



Evaluation for Investing in Children Membership Wheatley Hill Community Centre

Wheatley Hill Community Centre is situated in the village of Wheatley Hill, a former mining community on the A181, 7 miles from Durham City. The Centre was formally a Miners Welfare, now refurbished with the addition of a new extension to the building which has increased the number of services available to the community. In its promotional literature, the Community Association stated aims are to *"provide and maintain a public place for the use and benefit of the inhabitants of all ages in Wheatley Hill and the whole of the district"*

Wheatley Hill is well known to Investing in Children. In 2003, IiC supported a group of young researchers from the village to challenge the negative attitudes toward young people and to try an increase access to services in the area. The project became known as the *Carrier Bag Culture*, a name which reflected the concerns of some in the village that young people spent most of their leisure time buying alcohol from local shops and carrying it to remote parts of the village where they would get drunk and cause a disturbance. The *Carrier Bag Culture* research revealed that, for most young people, boredom was the main issue and this was exacerbated by a feeling that they were being excluded from their own community. Young people pointed to services in the village which they felt excluded them and prevented from engaging in discussions to improve their situation. The Community Centre was one of those places that was clearly not meeting the needs of young people.

I returned to the Community Centre this year to find a place almost unrecognisable from the centre of a few years ago. The building has been modernised and now has a full time Centre Manager and a staff team supporting a range of new services to the public which include a crèche facility for all centre users, training rooms, fitness suite, IT suite, café with kitchen, main function room with sprung floor for dancing, concerts, social and recreational activities, conferences and meetings.

I met with Joyce Unsworth, the senior youth worker who is employed by Education in The Community. Joyce explained how some of the changes have benefited young people in the village. Young people now have a dedicated youth room they can call their own; they meet here twice a week and during school holidays. Young people also have greater general access to other parts of the centre including the main hall and can join the junior gym, attend computer classes and a range of other clubs covering martial arts to art & crafts.

However, for Joyce, the biggest change has been what she describes as a 'slow but steady' change in attitude toward young people. When she began working at the centre, she saw it as her responsibility to support the young people to challenge some of the old ways such as the practice of having a separate door for young people and the restrictions placed on them entering the centre at certain times. She also had to challenge the way young people were spoken to by other users which she and young people felt was discriminatory. Joyce is quick to point out that she has not been alone

and has had support from the new staff, particularly the Centre Manager.

Although Joyce has often found herself advocating on behalf of young people she sees a greater advantage in supporting young people to challenge and change things for themselves. In July 2006 young people published a report of research they had carried out with the support of youth workers. The report highlighted many of the concerns of young people raised in *Carrier Bag Culture* research three years before and has been used to challenge people to raise the standard of youth provision in the area. The following is a quote from the report summary -

"As youth workers we value the opinions of the young people who come into the centre, and following discussions with them and information gained from research we have identified the need for drastic changes in the community with regards to youth engagement and inclusion"

Changes are to include area youth projects covering Wheatley Hill and Thornley, which will add outreach and detached work and the setting up of some sort of youth engagement forum yet to be decided. There will also be greater access to information by young people on issues relevant to them.

At my second visit to the community centre on 21st November, I met with a group of 12 young people aged between 12 and 14 years, most were regular youth club members. I explained the purpose of my visit and what the Investing in Children Membership Scheme is all about. All of the young people described the centre as a place that is friendly and accessible and feel the liC Award would be well deserved. They were particularly pleased that this year, for the first time, their request to hold a junior disco on the new main hall had been granted. I noted the following additional comments.

"it's good because we get a choice about what to do, we can do fun things as well as education"

"Joyce treats everyone equal"

"the staff are all friendly"

"we get treated with respect and that's important"

"it's good because we can get involved in all sorts of things and we get to go on trips"

"there is always a range of things we can do"

Some of the young people know Cllr Morris Nicholls who had played a key role in the *Carrier Bag Culture* project. Cllr Nicholls set-up a *Junior Ward Surgery* following the research in 2003 and it seems many young people still attend. He is also a member of the Community Centre management committee. Joyce fully supports the meetings but also feels that young people's access to the committee could be improved. She explained the situation at present.

If young people want to raise issues with the management committee they have to attend the meetings, which at present take place during the day. As this prevents most young people of school/college age attending, Joyce often acts on behalf of the young people by attending and raising issues for them. Not particularly comfortable with this

she and the young people decided to write letters to the committee instead so that they at least receive a direct reply. This has worked reasonably well and the young people's concerns have been well received by the committee. However, Joyce and the young people feel that it is unfair for the major decision making group in the centre to meet at a time that excludes most young people and are trying to change this.

Joyce also feels that individual members of the committee should come along to youth sessions to observe and to help out occasionally as this will help foster a better community spirit in the centre. This is an idea young people support and one committee member responded to a request by young people to help with an arts session.

Despite the many challenges that lie ahead it is clear from my visits to Wheatley Hill Community Centre that much has changed. The modernisation of the building has led to the general improvement in services to the community including young people. Not only do many more young people attend the centre but there is now a far more positive attitude toward the active participation of young people. When I first met with Joyce I asked her if she was seeking the Investing in Children Award for the Community Centre as a whole or for her own youth club section. She is very clear that the Community Centre should apply for the award as it will help to encourage everyone who works in and uses the centre to strive toward continued change and improvement. Future evaluations, she feels, will help measure progress toward the improved access of young people to the decision making bodies within the centre.

I wholeheartedly agree with this approach and have no hesitation in recommending Wheatley Hill Community Centre receives an Investing in Children Award.

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Investing In Children

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