

# Exeter Community Initiatives (ECI)

## Beacon Heath Community Project

### Interim Evaluation March 2010

#### **1. Background & Introduction:**

ECI as an organisation, through work that we have undertaken in the past such as the Links Project and Exwick Community Project, recognises the importance of and need for community development work in Exeter.

Whilst the County and City Councils are supportive of community development work they have not been able to commit resources to this leaving Exeter without any dedicated community development projects. ECI, after consulting with local partner organisations, decided in September 2008 to commit money from our reserves for a Pilot Project in the Beacon Heath area of Exeter to carry out community work and explore and test out different ways of engaging with people. The project would recruit externally for the post of part-time Community Worker for 21 hrs per week.

#### **1.1 Aims of the Pilot Project:**

Our vision is to support people to build stronger, more active community through stimulating self determination, co-operation and consideration; opening up local and other opportunities that will benefit people; encouraging involvement in the broader community and through building a stronger and more supportive community based on a sense of place.

We will achieve this by:

- asking adults and children about their lives and how they see their neighbourhood to have an insight into the lived experience (individual experiences rather than assuming that all for example, single parents have the same experience, outlook, expectations, networks and personal resources)
- developing a model of working that focuses on the strengths of the community
- developing creative and environmental projects that will excite and interest people as a means to build a 'sense of place' creating a stronger and more positive local identity
- developing creative and environmental projects that work across generations to build understanding, co-operation and positive shared experiences that become part of the history of that community
- supporting the development of local groups and activities that arise from the community
- supporting local people or groups to develop beneficial partnerships with agencies working in Beacon Heath

#### **1.2 Why Beacon Heath?**

There are over 2000 households in the area consisting of 5 different housing estates, 3 of which are owned by Housing Associations or the City Council. Within the areas of social housing there are significant social problems many of which are the effects of low incomes and poverty. In the area overall there has been very little community activity happening. A resident run group called The Beacon Project closed in 2006 but very few people were involved with that by the end. Currently there is one estate (Arena Park with approx 100 households) that has a Residents' Association which was set up to get people involved and develop activities for young people. There is another small estate (Roundtable Meet) that has been having meetings but this is based on issues with young people and a particular path. The City Council convene a Residents Forums which is combined with the Police

PACT (Partners and Community Together) work but the turnout for these meetings is mixed and the focus is on concerns: typically anti-social behaviour; parking and speeding.

ECI carried out a Community Consultation on behalf of the Beacon Project in 2005 and has continued to maintain a presence and concern for the area through co-ordination of a network of local agencies and groups called, Beacon Heath Working Together, which meets on a quarterly basis.

The area has had a certain amount of development with building of Beacon Heath Children's Centre, the Knight Club, St James School and the re-positioned Wilkies Store. However with the exception of Wilkies these other buildings are only open to certain sections of the community and there isn't a community centre in the area. The only facilities for community use are Beacon Heath Church and Holy Trinity.

St James' School is trying to overcome a bad reputation and having come out of special measures they are making great strides in levels of achievement. The Headteacher has developed Community Awards in addition to the academic achievement awards they make to pupils and is very keen for their pupils to get involved with community projects.

Whilst the Senior School is making good progress the Foundation Stage Profile for the Beacon Cluster is very poor and Willowbrook Primary School subsequently went into special measures.

## **2. Methodology:**

The basis of this project was to explore and test out different ways of engaging with people, to learn from what we do and to shape and change our approach through this learning. This was based on our theory that the most effective way to do this is to build relationships with people in their communities through offering activities and projects that are of interest to them and to see what can develop from this, rather than coming into a community and wanting people to engage with a single issue or theme such as trying to set up a community association or trying to get people into work, etc.

Fundamental to our approach is a belief in people and desire to value them through recognising that they are the experts on their lives and experiences and that any change will only happen because people want it for themselves, rather than external agencies being able to impose it.

We therefore wanted an open-ended and responsive approach to the development of the project and opted to use creative and environmental activities/projects as the starting point and the means to engage with people of all ages. The intention was that the direction of the project would be shaped by people through their responses to activities whilst we as an organisation would learn through the process not only about what people want to engage with, but also about how best to do this in a way that creates sustainable activities that are not dependent on a worker in order to happen, thereby leaving the community strengthened by our involvement.

An initial set of ideas were developed as part of the project proposal to give people a sense of what we wanted to develop. These were as follows:

- Social Histories - Exploring the Life Stories of Residents and stories about the area (this could be done through interviewing, video recording, creating mini-books, etc. and potentially could be undertaken by young people from the Senior School or by

other people in the community and there could possibly be the opportunity for providing training in making films, interviewing, writing skills, using computers, etc). Or developing a photographic history of the existing community (What is the earliest year that someone has a picture of themselves or family in Beacon Heath and can we get pictures for every year from that year to the current day)

- Learning about the local Environment - Developing a Growing Project: encouraging the growing of food through bringing people together who are keen gardeners to share their knowledge with those who know very little. Setting up seeds and plant swaps, sharing knowledge about what grows in the area and what doesn't. Looking at ways to keep vegetables through preserving, etc. Or taking a more arts based focus to the area to produce an Environmental Snapshot (profiling the ecology of the area, making 'soundscape' recordings of the area)

A Community Worker with experience in Arts and Environmental work, Eve Malster, was employed in November 2008. In addition to exploring the initial ideas she was also directed to take on the development of the community newsletter which had been started by members of the Beacon Heath Working Together Network and to organise community events. These had both been identified by local people through the community consultation carried out in 2005.

### 3. What has happened so far:

The following relates the activities undertaken so far with the aims of the project.

- **asking adults and children about their lives and how they see their neighbourhood to have an insight into the lived experience (individual experiences rather than assuming that all for example, single parents have the same experience, outlook, expectations, networks and personal resources)**

*History of Hands* - This was a project that involved 15 older people and young people (Years 8 and 9 from the Senior School) exploring through Art the history of their hands. For the older people they brought in lots of things from their lives to develop a collage of what they have done throughout their lives. For the young people the project was included as part of their Learning for Life curriculum. The project culminated in a session that brought young people and the older people together to see and discuss each other's work. The project created a lot of discussion and people were really eager to tell their stories. With the older people they helped each other with their collages. From the interest in the creative activity future sessions are being planned with the Age Concern group.



*'The group really enjoyed participating in the 'hands' project with a group of children from St James School. They were not really clear how they could participate to start with but really got enthusiastic when they saw what they could do. It made them think what interesting lives the other members of the group had had! That afternoon was so different and they want to do other 'different' things.'* (Age Concern Facilitator)

*20 Questions* - This idea is about forming links throughout the community using a set of 20 questions. Whoever answers the set of questions has to nominate the next person to

answer them. Our idea was to get several question chains going at once and to require people to nominate someone from a different generation. The school wanted to take this on as part of their Learning for Life curriculum and the young people developed the list of questions and then gave the questionnaires out to members of their families. This meant that the final list of questions were what were acceptable to the school and some of the more interesting questions that the young people proposed were not included and the chain part of the process didn't happen because pupils only gave them to their family and took them back into school. We did publish one of the responses in the newsletter to let the wider community know about this work but overall from our perspective allowing the school to take this on didn't achieve what we wanted. We may re-visit this in the future.

*'.. the work has been really good from our point of view. It has helped inspire our students and has helped them play a bigger role in their community. It has also offered us opportunities to liaise with the wider community and to get a sense of the key focuses for community project work. I hope that we have also played a useful role in the Community Project and I hope that this can be refined and extended in the future. I personally have found it helpful to liaise with someone outside the school, particularly because you (the community worker) have had a fresh take on things, done a lot of hard work on my/the school's behalf, and because it has given me a specific community link and access to others in the community I might not have had access to otherwise.'* (Assistant Head Teacher, St James School)

*Social History Recordings* - this work is on-going and is focused on interviewing older people about their lives. There are a number of ideas about how this material will be used including as part of an international story exchange through the school who are linking with a school in Sri Lanka. Additionally both Age Concern and the Youth Service want to be involved in inter-generational work through recording and editing interviews and the Landlady of the local pub has also been helpful in identifying people to interview.

*Community Newsletter* - Through the project worker a much more interesting newsletter has been developed and it now includes some articles produced by local people. The intention is to reach a point where it is being produced entirely by local people but it has proved slow process to get people involved. We have recruited a number of volunteers to deliver it.

- **developing a model of working that focuses on the strengths of the community**

*Growing Project* - We have recruited and trained 5 Street Reps to promote and support their neighbours to begin growing food in containers. The process of getting the local college to employ a trainer to enable the training to take place was very slow. In addition to this with people's different time commitments it has been challenging getting people trained and inducted and we have had to develop more flexible ways of doing this and we are now hopeful that this will really take off this year. The trainer employed by the college has been very interested in our work and has got involved on a voluntary basis to help with events such as the Apple Day and the Wassail.



*One participant from the Street Reps course commented that: "It was amazing. I would never have met any of these people, even though they are my neighbours, if I'd not done this training".*

*Craft Group* - Initial sessions were held to gauge interest. A group developed quickly and people were keen to continue with them and so this has become a regular group. There are currently 14 people (adults) including 2 men who are part of the group and the ages range from 3 years to 80 years. The people attending are either unemployed, retired or work part-time.



Members of the group have been encouraged to share their skills and interests with each other as well as trying out a range of new crafts introduced by the project worker and other Makers. Our initial vision was that people could potentially group together to sell what they make through a website. The group's first response was that they wanted to keep what they made. They have subsequently

thought about how the group can continue in the longer term and want to raise money through selling goods to fund the group. They have also, with the help of the worker, written a funding bid to a small trust. Circumstances have meant that the worker has not always been able to be at the group and they will now run whether she is there or not.

*During an appliqué session Eve taught C how to use the sewing machine. C said 'she still feels traumatized by the sewing classes she had at school'. Eve encouraged her to join two other women in the group where one of them was teaching the other how to put a cushion together from a pattern and sew it. By the end of the session everyone had a complete cushion and no one was traumatized.*

*Community Newsletter* - as described above

- **developing creative and environmental projects that will excite and interest people as a means to build a 'sense of place' creating a stronger and more positive local identity**

*Growing Project* - as described above

*Apple Day* - This was a community event held last autumn in the Orchard part of the Mincing lake Valley Park which is within the area. This is part of encouraging people to make fuller use of the open spaces around and to encourage interest in the community's orchard. Over 50 people attended some of whom didn't know the Orchard existed prior to this event. At the event there was apple pressing, campfire cookery, storytelling, craft activities for children, advice on growing and music. It was fortunate that the weather was good and this helped achieve a good turnout.



*Environmental Play Session* - These were 3 outdoor play sessions in the Valley Park held during the school holidays and were attended by 20 families. The aim of the sessions were using Forest School skills such as doing an initial risk assessment with the children to identify what is safe and what is dangerous. The sessions involved activities like making stink potions. Those who attended enjoyed the sessions but we would like to have drawn in

more families and so have re-considered our timings for future activities and means of publicity.



*Foraging and Jam Making* - This was part of making use of the Valley Park by having a guided walk to see what people can find that is safe to eat. The walk was led by a volunteer who was knowledgeable about what is safe to eat and times of year for harvesting. There was good group discussions about what could be made with what was being picked. The apples and blackberries were then used to make jam. The activity was planned to happen in one day. For the foraging there was a group of 15 people and not everyone had met before so new relationships were formed but not everyone could commit to the Jam making as well which in the end took place in the home of one of the families rather than Home Economics room at the school as originally planned. For future activities any preserve making will be done as a stand alone activity.

*Wassail* - This was based on a traditional event where songs are sung to bless the orchard and toast the trees in order to get a good crop of apples in the forthcoming year. The event was held during the early evening on one Sunday in January and was very successful in bringing people together with 55 people attending. At the event people suggested that the Orchard should become a Community Orchard and this was subsequently discussed with the City Council and has been agreed. Also someone who has skills in grafting apple trees volunteered to show other people how to do this and this session will be held in the near future.



*Craft Group* - as described above

*Community Newsletter* - as described above

- **developing creative and environmental projects that work across generations to build understanding, co-operation and positive shared experiences that become part of the history of that community**

*History of Hands* - as described above

*20 Questions* - as described above

*Social History Recordings* - as described above

*Craft Group* - as described above



- **supporting the development of local groups and activities that arise from the community**

*Community Newsletter* - as described above

*Parkour* - From talking to young people it was identified that there was interest in Parkour (or Free Running). It was decided with the Youth Service to organise a session with a trainer from Bristol City Council. The session was attended by 8 young people some of whom struggle in various ways with school. The worker observed that all the guys were totally engaged in the session and were very supportive and encouraging of each other.



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*'Although the project has only been running for 6 months it has made an impact on the area. Eve and I worked to provide an opportunity for young people to develop their Parkour skills by bringing a coach down from Bristol. Eve's connections provided equipment for this event ... and (it) was enjoyed by all the young people taking part. It is hoped that this activity can be further developed through the links with the Bristol group.'* (Area Youth Worker)

As the session had proved so successful it has been hoped to continue to provide these sessions but the County Health & Safety officer would not endorse Parkour being provided in Devon.

*Street Dance* - Again from talking to young people it was identified that there was interest in learning Street Dance. Taster sessions were provided as part of a launch event and are going to be provided in the next couple of months as part of a wider performance project that will link young people from different areas of the City.

*Crafts Group* - as described above

*Future Plans – Skills Survey and DIY* - Through conversations at the Craft Group people identified that there were basic DIY skills that they would like to learn that some of the other members of the group knew how to do. This was discussed with other people and as an idea seemed to generate a lot of enthusiasm. The intention is to carry out some level of community skills survey and to begin organising opportunities for people to share their skills with others who want to learn them.

- **supporting local people or groups to develop beneficial partnerships with agencies working in Beacon Heath**

*Events* - Through events like the Apple Day links are being made with the Countryside Rangers which has led to greater involvement of local people in plans and activities for the Valley Park, for example involving local people in planting new apple trees. Links have also been made for people through involving agencies in events such as the Children's Centre Youth Service and Home Start.

*Exeter Festival – Parade* - The City Council Arts Officer initially had an idea about involving different communities of Exeter in the Summer Festival Parade. The original ideas would have involved people in making things for the parade and possibly learning community circus skills but the ideas changed a lot and the opportunities for community involvement decreased to the point where it was just school groups that were involved. It was a frustrating process for the project worker who had tried to get people involved and interested in the initial ideas. In this situation neither the community of Beacon Heath nor our worker had any control or influence over how it developed.

*Community Newsletter* - as described above and through the promotion of other groups and agencies working in the area such as the Age Concern Group

#### **4. Lessons learnt:**

- It is a time-consuming and often slow process working with people when you allow them to lead, but it pays longer-term dividends in terms of skills developed and local ownership of the work being carried out.
- When asking people about taking responsibility in running a group e.g. the initial response is reluctance possibly through fear or lack of confidence. However, through stepping in to cover, they have shown confidence in running the group and have gone on to discuss and take more responsibility about the future direction of the group.
- Through working with people at their own pace it can allow important things to emerge from the history of the community. For example people have expressed anger and hurt about past experiences of getting involved in the community, where things went wrong and they felt marginalised and they weren't listened to. Consequently these feelings have discouraged them from engaging with other activities.
- The community worker's role in encouraging people to try things out, and supporting them in doing so, has been vital.
- Whilst you can have a plan of how you would like a group or activity to develop it is ultimately up to the people involved, and it therefore may feel disappointing at times when things don't go as you expect, but then people may well turn around and surprise you positively, e.g. with the development of the craft group, the group initially didn't want to sell their own products, but later decided they would do so but specifically to support the running costs of the group. This is also true of working with different agencies such as the school.
- However, in allowing people to take decisions about the direction of a group or activity, this has meant that they develop their own direction, which may be similar to our initial plans but they have their own rationale and more ownership over what they are choosing to do.
- We need to be flexible and be prepared to adapt our plans and systems of what we need to do in order to enable something to happen (e.g. with Street Reps – expecting to be able to get everyone to come together for a formal induction session in our offices)
- Working on the ideas of outside agencies may sound good but are not necessarily good opportunities for local people as the ideas have not come from them and do not offer them the opportunity to shape and control their involvement and therefore they can be disempowering experiences (e.g. Exeter Festival)

#### **Concluding comment:**

*'As the local county councillor I have been particularly pleased that the project has developed strong links with St. James High school and the Knight Club building a better understanding between young and old.'* (Local Councillor)

Carole Pilley, Community Development Manager – 8<sup>th</sup> March 2010