

How children and young people's voices influence services planning

CASE STUDY:

Shetland – Our Peer Education Network Project

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The National Third Sector GIRFEC (NTSG) project is a partnership between Children in Scotland and the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland (CPPS). Thematically, it works to connect, engage and influence.

The NTSG project supports local and national third sector organisations to strengthen their roles as core partners in children's services planning and delivery and, in doing so, improve outcomes for children, young people and families. The project facilitates third sector organisations to connect with each other and with the statutory sector, helping the sector to influence local and national policy. The 'engaging' strand of the project seeks to identify and support good practice by organisations and partnerships in listening to children and young people and how their voices influence the planning and delivery of services.

Linked to the project's 'engaging' theme, this case study has been developed by the NTSG team in collaboration with Voluntary Action Shetland. It is the first in a new series of case studies looking at examples of third sector engagement practice with children and young people and how this shapes children's services planning. Each case study provides a snapshot of the different methods and models of engagement with children and young people as well as illustrating how their voices have contributed to the ongoing shaping of services within wider planning process. The NTSG project has considered the practice in the case studies in line with the National Standards for Community Engagement.

If you have identified any examples of good practice, we welcome your feedback and suggestions for future case studies. For further information relating to the NTSG project please contact the project team at: girfec@childreninscotland.org.uk

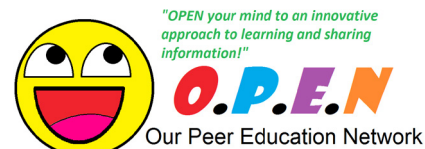
Case Study Name: Voluntary Action Shetland - Our Peer Education Network (OPEN).

Case Study Area: Shetland

Age range of children and young people involved: 12-25

What is Peer Education?

Peer education approaches value the views and experiences of young people, making them the experts and recognising that they can positively influence and support each other. Peer education approaches can be particularly good at ensuring messages are meaningful because they involve young people who “understand the needs and issues themselves”. As well as imparting knowledge, peer education approaches usually focus on raising young people’s self-esteem and social competence as well as developing their skills to help them “make informed choices... and feel able to act on these choices.” (Department of Health, 2002).



Background to the OPEN Project

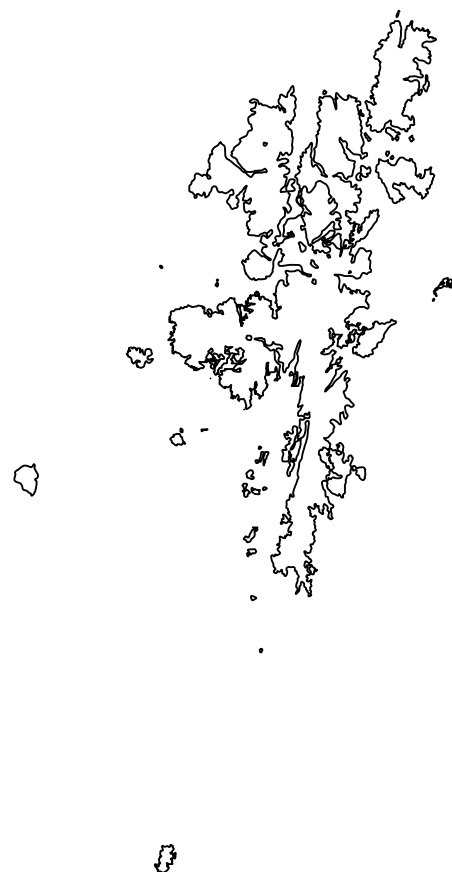
Our Peer Education Network (OPEN) project Shetland was conceptualised by a local youth worker, who recognised that there was a gap in the engagement with young people on issues around sexual health, drugs and alcohol. Through researching existing peer education projects and the resources needed, funding was first secured for the OPEN project in 2011. In 2013 the project was then taken under Shetland’s Third Sector Interface, Voluntary Action Shetland.

The young people explained that they felt a disconnect when talking to adults about topics relating to drugs, alcohol and sexual health. They requested a service they could learn from and where they could share their views through peers instead of teachers or youth workers.

It was recognised that peer education had not been done before in Shetland and could be a solution to the request of the young people. OPEN then began to recruit and train young people aged 16-25 to become ‘peer educators’. The programme largely attracts those not in education, employment or training and since starting the project in 2012, 139 young people have been recruited and trained as peer educators. The recruitment of peer educators occurs largely via word of mouth through friendship or familial networks, with many who have benefitted from the programme progressing to become trained as peer educators.

Each peer educator has a ‘key-worker’ who is a staff member allocated to support their personal development. The project has dual benefits as it is seen to provide a useful way for peer education volunteers with few or no qualifications to gain skills, training and accreditation (Dobson, 2019). The peer educators began to deliver workshops around issues such as sexual health, drugs, relationships and mental health; as well as promoting harm reduction.

The project has since progressed from being delivered on a small-scale level, to being delivered across every secondary school in Shetland, aiming to deliver 50 workshops to 800 young people per year. Since April 2018 OPEN has delivered 76 workshops and worked with 1212 young people.



Assessment of project methods

The NTSG project has studied the OPEN example and the participatory methods used: participatory dialogue, engaging with feedback and collaborative working with strategic partners.

Each method has been considered in relation to the National Standards for Community Engagement (NSCE) as a means of appraising the project's practice. The NSCE include:

- a description of the main elements of effective community engagement practice (see diagram below).
- performance statements which can be used to assess high quality participation and engagement results.

7 National Standards for Community Engagement



(NSCE, February 2019)



Participatory dialogue and planning with young people

From the beginning, the OPEN project has endeavoured to embed an inclusive approach in their practice.

The NSCE standard of 'Inclusion' states that "We will identify and involve the people and organisations that are affected by the focus of the engagement." **Involving those who are affected by the focus of the engagement at the earliest opportunity** (in OPEN's case, the young people), demonstrates OPEN's work to reach this standard. With OPEN, the original idea for the project was conceived by young people and the project managers have continued see young people's involvement in decisions as a fundamental part of the project.

Participants in the process committed to continued two-way communication with each other through participatory dialogue. This involves young people and develop planning at both a project and strategic level. It is recognised at strategic level as a valuable method for developing youth services in partnership with a range of young people in Shetland. Strategic partners also use peer educators as a flow of communication to signpost

and provide an awareness of local services available and to help young people create a better understanding of what they provide. This has resulted in an increasing number of young people accessing existing services, identifying gaps and finding solutions to meet their needs.

OPEN has taken **measures to involve groups with protected characteristics and people who are excluded from participating due to disadvantage relating to social and economic factors**. This has been done by rolling out the programme to every school across Shetland, allowing young people of all ages needs and backgrounds to access and become involved in the programme without scrutiny. Further, young people who are not engaged in the education system can also access the programme through attending evening sessions. Many young people have benefitted so much from the programme that they have undertaken training by OPEN to become peer educators, supporting other young people in similar circumstances.

The table below aligns the project's practice with the NSCE's 'Inclusion' standard.

'Inclusion'

Project Practice

The project idea originally came from the young people. It was progressed in partnership with the project managers and young people where they were able to design what it would look like.

Young people are continually involved in the planning and direction of the project. Participatory dialogue is used not only to direct the project but has been used as a way for strategic partners to listen views to young people to shape other services. In turn, the young people signpost and provide an awareness of local services available.

Young people in every high school in Shetland have been offered the chance to participate in the project. Those who are not engaged in school are included in evening sessions or have been trained as peer educators.

How we know we are meeting the NCE standard for 'Inclusion'

"The people and groups who are affected by the focus of the engagement are involved at the earliest opportunity."

"Participants in the community engagement process commit to continued two-way communication with the people they work with or represent."

"Measures are taken to involve groups with protected characteristics and people who are excluded from participating due to disadvantage relating to social or economic factors."

Engaging with feedback

The NSCE 'Communication' standard states that "We will communicate clearly and regularly with the people, organisations and communities affected by the engagement." The project has done this by engaging with the views of the wider community and ensuring that feedback is part of the engagement process.

OPEN has endeavoured to ensure that **feedback is a true representation of the range of views expressed during the engagement process** by engaging all stakeholders in the OPEN project. This includes the peer education volunteers, the young people taking part in the programme, teachers and head teachers and the staff working in the project. The OPEN project engages with feedback in several creative ways including meetings, discussions with key workers, written evaluations and online feedback. Peer educators also meet with their key worker every term (4 times a year) to ensure that each young adult can raise issues, discuss and influence the direction of the project. This feedback is then shared regularly at meetings and used to develop the workshops and direction of the project.

Together with the peer educators, the staff at OPEN work to decide the project's next steps, ensuring that the views of all stakeholders are considered in the delivery and content of workshops- with the strongest focus on the views of the young people themselves.

This creates a system which ensures the views of the wider community continuously help to shape the engagement process. Through feedback, the content of course has changed and evolved as the young people children have suggest what they want to learn about. Una Murray one of the project co-ordinators stated that the autonomy of the content has been one of the main successes and is the driving force behind what keeps the young people engaged.

As a result of listening to the views of young people and the wider community OPEN have created an LGBT workshop. This was developed by one of the peer educator volunteers at OPEN: "They went off on their own and produced a format for an LGBT workshop without any of us (staff). It was obvious that they didn't really need us interfering, they could go and complete that on their own... and they did and it was great. It was something they were passionate about." (TW) (Dobson, pg40. 2019).

The table below aligns the project's practice with the NSCE 'Communication' standard.

'Communication'

Project Practice

The OPEN project asks for feedback from all stakeholders including the peer education volunteers taking part in the programme. These views are then considered in the decision-making process, with the strongest focus on the views of the young people.

OPEN members' needs and priorities for action are identified and promoted through strategic partnerships and prioritisation of youth voice.

How we know we are meeting the NCE standard for 'Communication'

"Feedback is a true representation of the range of views expressed during the engagement process."

"Systems are in place to make sure the views of the wider community continuously help to shape the engagement process."

Collaborative working with strategic partners

The NSCE 'Impact' standard states that: "We will assess the impact of the engagement and use what we have learned to improve our future community engagement." This has done with OPEN at both delivery and strategic level.

Decisions which are taken reflect the views of the participants in the community engagement process. NHS Shetland and Shetland Islands Council have recognised young people's request for more education around sexual health issues. As a result, they have provided funding for the ongoing provision of workshops through the Shetland Integrated Joint Board. Shetland Alcohol Drugs Partnership has also again allocated funds for the OPEN Project after recognising that young people would like to be better educated around issues of drugs and alcohol.

It is widely recognised that through the project, **participants have improved skills, confidence and ability to take part in community engagement in the future.** The organisation is associated with increases

in confidence, community engagement and positive sense of identity amongst volunteers (Dobson, 2019).

Having seen the impact of young people being at the centre of decisions, there was a recognition of the need to involve young people at strategic level. OPEN has since been funded to recruit, train and support six young people to become partners on the Emotional Wellbeing and Resilience Project Steering Group. It enables young people from across Shetland to be represented and have a voice at strategic level.

Local outcomes, and services have improved as result of the engagement process. The Shetland Community Partnership has assessed the impact of OPEN's engagement and as a result, has funded a new Emotional Wellbeing and Resilience project. Emotional Wellbeing and Resilience is one of Shetland's Children's Services Planning priorities for 2017-2020 and has partnership-wide input from VAS, NHS Shetland and Shetland Island's Council.

The table below aligns the project's practice with the NSCE 'Impact' standard.

'Impact'

Project Practice

The OPEN project uses young people's voices, together with Community Partnership to map existing service provision, identify gaps in current services and improve local children's services planning at a strategic level.

The OPEN project is an ongoing method of community engagement. It is seen by strategic partners as an integral part of listening to the voices of young people in Shetland. The organisation is associated with increases in confidence, community engagement and positive sense of identity amongst volunteers (Dobson, 2019).

The Shetland Community Partnership has recently funded a new Emotional Wellbeing and Resilience project. The need for a new service in this area was highlighted through the young people at the OPEN project.

How we know we are meeting the NCE standard for 'Impact'

Decisions which are taken reflect the views of participants in the community engagement process

Participants have improved skills, confidence and ability to take part in community engagement in the future.

Local outcomes, or services, are improved as result of the engagement process.

Project Challenges



For projects to be sustainable and inclusive, it is crucial that all stakeholders feel involved and consulted. This may prove difficult, particularly when consulting with stakeholders who have power over volunteers at the project, for example schools who are facilitating them run the project (Dobson, 2019).

Sometimes, the needs of the school may limit the young people-led approach that the OPEN project advocates. For example, the school often selected the 'most appropriate' age group to receive workshops rather than the young people themselves. Despite the slight conflict of interest that can occur with stakeholders, the OPEN project is an excellent example of how stakeholders can work together, drawing upon each set of skills to deliver and design services and programmes which keep the views of the young people central.

One of the main unique aspects of this study is the location of where it takes place. In Dobson's study (2019) she comments that the "size of the community was frequently identified as a contributing factor in OPEN's success." Implementing a peer-education project in larger areas may well come as a challenge. However, peer education may work well in similar communities to Shetland. As an alternative context to this, it has been suggested that cluster settings in local authorities might be a successful way of piloting the project in larger areas.

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NTSG Reflections – What can we learn from OPEN?

The OPEN project has been shown as a successful and organic way of engaging with the views of young people to shape children's services planning in Shetland. There are several principles that others can learn from OPEN and apply in their own local areas:

1. **Listening to young people's views should be a foundational value rather than an added engagement 'step'.**

The project idea was established by listening to young people, meaning that from the outset OPEN's showed a value for their opinions and taking them seriously (UNCRC Article 12). The project is unique way of continually engaging with voices of young people to shape services that were pertinent to them.

2. **Support young people to identify issues that are important to them rather than consulting them on a problem.**

The OPEN project encourages the young people freedom to design the peer education content and direction so that the project remains sustainable and relevant to the young people.

3. **Clear evidence of successes and challenges provides valuable learning for upscaling engagement.**

OPEN can clearly evidence and demonstrate how the third sector fulfilling a gap in the existing children's services available. It has also helped to ensure that groups of children and young people are not being overlooked or that services are not duplicated or competing with one another.

4. **Relationships at all levels are core to having influence in the Children's Services Planning process.**

OPEN foster strong relationships with young people and partners from head teachers to strategic board members. This creates a mutual trust and respect and means that the focus remains on the children and young people they serve.

5. **Make it a priority that views of children and young people are fed in at strategic levels.**

VAS has a strong representation on the Children's Services Planning board and strategic groups and has used this opportunity to regularly present the views and opinions of the young people at strategic meetings and ensure that their right to be heard is being supported.



How does OPEN influence Children's Services Planning?



Having the right representatives involved in Shetland's strategic groups has enabled the project to influence Children's Services Planning. Una Murray, a member of VAS also sits on several priority groups that feed into the Community Planning Partnership board meetings. In addition to this Catherine Hughson, the Chief Officer of Voluntary Action Shetland sits on the Community Planning Partnership board where she promotes the work of OPEN at strategic level.



The voices of children and young people are heard through social media, online fora and evaluations from the peer education work. These evaluations are gathered and shared with strategic groups which where third sector representatives can advocate for and pass on the views of young people through the project.



The project is recognised at strategic level as a valuable method in developing youth work services in partnership with young people in Shetland. It is highlighted in the children services plan as an integral vehicle for how the Community Partnership engages with Shetland's young people.



The OPEN project uses young people's voices, together with Community Partnership to map existing service provision, identify gaps in current services and improve local children's services planning at a strategic level. It has helped to ensure that groups of children and young people are not being overlooked or that services are not duplicated or competing with one another.



Through listening to the needs of young people at OPEN, a new Emotional Wellbeing and Resilience project has been created. The project is one of Shetland Children's Services Plan priorities for 2017-2020 and has partnership-wide input from VAS, NHS Shetland and Shetland Island's Council. OPEN are currently employing 6 young people to work as strategic group members for the Emotional Wellbeing and Resilience project.



Through OPEN's evidence of impact, they have also recently received funding of £11,238 via Shetland's Head of Children's Services for the ongoing delivery of OPEN workshops in schools 2019-2020. OPEN will aim to match this funding with national sources to secure the ongoing delivery of this work.

For further information about the OPEN project please contact Una Murray at: una.murray@shetland.gov.uk



References

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