



Moray youngsters are an inspiration

Young people in Moray have spearheaded a venture that could inspire youngsters across the country.

Already two major UK foundations have visited Keith to find out how the Loft youth centre has harnessed the interest and enthusiasm of young people in the area.

Although still in its early phases, the Loft has been a resounding success. Its drop-in centre routinely attracts up to 100 young teenagers over its Friday and Saturday evening sessions.

Just by having somewhere young people can regularly congregate has enabled a youth forum to develop naturally. But the project's achievements are growing well beyond simply providing somewhere for youngsters to meet. It's helping create training and job opportunities, and tackle problems linked to alcohol, drugs and anti-social behaviour.

'What's important is that the money we've put in has mattered. It's been pivotal to whether it'd be successful or not. And sometimes we've not offered to give money, but pointed people in the right direction, and that's every bit as important.'

Franziska Smith, HIE Moray

Fundamental to the project, says Gill Dolphin, who helped young people get the centre up and running, is that it was never allowed to become the view of establishment agencies of what young people needed.

"I was working as a community agent and a group of youngsters came to me about three years ago and said they wanted a youth café and drop-in centre," says Gill.

"I said we needed to go to consultation, to make sure we were doing what people

wanted." There were predictable complaints about having nothing to do and nowhere to go, but the exercise also revealed an alarming picture of young people with low expectations about themselves, the area they lived in and their prospects. The youngsters also responded candidly about the ties between these, alcohol and drugs.

The choice was between a quick-fix solution that risked being ineffectual, or doing something that tackled the issues. And it was left up to the young people themselves.

They made the tough choice - partly, says Gill, because a well thought-out and ambitious project would be more likely to win financial backing, but mainly because they recognised it was the right way to tackle the issues they themselves had identified.

The search for premises led to the name: the first building the group looked at was above a bank; they liked the idea of a loft and the name stuck. The drop-in centre is housed in a former hotel. With HIE community land fund backing, the group is buying and renovating the property.

Informal workshops - again developed from within rather than imposed from above - help young people to explore the issues surrounding drugs and alcohol misuse and anti-social behaviour. A part-time intensive support worker has been taken on, and a mentoring scheme set up, to help youngsters cope with problems. The drop-in centre is expanding to include a café, which will be used to provide training in catering, hospitality and health and safety.

Two young people are being employed to run a bar - dry, of course - and two

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Community impact checklist

- ✓ New social and life-skills focus provided for young people
- ✓ Training and job opportunities opened up
- ✓ Measures in place to tackle drug, alcohol and other problems
- ✓ Young people taking responsibility for issues around them

case



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others are leasing a public address system the Loft has bought, and using the equipment to stage discos and functions.

Ultimately, the aim is to make as much of the operation as possible self-funding and, to this end, a project co-ordinator has been employed to take care of sustainability issues. The project has also attracted the attention of the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, one of the largest independent grant-making foundations in the UK, which is interested in using the Keith project as a model; and of the Prince's Scottish Youth Business Trust, which is considering ways of helping the Keith youngsters develop the project even further.

Adds Gill: "The difference it's making is hard to quantify, but the young people are now feeling ownership in the community. There's a rise in confidence and a willingness to look at issues. "Whereas before they were feeling talked at, now they feel they can take on responsibility for issues around them."

When you have someone to turn to

The young people who set up the Loft youth project know they can turn to a small group of adults who freely give their time to provide advice when it's most needed.

And the adults enjoy a similar relationship with the enterprise network.

"We've been involved since the beginning," says Franziska Smith, of HIE Moray.

"We've been in the background, saying we'll be able to help in some way or another when it comes to the next round, or trying to give support, to tell people to stick in there."

Enterprise company support doesn't simply mean money - indeed HIE Moray has contributed modest funding; for example to buy a PA system the Loft is leasing as a business venture, and to help

renovate the kitchen that will be the focus of new training courses.

Other forms of help have included guidance on accessing other sources of funding, including HIE's community land unit; attracting business advisers to probe new ways of helping the project develop, and attracting groups such as the Prince's Scottish Youth Business Trust. And sometimes the most important help of all has simply been encouragement.

"They've given us support when we've needed it most," says Gill Dolphin.

"In the early days especially, when you were standing there and wondering can we really do this, just having someone saying 'you can do it' was great."

Project funding

- HIE Moray: £10,000 to buy portable PA system, mixing deck and mobile disco for lease
- Scottish Land Fund and HIE community land unit: £82,240 and £9,760 to buy the property
- Rural Partnership Fund: £50,000 award to open youth café
- Various sources, including local fund-raising: £26,300

Democratic dilemma

Young people didn't shy away from the seemingly dull matters of drawing up the Loft's policies and procedures.

"Most of these were done in consultation with the kids on a Friday and Saturday night," says Gill Dolphin.

"During one of the sessions they felt strongly that they should be able to smoke in one area of the building.

"We did consultations every way we could and it came back the same way: they wanted a smoking area. We couldn't say this project was young people-led for our convenience. It has to be young people-led as far as the law allows. So smoking is permitted in one part of the building."

The decision has had an unexpected advantage. It provides an opportunity to explore smoke-related issues, which wouldn't have been possible if smokers had been excluded.

