



# Pursuits of youth

Harnessing young people's energy and new ideas  
to help them regenerate their communities

Last year RENEW Northwest, the Regional Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Communities, established a task force to better understand why, despite many initiatives to address the issue, so few of the residents of regeneration areas find their way into regeneration employment and governance.

An Innovation Task Force was formed by regeneration experts from across our region, taking evidence from a wide range of projects across the Northwest. This publication highlights two examples of good practice in youth engagement in Carlisle.

For further information on the findings and forward programme of the Innovation Task Force please visit [www.RENEW.co.uk](http://www.RENEW.co.uk).

## References

1. Department for Education and Skills, *Youth Matters*, 2005 [www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/youth](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/youth)
2. Unicef, Report Card 7, *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries*, 2007 [www.unicef.org.uk/youthvoice/wellbeing.asp](http://www.unicef.org.uk/youthvoice/wellbeing.asp)
3. The Government's respect strategy is available at [www.respect.gov.uk](http://www.respect.gov.uk)

## Introduction

The cataclysmic floods which took place in Carlisle in January 2005 have acted as a catalyst to the city's regeneration. The Carlisle Renaissance consultation has drawn in all sectors of the community, from the city itself and its outlying villages, in a wide-ranging conversation about Carlisle's future.

Stanwix Youth Club, founded the year before the floods, has been part of the wave of new ideas and energy which has infused Carlisle. Young people and adults have explored new ways of working together and enabling young people's voices to be heard to help run and regenerate their communities.

In recent years the government and other public bodies have increasingly highlighted the importance of listening to young people when considering how public services and policy are run. A green paper, *Youth Matters*, was published in November 2005 and drew more than 19,000 responses from young people.<sup>1</sup>

There are many reasons why we need to hear youth voices. They are important in creating an environment that the citizens of the future will want to live in; reducing antisocial behaviour and crime by offering young people alternative activities; and giving children better protection from abuse and bullying, by ensuring young people know where to go for help and are confident that they will be listened to.

Despite the comparative affluence of the UK, a UNICEF report released in February 2007 rated Britain as one of the worst industrialised nations to grow up in. While rating high for formal education, Britain ranked low in five other categories: quality of children's relationships with their parents and peers; child health and safety; behaviour; risk taking; and subjective wellbeing.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these issues are also raised by the government's 'respect' agenda, which identifies young people as perpetrators of antisocial behaviour, laying the blame on factors such as poor community cohesion and the breakdown of relationships between the generations. Responses include making public services more sensitive to their users, improving techniques for dealing with young people in trouble at school, and funding activities for young people such as youth projects and sports programmes.<sup>3</sup>

The Carlisle experience highlights that any



*Rebecca Farrell and Jack Johnstone kick about ideas and more at Stanwix Youth Club*

such investment in youth activities and community programmes needs to be designed in collaboration with the young people they are aimed at.

Consultation needs to be structured so that young people are demonstrably listened to and involved from start to finish, and feel a genuine sense of ownership of projects, valuing them as significant parts of their lives and not tokenistic initiatives, parachuted in by distant experts.

## Key findings

*The central message of both the Carlisle Renaissance and Stanwix Youth Club experiences is the importance of genuinely involving young people.*

*In both cases young people were involved in designing the projects. In the Renaissance scheme, people attending youth clubs were asked for suggestions on how questionnaires should be modified for young people. The successful 'diary room' format was adopted, created by teenagers in an anti-bullying programme run by Connexions Cumbria and Carlisle City Council.*

*At Stanwix, young people have directly run the club since its inception, consulting users about new games and activities. They have expanded the club's involvement in wider community activities by playing a genuine role in the Neighbourhood Forum.*

*The direct involvement of young people from the beginning has generated a genuine sense of ownership. As a result young people have been keen to volunteer, both at the Lanes Shopping Centre consultation and at Stanwix Youth Club.*

## Carlisle Renaissance

### The project

In January 2005 Carlisle suffered massive floods, which affected thousands of households and businesses, resulted in three deaths and cost millions of pounds.

A major regeneration scheme, Carlisle Renaissance, was announced in January 2006 as a response to the flooding, with significant consultation exercises throughout 2006 and into 2007.

It has been presented as an opportunity to completely reshape the city over the next decade. Carlisle City Council has highlighted the importance of including the views of young people, stressing that these are the people who will live in the newly configured city.



*Aimee Gratwohl and Ryan Fletcher spread the word about regeneration plans on the streets of Carlisle*

Carlisle Renaissance has been praised for its success in incorporating young people's views, through a programme run in conjunction with Connexions Cumbria and the council's youth engagement and play team workers.

The key elements have included:

- Workshops at four youth clubs, two in rural areas outside the city, one in urban Carlisle and one at the city's skate park, engaging with young people aged 11 to 20. Each venue hosted two workshops, around two months apart, to allow the Renaissance workers to bring back the data they'd gathered to verify and discuss with the young people, feeding in ideas from other groups;
- Further workshops at council-run activity clubs, involving children aged five to 11;
- Questionnaires to targeted age groups in all the city's schools. The questionnaires used a format provided by the council's regeneration consultants, but modified using suggestions from young people already involved in city council and Connexions

Cumbria projects. The return rates for young people's questionnaires were excellent, and better than those from adults;

■ Using a shop unit in the city centre's Lanes Shopping Centre for a week over spring half term as a drop-in venue. Young people made their views known through a Big Brother-style diary room, maps on which ideas and opinions could be marked with sticky notes, and a graffiti wall. Renaissance workers were also on hand to answer questions and provide information. The unit was partly staffed by young people involved in council and Connexions Cumbria programmes;

■ A city council film project run in conjunction with Cumbria Film Collective, which allowed groups of young people to learn film techniques and use them to make short videos in the styles of thrillers, *films noir* and ghost stories, exploring ideas about the city and its future.

### *The difference*

Tracy Moore, now 17, was one of the young people who volunteered to help with the consultation. She helped design the questionnaire that went out to schools, youth clubs and Connexions Cumbria.



## *Good practice resources*

*Working Together: giving children and young people a say* is a Department for Education and Skills pack with suggestions on ways of giving young people space to make their views heard. It is available to download from: <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk>

*An Education for Citizenship* consultation pack for young people has been produced by Learning & Teaching Scotland and Save the Children Scotland. Information and downloads are available at: [www.ltscotland.org.uk/citizenship](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/citizenship)

She also volunteered at the Lanes Shopping Centre, helping other young people fill in questionnaires, handing out flyers in town, and operating the video equipment in the diary room.

'I enjoyed working in the shop best because I got to meet loads of new people. I also built up my confidence by meeting and talking to other young people, and I now have something else to put on my CV when I apply for jobs,' she says.

'I understand loads more about Carlisle Renaissance and I learned that consultation doesn't just have to be filling in forms – it can be much more fun. To any young people wanting to get involved in the second phase of the consultation, I'd say give it a go! It's a great way to make new friends and it makes you feel good that you are helping young people's views to be heard.'

Ian McNichol, director of Carlisle Renaissance, puts Tracy's experiences into context: 'The views of young people are a crucial part of consultation, but are especially important for schemes which could have a long term impact on their local environment.'

'When we began to consult on Carlisle Renaissance we wanted to make sure that all parts of the community were involved. We recognised that young people play an important part in our city's development and we wanted to give them the opportunity to have their say.'

He adds: 'The challenge now is how we build this into the decision making process so that we can trace a line between consultation and what happens on the ground. This is particularly vital where the views of those consulted are not carried forward to delivery.'

*Aimee Gratwohl shows she's not afraid to be at the centre of the plans for a better Carlisle*

‘Often the reason people think consultation is a waste of time is because they are asked for their views, but they are not made aware of why they may be discounted at a later stage, which may be for many reasons, such as feasibility issues.’

Loreena Cairns, a Connexions Cumbria personal adviser, and Rhian Davies, who works in the council’s youth engagement team, helped make young

people’s involvement in the consultation a reality. Running workshops and organising open access activities at the shop unit, they were responsible for a three month programme of consultation exercises, getting initial reactions from young people and then feeding back a range of information between groups, allowing those consulted to react to other people’s ideas, adding to some or changing their own views.

The interactive methods they used brought in information vital to the consultation, drawing out opinions from young people which surprised even those who worked with them regularly.

‘When we did the first workshops we used the themes outlined by the Renaissance, looking at housing, education, transport, employment, leisure time,’ Rhian says. ‘We used a range of activities to get young people to think about them – did the young people think when they were older they’d be able to afford a house, did they think they had opportunities to get good jobs in Carlisle or would they have to move away?’

‘We started the ball rolling and that prompted a lot of really good discussions, especially in the clubs, and some of the youth workers who were leaders couldn’t believe they were talking about these issues.’

‘The young people had really strong views about a lot of things – we were surprised because maybe we’ve not spoken to them about those issues before: it was the total opposite of the idea that young people are apathetic about these things.’



*Chris Murphy, Helen Askew, Aimee Gratwohl, Rhian Davies and Ryan Fletcher with examples of the fresh thinking generated by the consultation workshops*

Like Ian McNichol, Loreena and Rhian are acutely aware that the Renaissance consultation is far from over, and that young people need to be incorporated into all the phases, not just the initial information-gathering.

‘We haven’t nailed it completely, but it was a good start,’ says Loreena. ‘It’s something that we can work on and continue to improve as the process continues.’

‘The whole thing with consultations and young people is the importance of them understanding where that information’s going, that it doesn’t just vanish into thin air when they’ve completed the questionnaire. That’s one of the reasons we wanted to go back and not just do a one-off session in those areas, to keep that communication flowing and give them as much information as they were giving us.’

### *Find out more*

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## Stanwix Youth Club

### The project

**S**tanwix Youth Club was established in 2004 after young people from Trinity School in Stanwix, Carlisle, were invited to their local neighbourhood forum to talk about youth issues.

Irene Ruddick, a Connexions Cumbria personal adviser working with the school, recounts: 'I attended the Stanwix forum in 2004, just to hear what was happening in the community, and there were issues at the time of young people's behaviour.

'I had a chat with Liz Mallinson, the county councillor who chairs the forum, after the meeting and said, look, there are issues here with young people but I can't see any young people here to represent themselves. She said to me that if I could bring 10 to 12 young people to the next forum they could speak, and I did.'

Stanwix had already been identified by the local authority as an area where provision for young people was inadequate. The young people who attended the forum made it clear that their main need was for a local space for activities. A group of five young people formed the youth committee of the new club, with an adult committee to handle legal issues and to pass on skills such as bookkeeping,



*The Stanwix gang: Jack Johnstone, Irene Ruddick, Karen McKenzie, Ben Spedding, Rebecca Farrell and Liz Mallinson.*

fundraising and organising meetings.

Stanwix Youth Club is marked out by the determination of the young people there to run it for themselves. The youth committee is the main decision-making body. Some of the founders are also planning to take on legal responsibilities once they are old enough.

One of them, Rebecca Farrell, explains: 'I'm on the young people's committee and I shadow the chair, so hopefully when I'm at the legal age of being able to chair the committee I can take that role, and that's the plan for all of the young people.'

The club runs sessions every Friday evening, offering activities ranging from films and board games to Xbox and pool. It organises games tournaments and trips to ten-pin bowling and ice skating.

The club attracts at least 30 young people most Fridays, rising to a full capacity of 50 in the summer. But the committee has grander plans, including the possibility of offering football and cricket training and hopes of larger facilities.

The activities also reflect the club's commitment to social responsibility, with workshops on drugs and alcohol, self-harm and bullying, and plans to run a certificate course on teenage pregnancy at a separate venue for those old enough to attend.

### The difference

Liz Mallinson, Cumbria county councillor for the area, was instrumental in establishing the youth club through her role as chair of the Stanwix neighbourhood forum, and has continued to help get the young people on the committee involved in community structures.

'This club is a good example of how much can be achieved with very small resources,' she says, stressing that the most important thing is that it's run according to the needs and wishes of the users.

*Liz Mallinson (left) and Rebecca Farrell stand together as key members of the team behind Stanwix Youth Club*





'You can put something amazing with all the bells and whistles in the middle of a council estate and it will do no good if you haven't asked people what they actually want. It's important to give the young people their head and you'll be pleasantly surprised – you just need to give them the support and then take a step back while they make the choices.'

She also stresses that the club has been a success because it has met the expectations it created. 'There is nothing worse than promising all sorts of things and then not coming up with the goods.'

Sixteen-year-old Rebecca Farrell shadows the adult chair of the club's committee, and has been involved since she was 14. She feels the club has been significant in integrating young people into positions of respect in the local community, giving adults a more positive view of young people's ability to contribute to the area and manage their own affairs responsibly.

'Teenagers that do bad stuff get bad press for the rest of us, but because we make a positive contribution adults start to see that we're not all bad,' she says. 'They've seen something positive coming out of the youth club, and we give them updates and tell them what's been happening, so it keeps them involved and they can see what's going on.'

Liz Mallinson agrees. 'The club and the young people on its committee have genuinely changed the attitude of some local people towards young people. Stanwix was well known for getting Cumbria's first

dispersal order because it had large groups of young people coming in groups and gangs to use its parks for drinking and hanging around.

'The young people from the youth club came to a meeting and answered questions and put their point of view, dissociated themselves from these activities and stood up for themselves, and this really enhanced how local people saw the club and its members, and defied some of the stereotypes of young people in the press and newspapers.'

Rebecca believes the club has helped keep some of its members out of trouble. She cites the case of one boy who 'doesn't mix with people very well, so he comes to the club and now he's found people with the same interests. He comes every week from the other side of town'.

The club's proximity to two large schools has, she believes, allowed it to attract a wide range of members, bringing together young people from different backgrounds and areas who would not normally mix socially, and helping some teenagers to feel less isolated.

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*The club provides social opportunities for young people such as Jack Johnstone and Rebecca Farrell*



Rebecca lists many personal benefits from the club, including the public presentation and management skills and confidence she has picked up through her role.

She says giving young people the lead in running the club has been key to its success: 'It's important to have young people's and adult committees because you get both views on things... we're children but we know how adults feel about us, but also what young people want.'

'We know what people at school say, and it's such a big school with all different groups, so I hear about everyone, people who are involved with the police a lot and people who aren't, so we can talk to them and find things for them to do, in a way that maybe adults can't.'

Irene Ruddick is impressed with the young people's decision to invite community police officers into the club. Rebecca Farrell says this has led to better relations between local youth and the police, making those who have not been in trouble feel safer and giving others a chance to encounter officers in a less hostile environment.

'They themselves realised that there wasn't enough police presence and that they didn't see enough of the community police officers,' Irene says, 'not because there was any trouble but just for people to see them as part of the community.'

She says the club has helped to involve its members in wider participatory processes. The youth committee is trying to arrange a trip to the Houses

of Parliament, inspired by the club's mention in the *Youth Matters* green paper. The club's own structures have given members and their families a taste of how organisations work and removed some of the intimidation many people feel when encountering officialdom.

'We have a proper AGM in the summer and all the young people and parents will be invited, so they're seeing how it should be done, and being involved in doing it properly,' Irene says.

'We had a 12 year old sitting in meetings for four hours one Sunday, when he could have been playing with his PSP. They learn from that, and when young people and parents are in official situations outside the youth club it's less scary for them because they've seen how things work.'

### *Find out more*

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RENEW Northwest is the Regional Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Communities. We develop dynamic and responsive learning opportunities to provide practitioners with the skills and knowledge required to deliver sustainable communities.

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