

EVALUATION OF THE UNDERGROUND AND NETWORK PROJECTS

Commissioned by

THE ROCK TRUST

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The Sessional Workers

The Volunteers

The Funders (Present and Past): The Big Lottery, Choose Life, Tudor Trust, Esmee Fairbairn Charitable Trust

The Referrers: No 20, Stopover, Broomhouse YMCA, YPU, Streetwork, Horizons, Link Living

The Partners: YPU, Homeless Practice, Barnardos 16+, Streetwork, Caledonian Youth

The Young People

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SUMMARY

This work was commissioned by The Rock Trust as an independent evaluation of The Underground and Network projects. The research was carried out between May and July 2005.

Information was gathered from a variety of sources and using a range of methods including semi-structured face to face, telephone and group interviews.

The outcome demonstrated clearly the considerable value of both The Underground and Network projects to the young people who attend them. Furthermore, both projects adhere closely to the recommended guidelines of key government policies on homelessness.

The report highlights reasons why the projects are a success and makes recommendations for the future.

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EVALUATION OF THE UNDERGROUND AND NETWORK PROJECTS

I INTRODUCTION

The Underground

The Underground was established in 2001 as a Healthy Living Centre, for young people between 16 and 25 years of age. The expressed aim of the project is to improve the health and well being of socially excluded young people. Specifically, to improve access to health services, provide an environment within which young people can explore issues of concern to them, to develop relationships with similar people, to minimize harmful behaviours, to support young people in addressing their health needs and to promote cohesive practice by developing partnerships with other agencies. The project is part of The Rock Trust, a charity which provides opportunities and support for homeless and vulnerable young people to develop their own personal, social and practical skills.

The Underground is in partnership with The Rock Trust and six other statutory and voluntary organizations for young people in Edinburgh.

The Underground is staffed by a project manager, two full time Youth Development Workers, a part-time Mental Health Worker and ten sessional staff, equivalent to 2-3 full time staff. The project works to meet its aims and objectives through the structure and running of the organization, from its relationships with other agencies but primarily through a wide variety of activities, drop in sessions, one to one and group work for the young people.

Networks

Networks developed from a previous befriending project (Keystone) which was established within The Rock Trust in 1995. Networks offers socially excluded and vulnerable young people a time limited befriending service. Volunteers are carefully selected, trained and matched to a young person for the period of one year. Unlike many other befriending agencies, the service is focused and goal oriented. The young person also continues to meet with the Coordinator throughout the year for assessment and review and has the opportunity to attend small groups set up by the project.

Networks currently has one Coordinator, fifteen volunteers and eleven active cases.

The Evaluation

This independent evaluation of the Underground and Networks project was funded by The Rock Trust and conducted by the author between April and July 2005. A draft copy was submitted to the Director of The Rock Trust at the end of June 2005.

Background Literature

In their report *Homelessness: An Action Plan for Prevention and Effective Response* (2002), Scottish Executive made several recommendations regarding the health of homeless people. It was recommended that service providers should promote values, attitudes and behaviour such that the services delivered are both responsive and personalized. The report also emphasized the importance of good staff training in order that the homeless person could be empowered. A flexible, holistic approach was advised and joint working with other agencies to be encouraged.

Similarly, one of the key aims of the *Homelessness Strategy for Edinburgh 2002-2007* is to ensure that there is a range of services that can work to minimize the damaging effects of homelessness. This document also emphasizes an integrated response to homelessness through joint working. The health needs of homeless people are given priority and should be tackled via improved access to health care facilities, education and information, and specialist workers in the field.

II METHOD

Data Collection

Information was gathered from a variety of sources. Semi-structured interviews (Appendix) were conducted both in person and by telephone to gather the views of the young people, the Project Managers, the Project Workers, the sessional staff, the volunteers, the Partners, the Referrers, the Funders and the Director.

Additional information was collected regarding the demography of the young people, numbers attending group activities and the perceived change in the young people since attending the project, as measured by an independent rater.

Sample

- i) Qualitative information was gathered via semi-structured interviews with seven young people who attended the Underground on two separate drop-ins. Every effort was made to select a random sample from those young people attending afternoon drop-ins. However, attendance was low on those particular days and the final sample comprised of those available and agreeable to taking part in an interview. It could therefore be argued that this is a biased sample, from a self-selected group who choose to attend the Underground, agreed to participate in

the research and therefore perhaps place a higher value on the service than others. Three female and four male service users were interviewed and their ages ranged from 19 to 25 years. One of the young people also was matched with a befriender and attended activity groups through Networks.

This sample is selected from a total of 72 young people currently on file and regularly using the service. Of those 72, 29 are female, 43 are male. There are however a total of 250 on the books, many of whom attend less regularly.

- ii) The Manager of the Underground and Coordinator of Networks were interviewed to gather both factual information and their personal views on the projects.
- iii) The two Youth Development Workers and the Mental Health Worker were interviewed to seek their views on the projects.
- iv) Five sessional workers were involved in a group interview to offer their views on the Underground project.
- v) The author met with four volunteers in a group interview and conducted telephone interviews with three other volunteers to seek their views on the Networks project.
- vi) Telephone interviews were conducted with key personnel from four grant giving bodies. A letter of introduction was sent prior to this (Appendix).
- vii) Telephone interviews were carried out with personnel representing five of the Partners. Again a letter of introduction was sent in advance (Appendix).
- viii) Seven Referrers to the Underground and two Referrers to Networks were contacted by letter and followed up with a telephone interview.
- ix) Independent ratings of observed change in two young people as a result of attending the Underground were gathered from the Deputy Manager of Bedrock (Supported Accommodation) in West Lothian.
- x) The views of the Director of The Rock Trust on both projects were sought.

III RESULTS

THE UNDERGROUND PROJECT

The Young People

The face to face interviews demonstrated clearly and beyond doubt the considerable value of the Underground project to the lives of these vulnerable young people. This was evident from their comments and from the wide range of activities available to them. A full list of the activities can be found in the Appendix. Brief summaries of the interviews illustrate well the benefits to the young people.

Case study one – Sue is a 19 year old service user who started attending the Parents Group earlier this year. She has a five month old son and brings him with her to the Underground. She heard about the service through friends and loves it because it gives her an outlet, has allowed her to meet others in a similar situation and has been a valuable resource for helpful advice about parenting. Prior to this she had become fairly isolated with most of her friends attending college. She had tried other toddler groups but felt judged by other parents who tended to be older. She particularly valued the opportunity to speak to health professionals in a relaxed, informal setting where it was easier to ask questions. She would like to see more meetings for the Parents Group. She also volunteered that the staff really listened and would take on board the ideas of the Service Users. There was a real sense of trust with the staff and “If you’re upset, they know how to make you feel better”.

Case study two – Marie is a 22 year old who has been attending the Underground for about three years. She lives alone and values the fact that it gets her out of the house. She was very aware of the Healthy Living aspect and particularly enjoyed the cooking and health related issues. In her time with the project she has moved from hostel accommodation and now has her own tenancy. She was apprehensive when she first attended but feels it is a safe place. However, at times the atmosphere could be tense and she would like the staff to be stricter about asking Service Users who are under the influence of drugs or alcohol to leave.

Case study three – Sam is a 23 year old male who has been attending the Underground since it opened. He enjoys the full range of activities and particularly the DJ sessions on a Saturday morning. He has lived in hostels since he was seventeen years, takes on intermittent work and has some plans for training at college. He volunteered, the Underground “keeps me out of trouble. If I’m here, I’m not in trouble”.

Case study four – David is a 23 year old service user who has been attending The Underground for 6 months. He heard about the project through his supported accommodation and drops in once or twice a month. It helps him because “It gets me out the house” and “It’s a safe place to come”. However he was critical of the routine and predictability of the service and would like to see more community based activities. Although he interacted with the other young people at the Underground he had not made any specific friends.

Case study five – John is a 25 year old service user who has been coming to the Underground two or three times a week for six months. Through the Underground he’s “met loads of friends”, enjoyed the gym, football and the regular drop ins. He thinks the staff are “brilliant”, “supportive” and “trustworthy”. He thought the service could publicize themselves more by staff going out to tell young people about the project.

Case study six – Ian is a 21 year old who has been attending the Underground since it opened. He found it particularly helpful at that time as he had just moved to the city and lacked self confidence. Through the Underground he has met new friends, developed his interest in music and learned to play guitar. A previous drug user, he feels he’s learned a lot about drugs and healthy living. He has also found the Parents Group useful and great fun. As a keen sportsman, he thought that the Underground could set up sports competitions with service users in other similar agencies.

Case study seven - Sharon is 25years old and has been coming to the Underground off and on for about a year. In that time she has moved in to her own flat and plans to get back to college. She has found the staff extremely supportive and have really helped her “move on and think about things”. She also noted that she felt very safe at the Underground and trusted the staff.

A wide variety of activities are on offer throughout the week and are generally well attended. Statistics over the past four months indicate the following average attendances:

Breakfast Club	13
Open Access	8
Parents Group	7
U Guys	4
Exercise Group	11
Arts Group	5

The Youth Development Workers

Both members of staff were very positive about the Underground and had clear ideas about its relative strengths and weaknesses. There was recognition that the target group is a challenging one to work with and just making the connection with the young person could be difficult. Unlike many similar organizations, the Underground strives to be Service User led whilst still holding on to important principles and rules. This balance between the formal and informal is tricky but the Underground seems to be achieving it much of the time as evidenced by observation and comment from various sources. The geographical location is ideal and the reputation of the service is thought to be good.

Just as the staff listen to the young people, the staff felt listened to by management and thus the project was constantly evolving and growing. Whilst there was seen to be a lack of clarity around some policies and procedures, management was commended upon their responsiveness to crises. There are also excellent ongoing supervision, support and training opportunities for permanent staff.

There was some discrepancy regarding the importance of the Underground's status as a Healthy Living Centre. One worker thought that the team should be making more effort to promote this through activities whilst the other felt that this was not always appropriate and health issues were not always a priority for many homeless, vulnerable young people.

There was also differing opinion regarding the importance of one to one work with the young people. One worker clearly felt skilled and able to work in this way, the other thought that this was outwith the remit of the team and that their particular skills lay within the group work.

The policy regarding admission of young people under the influence of drugs or alcohol is often tricky to put into practice, especially given the lay out of the building and the narrow, basement entrance to the facilities. Often young people gained access before it could be established whether they were intoxicated or not. Clearly this is an area staff are very aware of and work hard to manage at all times and in a unanimous manner.

There was a real sense that there is plenty opportunity and scope for development within the project. Both workers had reservations about using volunteers owing to the specialist nature of the work. However, it was thought that there could be more opportunities for sessional workers. Also, the service could be open more frequently for the young people and the service should generally expand.

The Mental Health Worker

The Underground has the services of a Mental Health Worker 3 days per week, seconded from the charity Health in Mind to The Rock Trust for a period of 2 years. With a background in mental health nursing, she brings a skilled and experienced approach to the project. Her aim is to take a holistic approach such that mental health issues are incorporated into all activities. She also works with some service users in an individual capacity. Recently she has started a more formal evaluation of the young people's psychological wellbeing using a standardized questionnaire.

Whilst generally positive about the work of the Underground, she felt that the team perhaps needed to stay focused and emphasize the healthy living aspect of their work. Otherwise, the project ran the risk of becoming merely a social venue that provided food to the young people but little else. She also thought that at times it could be too 'youth friendly' and activities were undertaken just because requested by the young people.

The policy on drugs and alcohol was thought to be generally well managed but needed effort from the team to keep clarity and consistency.

Given the proximity of Bedrock, there could be more useful contacts and links between the different divisions of The Rock Trust.

The Mental Health Worker reiterated the praise for management and particularly the ongoing support, supervision and training opportunities.

The Sessional Workers

The sessional workers were very positive about the work of the Underground and particularly the variety of activities available, the opening hours and the relaxed atmosphere with minimal rules and regulations. They thought there was a sense of shared ownership with the young people who respected the environment and the staff.

There was a sense that the Underground was achieving its aims in that they could witness changes in the young people over time, perhaps becoming more independent, responsible, moving into tenancy, employment etc. However, they also thought that the team should be more pro active in moving people on and ensuring that they do not become too dependent upon the Underground.

They also thought that more could be made of links with other organizations.

They enjoyed their work and described the Underground as honest, fair and friendly with clear boundaries. Their view of supervision and training was mixed but generally that there was room for improvement. However, on a daily basis there was a sense of being well supported by staff.

The Deputy Manager - Bedrock West Lothian

The views of the change in young people as a result of attending the Underground were sought from a relatively independent source, namely the Deputy Manager of a Supported Accommodation project in West Lothian. She identified two young people who had attended the Underground and in both cases she noted significant improvement along several dimensions, including, self-confidence, maturity, mood, independence and social integration.

The Project Manager

The current manager has been in post eleven months and has a clear vision of the Underground and where it is going. She works hard to remain focused and is responsive to her staff and the young people using the service. Formal evaluation of the service is difficult owing to the transient nature of the client group but every effort is made to measure the success of the groups and other activities. Statistics are gathered on attendance at various sessions and there is an awareness of the importance of more formal evaluation of what is going on. Annual reports describe the activities of the project and effort is made to keep others informed. She is constantly aware of the project's aims and objectives and adheres to them in all the activities that are planned and undertaken.

She expressed disappointment in the lack of interest and involvement demonstrated by some of the Partners.

The Director

The views of the Director were reiterated by many others interviewed in the course of the research. She praised the positive learning culture, the holistic nature of the work and

the self-awareness of the team. She was aware of the need to improve the relationships with the Partners and the importance of evaluation. She also emphasized the need to dis-engage with the young people as appropriate.

The Referrers

Many organizations within the city enable vulnerable young people to access the Underground. They include, the Young Persons Unit at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, the YMCA, various hostels and Supported Accommodation within the city. All staff from such organizations were extremely positive about the service. In particular they praised the highly skilled, professional staff, their excellent reputation, the variety of activities available and their success in engaging with a particularly challenging client group. The feedback they received from the young people using the service was good and evidenced by the fact that they kept attending. Many described the project as unique within the city and a valuable resource. There was praise for their PR and the efforts made by the staff to meet with and work with other agencies. Regular updates via email enabled other agencies to keep abreast of developments.

The only criticisms were that the project should have more staff, more activities and longer opening hours.

The Partners

There were diverging views on the success of the Partnership. Some were very positive about the mutual benefits of being in partnership with the Underground, namely the sharing of experiences, staff, joint working etc. Others were unclear of the nature of the partnership and indeed the expectations of themselves within it. There was a sense that it perhaps had been more important in the early days when the Underground was establishing its identity. It was also noted by some that all staff in similar organizations are stretched and busy and to extend outwards to another organization, whilst important was perhaps not seen as a priority.

The Funders

Comments from key personnel from past and present funding bodies were brief. They noted that the fact that no problems had been highlighted and that reports were received as requested indicated that all was well. None had detailed knowledge of the project although could have accessed this if required.

NETWORKS

The Young People

Owing to the sensitive nature of the work of this project, only one young person involved in Networks was interviewed. She was very positive about her contact with her befriender and described the enormous difference that this had made to her life in terms

of confidence and enabling her to join in other activities and groups. Through Networks she had started photography and was delighted with the results which were displayed in the premises.

During the course of the research, the Coordinator of Networks was undertaking a survey of the young people and their views of Networks. At the time of reporting, seven questionnaires had been returned and all were entirely positive about the value of the service.

The Coordinator

The Coordinator of Networks has been in post since September 2004. She is also the Deputy Manager of the Underground. She described Networks as a more modern approach to befriending. The contact is limited to a year and this allows the work between the befriender and the young person to be focused. In addition to the time with the volunteer befriender, the young person has an initial assessment and ongoing support with the Co-ordinator. There is also the opportunity for group work. The volunteers undergo extensive training and great care is taken to match the volunteer and the young person. Unfortunately, this can lead to delays for both parties in establishing a match.

There is a very real sense that the project achieves its aims from the feedback received via the volunteers and the young people. Also, from the fact that the young people are seen to grow in confidence and start to become more socially integrated. The coordinator is aware that at present there is no volunteer policy, no grievance procedure and no ongoing training for volunteers and is planning to address this.

Recruitment of volunteers has been successful through advertising and contact with other likely sources eg. students.

The Coordinator shows tremendous enthusiasm and drive but is fairly stretched in terms of her time. The project is developing and growing but is clearly requiring further resources to support this.

The Mental Health Worker

The Mental Health worker is also involved with Networks offering one to one counselling. The input is professional and also offers the Co-ordinator opportunities for support and the sharing of ideas.

The Volunteers

As expected, the befrienders were volunteering for a variety of reasons but all found the work challenging and enjoyable. They felt well trained and supported. Some described the project as unique given the age group of the young people and the time limited nature of the contact. However, there was some uncertainty about the ending of the contact and whether or not the relationship could be extended.

There was an awareness amongst the volunteers that the staff seemed overworked and more resources were required. There was also frustration for some at the delay between completing training and being matched with a young person.

The Referrers

Again, staff from other organizations referring young people to Networks were extremely complimentary about the service. Some thought it was unique in the age group it targeted and in reaching those young people that other organizations failed to engage with. It was described as very accessible and accommodating. The service was seen as professional and responsive.

There was an awareness that the service was growing and resources stretched. Publicity could be better and the profile of the project could be raised.

The Funders

Little comment was made, again indicating that there were no problems with the project from the funders' perspective.

The Director

The Director was again very positive regarding the Networks project and its ability to reach young people with complex needs and in a way that made them feel valued. However, she thought that the project required to communicate its methodology to lay people in a more structured and analytic manner. As with the Underground, evaluation is important and also the ability to dis-engage with the young person when appropriate.

IV DISCUSSION

The Underground

All evidence supports the view that the Underground is meeting its aims and objectives in providing a quality, professional service to a group of vulnerable, young people. It achieves this through the processes and activities identified in the original objectives. The staff team is strong and benefits from diversity of views, skills and interests. The involvement of the Mental Health worker enhances the overall project and she is able to provide a more objective view of the service.

Staff are aware of the fine balance in attracting and connecting with young people whilst keeping order within the Underground. Regular, open communication and review helps this. Staff are also aware of the importance of maintaining focus within the diversity and flexibility of the service.

Liaison and PR are excellent and the service has an extremely positive reputation city wide. Staff are well supported by management who are responsive to ideas and innovation.

Clearly there are opportunities to develop and grow and this seems to be an ideal time to do so given that the service is well established. Perhaps the team needs to address how they can optimize the rich skills mix amongst themselves and also within the sessional workers at this time.

Whilst evaluation of the projects success is complex, this is an important area and developing this would also help the project both focus and plan ahead.

Networks

All evidence supports the success of this unique project. The extent and quality of the service from just one Coordinator and her volunteers is outstanding. However, additional resources are urgently required to ensure the continuity and growth of the service. Furthermore, this is vital to ensure the continued psychological well being of the Coordinator.

The volunteers are well trained and supported and consequently demonstrate commitment to the project.

There is a realistic awareness of the importance of sharpening up policies and procedures, particularly at this time of potential growth.

Evaluation and PR are important areas for the project to address at this stage.

Both projects adhere closely to the Scottish Executive recommendations. They achieve this by offering a flexible and personalized service to the young people through their approach and a wide range of activities. The Underground is holistic and pro-active, always striving to empower the young person. It pursues joint working via its active Partnerships and also via the regular involvement of various health care and other professionals.

Furthermore, the projects are implementing the specific aims of the Homelessness Strategy for Edinburgh. They are achieving this through joint working and their Partnership with other agencies, their emphasis on the health needs of the young people and the awareness of staff in recognizing and minimizing the potentially damaging effects of homelessness.

The Underground and Networks give time and effort to appropriate staff training and thus ensure appropriate knowledge, values and behaviour from all staff.

RECOMENDATIONS

The Underground

- The Underground needs to consider how it develops to maximize the rich skill mix and interests of the staff.
- Policies and procedures need to evolve and be firmly established.
- Staff need to stay focused on their aims and house rules.
- The project should consider the purpose of the Partnership and how it can best fulfill this for all parties.
- Benefit could be gained from forging stronger links with Bedrock
- The Underground project is unique and should promote itself as such and also as a centre of excellence.
- Learning should be shared with other organizations.
- The project should continue to strive for further resources to enable expansion.

Networks

- Networks urgently requires greater resources. Primarily more staff to ensure the continuity and expansion of the service.
- The project needs to establish appropriate policies and procedures.
- Evaluation of the service is important and should be given due time and priority.
- The public image and knowledge of Networks should be addressed with the support and backup of The Rock Trust.
- Volunteers need to be reminded and remain clear about the end of the contact with the young person at one year.
- Like the Underground, Networks could benefit from stronger links with other parts of The Rock Trust.
- It may no longer be appropriate for the Co-ordinator of Networks to also be the Deputy Manager of the Underground.

APPENDIX

SAMPLE LETTER OF INTRODUCTION TO THE SERVICE USERS

Dear Service User

I am writing to introduce myself and ask for your help in a small project. I am an independent consultant and have been asked by The Rock Trust to carry out some research with the Underground Project. In particular, I am interested in the views of service users of the Underground.

If you are agreeable, I would like to meet you, tell you about the research and learn more about yourself. I would want to spend approximately half an hour with you.

Best Wishes

Yours sincerely

Dr Janice E Whittick
Researcher

CONSENT FORM SIGNED BY INTERVIEWEES

I, THE UNDERSIGNED, AGREE TO TAKE PART IN A BRIEF INTERVIEW FOR THE PURPOSES OF RESEARCH ON BEHALF OF THE ROCK TRUST. I UNDERSTAND THAT I CAN STOP THE INTERVIEW AT ANY TIME.

í í

SAMPLE THANK YOU LETTER TO THE SERVICE USERS

Dear (Service User)

Just a short note to thank you for taking part in The Underground research project. It was a pleasure to meet with you and I appreciate the time you gave me.

I hope you continue to benefit from your involvement with the Underground project.

Best Wishes

Yours sincerely

Dr Janice E Whittick
Researcher

SAMPLE LETTER TO OTHER AGENCIES

Dear

I am writing to you in my capacity as an Independent Consultant, asked by The Rock Trust to evaluate the Underground and Network projects. I understand that you are familiar with these services and I was hoping you could spare ten minutes of your time to speak with me on the telephone.

I am particularly interested in your views of the projects, your expectations, experiences and any additional thoughts or ideas you may have on the service.

I will contact you by telephone within the next few days and, if you are agreeable, can arrange a mutually convenient time to discuss the above.

Yours sincerely

Dr Janice E Whittick
Chartered Clinical Psychologist

OUTLINE OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW WITH SERVICE USERS

- Background information
- How long have you been coming to the Underground?
- How did you hear about it?
- What do you do here?
- Has it helped and if so in what ways?
- What would make it better still?
- Anything you don't like?
- Who/what else supports you?
- Is it what you expected?
- What next for you?

OUTLINE OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH WORKERS

- Background information
- How long have you worked on the project?
- What do you think is good about the project?
- What is not so good?
- How does it help the young people and how do you know?
- How do you think the project should develop?
- What about public image?PR?
- What about support, supervision and training opportunities?

LIST OF ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY THE YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE UNDERGROUND

- Breakfast Club
- Exercise Group
- Independent Living Skills
- Lyceum Group
- Tuesday Open Access
- Thursday Open Access
- Parents Group
- World Aids Day
- U Guys
- U Gals
- Video Nights
- Green Team

LIST OF ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY THE YOUNG PEOPLE AND VOLUNTEERS WITH NETWORKS

- Museums
- Cinema
- Visits to other youth services
- Meals
- Coffee
- Pool
- Gym
- Badminton
- Tennis
- Cooking
- Walks
- Rock climbing
- Paintball
- Theatre
- Conferences
- Photography
- City visits
- Drumming
- Visits to beauty spots
- Visits to animal sanctuaries
- Library
- Charity shops
- Dance classes

VII REFERENCES

Scottish Executive (2002). Homelessness: An Action Plan for Prevention and Effective Response.

City of Edinburgh Council. Homelessness Strategy for Edinburgh 2002-2007 (Ref 02632)