

Making a difference

How eight learning centres found new ways to work with school age learners



Please note the photographs in this booklet are for illustrative purposes only.

In the summer of 2005, the Scottish Executive published Lifelong Partners, which detailed how schools and colleges might co-operate to give post-14 years pupils a better and wider range of options. The document made reference to the potential role of learndirect scotland branded learning centres.

Since we knew that some of the 500 branded learning centres across Scotland were already engaging with school age learners, we invited representatives from a number of these centres to meet to map out present activity, review current practice and explore new ideas.

It was clear from that discussion that there was a wealth of activity in this area. It was also clear that centre staff had innovative ideas that would address a range of issues affecting the potential of young people to realise their aims, such as, disaffection with the learning system; lack of opportunity locally; lack of information; and a need for more individual support and encouragement.

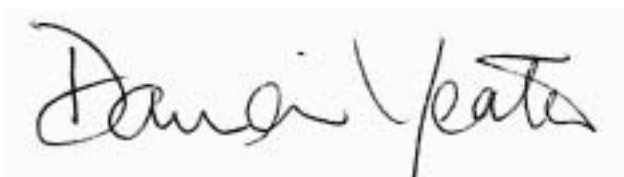
As a result of these discussions, we initiated four exciting projects and produced case studies on four more examples of good practice. The projects range from involving pupils in Formula 1 racing and other sports, to developing the skills employers want through practical work-related programmes.

Blended learning is also playing a growing role in engaging young people. This combination of e-learning and other delivery methods opens up areas of work young people may not have considered.

The case studies in this publication are very encouraging and include words like motivation, health, confidence, engagement, teamwork, citizenship and success.

We at learndirect scotland believe that the results and achievements that we highlight in these case studies demonstrate that learning centres, working closely with schools and other partners, are creating new, high quality and stimulating learning opportunities which can address many of the issues faced by young people. By building and investing in existing partnerships there is clearly potential to change our young people's experience of education and to prepare them for the world of work.

We hope that you find the case studies of interest.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light grey background. The signature reads "Damien Yeates" in a cursive, flowing script.

Damien Yeates
Chief Executive
learndirect scotland



Playing with model cars proves a valuable lesson in engineering

The last thing you would expect to find youngsters doing at school is playing with model racing cars. Surely they should be sitting quietly at their desks doing English or maths?

But pupils in schools in Tayside, Fife, Aberdeenshire and Campbeltown are learning about manufacturing, design and planning, marketing and sponsorship and, perhaps most important of all, about engineering and its importance in today's world.

The young people are taking part in a UK-wide competition called the F1 in Schools Challenge. Its original purpose was to bring engineering as a career to the attention of young people. With the tendency, in the latter part of the 20th century, for universities and colleges to concentrate on subjects such as social work, psychology, media studies, etc, rather than science or technology, the number of qualified engineers coming out of further education dropped dramatically.

Companies involved in engineering, like Jaguar, BAE Systems and Denford, traditionally machine tool manufacturers and now suppliers of engineering software and hardware to the education sector, decided to tackle the problem by considering how they could raise the profile of engineering with young people to encourage them to think of a future career in some branch of this industry.

The F1 in Schools Challenge

The three companies put their heads together and came up with the F1 in Schools Challenge, which offered teams of secondary school pupils the chance to design a model racing car and race it against teams from other schools. Not only would the youngsters learn about engineering, design and manufacture as they made the model car, they would also be expected to get sponsorship for the challenge and therefore would have to learn about marketing and promotion.

For the Angus Training Group (ATG) in Arbroath, predominantly involved in training engineering apprentices, the F1 Challenge has become a large feature in the working year.

Jim Thomson, managing director, knew just how hard it was to recruit young people into the industry: "I thought it would be a good thing to bring to schools in Angus, with a view to encouraging teachers and pupils to think about the connection between design, engineering and manufacture."

The lack of technical teachers in the local schools who could oversee the work of the pupils taking part in the challenge was a problem. Scottish Enterprise Tayside and Tayside Council got involved and agreed to pay ATG to train teachers to use a software design package, which they could then train the pupils to use. "The schools got the software free if they sent their teachers to be trained by us," explains Alan Swankie, training manager at ATG.

Since September 2002, Alan and his team have trained 108 teachers to use the package and it is now four years since the first six teams from schools in Angus entered the challenge. The following year, schools from Perth and Dundee joined in and in 2006, 17 teams took part, with the final held at the Sensation Science Centre in Dundee.

Teams are picked from three age groups: first and second year, third and fourth, and fifth and sixth year and judging is tailored to each age group. Most teams have four to six members and, encouragingly, it attracts more girls than boys.

The teams are each given the same set of components from which to manufacture their model cars. The cars are powered by a canister of CO₂ gas and at the final are raced along a 24-metre track.

Once the design is completed using the software package, it goes through various tests, including a wind tunnel simulation, to ensure it will perform properly. Then it is e-mailed to ATG who cut it out and manufacture it and return it to the school for finishing. While the model is being designed and made, money needs to be raised to pay for the manufacture and sponsorship must be sought from local companies.

Learning to use design software is just the start

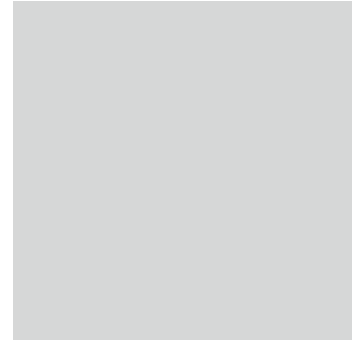
During the design, manufacture and marketing stages the pupils are not just learning about how to use Computer Aided Design (CAD) software or how a design gets made into a real object; they are also learning about teamwork, leadership and delegation. One member of the team becomes project manager and everyone must work together and communicate with each other. They have to do a 10-minute presentation to the judges at the final of the challenge, so they learn about presentation and graphics skills. Raising money teaches them about negotiation, marketing, how to write letters asking for support and gives them invaluable experience of how the world of work operates.

The teams taking part have to fit in their activities with their ongoing schoolwork. "A lot of them concentrate on it during their lunch hour," says Alan, "or stay on after school. They are really keen and the teachers sometimes can't get rid of them! And before the final they're often up all night finalising their presentations. But seeing the delight on their faces at the final makes it all worthwhile. It's great!"

The young learners who take part are from all walks of life and the schools encourage them to think of going on to university or to do apprenticeships. Many of the youngsters take part in the challenge every year, working their way up the age scale and building on the experience they have already gained. And the original idea of encouraging them to think about engineering is, if only slowly, beginning to pay off. "One of our engineering apprentices here at ATG took part in the challenge when he was at school," says Alan.

It is a lot of work for Alan and his colleagues, who are busy training first year engineering apprentices as well as running first aid and health and safety courses in conjunction with Angus College, but they obviously thoroughly enjoy it. "The young people are so enthusiastic," he says. "We heard about one team who came into school the morning after the final and announced they were starting again right there and then for next year!

"We feel something like this should be on the school curriculum, but so often the teachers don't have time for it, unless they're really interested. It's just a pity that there is such a shortage of technical teachers in schools now."



Castle Douglas IT Centre does things by the letter

Youngsters are used to sending text messages to each other and no-one minds if the spelling is a bit dodgy. It's the message that matters – and getting it there as fast as possible.

But some young people don't realise that when it comes to the world of work things are not quite so haphazard. It's not acceptable to dash off a quick letter full of spelling mistakes and bad grammar. If they are going to get on, they need to learn how to write a letter correctly and how to make it look neat and presentable.

This is just one of the lessons that the staff at Castle Douglas Community IT Centre are helping to instil in school age learners from their local community. "We're trying to help them see that when they go into the outside world it's important to be accurate," says Jackie Williams. "So we're working with them on things like that as well as trying to give them an idea of what other qualities and skills will be useful to them in the next few years."

Young Futures

Jackie and her colleagues, led by development officer Pauline Bell, are involved in a project called Young Futures. They have already run a pilot programme with Dalbeattie High School and are now planning to continue it and also to extend the project to include pupils from Castle Douglas High School and Kircudbright Academy.

"Some of the young people already know what they want to do when they leave school," said Jackie, "but others don't. We're not only developing their IT skills, we're coaching them in life skills. For most, it's the first time they've been in a learning environment outside school and we're helping them to adapt to that new situation and to get as much out of it as they can. We're being as creative as possible, getting them to experiment with working in teams, working on their own, questioning things and thinking laterally – all to encourage them to develop their individual potential."

The youngsters are mostly from third and fourth years and were specially chosen by their schools for this project. The core of the course they follow is CLAIT 2006 – Computer Literacy and Information Technology – which teaches them word processing, document production and file management. "They have a book to work through with various exercises and we provide whatever support is required. They have various mock tests and then they sit an exam at the end of the course. So far three have completed the course and received a certificate – they're over the moon about that."

To start with Jackie found that the pupils constantly asked: “What should I do now?” but once they realised that the centre wanted them to think much more on their own they really embraced the challenge and progressed in leaps and bounds. “We’re treating them as adults,” explained Jackie, “and we’ve been really surprised and encouraged by how well they have responded to the standards we have set – it’s very rewarding.”

The youngsters go to the centre for about eight weeks, one afternoon a week, for two hours. Some then continue with school, while others may go on to a job or to higher education. The first pilot course started in February 2006 and feedback from pupils and teachers has been wholly positive.

More than just IT

Other ways of engaging these young people and opening their eyes to the opportunities, as well as the demands, in the world beyond school are also planned. “Through learndirect scotland, we have arranged a visit by staff from the Glasgow Science Centre. They’re going to do a variety of things such as demonstrations of robotics, so it’s going to be really interesting. We’ll be inviting several people to come along but we thought it would be good to include the pupils because it will surprise them and, we hope, interest them. It will also demonstrate our commitment to helping them learn more here than just IT.”

While the project has been a stimulating change for the pupils, it has been a new experience for Jackie. “I’m having a bit of a career change. I worked in retail for a number of years as a buyer, travelling all over the world, so this is something completely new for me. It’s also interesting for the pupils as I have some practical knowledge of what happens out there in the workplace that I can pass on. They’re always asking me questions about it!

“I’m thoroughly enjoying my work here. I get a lot out of it because I’m really seeing people – of all ages, not just the young people – learning and advancing. In my previous jobs there was inevitably more focus on turnover and profit than on working with people and watching them develop. It’s very exciting.”



North Highland College offers stepping stone

Learning centres are traditionally places that cater for adults who have left their schooldays behind them. But at North Highland College in Dornoch and Alness, members of staff have been using their skills to help much younger learners.

Over the last four to five years, staff at Dornoch and Alness, which are both learndirect scotland branded learning centres, have taught 150 to 200 young people every week. The young people come in from surrounding schools to take part in workshops and projects in a wide range of subjects that are not taught at school. And staff from the learning centres have been going out to schools to give talks on general life skills, team building or motivation.

Russell Rekhy is the manager at Dornoch and Alness, both part of the North Highland College which, in turn, is part of the University of the Highlands and Islands. "Our strategic aim is to provide education in the Highlands and also to show youngsters some alternatives when it comes to future careers," he explained. "Our programmes with schools are a stepping stone to college and open their minds to a whole range of possibilities about what they might do after they leave school."

Subjects to suit all interests

Projects with school-age learners cover an astonishing variety of topics. One of the things the centre offered was a beauty academy on a Friday morning or afternoon, when pupils from three or four local schools went along to the centre to learn about presenting themselves in a good light and how to put on make up and do their nails.

In an 18-week taster programme, one-day workshops were offered on health and safety, first aid, IT, food hygiene and other subjects.

"We did a six-week course on business and what it involves – how companies work, how they are managed, that sort of thing," said Russell. "And we've held workshops on hospitality – how to prepare food and what to serve for breakfast or main meals."

The centre has also used music to engage the youngsters. "We ran a music academy – we've got some good instructors on hand – and to start with we just told the young people to make a noise! Then they had a great time learning a bit about using the instruments. It gave a lot of them confidence as they were doing things they had thought they could never do."

The music academy was so successful that it is going to be repeated in greater depth with more staff helping out. And a similar success story was a simple exercise using digital cameras. “We bought about 30 digital cameras and told the young people to go and experiment with them. Then we showed them how to download the photos and do things with them. This led to them asking how they could get into graphic design. We asked a graphic designer to come and talk to the pupils about how she developed her skills and what you need to do to study design.”

Beyond the classroom

Other courses have covered topics that would never have been offered at school. Knife skills taught youngsters how to use different kinds of knives in the kitchen and gave them more confidence in the hospitality courses. Cake decorating has been running in one of the Dornoch schools for four years. At the end of all these workshops and courses there is a celebration event, with parents and teachers invited along to see a display of the young people’s work and a presentation of certificates.

“We cover schools in an area of about 30 to 40 miles from Golspie to the north of Dornoch, down to Dingwall, in the south, working with young people aged 13 and upwards”, said Russell. We let the schools know what we are offering and they tell the parents and the youngsters what opportunities there are, usually on Friday afternoons, to come to the learning centres and take part. Some of them suggest ideas too. For instance, someone pointed out that a lot of young people use computers but they don’t know how to type. We piloted a keyboard skills course in one school and that was very successful, so we’ve expanded it to other schools. Sometimes, the youngsters themselves suggest something – we did a course on parenting skills and some of the youngsters went on from that to do care programmes at the college.”

Guest speakers spark interest

All these programmes have been run with the centres’ own staff, although Russell also invites guest speakers. A masterchef from London who was in the area came to talk about alcohol problems and his own experiences. “The pupils were very quiet to start with and then they got really interested. I think they got a lot out of it.

“Another time someone from the RAF came to talk about careers with the air force and some of the youngsters went to the base at Lossiemouth and came back really excited and motivated. We also bring in people from Careers Scotland to talk about careers and we get the young learners, either at the centres or in their schools, to use learndirect scotland’s learning bytes courses.”

Russell and his staff notice the difference their approach has made in the youngsters they deal with. “Some of them come in here and are really shy to start with, but then they become absorbed and really develop and blossom. It does great things for their confidence.

“A lot of them now have completely different career paths ahead of them because they’ve found out about all sorts of opportunities they didn’t know existed. Taking part in our hospitality course, for instance, could lead them to a career in the hotel industry. Some of them say they want to go in for something because that’s what their friends are doing and we can say, well, do you know what’s involved, do you know what the cost of that will be and how much you’ll have to study?”

Perhaps Russell’s greatest asset is his helpful and flexible staff who will turn their hands to anything. “They’re great, and our growth in this area has been phenomenal.”



Learning centre in school is a hit with pupils

Education is seldom out of the news and we're only too familiar with the problems schools face with discipline. So it's refreshing to come across a school where pupils are not only interested but are enthusiastic and really want to learn.

At Dunfermline High School in Fife, pupils are encouraged to push the boundaries of their knowledge by visiting a learndirect scotland learning centre. And they don't have to go far to find it as the learning centre is right in the middle of the school!

Community Use at Dunfermline High has been, as its name suggests, a centre for use by the community for over 25 years. Through the centre, the public has access to the school's swimming pool and sports facilities as well as a range of evening classes in languages, art and drama.

There are Easter courses, ski-ing trips and outdoor activities. Since early 2005, the centre has had learndirect scotland branded status, which has allowed it to offer a much wider choice of learning and training – not just for the community but for the school itself.

For the last year, Community Use has encouraged pupils at Dunfermline High to come to the centre to get involved in some aspect of learning. Some of this has been based on their interests or activities in school such as training to be a lifeguard for the swimming pool, but Mike Joiner, head of the centre, and his staff hope to address what they see as a gap in the school's curriculum.

"They get taught history or geography or maths," says Mike, "but they don't get taught some of the basic skills which they will need in their working lives, like how to write a business letter, or how to answer telephone enquiries.

"The really bright pupils will find that out for themselves and there's a lot of support for those with social problems or learning difficulties. But there are many young people who are not academic and are aiming to work in offices, call centres or shops.

"They're not going to go to university, but the school doesn't really equip them with the soft skills that employers say are missing in school leavers today – communications skills, team working, customer care. They need a push in the right direction so we're working with fourth, fifth and sixth-year pupils to help them learn these skills."

Pupils embrace online learning

As a branded learning centre, Community Use can offer a wide range of online courses made available by learndirect scotland, as well as a selection of sports and outdoor activities. And pupils are queuing up to take part. With 1800 pupils at the school and 600 to 700 in the top three years alone, there are a lot of potential learners to accommodate. But the school is very supportive, offering the use of up to 40 computers in its library if there is too much pressure on the centre.

Jackie Brand, the learning centre co-ordinator, is on hand to help pupils decide what they want to do. "We ask them to fill in a form with their details, what courses they want to do and what sort of work they hope to do when they leave school," says Jackie. "I can then guide them to the right course and help them with anything they find difficult. I can also see if they are ready to try one of the online tests and get a certificate or if we need to direct them to something like the Big Plus, which is aimed at helping with literacy and numeracy."

Community Use was awarded funding to take its activities further by inviting specific pupils to come to the learning centre. "We're starting with 10 from each of the five houses in the school, who will be identified by the guidance staff as pupils who would really benefit," said Mike. "We'll work out the kind of courses they need and get them started. We'll measure their progress and monitor how the courses are helping them to get a job."

Mike feels it's very important to give the pupils something to aim for and to encourage them. "If they can get an achievement award for a course, they'll feel so much more motivated to continue learning and we want them to feel that there's more to life than school at their age. I'm organising a motivational speaker to talk to the young people taking part in this new project to inspire them. We can help them work out what they want to do, and, perhaps more important, let them find out what they don't want to do. All our courses are flexible, they can go at their own pace and learn when it suits them. We're really helping them with their own personal development."

Working with local companies reaps rewards

Sky is one of Dunfermline's major employers and pupils have visited the company businesses to find out what businesses are looking for when employing school leavers. "We've built up a good relationship with Sky," he says. "Our pupils can see how they deal with customers and what it's like working in a big company. Some of the pupils have ended up getting jobs there.

"We've also talked to other local employers to find out what they want to see in a CV from a school leaver, so that pupils can understand the different needs of the construction industry, banks, or the retail sector. Avenue Scotland, a national recruitment agency based in Dunfermline, has offered to send managers to speak to targeted groups of pupils. The local companies are delighted to work with us – after all, it benefits them in the long run."

Some of the pupils who have worked with Mike and his colleagues come back as coaches to help with younger learners, most on a voluntary basis but some get paid for their work.

Mike and Jackie have set up links with another school in a more deprived area of Dunfermline, as well as a satellite centre in Kincardine, where computers and support will enable local young people and their parents to benefit from the online courses. And it doesn't stop there. Mike now has plans to offer the courses to teachers at Dunfermline High as part of their continuing personal development.

Mike Joiner is passionate about what he does and it shows, not just in his own enthusiasm but in the attitude of the pupils who crowd round him to chat. And Mike has his own ways of finding out if he and Jackie are doing the right thing – with a son and daughter at Dunfermline High, he really has his finger on the pulse.



Employers take on youngsters in local football stadium

To get school-age learners interested in something, you need to use a particularly enticing 'hook' to grab their attention. And what better way to spark the interest of young people than to offer them the chance to visit their local football club?

So many young people are 'turned off' by school and anything to do with it that they have become completely disengaged. But give them the chance to get up close with their football heroes – and perhaps learn something new at the same time – and suddenly you have their attention.

Lynne Hunter, director of Success Training Scotland in Grangemouth has been involved in a successful initiative that has used football as a way to get to some of those disengaged youngsters.

"It all started early in 2004 with the launch of an initiative to get footballers to think beyond their current careers on the pitch to a time when, for whatever reason, they were no longer able to earn a living from the game," explained Lynne. "Maybe they would be injured, or just get older and find it difficult to keep in peak condition. Whatever the reason, a training package to help them learn something else other than football was set up and our local football club, Falkirk, was one of those who took part.

"It was very successful. The guys really took to it – and several went on to study for the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) which is a recognised qualification in IT all over the world and means that they now have skills which could take them in all directions."

In 2005, Falkirk Football Club opened a magnificent new stadium just along the road from the Grangemouth learning centre. The club was determined to make the building accessible to more than just football fans once a week, and so joined forces with Lynne and her staff to establish a learndirect scotland branded learning centre in the stadium.

Much of Lynne's work is involved with helping local employers with training issues and, inevitably, she heard about the problems employers had finding young people with the necessary skills for work. She was also aware of the Scottish Executive's activities with young people who, for whatever reason, were not involved in any kind of education or training. These youngsters are categorised as NEET – not in employment, education or training – and are mostly of secondary school age. The Executive has identified the need for an enterprise culture to be established among young people and is encouraging employers and training organisations to work together to help to prepare youngsters for the world of work.

Lynne set about bringing these different strands together and, along with Falkirk Football Club, took her ideas out to local schools.

Determined to succeed

“We were able to offer a flexible curriculum, funded by the Executive through its Determined to Succeed programme, to try to get young people into various initiatives to stop them falling into the NEET category,” she explained. “We started by bringing youngsters to the football stadium for three hours at a time for six weeks. We set up a Heritage Trail in the stadium, which described the history of Falkirk from the earliest times. learndirect scotland developed a course that focused on the Heritage Trail and helped the youngsters to see what they had learned from it.

“It really took off. The young learners loved it because they got the chance to see inside the stadium, to go onto the pitch and see the changing rooms and feel what it was like to be a footballer, and at the same time, they started learning.”

The next step was to encourage fifth and sixth year pupils into the stadium to put together a newsletter. “They did it all themselves,” Lynne explains, “taking photographs, writing it up on the computer, doing interviews. It taught them the soft skills, like communication, teamwork, speaking to people, literacy and IT, which employers are constantly telling us are missing from so many school leavers.”

The youngsters also learned about first aid by taking part in a simulation exercise where they were ‘anointed’ with all sorts of scars and wounds and taught how to deal with them. “They really enjoyed that and made quite a lot of their ‘wounds’ themselves!” says Lynne.

Food for thought

Another successful initiative was to get the football club’s chef to describe to the youngsters the sort of diet that a professional footballer should be eating to stay in tip-top condition. Then the pupils were invited to sit down to a meal that demonstrated this kind of diet. “Some of them had never eaten food like that before – in fact some of them were heard to say ‘I don’t eat that’. But they did!”

Buoyed up by this success, Lynne and her colleagues looked at other ideas to get over to school leavers the types of things they could expect from prospective employers. “We set up a ‘speed-dating’ exercise, except that instead of boys and girls we had employers and school-leavers. We had about 60 young people there and 10 employers including the local fire brigade, Boots and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

“The young people went round in groups and had about five minutes with each employer and found out about entry requirements, salaries, the skills they would need and how to get more information. Then the whistle would blow and they moved on to the next one. Because they had to get information in a short space of time they really seemed to concentrate on it.”

As a result of this exercise, employers are now coming back with actual vacancies that they want to fill. It’s all very rewarding for Lynne and her team. “So many youngsters are fed up with school,” she said, “and schools find it difficult to reach them. They haven’t the time or the funding or even the flexibility to look at how they could offer more vocational training and qualifications. Some of the pupils come in here thinking they want to do one particular thing and they suddenly realise there’s all sorts of other things they could do with their lives.

“They also like the way they can learn here, it’s interactive, it’s different, and it’s fun.”



Women and young people find common ground at local technology centre

If you are running a learning centre specifically for women, the last thing, surely, you would want to do is become involved with school age learners. But for Lorraine Boyle and her team at the Fife Women's Technology Centre (FWTC), the experience they gained working with women encouraged them to extend their work to help local young people.

"We try to help women to find or recover their self esteem," said Lorraine, "and that's exactly the problem with a lot of the local young people. They don't think they are worth anything and, consequently, don't think they are capable of doing anything with their lives. We've been very successful at encouraging women to do all sorts of amazing things and now we're finding that we can help school age learners too."

Lorraine is manager of FWTC on the outskirts of Dunfermline. With her colleagues, she runs a project during the school summer holidays that gives youngsters a chance to experience working with multimedia.

One of the tutors at the centre, Robert Dillam, whose intriguing career so far has seen him work in engineering, IT and as a professional guitarist in a touring rock band, has been involved with the project from the start. He said: "We wanted to work with young people on some kind of multimedia project and came up with the idea of getting them to write and record a piece of music, take photos and videos of the process and put the whole thing onto a website.

"We have access to a local recording studio called Tower House, a community project in the middle of Dunfermline with rehearsal rooms, a studio and in-house engineers. They already do a lot of work with young people and local bands.

"The Integrated Community Schools Team in the area identified local youngsters who they thought would benefit and we got a group of 17 together, aged between 10 and 15 years old."

The course, called Projekt, ran over three weeks, for three days a week from 10am to 3pm. Some of the young people wrote and played music while others did photography and video or designed the website.

The youngsters tried different activities including writing music, singing, playing an instrument, taking photographs and graphic design.

“At the end of it, we launched the website and invited parents and teachers along to celebrate. Everyone got a certificate and a CD. It was a great success. One boy turned out to be brilliant on the piano and one of the girls who started out being too shy to sing but had a lovely voice and ended up singing along with the piano player to Phil Collins’ ‘Take A Look At Me Now’.”

Robert aims to make the course slightly more streamlined. “We tried to do too much,” he admits, “so we’re going to have a week of pre-production here at the centre, a week at Tower House working with the music and the final week back at the centre doing the editing and the website.

“We also found the age group was too wide. The 10 to 12 year-olds weren’t really interested in the recording studio while the 14 and 15 year-olds loved it.

“But there was a definite feeling of achievement at the end of it. The youngsters realised that they could do something different and do it well. And they learned about working together and communicating.”

IT project helps to open doors

FWTC has helped young people to recognise their potential in other ways. In another project, youngsters from third and fourth years went to the centre for an afternoon once a week to learn IT. “Most of them were disengaged from mainstream learning,” Robert said, “and we provided an alternative learning environment for them. They mixed with more mature people, the women at the centre, and saw how keen they were on learning. Most of them didn’t get computing at school and we taught them the software side of IT as well as maintenance, soldering and electronics.”

One of the groups has been successful using Windows and accessing the internet and is now working towards assessments and getting qualifications. The other group had various behavioural problems and Robert and his colleagues tried several activities such as music creation and handling video cameras to try to capture their interest.

“They were all boys,” says Robert, “and were all trying to outdo each other. It’s much better to have a mix of boys and girls. Also the school kept changing their minds about who should be at the course and we couldn’t build up relationships. But the schools report that when the young people come to us truancy levels are greatly reduced.”

There have been other breakthroughs for Lorraine, Robert and their colleagues. One young lad who did not go to school at all during first and second year is now going regularly to the centre to work towards achieving the European Computer Driving Licence. He’s at the centre one day a week, often until 9pm and is now talking about going to college. Another 15-year-old, who has Asperger Syndrome, a particular form of autism, goes along on an ad-hoc basis.

“His school had virtually given up on him,” said Lorraine, “but we discovered that he is brilliant at computer games. He feels at home with the computer and doesn’t mind sitting in with the women’s groups. He is now writing games and computer code and his school teachers are amazed at the progress he has made.

“We’ve learned so much from working with women here. Many of them hated school and drifted into drugs and crime. We felt it was worth trying to engage with young people before they go astray. We’ve studied how people learn – how everyone is different and how many of the women have come to realise that they aren’t thick, they just haven’t had the right opportunities. It’s the same with the young people – we can encourage them and help them to realise that they too have potential and they can really do things. They just need a bit of help.”



Urban Fox brings hope to Glasgow's East End

Helenslea Hall sounds impressive but it's not a stately home. Far from it. It is situated in Glasgow's East End, just around the corner from Parkhead, home of Celtic Football Club. Football is one of the dominating features of the area; the others are deprivation, unemployment, gang fighting and hopelessness, a sadly typical inner-city location.

But the building at Helenslea Hall, which houses a learnirect scotland branded learning centre, represents a big ray of hope. Here, a small but highly dedicated team works tirelessly to reach out to the surrounding community and give people encouragement, help them to find their self-esteem.

The centre is run by Michael McCourt who was born and brought up in the East End and, until last year, lived in the Lilybank housing scheme near Helenslea Hall. Michael understands the kind of life youngsters tend to lead in this area and, having himself fallen foul of the law in the past, he's very keen to show the local youngsters that there is another way they can look at life.

Six years ago, Michael and Helenslea Hall management committee launched the Urban Fox Programme, which organises activities and support programmes for youngsters of school age in the area. When it first started, Michael realised that the way for the programme to attract attention was to use the most popular pastime and source of interest in the area – football. He set up football coaching for youngsters with encouraging results and, having got the young people interested, he was then able to assess what other needs the youngsters and the rest of the community might have.

After the success of the football programme, Michael and his colleagues organised other sports activities that have multiplied over the last six years, providing youngsters with outdoor pursuits such as hill-walking, abseiling, canoeing and kayaking, sailing and windsurfing. "Our aim is to provide not just the thrill and experience of the outdoors but also to encourage team building, leadership, communications and trust", said Michael.

"The courses are not just for our youngsters here but for young people from other neighbourhoods. One of the major problems is gang fighting and the territorial issues it brings. By taking groups from 'rival' areas away together this territorial aspect can be challenged and youngsters can see that their neighbours are just like themselves."

Community initiatives help combat gang fighting

Another successful initiative is the Friday night drop in, when secondary school pupils go along to Helenslea Hall on a Friday night to meet friends and join in activities. The youngsters organise their own programmes, inviting people in to talk about health issues such as drug and alcohol problems and running discos to raise money for trips to the cinema or the bowling alley or for day trips. With Friday nights going well at Helenslea, Michael took the idea to other neighbourhoods and now there are another five drop-in centres in the surrounding areas, running similar events. "This has also helped with overcoming the territorial nature of life here in the East End," he says.

Most youngsters are interested in new technology such as IT and mobile phones but many have no access to computers. Since the summer of 2005, Helenslea has developed an initiative called Cyberfox that is IT-based.

Michael is in the process of applying for funding for this project to help with the purchase of two special IT chairs and the fitting out of a mobile centre to transport equipment to the various venues. This is a van that has been colourfully resprayed with the Urban Fox logo and attractive slogans and has blue neon lights underneath to attract attention.

The chairs are state-of-the-art structures designed specifically for use with online equipment. They were made by a German company for a programme that fell through and Michael was lucky enough to get two of them for his project. Each one consists of an airline-style chair with an integral desk supporting a flat screen and keyboard. A sound system is built in so that the user has everything easily to hand. "What we aim to do," said Michael, "is let the youngsters play games online but they have to use the keyboard, rather than a joy-stick, as this helps to develop keyboard skills. We run the event for about three hours and an hour of that will have an educational element – directing the youngsters to websites and even to online courses that could help them to develop their skills."

The chairs are also useful for adult learners who want to access online courses available at the centre. Helenslea Hall, which has recently undergone substantial refurbishment, has a quiet area for those who want to study and computers for online learning. The centre is well used by adult learners, church groups and football groups. Many young people now come in to access online learning to gain certificates or help improve their interview skills, all with the eventual aim of helping them improve their chances of employment.

The original football courses, started by Michael, have paid many dividends in giving youngsters something to do and a chance to develop their skills, learning teamwork and communication.

John McGowan, development officer at Helenslea, was on one of the early football skills programmes and has now gone back to the centre to manage and develop Urban Fox's sports, football and events.

The other development officer, Debbie McGowan is involved with the Healthy Young Fox Cubs, to help combat obesity among 5 to 12 year-olds and to promote sport and fitness in local primary schools.

With a dedicated website and plenty of give-aways like pens and keyrings, the news about Urban Fox and now Cyberfox is spreading. And along with it is spreading the hope of change and regeneration.



Centres in Wick equip pupils for care work

Every child should have an equal chance of getting a good education. In many schools, classes are too big and teachers often too busy with discipline issues to give much individual attention. Poor achievers at school may be left to their own devices to muddle through as best they can. As a result, the opportunities they have for making something out of their lives can be few. Luckily, in many areas things are being done to address this situation. At the North Highland College learning centres in Wick and Alness, staff are doing their bit to improve the lot of some of these youngsters.

In Wick, Moira Gunn, head of the community and health section of the North Highland College, runs a scheme to help under-achievers through the learndirect scotland branded learning centre. "We wanted to involve school-age learners in some way at the centre and we found a group of girls at Wick High School who were interested in what we were proposing," she said. Quite a few of the pupils were already involved in other courses running at the centre, but some of the girls wanted to be nurses or work in childcare. The centre decided to introduce one of the new Skills for Work courses that cover a range of subjects that are not taught at school. These courses, at Intermediate 1 and 2 levels, are designed to enable students to gain skills suitable for employment in their chosen area.

For the past two years, pupils have been going to the centres at Wick or Alness one day a week. "Last year, four schools in Alness took part. They mixed very well and the results have been very good. In fact two of the girls on the course left school at Christmas, but kept going back to the centre to continue learning."

The youngsters study subjects such as care values, how to recognise the needs of others, human development and behaviour – all of which will help them if they work in care or childcare in the future. As part of their studying, the girls get involved in e-learning and online materials have been developed to help them. "They really enjoy this," said Moira. "It's such a different experience for them from the way they are taught at school. It's very interactive, so they can have some fun while they are learning." The youngsters can take the SQA external exam at the end of the course and this can be a stepping-stone to the full-time college courses such as Access to Health, Child and Social Care. It may even lead eventually to the degree course in Child and Youth Studies.

As it is entirely online, the BA in Child and Youth Studies provides an excellent opportunity for people in remote areas to study at degree level. Students may study full-time over three years or part-time for six years and many attend their nearest learning centres to use the computers and other facilities. The North Highland College currently supports about 45 students from all over the Highlands. It's a three-year online degree course, with projects, group discussions, tasks and assessments. Every student has an adviser who provides support either online or face-to-face.

New start for young mum

There has been another benefit of interaction between school-age learners and the centre at Wick that no one had foreseen. Last year, two of the young adult learners who use the centre became interested in doing the same course as the youngsters. “We have two young mums, both of whom have four-year-old boys,” explained Moira. “One is 24 but the other, now 18, first became pregnant when she was 14. They have had such a good influence on the group. Because of their own experiences they both now realise just how important qualifications are if they want to improve their own lives and those of their children. They’ve been encouraging the others to take learning seriously.”

One of the young mums is doing the European Computer Driving Licence. Both of them are moving on to study full-time at The North Highland College. One has been accepted for a place on the national certificate in Early Education and Childcare course, while the other has been accepted onto the Access to Health, Child and Social Care course.

Both have appreciated the financial support they received from the college to help with their childcare while they were studying at the centre. Learning has already helped them tremendously. “I’ve watched the 18-year-old grow up in the year she’s been here,” said Moira. “She wants to be a nurse and she’s really taken responsibility for her life. As part of our Access to Health, Child and Social Care course, we provide a group of subjects that are accepted by Stirling University for entry to nursing. Through this scheme, the college has an annual allocation of places for nurse training at Raigmore Hospital in Inverness. If she passes her course she has a good chance of getting in to nursing.”

Moira is so encouraged by the success of the project that this autumn sees the start of another Skills for Work Course, this time in Early Education and Childcare. “We want to give these youngsters the opportunity to improve their level of education, but we also want to give them an idea of what studying at college will be like and to give them a flavour of what would be involved in a career in Care or Childcare.

“The staff here all feel such a great sense of achievement when some of these youngsters, who have not succeeded at school, do well as a result of the learning opportunities we can offer them at the centres.”



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