

Case Study 11: Young Musicians on the Move

Torry Youth Project, Torry, Aberdeen

This case study describes a community education project that has been developed to give young people opportunities to develop their musical potential through the setting up and operation of rock bands.

The Torry Youth Project was established as an Urban Aid initiative in 1986. Housed in a double temporary classroom unit it is run by a community education leader with one full-time project worker, a part-time clerical assistant and has a budget that permits in the order of eight part-time workers and tutors to be employed for parts of the calendar year. The project is geared to focus on work with 14–16-year-olds and 18–24-year-olds. Originally funded for four years the project became mainstream within the work of Grampian Regional Council and most recently within Aberdeen City Council.

The project staff is part of an area community education team that serves the Torry area of Aberdeen. There are a number of issues on which social work, education, community education and other agency teams are working collaboratively to tackle. These include combating drug abuse, unemployment, teenage pregnancy and the dangers inherent in opting out from full-time education. The area has a number of priorities for community education work and in particular the stimulation of participation and social inclusion of the young people in the community that they serve.

In tackling these wider objectives a variety of initiatives is run by the project, including:

- 14–16 after-school services including life skills, such as cookery for boys
- an advice and drop-in centre through the day for 18–24-year-olds with a focus on information and employment issues – a staging post for pointing young people to more specialist advice and help centres
- young women and teenage mums group two afternoons per week with crèche support
- 14–18 and 18+ group two nights per week with adventurous and recreational activity from hill walking to snooker
- a music support group.

The project is valued by the community and by the clients with whom it works. It is innovative and successful: hence its continued existence beyond the original set-up plans for a two-year operation. However it is in the area of music development that a number of creative approaches have been employed and that the creativity of the young people has been developed. Music has been used as a key to unlock a few doors on the road to achieving wider individual and group objectives concerning the personal, creative and social development of the young people involved.

The project team was aware of the significance of rock band culture and music for young people and saw the value placed by youngsters on the music

and the rock band as a way to personal satisfaction and achievement. There was often an interest in learning to play an instrument when there was little inclination to be involved with anything else in the education area. They realised that in the operation of a band there was opportunity to develop skills such as those involved in team working and collaborative activity, and ways to develop attitudes such as tolerance and respect for the ideas and contributions of others. It also seemed to the team that there was the opportunity to unlock the creativity that they believed was in the youngsters and to develop this into longer-term prospects connected with employment, education and personal development. For example a key consideration in the establishment of a good rock band is that there have to be clear understandings with regard to drug and alcohol use. The approach followed was to research video archive of famous rock stars talking of the problems caused by drugs and alcohol to musicianship and effective band working. Not all the material used was of the positive outcome type with the viewing of spoiled performances and band break-ups forming an important part of discussion sessions. These discussions reinforced the project rules regarding the use of dangerous substances whilst exploring the requirements for achieving success.

The kids know we have a zero-tolerance approach to drugs and alcohol but the work began to underline that the approach was based on more than simply adults frowning on more extreme behaviour but on how it could damage them and their investment of time and effort in working together.

Janice Lafferty, Project Leader

The project runs music tuition sessions across the week involving some 40 young people. There are two part-time tutors, Phil Robertson who is the guitar tutor and Grant McLeod who does the drum work. They are professional musicians and local band members. Although not qualified teachers they are fully *au fait* with band and entertainment work.

They have played in local bands and toured around Britain. They know the community and the local music scene. They are both excellent at what they do and really know their stuff in terms of music and band development. They have a great way with the kids and they are especially aware of the issues concerning young people and the pressures of drugs and alcohol. Indeed that was really the motivation for their participation in this particular initiative.

Janice Lafferty, Project Leader

They know if there is a gig on that they need to help each other and take responsibility for organising things – it's like a community of musicians. The older ones come back and help the younger ones and vice versa. The best lessons are one-on-one but I sometimes have twenty youngsters here so I get them to share their knowledge and show and teach each other. It works well, and as well as the music they are learning how to communicate and work with each other.

Phil Robertson, part-time tutor

The project provides a range of instruments for use although the young people often acquire their own in the course of their time with the project tutors. This work takes place in the project base, which is separate from other buildings and housing, their having tried and failed to be accommodated in other community buildings and schools, due to noise and organisational difficulties. By keeping the noise limited to certain hours and using Saturday, a day when many in the community are shopping or engaged in other activities, the disruption to the immediate neighbours is minimised.

The existence of bands has always been part of the project activity but it is only recently that the context for this work has been sharpened and the creative elements heightened to go beyond personal and social development to embrace genuine creativity and original music making. They have had their past successes and one of the bands, Elevation, has achieved regular local work on the pub and club circuit in Aberdeen with one of the members going on to study music at college. However for the most part the bands broke up and individuals moved on. The bands that are the subject of this case study were of another character and the context and their formation and development was very different from that of the previous groups.

Aberdeen City Council made available a challenge fund called the Drugs Strategy Initiatives Fund. The project leader was aware that a number of the current cohort of young musicians had had actual or peripheral involvement with drugs and she sought and obtained challenge funding to develop an anti-drugs initiative through the music activities. This included the use of existing drugs programme material but importantly the development of new material relating to the rock band scene. What was being developed was a diverse approach going beyond the education and harm reduction advice, which was the general pattern, and moved towards providing activities that offered alternatives to drug involvement. To focus the work of the bands more than had been the case in the past, the funding was used to secure recording sessions at the Fluxus Recording Studio in Aberdeen. This allowed for 40 hours of recording time to produce two master CDs that the bands Liber8 and Area69 could use to promote themselves on the band circuit in Aberdeen and on local radio. The project also involved a professional photographer and a graphic designer to produce, with the input of the young people, promotional posters and photographs and the design and production of CD jewel case inserts.

The initiative involved eight young men, several of whom had had periods of trouble with school or the police. However, all had consistently maintained attendance at the project music sessions for three years or so. The tutors involved with the groups sharpened attention given to the message that drugs and effective music making do not mix despite media hype to the contrary. Interviews were done with the individuals involved before the initiative got underway and follow-up interviews were used to evaluate the outcomes. The initiative saw the development not simply of practised play lists for the bands but the writing and recording of original music. The Liber8 original tracks were used by Grampian Police to form the background for their anti-drugs video

support package called *The Buzz*, which seeks to provide alternative approaches to drugs abuse education through more relevant and current images and media messages for young people who may reject school-focused approaches. A launch event was held for the release of the CDs and was attended by local elected members and staff from various agencies involved in the community. The bands performed and there was genuine appreciative feeling for the high achievements and success of the young people involved.

The older of the two groups, Area69, disbanded at the end of summer 2000 as some five of the eight young men involved gained places on music courses or moved into employment. The project leader recognised how positively the bands and particularly the younger band, Liber8, had responded to the challenges of the initiative. She took the opportunity to contact local politicians with a view to putting the band forward as an ambassador group in any of the Council's international links programmes. It was suggested that as well as promoting the tartan image of pipe bands, Scottish country dancing and other traditional culture forms that modern 'heavy metal' music might be appreciated, particularly with younger civic partners. Largely as a result of the quality of the launch presentation, the demeanour of the band members at that event and an interview with the Council's international officer, an invitation to join a visiting group was received. The invitation was to participate in an international youth music festival in Belarus in October/November 2000.

What an experience for these lads! I have been in youth and community work for 26 years and there has been nothing as rewarding and significant in the lives of a group of youngsters with whom I have worked.

There were some initial reservations on the part of the young people, ranging from lack of confidence in travelling away from home, and fears about going to somewhere associated with Chernobyl, to concerns about associating with a pipe band going on the trip whose music was perhaps less 'cool'. Discussion overcame these problems and the event proved to be an outstanding success. The band enjoyed a week of near pop-group stardom and the band members felt appreciated and valued in a way not experienced before. Relationships were made across international boundaries and an appreciation was gained of the culture and the hard work to achieve musical success whatever the context. In terms of performance the group gained experience of sophisticated stage and sound systems and of playing to very large audiences.

They went down a bomb. There were young lassies chasing after the tour bus and people stopping them in the street for autographs. It was such an experience and at the same time they learnt a lot about social conditions and values in the eastern bloc. They adjusted their thinking and gained new perspectives and values on what was available at home. They played for the local troops, lads of their own age, and contemplated the implications of conscription. They realised that they had choices but that many of the young people they were associating

with at the festival did not have too many options in their lives.

To be so important and to meet so many people who valued them for their music and themselves has had a huge effect on them as people and their attitudes to life and the future.

Janice Lafferty

The band has now made a second CD funded by the selling of copyright permission of their first tracks to the police for use on their video packages. They now have regular gigs and one of the three is now in a full-time music course.

One of the features of youth work is overcoming the disposition of many of the young people to give up easily when challenged. With this band we have gone past that they now have the confidence and the determination to succeed – and they did this for themselves.

Janice Lafferty

There have been other developments too.

- Freeline, another new young band working through the same process, has been established with Liber8.
- Around forty young people are voluntarily undertaking music tuition at different levels with the part-time tutors.
- An annual open-air concert involving the bands has been relocated to the youth project site and the band members are involved in the organisation and running of the event. In this the young people have had to tackle the issues of working with others in the potentially vexed area of stewarding and crowd management. This they have done with considerable success together with other achievements including the negotiation of financial backers for the event.

This year the concert will have bouncy castles and other things for families. I can remember how I went to ones in the past and thought I would want to play in a concert one day – it was my ambition and I have achieved it. I think a lot of young people think rock music is cool and seeing us and the other bands will encourage them to make music and to participate.

Martin, vocalist

- Partly as a result of this work and some public meetings with young people in the area the Torry Rock Forum has been established. This is a properly constituted body with a committee that includes representatives from all the bands. They made the application for support from Council and they were keen to participate in what is a citizenship development in community responsibility and organisation. The success of the forum is plain with the coordination of band music activities in the area and the assumption of complete responsibility for the organisation of the 2001 open-air concert including letter writing, advertising, collaboration with agencies such as the police, stewarding and of course the performances.

Because the forum is run by young people it is better than something controlled by a couple of adults. We feel that we are getting real support and involvement and we have already achieved finance to £2000 to cover costs for the open-air concert.'

Chris, Liber8

For me this growth of their responsibility and the willingness to solve problems on their own initiative is one of the most rewarding outcomes. We are always in the background if things start to go wrong but it is vital that they identify and tackle things themselves from reorganising their instrument store to the complex areas of compromise and negotiation with outside agencies. These developments have led to a flowering of their natural creativity not only in their music but also in the wider area of contribution to their community.

Janice Lafferty

The young people in the bands and the project team who have worked with them have demonstrated creativity and innovative approaches to problems on a variety of levels. A number of features can be identified as contributing to their successful answers and approaches.

- Concern to provide support and facilitation with a focus on developing attitudes and not simply giving instruction and delivering messages.
- Relevant and practical attention to real-life solutions in moving on the personal development of the involved young people with particular attention to tolerance and interpersonal skill development.
- Collaboration and team-working development as a core factor.
- Real value for the success and achievement of the youngsters involved by a wider community including those in positions of authority as well as peers.
- Input of real world players like graphic artist, musicians and photographer.
- Taking a risk on the unknown – working in the territory of drugs and heavy rock music, going to Belarus, running an open-air concert.
- Flexibility of approach to meet changing circumstances.
- Consistent values and attitudes combined with effective leadership.
- Real value for contribution of peers and collaborative learning.

This is what I want to do. I don't want to be promoted and have to deal with all the paperwork and the meetings. I enjoy working directly with the young people and modifying my practice to deal with the changing circumstances. I hope the system will let folk like me keep going.

Janice Lafferty

I met this tutor called Sergei and he invited me to play with his band. It was blues music and we got on fine – I played with the Belarus band every night of the week. We e-mail each other now although he only has very limited access to the net. We even use voice mail to send each other pieces of music. The visit has been a power of good for him. His band is now gigging regularly and all this because we were on

TV. He has now got a job in a studio and is developing things further.

The great thing is that when we run the open-air event seven of the ten bands taking part will be Torry bands – by popular demand and because they are good. I get a great buzz out of seeing the parents and friends of the performers taking such pride in the achievement of the young folk.

The youngsters see this place as their place, a music-making centre and that means they own it and the activities that happen here. As it is their own they want it to be as good as it can be – and it is.

I never make decisions about who will or should start a band. It has to come from them. If it is their idea they can pull each other along and make it work and that is better than anything I can do by way of motivation.

The bands send out the right signals: that folk are getting on with things and are not being distracted by drink, vandalism, drugs and crime – I think the community knows that and appreciates it.

We are promoting music as well as working with the lads in the bands. The wee kids watching the performers and the older ones learning and practising realise that if they can do it so might they. There is a real outlet for their musical creativity – it is a reality and not something that others get the chance to do but not them.

Phil, part-time tutor

This is the obvious place to be for music in Torry. We were just mucking about with music but we hit it off as friends and musicians and we decided we might take it further. It was here we really learned to play as a band and we gained a lot from others in the project.

Chris, Liber8

It's been a positive experience. We have seen ourselves come from being three kids playing cover songs to playing in live concerts in front of hundreds of people – and playing our own music, which they seemed to enjoy.

Chris, Liber8

Belarus was an eleven out of ten experience. We met so many people and shared so much music. We learned about the mechanics of setting up a large-scale concert and we saw how much better off we were in terms of material things and opportunities when compared to the folk of our own age over there. We realised how lucky we were to live somewhere with a transport, education and health system and how much people here take these things for granted.

Band members

It was my dream to be a full-time rock musician and I am on the way.

As a young boy I had decided that I would play in the Torry concert but the dream is what I am going towards now with the band.

Chris, Liber8