

ARK COMMUNITY NETWORKS – PROMOTING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP
Our work leading up to the Lottery funded project.

ARK Community Networks supports people with learning difficulties to lead lives of their choosing in their own homes. We have 28 services, throughout twelve Local Authorities across the East of Scotland and the Central Belt. We currently support 330 people.

For some time now, ARK Community Networks has put emphasis on supporting people to be connected into their communities: both geographic and communities of interest. Initially, we focused on supporting people to link into activities and groups, based on their interests, and to build and maintain relationships and widen their social networks. We also believe, however, that it is important to support people to play an active role and have influence in their communities. People with learning difficulties are often viewed as people in need of support and services. Where they are supported to make their voice and views heard, it is often in relation to services provided specifically for people with learning difficulties. This is indeed vital but we would also like to see people having a voice in, and influence over, how mainstream services are delivered as well.

We know that many of the people we support have concerns about issues within their local community, such as road safety, public transport, environmental issues, accessibility of health and other services. We want to ensure people have the necessary information and support to take up these issues if they so wish. We are keen to support people to build their confidence in influencing the provision and development of public services across the board.

In April 2004, ARK Community Networks organised a conference in partnership with the Black Community Development Project entitled 'Breaking Barriers: Supporting Participation in Community Planning'. This conference brought together a diverse range of groups and representatives of groups who are often marginalised, alongside representatives of current planning structures, to share good practice in, and identify and begin to tackle the barriers to, effective participation.

About the same time as this, we were successful in securing funding from SCVO and Communities Scotland to support the involvement of National Intermediaries in Community Planning. Community Planning places a duty on Local Authorities, Enterprise, Health, Police and Fire Bodies to participate in working together to provide better public services. One of the main aims of community planning is to make sure

people and communities are genuinely engaged in the decisions made about the public services which affect them.

The funding allowed us to appoint a worker for a nine-month period to promote Community Planning and active citizenship within the organisation. Whilst being very clear that we would need to start where people were at in relation to their issues of concern, our hope was that we would be supporting people to take up 'generic' issues, in other words, issues which would have relevance to any community member rather than services offered specifically to people with learning difficulties. This was exactly what happened. For an easy-read summary of the work of this project please see SUMMARY OF WORK BEFORE BIG LOTTERY FUNDED PROJECT (ACCESSIBLE).

Aims of project

- To raise awareness amongst the people we support of the opportunities for them to have an influence within the community planning structures,
- To support individuals within two distinct geographical areas to take up issues of concern at local level,
- To raise awareness amongst staff of the structures and opportunities within Community Planning,
- To build in-house capacity of staff to support people to be involved in local issues,
- To deliver training in Citizenship, Democracy and Community Planning to some of the people we support,
- To produce a Training Pack based on the above,
- To collate and share examples of good practice in, and barriers to, supporting the effective involvement of people with learning difficulties.

In order to have a benchmark from which to evaluate the success of the project, questionnaires were sent both to the people we support and to staff to ascertain existing knowledge and activity around community involvement. A high number of responses were received from individuals supported by ARK, which gave a clear indication that people wanted to know more. Numbers returned by staff were lower but also indicated a desire for more information.

Building staff knowledge and skills

Following on from the questionnaires, two briefing papers and a newsletter have been sent out to interested staff, giving a broad overview of Community Planning and explaining some of the key structures, groups and processes for supporting individuals to get involved in community activity. We identified link workers to take a

lead role within their service for promoting active citizenship. We have held meetings with interested staff to share experiences and inform of the work of the project.

There has been input on active citizenship into two training courses for staff (one of which was addressed by our community activists from Peebles). This has begun the process of raising awareness, increasing knowledge and generating interest and enthusiasm amongst staff. Staff are now beginning to listen differently when an individual complains about not being able to access their local bank because there are steps, or expresses concern about the traffic lights changing too quickly, resulting in insufficient time for people with mobility problems to cross. Staff are beginning to realise that the people they support have the right to take up these issues if they wish and thus begin to influence change.

Some of our services have made links with their local CVS (Council for Voluntary Service) to gather information about the themes and structures of community planning in their local area. Some staff have begun to attend meetings which they feel are of relevance to the people they support, and are inviting individuals to attend with them. This is still very small scale but we hope that, as the learning from this spreads throughout the organisation, more staff and people we support will build similar links, with resulting increased involvement in local structures.

Supporting community action

Our original intention was to support 2 individuals or groups in 2 specific geographical areas to take up issues of concern. In effect, the Project Worker (PW) was supporting 12 people across 4 Local Authorities to progress issues of concern. The level of activity varied from people who were just beginning to explore how they might take a first step on things they had concerns about, to a well-established group in Peebles who have successfully raised several issues with their local Council. Their story provides a clear illustration of what is possible. These words are extracts taken from the presentation they gave to the Council meeting:

‘We are asking our local council to consider putting a puffin crossing at the foot of the Old Town, Peebles. This is a dangerous area for people to cross. The pavement on Kingsmeadows road is in need of repair. It has just been filled in roughly in some areas. This causes problems for wheelchair users and prams. The cobbles (School Brae) are raised up and people are tripping over them. We are

asking our local council to do something to improve this situation.'

The group put a petition around shops and libraries within Peebles and presented it to the Council meeting. They received press coverage for their activity, following which a member of the public contacted them to ask them to raise the issue of installing speed bumps in her street. They are clearly seen as people who are contributing to improving the community. As a result of the presentation to the Council, a council representative is meeting with them on a 3 monthly basis to report on progress on the issues raised. A group member has also been invited to sit on the Tweeddale Safety Panel.

The group's views on why they took action on these issues, and the views of other activists, are in the attached Newsletter, which they wrote to inform other people supported by ARK Community Networks of their activities and the perceived benefits, both for themselves and their community.

In addition to the direct support, the Project Worker, the Business Development Manager and a co trainer from People First ran a 6-week course on 'Citizenship, Democracy and Taking Action in Your Community' for 9 people in our Region 4, which covers East and Mid Lothian and the Borders. Despite travelling some distance to attend, participants enjoyed the sessions and several went on to take action on issues that concerned them. The material used on the course has formed the basis of the Training Pack, **'Taking Action and Making a Difference in your Local Community'** which can be used with lots of different groups. For details of how to get a copy of this, see the Training page.

Future Direction

After the funding provided by SCVO and Communities Scotland ended, we continued to support our community activists and sought external funding to continue the specific focus on promoting active citizenship. We were successful in securing three years' funding from the Big Lottery fund for this. For more information about the aims of this project, please see The Lottery reports in the Background section. The aims are also outlined in the main page 'What is active citizenship' article.

We hope that this work will support people with learning difficulties to become more involved and play a more direct role in the decision making structures within their own communities. Their role as active citizens, with a lot to contribute to influencing public services, will be clearer to all concerned. We believe this approach will promote

greater social cohesion, through people with learning difficulties working in partnership with others on issues of mutual concern, thus promoting greater understanding of the concerns, strengths and contributions of people with learning difficulties within the wider community.

Sylvia Crick
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