



Commission for
Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

Making Best Practice Stick

Rural Youth Projects: 'No Blagging':

Using art to give young people a voice in rural Cheshire

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Introduction

One of the most affluent counties in England, the unemployment rate in Cheshire is consistently below that of the North West and the rest of Great Britain, and, in recent years, employees in Cheshire have had hourly earnings rates higher than the English average. Although agriculture and dairy farming has slowly declined over the past 25 years, there has been a steady rise in jobs in the manufacturing and financial sectors.

The county town is Chester, a city with 1900 years of history. It is an extremely busy place, well visited both for its shopping and its Roman, medieval and Georgian remains.

There are numerous rural towns and villages in the surrounding large rural district. One of the oldest of these is the picturesque market town of Malpas, with its half-timbered houses, medieval church and old brick buildings. This community of 1,200 residents is the base for the 'No blagging' project.

The small Youth Service team that covers the City of Chester District aims to meet the needs of the young people not only in the large and dispersed rural areas but also in urban Chester. The patch includes Blacon, which at one time contained one of the largest council housing estates in Europe.

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What is the project about?

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The project was instigated in Autumn 2005, when Claire Smith of Cheshire's Rural Touring Network got together with Jo Austin-Preece from Cheshire County Council Youth Service to create a piece of theatre that represented a very broad range of youngsters.

Some of the young people were at risk of exclusion from school, others had disability issues, some were farmers' children and some lived on council estates and they varied in their ability at school and the stability of their home lives. Most of the children were drawn from Malpas. However, young people were also invited from Chester. The partnership included the manager of the Malpas Young People's Centre, as well as a representative from the secondary school.

First of all 25 young people (aged between 13 and 18) attended some or all of eight workshop sessions during November and December 2005 where they came up with the initial ideas and stories for the play.

These were further developed during a residential weekend in January 2006, when the young people, youth workers and artists really bonded. The sessions provided rich material that gave clear ideas for the storylines – incomers, relationships with other youngsters, single parenthood, car accidents, disability, inadequate parenting. A professional playwright listened in on the discussions, taking notes. He collated the information, then took this back to the young people to re-evaluate through further discussion at a number of follow-up sessions.

Throughout, it was absolutely the intention that performance aspect of the play should not overshadow the issues that the young people saw as important. Concerted efforts were made to ensure that the creative professionals involved did not overshadow the young people's self-expression in an attempt to mould it into some kind of theatre. The professionals in turn supported the youth workers and came to see the value of their work.

The young people were adamant that the sometimes brutal truth of life where they live was acknowledged. When an early draft of the play left out drug dealing, for example, they insisted that it should be put back in because this is something they do have to face.

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Jo Austin-Preece is sure that the young people gained much from being able to reflect on their experiences, as this is something that young people don't often get the chance to do. The presence of people who were willing to listen and were very interested was the catalyst for them to identify what freedoms they have compared with their urban peers and the things that they find most frustrating, such as that they are often misunderstood by older residents. Jo adds: “The most important thing for the young people was that the play really said what they wanted to say. The whole process of talking with others about their lives, finding common ground, stepping out of themselves and being taken seriously by professional artists did a great deal for their self-esteem. And they were really delighted when they recognised themselves in the parts as written.”

An important part of the creative process was the contribution of the professional musician who elicited some remarkable music from the youngsters. For instance, he replicated the sounds of a night time walk in the woods which the young people took. During this experience the youngsters discovered that when they walked through the woods they saw, heard and felt quite different things according to what they were used to – the town children walked tentatively whereas the country people walked with confidence. The walk was an important turning point because the young people started to see things from one another's point of view.

The play is entitled ‘The Maize Field’, based on the place where the young people in Malpas hang out. The story line is about two young people, Jason and Sara, from different backgrounds who live in rural Cheshire. Just when their new relationship appears to have been destroyed by their parents, they and another young person from the village, Katrina, are involved in a fatal car accident. It is a hard hitting play, and one that is very much an expression of youth issues.

Although the Maize Field was informed and written by the young people, it will be performed by professional actors and musicians. This places the young people's work on a more professional level. According to Claire Smith of the Rural Touring Network, it is essential that the work should be associated with high quality “so that the youngsters can have an authentic sense of achievement”.

The young people helped the professional theatre director in auditioning for the cast. This was a useful experience in itself, impressing on them the level of responsibility when making decisions about other people.

The Maize Field is going to tour rural youth clubs, schools and other venues in the county this autumn, and the youngsters have helped design the stage set and posters for the play. They enjoyed working with others from creative industries and giving thought to event management, such as liaising with the theatre company, booking venues and preparing press releases.

Claire Smith says she was impressed by the youngsters' continuing commitment to the project, and the way they were always in the right place at the right time: "Being involved in this project has been great for all the young people involved - there are no barriers - everyone has been able to contribute."

The plan is now for the touring play to be used as a springboard for others to find a voice. The communities will be visited before the show by detached youth workers and young people will be encouraged to tune into the themes of the play.

Claire adds: "One of the most exciting spins-offs, I hope, will be that other groups of young people elsewhere in the district see the play and are inspired to do a similar kind of thing."

How is the project funded?

The project cost in the region of £16,000, including the residential weekend and workshops, the professional artists' fees, production costs and venue expenditure. Significant funding came from Cheshire County Council, the North West Development Agency and the Rural Touring Network, with other organisations providing smaller contributions. Some income is also expected to come from touring the play.

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Summary

This project exemplifies how the theatre, and the Arts in general, can provide a very potent voice for young people. As Jo Austin-Preece puts it: “Any medium like this is a more interesting and productive way of hearing young people’s voices than sitting them on management committees and asking them how it feels to be young!”

The play has succeeded in putting across the young people’s experiences in words that the adult population can grasp.

The overall experience has undoubtedly broadened the horizons of the young people, some of whom were in danger of exclusion from school. In the event, they have produced a play that is well worth seeing, imaginatively produced and interesting at all levels.

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