

ARK's 'Promoting Active Citizenship' Project, Year One - 2006/07

The overarching aim of this project is to promote active citizenship amongst ARK staff and the people we support. It will also work to support the people using our services to increase their social networks and to progress their opportunities for employment and for delivery of training.

In terms of working with the people we support this will involve:

- Continuing the work of the 2004/05 pilot 'Promoting Active Citizenship' project to identify individuals or groups who wish to become better connected to their local community.
- Identifying opportunities to enable people to raise issues of concern and play a role in influencing change by contributing to local democracy.
- Delivering training around citizenship, democracy and access to employment.
- Supporting service user input into staff induction and training.
- Supporting service users to produce information and newsletters for the benefit of other people with learning difficulties.
- Setting up circles of support for individuals

In terms of working with staff at ARK this will involve:

- Building capacity amongst staff in understanding how to support our service users to participate and be included in community groups and fora.
- Delivering training in community connecting and person-centred approaches to citizenship and access to employment.

Other work which will happen alongside the above will reach into and beyond local communities, seeking out good practice in engaging with community groups across Scotland and the UK to identify learning that can be brought into ARK. A key element of the project will be liaison and joint working with other groups who are involved in supporting active citizenship to promote mutual learning and raise awareness of good practice strategies towards the effective participation of people with learning difficulties.

Progress to date

Continuing on from the work of the pilot project contact has now been made with most of our 'active citizens' who were supported to take action on things that concerned them in their local communities (Region 4). All of those contacted (in Peebles, Dalkeith, Haddington and Musselburgh) are keen to build on the work they began during the pilot and to 'step up' their campaigns. This has involved the various groups and individuals coming together to discuss the areas of concern, to share learning and to come up with strategies for action.

They have also had contact with other groups and over the next months will be working more closely with people from organisations including Enable, Edinburgh Development Group (EDG), Key Housing etc. This will ensure that the experience and learning of our active citizens at ARK benefits not only people with learning difficulties but also other disadvantaged groups within the wider community.

Community activist and service user involvement and activity

- May 06, two of our active citizens co-facilitated a 'Pathways to Participation' workshop at an ARC Conference on service user involvement.
- Summer 06, two of the people we support worked with us on the short listing and recruitment process for a new Participation Officer post at ARK. In the end three of our active citizens took part in this process and we successfully appointed in January 07.
- Activists in Dalkeith approached their local councillor with concerns around road safety and the traffic lights in their town centre.
- Two activists from Peebles are core members of their recently established Citizens' Panel for Learning Disability carers and service users in the Borders. This group is now growing and another of our active citizens has also joined. We are working closely with People First and the other Panel members to develop a more effective method of representation and information sharing from this important group.
- A group of service users from Region 4 met together several times to discuss involvement in ARK staff induction and training. Two members of this group provided valuable input to the Region 4 staff induction in December – the feedback from staff was excellent!

- Several of the people we support participated in the Lothian Strategy Review consultation events which took place across the Lothians, in October. This included both people who have identified themselves as active citizens at ARK and also some of their friends who use our services. **We are finding that more and more people are joining our groups as they begin to hear about the project from their friends or staff.**
- Active Citizens at ARK have worked together to produce two fantastic newsletters to date, sharing their stories about taking action and making a difference in their local communities. Several contributors have sent in stories whilst others have been attending meetings. The message is getting through that there are all sorts of ways that the people we support at ARK can participate. It is not all about attending meetings; it is about having a voice! **There is 'room for all' in the Promoting Active Citizenship project.**
- Three of our active citizens from Peebles worked with us to prepare and facilitate a joint workshop with EDG at the Scottish Social Services Council conference in October. This was a big national event during which we ran a workshop called 'Involving the Experts' in the morning and again in the afternoon session. It was very well received and it was great to work with EDG on this.
- Our active citizens have supported the 'Give me 5' campaign to increase the amount of 'permitted earnings' in line with the minimum wage and in order to ensure equality of opportunity to work for people on incapacity benefits. One of our members attended the campaign launch in the Scottish Parliament in November, and took part in the discussion at the committee room table.
- Several of our active citizens attended the Cross Party Group on Learning Disability event in the debating chamber of the Scottish Parliament in November. It was great to see so many of our members being included and participating in the People's Parliament!
- The 'My Right to be Safe' group has gained both numbers and interest. Members are working together to think about issues around bullying and harassment and how they can make a difference to this in their local communities.

It is important to note that there has been much more activity going on over the months and across all of the regions. The aforementioned are just a few of the 'highlights' from our project.

Identifying opportunities to access local democracy

Work has begun to map the political landscape in each of the three local authority areas in Region 4. Plans are to work with other agencies and key stakeholders (People First, Local Area Coordination, Community Planning Officer etc.) within the localities to produce accessible information on planning structures and local democracy.

We are very happy that the Lottery has in principle accepted our proposal to keep the project's focus in Region 4 for another 12 months due to the length of time it takes to truly embed the work and to build strong foundations in regard to accessing local democracy.

Information

Questionnaires were circulated to all service users in Regions 2 and 4 to gather baseline information relating to the aims of the 'Promoting Active Citizenship' project. 51 responses were received.

A questionnaire was sent to all local managers re. Employment issues

Briefings for service users were produced on 'Citizenship', 'Circles of Support' and 'Employment – a guide to benefits'

Briefings for staff were produced on 'Employment', 'Circles of Support' as well as the circulation of other information relating to the work of the project and issues of concern raised by the people we support.

Training

A three day training session on 'Citizenship' took place in Region 2 in September/October.

A 'Path to Employment' workshop took place in Region 4 in September. This was followed up with a 'My Employment Story' workshop in November.

People who use our services were involved as co-trainers and presenters at each of these sessions.

Circles of support

Work has taken place to build a circle for one of the people ARK supports in Region 4. It is our aim to develop this approach with more individuals across the various regions.

Joint working

Links have been made with key personnel and/or service users at Enable, EDG, Key Housing and the Thistle foundation with a view to joint working on various aspects of promoting active citizenship. Many other useful contacts have been made and work will continue to build on these.

The way forward

The way forward will involve building on the foundations already laid and remaining responsive to the expressed needs and concerns of the people we support at ARK. The Development Worker will continue to work with current active citizens and to engage with other interested service users, staff members and community groups to promote the involvement of all citizens.

Accessible information will be produced and disseminated widely on all aspects of citizenship including access to employment and newsletters will be produced for people with learning difficulties *by* people with learning difficulties.

ARK's Participation Officer will work alongside the Development Worker to ensure that at ARK we are leading by example in promoting the full and effective participation of people with learning difficulties within our organisation and in their wider communities.