

STAR Communities First

Introduction

STAR Communities First in Adamsdown, Cardiff, is funded by the Welsh Government as part of its flagship community development strategy for the most deprived wards in the country. In 2002, Cardiff Council received funding to focus on four of its most deprived wards and, for ten years, Council staff were responsible for delivery. In 2012, Cardiff Community Housing Association was commissioned by Cardiff Council to take over STAR, providing the training, education, employment and support services for local people in Adamsdown and a number of other target areas. Su Wade is its Cluster Manager and has worked in the Adamsdown area for nine years.

The Communities First programme has three key aims: more prosperous communities, healthier communities and learning communities. Activities are broad and varied, and they meet the Housing Association's core aim for tenants to feel '*proud of their communities*'. Within the Prosperous Communities strand, activities include community-based work clubs and volunteering, financial literacy and local business support. The Healthier Communities strand includes a health outreach programme, environmental projects, physical activities for the community including a focus on older residents, and mobile services such as a 'Fruit and Veg' shop, healthy cooking roadshow and advice services.

Its supplementary education programme, the Homework Club, falls within the Learning Communities' strand, which also supports family learning and hosts a Youth Forum. The Homework Club started in 2009 and has since become an integral part of the programme supporting around 70 children and young people aged 6 to 18 years with maths, science and English.

Cardiff Community Housing Association (CCHA) was established in 1996 and is an Industrial and Provident Society and registered charity. Today, STAR Communities First covers three wards in addition to Adamsdown and has a current annual turnover of £700k.

How the Supplementary Education programme began

The Supplementary Education programme began in 2009 when two fathers of Somali origin came to see Su at the local resource centre where she is based. She is well-known in the community and they approached her to see if she could help them to set up a football team for some of the local youths. As the conversation continued, they told her that a few local families had been paying for a private tutor to visit their homes to help their children with homework. Unfortunately, the tutor had moved away from the area, and parents were now struggling to effectively support their children through school either because they themselves had a poor education history or because they were not strong English speakers.

At a later partnership meeting with local organisations and key stakeholders in Cardiff, Su came into contact with the Cardiff University Widening Access Team. They had funding to involve people from minority ethnic communities in education and learning, with a longer term goal of encouraging more Black and minority ethnic students to study at the university. In order to achieve this, they wanted to support homework clubs in school settings. Su approached the university to see if they would consider homework club in a community setting and the university agreed.

After consulting with the local community and with the help of the two fathers, Su went back to Cardiff University with a proposal for their students to run a homework club for a small group of children and young people at the resource centre in Adamsdown. Although the centre is close to two secondary schools, those consulted felt strongly that the club should be based in the community because many of the children already felt disengaged from their mainstream school and would not want to spend additional hours there. However, to support the set-up of the programme, Su approached the secondary schools to provide learning materials for the classes, which they did. Local primary schools did the same. They also referred students who would benefit most from the programme and provided information about each student so that they could be supported effectively.

Shortly before the first session started, it became clear that there had been some misunderstanding between the Widening Access Team and STAR; the Team had assumed that a teacher would lead the sessions, with university students taking a support or learning assistant role. Concerned by the prospect of university students leading the sessions, they almost pulled out of the partnership. However, when Su organised a meeting for the Widening Access Team Coordinator and the two parents who had initiated this project, the Coordinator was encouraged by the parents' drive, organisation and commitment. The coordinator could also see that Su had made sure that all policies, processes and insurance were comprehensive. For these reasons, the partnership went ahead.

Although no one showed up at the first session, word of mouth quickly ensured that the homework club gathered pace. With the support of two university student volunteers, two community volunteers and, initially, a primary school Headteacher and class teacher, within the first month 15 primary aged pupils and up to 8 secondary aged pupils were benefitting regularly from maths and English classes. If they were struggling with other homework, they could get help to understand and complete it.

The programme

The Homework Club is still based at Adamsdown Resource Centre and, today, supports around 70 children and young people per week from a range of different ethnic backgrounds aged 6–18 years. Sessions for the youngest children aged 6–8 years take place on a Sunday morning and for the older primary school children on Saturdays. Key Stage 3 children (aged 11–14) have their classes on a Monday evening and GCSE and A-level support classes take place on Tuesday evenings. There is a maximum group size of 17 at any one time so that each child and young person gets the support that they need.

Approximately twelve community volunteers support eight students from Cardiff University to deliver these sessions. A named student from the University has a coordinating role to manage the timetable and rotas for the university volunteers, while the Children and Young People Learning Worker employed by STAR supports the coordination of the community volunteers, and liaises with the University. The community volunteers, some of whom have formal teaching experience, commit to a set day every week or fortnight, and the university students commit to around two sessions per week to ensure that each session has at least two university students in the classroom.

The university students are hand-picked and have all achieved A-grades in their A-level courses. They undergo some training with the university so that they are well equipped to lead the club. There is a deliberate attempt to recruit students from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds and/or those who are first in their family to go to university to further help raise the aspirations of the children involved in the programme.

Many of the children do not speak English in the family home and as a result, they particularly struggle with reading and writing in English. The sessions, therefore, focus on these areas as well as science and maths, which are the subjects where the older group needs support.

Except for the GCSE and A-Level support classes, each session follows the same structure: an hour and a half of homework support, followed by half an hour of enrichment activity such as a mini-class with a science professor who lives locally or group reading.

There are strong evaluation processes in place to capture academic progress and children and young people's personal development. Having consulted with the group and their families, it was noted that a lack of confidence and motivation to study were key barriers to their progression. The majority of children attending the classes do not have anyone in their family that has been to university, so part of the programme involves visits to the university to raise their aspirations. Other extra learning opportunities include visits to the theatre and trips during the school holidays.

In line with the wider aims of Communities First to develop the skills of adults as well, two parents have become Homework Club volunteers, six have undergone training to become learning coaches to mentor parents, and many parents have started their own learning journey with the project. In addition, parents are invited to meetings with tutors to discuss their children's progress and specific needs and how, in particular, they can support their children's progression and learning.

The programme has received praise and recognition externally for its work: the Children's Commissioner for Wales has praised the work of university students in supporting the local community and highlighted this work in the Child Poverty Strategy of 2012. He has since written to other higher education institutions to ask them to consider similar partnerships as part of their work on tackling child poverty. In a Children's and Young People Scrutiny Committee in May 2013, the work was highlighted as a good example of engaging the community in education.

Finance

Communities First in Adamsdown operates on a budget of around £80,000. Due to the commitment of the university and community volunteers, the Homework Club is run on minimal finance. Staffing costs account for just 15% of all expenditure – the Children and Young People Learning Worker based at the Communities First office spends a few hours each week to ensure the coordination and attendance of community volunteers.

Materials costs are also low (15%) as mainstream schools involved in the partnership have been willing to provide learning resources and other materials for the project. The main expenditure of the project is trips for the children and young people which amount to 60% of all costs, and refreshments during the club sessions (10%). The project also has access to free premises at the Communities First Adamsdown centre.

Financial Year	Income	Expenditure
2010-11	£3,285	£3,285
2011-12	£7,902	£7,902
2012-13	£3,857	£3,342

*Note: these figures are for the Supplementary Schools' Programme only. In 2011-2012, CCHA contributed additional funds from another budget that was underspent.

What next for STAR Communities First?

Su is keen that the Homework Club is able to meet the growing demand as there is a waiting list of students keen to attend. She is also conscious that better data exchange with mainstream schools alongside closer contact with parents would make it possible to more accurately monitor the academic progress and personal development of children and young people. Performance measures have already been designed with this purpose.

Although the university was initially worried about the lead role for student volunteers, they have since recognised that the students gain additional skills and experience through their

involvement in the programme. As a result, those student volunteers who progress from tutoring to a more responsible coordination role will be paid by the university for their work as an incentive to other students to participate.

Communities First is now trying out this model in three other areas, again with support from Cardiff University. Adamsdown and the three other areas in the STAR Communities First cluster will pay half the costs of a post to coordinate the expansion of this work and the university will pay the other half, such is the strength of the partnership between them and the commitment to the programme by the local community.

It is this partnership work that Su credits with the success of this project:

“Many universities have been under pressure to demonstrate how they are enabling young people from lower income families to access higher education. Cardiff University has shown a real and genuine commitment to raising the aspirations of young people and supporting them to reach their potential.”

<http://starcommunitiesfirst.com/>