2010).
- building warm, satisfying relationships with young people from a shared history and identity as community members.

Examples of good practice in this category include:

- A church youth club where the vicar had been concerned about lack of opportunity and behaviour of young people in the community. In response he opened up the Church Hall on Saturday nights and now has an attendance of approximately 120 young people. A very small amount of funding from the Activity Fund has enabled him to offer a more interesting and varied programme and secure support from voluntary helpers/parents in the community. Monitors noted the liveliness and engagement of members in the club. Young people reported that they felt safe, valued and that ‘there was always something going on’.
- A community organisation that runs a trampolining club for young people of different age groups, in a very disadvantaged area of the Wirral. This club was buzzing with activity and engagement by young people. Apart from the opportunity to gain skills in trampolining, a number of young people acted as volunteers and there were lots of other activities and trips they were able to engage in. Young people noted the warmth of the relationships with the volunteers, ‘they’re always there for you’. ‘There’s always something going on here’. ‘The staff don’t take any nonsense but they are there for you’. Monitors spoke to a young woman with a life threatening illness who came here because it was safe and she could get out ‘and be with her mates’.
- A small voluntary youth club that had used funding for a Hip Hop DJ night that was very well attended. This organisation had worked closely with police and the local community to address anti-social behaviour in the nearby park. In their feedback young people were very positive about their relationships with the staff and their ability to be involved in planning activities and events. “ The staff are great, they really care”; “There’s always something going on”; “I’ve been involved in the Hip Hop and been to see Hip Hop bands – we’re going to do an event for other young people”.

6. **Strengths of Programmes funded by the Activity Fund.**

- 6.1 The provision of often very small amounts of funding appeared to trigger a ‘can do’ optimism amongst staff about their work.

- 6.2 Having the extra funding encouraged staff from different sectors of the Youth Support Service to pool their resources, expertise and budgets to enhance benefits from the new funding. This means that a small investment makes a larger pool of resources available to meet the needs of young people.
- 6.3 Working in an integrated way with other services requires more detailed needs assessment, planning and organisation. This was a challenge to staff and volunteers but they reported greater job satisfaction in seeing those planned events coming to fruition.
- 6.4 Involving young people in the planning and delivery of activities was a requirement of the funding and often started with support workers consulting with young people. However in the best practices this moved to collaborative ongoing planning by staff and volunteers with young people.
- 6.5 Social and emotional needs were high on the agenda of young people. In all visits monitors observed meaningful and rewarding relationships with adults. Across all activity programmes, that were awarded a green measure, young people's feedback was about 'feeling safe', 'the staff really understand you', 'I get into trouble sometimes but they sit down and talk to you about it', 'You can go and talk to the staff about anything here'.

This feedback from young people is in keeping with the recent report 'Aiming Higher – Three years on' (DCSF 2010), which provides evidence from research that it not activities in themselves that build the blocks for engagement by young people, rather it is the opportunities for social, emotional and personal development incorporated within the total experience of engagement in activities that become the building blocks for future engagement and progression.

7. Recommendations.

- Disseminate findings from the External Monitoring to assist future planning.
- The Activity Fund programme has been successful in identifying some new providers. An audit of faith-based and community organisation support for young people could be undertaken to identify a wider range of providers available within Wirral's Youth Offer who may wish to co-operate in collaborative projects.
- The Link forum are able to offer training and support to faith and community based organisations to help them comply with Wirral regulatory procedures.

- Develop and publicise a user-friendly core offer to young people and parents on three levels:

Wirral Wide - Big Events.

District - Big Events and Specialist/Cultural sports activities linked to Hub structure

Neighbourhood - Mix of integrated support services and local faith based and community organisations interacting with district hub structure.

- Social and emotional development and progression as a result of engagement is an outcome of the Activities programme according to feedback from young people and through observation by External Monitors on the visits. All Monitors reported a real sense of excitement in seeing young people fully engaged, confident and developing greater competence evidenced by the ease with which they were able to communicate with the monitors. The Children's Trust may find it worthwhile to consider this outcome as part of the core of the Youth Offer within the Integrated Youth Support Services. Supporting young people to achieve this state of choice or learning readiness enables them to make more effective use of the specialist expertise of the diverse agencies involved in the Integrated Youth Support Services.