



Re evaluation for Investing in Children Membership Fishburn Youth Centre

Fishburn Youth Centre was awarded Investing in Children status in 2000 and received a second positive evaluation of the service in August 2004. For one reason or another, there was a delay in renewing the certificate but I was delighted to be invited to the centre in February 2007 to discuss the re-evaluation. I met with Senior Youth Worker Richard Parkin, Volunteer Worker Pamela Herron and several young people.

It has certainly been a busy time at the centre and the youth club is still very popular with young people. The centre is open five nights a week and as well as the traditional youth club provides various separate clubs focused on education, achievement and accreditation. There is a Millennium Volunteers Group and a number of opportunities for young people to earn a Youth Achievement Award.

In a previous evaluation it was noted that the main opportunity afforded to young people to participate in decision making was via a youth committee. While this hasn't formally been replaced and does still meet, Richard explained that they now operate a far less structured method of dialogue with young people. A great deal of discussion takes place during youth club sessions which young people have found more rewarding and fruitful. The Centre also holds open meetings called *consultation events* with young people at the beginning of every term to discuss the program of events and activities. When young people do raise issues they are encouraged to form themselves in to groups to 'troubleshoot' and come up with their own ideas and solutions. Richard pointed out that discussions with young people do not just cover activities, and gave an example of how young people are now, at their request, able to manage their own finances and bank accounts for the various clubs they belong to. Young people are also given a greater responsibility to raise money for projects.

A great deal of energy is focused on the accreditation side of youth work and I was interested to find out if this was at odds with young people who may want to come to the club and not be pressured into doing educational activities. Some young people do find this off putting, I spoke to four older boys who said they stopped coming as often because of the 'hassle'. The boys Gareth, Sam Ryan and Jonathon are all part of the drama group which is clearly the most popular section within the centre.

Richard is keen to point out that while there is a youth work curriculum to follow he doesn't think there is any undue pressure on young people to achieve because, for the most part, he can meet his targets by letting the young people choose whatever they want to do. This was borne out by Amy, Victoria, Zoe, Sophie and Jodie who said they feel under no pressure to do anything they don't want to do, and in any case it would be a small price to pay for what they describe as the fantastic opportunities they have had to travel away with the drama group. Recently they chose to go to London and stay in a 'posh' hotel as part of an 'educational' trip.

I asked the young people if there were things they would like change and I recorded the following remarks:

“We’d like the club to be open longer”

“It should be open during the school holidays”

I asked Richard about the issue which many young people have, not just in Fishburn, about youth centres closing during the holidays and he pointed out that the club can only remain open based on the youth work sessions paid for by Education in the Community, which means the club is closed 10 weeks in the year.

At my second visit I found out more about the drama club and other clubs within the centre. The drama group was an idea that came from a group of young people who are part of *On the Move* a decision making group with responsibility for new ideas and fundraising to create opportunities for young people to experience life outside Fishburn. Young people have participated in outdoor activities, ice-skating, trips to London, Blackpool & Sunderland with the drama a club and so on. I was also introduced to young people from a second group called *Going for Gold*. This is a decision making body responsible for improving the fabric of the building and has raised funds recently to refurbish the activity room.

Richard sees within these two groups the ‘activists’ among the young people, the “ones who are challenging and demanding improvements” Many of these young people have been involved in the Keyfund and he points to similarities to the way they do things here at Fishburn. When young people have an idea or a complaint or simply want to challenge the way things are done then they are encouraged to form themselves into groups to come up with solutions. I chatted with Alex and Scott, two young people who are members of both groups. They commented:

“If we want to something to happen we have to be prepared to make it happen”

“We have become very good at fundraising”

“We decide what we raise money for, that’s important to us. I also sit on an area funding panel and can tell straight away if the bids are from young people or adults, and it’s our job to make sure only bids that are young people’s ideas are passed”

“We have changed lots of things, just about everything we set out to do we have succeeded”

“If we can’t decide on the best way forward we have a vote”

Conclusion

Fishburn is a particularly well attended youth centre with a great deal of activity and variety for young people. It opens every week day and provides a comprehensive range of educational and leisure opportunities, many of these are in the form of trips and excursions that would otherwise be unavailable to young people in Fishburn. Young people here are also very active and hard working and take a great pride in the improvements they have made to the building and the activities it provides. The youth work team have been very imaginative in the way they have empowered young people to come up with their own solutions to problems. Unlike many youth clubs, Fishburn has also been able to retain a high number older teenagers many over 18 years old who see themselves as part of the management structure of the centre and the drivers of change.

Richard believes that if he were allowed to, he could leave these young people open up the youth club and run it by themselves. Many young people travel to the centre from other villages as well as from Fishburn and it is no surprise that attendance is so high. Whilst there, they are given a great deal of responsibility and trust and are encouraged to speak out and make their own contribution to the way decisions are made. Young people did point to some intractables, such as the curriculum and the closure of the centre during holidays and it will be interesting to see if these are still issues at the time of the next evaluation.

For this year I am happy to recommend that Fishburn Youth & Community Centre retains it's status as an Investing in Children Service.

B.Stock

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