



**Letters from a Social Entrepreneur
Lessons of Experience
Chapter 3: Collyhurst Community Education Centre**

Dear Reader

Please find the attached for your entertainment....It's always cost effective to learn from other people's mistakes.

Mick Sheldon (13 November 2010)

Mick's Story: "Who is running this centre anyway...?"

In 1984 I was invited for an interview to become the District Co-ordinator in Community Education Centre, based in Collyhurst. I had travelled from leafy West Sussex to spend the night in the Polish Club on Cheetham Hill Road. The interview lasted two days.

Collyhurst is one and a half miles North East of Manchester City Centre. The River Irk passes through the area, with prominent buildings including a local police station, Billy Green's pub (featured on the TV show "Toughest Pubs in the UK" and in the video for The Beautiful South's single "Manchester") two Roman Catholic Churches (St Patrick's and St Malachy's). Although the area is considered to have high levels of "anti-social behaviour" and deprivation, it's home to sport stars and entertainers, including...

- Jim Allen, British playwright (The Spongers)
- Pat Barrett, former British/European light welterweight boxer
- Stan Bowles, former England and QPR footballer
- Jackie Brown, former world champion flyweight boxer
- Les Dawson, British comedian
- Harry Fleming, former boxing manager to Johnny King, Jackie Brown, Jock McAvoy
- Michael Gomez, Irish born super featherweight boxer
- Bruce Jones, British actor
- Brian Kidd, former England and Manchester United footballer
- Johnny King, former British and Empire bantamweight champion[citation needed]
- Carlo Sartori, former Manchester United footballer
- Jack Smethurst, British actor
- Nobby Stiles, former Manchester United and World Cup winning footballer

Boxers, footballers, comedians – sometimes all three in one personality!



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Understanding Community (or when the memory of an elephant is not enough)

The interview was to take place at the Collyhurst Community Education Centre, Teighmouth Avenue, Collyhurst. That morning, on my journey, when I tried pronouncing Teighmouth, not only did local people grin at me, but taxi drivers (who would only take you there in the day time anyway) were unable to locate the address. I was soon to learn the real problem was the name “Collyhurst Community Education Centre” – everyone else called it “St. James”. Nevertheless, I got the job... Many years later I asked why only people from the far side of the Collyhurst Road attended the Centre. I learned that about a hundred and fifty years ago the Catholic and non Catholic communities were divided by the Rochdale Road. And only Catholics would use St. James’. Communities have long memories.

The Missing Statue: Inner City “self-help”

Before I arrived at Collyhurst Community Education Centre a statue had been erected in front of the building. The enormous lead statue of a mother and child was the result of a “Community Arts Workshop”. Whilst I was in no way qualified to pass judgement, it was clear was that the statue would never rival the work of sculptors, such as Anthony Gormley, either aesthetic quality or financial value. I was astonished to learn that the lead artefact had “gone missing”. A crane must have gone missing at the same time in order to remove and transport the statue. I was even more astonished to learn it had been recovered from a local park, with only slight damage. An example of imagination, ingenuity and self help within the inner city!

Democracy in Action (Pt 1)

Democracy was found in many guises at Collyhurst Community Education Centre. The balance of power between user groups running the centre was a delicate one. Initial meetings were not well attended, so it was decided to make sandwiches available to tempt people into the building. Local residents started to attend, but only if sandwiches were available. Having food BEFORE the meeting was a mistake we quickly rectified! Having food after the meeting improved attendance, but not always the level of contribution. Many older residents had gained experience and training through involvement with Tenants groups, Trades Unions and Community Associations, and could conduct themselves appropriately. Younger residents had less skill to obtain or wield power, but it didn’t take them long to learn.

A Baptism of Fire

At the time Manchester City Council (MCC) was glowing with success, gaining its first European Social Fund monies. This funding regime has a number of peculiarities, the most significant is the need for the applicant to find “match funding”, their contribution of “clean” money from other sources. No one at MCC had realised the need for matched funding.

ESF funds helped fund the expansion of Collyhurst Community Education Centre and its programmes. MCC’s first ESF audit coincided with the start of my new job in Collyhurst, which created an awkward problem. Our project was extremely well managed, targets were being met, but the European auditors wanted to know, where was the matched funding? After a great deal of head scratching, MCC reduced their budget in order to “find” the match funding. Only one problem - MCC had a no redundancy policy and staff costs constituted 60% of their overall budget. There was only one way to significantly reduce costs. MCC followed the Alliance approach. Local community organisations would have more power, but over less money. Collyhurst was not happy, and are not a community to be trifled with...



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At a public meeting with MCC and North Manchester community organisations, proposed cuts were listed and read out to a noisy crowd. The meeting was an example of local involvement at its most boisterous! Youth Clubs to be shut down and staff reductions were met with an uproar. Amidst the riot, a pattern emerged. Youth Clubs argued angrily **AGAINST REDUCING** staff levels and equally loudly **FOR REDUCING** staff levels at other Youth Clubs. Everybody followed this pattern. The final outcome was chaos, only to be resolved by the application of a community “executive decision” and some brilliant administrative sleight of hands of local activists.

Democracy in Action (Pt 2): A Significant Victory

The youth club at Collyhurst Community Education Centre shared space with a nursery school, over 50s club, basic education classes and drop-in sessions for unemployed people. Young people preferred the flat roof, which for some reason they confused with a trampoline. It reached a stage where we could no longer justify the physical and psychological pressure created by the effort to protect young people from themselves and one another.

Staff mounted a campaign with young people to construct or purchase a purpose built youth club. At first, this seemed ambitious. MCC was “reorganising” all local funding. Undaunted, we enlisted the help of the redoubtable Mildred. A longstanding centre user, then in her sixties, Mildred organised trips for the over 65’s. She “owed us one”. On one of the trips, attended by a group of lively elderly women, the group had “molested” their young male coach driver. Mildred insisted they’d only been trying to get him to dance, but I pointed out, a driver should concentrate on one activity, driving. Dancing nor the slightly more risqué acts he was being encouraged to commit were not part of the deal! Whatever the truth, major negotiating to mend bridges between the over 50’s and the bus company was needed. This gave us ammunition to approach Mildred on behalf of the youth club. To my surprise, I did not have to use this ammunition. Mildred was quite clear - when she was young she had been a live wire. She mobilised the over 50s to seek the support of senior politicians. Her support helped us to gain the first purpose built youth club for many years.

Democracy in Action (Pt 3)

The evolution of the Collyhurst Community Education Centre users group into a “Centre Committee” did not prevent MCC from continuing to seek further community involvement in their district level decision making process. Inside MCC an argument raged about who should run community education. On one side, the huge and imposing North Manchester Community College, with headquarters at the Abraham Moss Centre and a ten million pound budget. On the other side, an unassuming (by comparison) adult education centre, also based at the Abraham Moss Centre, but occupying just one suite of rooms.

Nothing at the theatre quite equalled the dramatic tension of the public meeting called to address this issue. Local residents were unmoved by the whole affair. The professionals, politicians and activists rose to the bait and the debate. I found myself wishing the passion might be deflected into the budget, but that was not an option, and not untypical of such debates. Whilst I can clearly remember the energy and passion expressed, I cannot remember the outcome. Politicians finally announced the North Manchester Community College to be the winner. A few years later, North Manchester College would be “merged” with South Manchester Community College.



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The White Rabbit or Elephant in the Room?

When times are hard, clever politicians look for imaginative ways to deliver more for less. Failing that, they find ways to deliver less for less. Whilst at Collyhurst, I heard politicians walking around active school buildings, exclaiming, “Isn’t it a shame to have all these wonderful facilities, as yet unused by local adults...” They wanted to squeeze the maximum out of existing building and resources, rather than fund additional purpose built spaces for adult education.

Considerable planning had created the Collyhurst Community Education Centre, a partnership between a nursery school and the MCC’s Adult Education Department. Partnership does not quite capture the arrangement. Combining a Nursery School with a community education centre was difficult. For example, work with children and adults require radically different health and safety measures. Nursery provision requires control, whilst Adult Education requires open access. The nursery curriculum was planned to the last detail. Youth work needed responsiveness to the changeable moods of very lively young people. To relieve tension, we held frequent meetings with me (Head of Collyhurst Community Education Centre) and the Head Teacher of the Nursery School, as facilitated by LEA Advisers for Adult Education. Both LEA advisors were exhausted and permanently anticipated trouble, which arrived in various forms. The Head of the Nursery school brought her pet rabbit to an emergency Strategy meeting. To add salt into the wound, none of these sessions resolved the incompatibility of the Nursery School and a community education centre.

Bulbs: Innovation in Community Education

Collyhurst Community Education Centre ran activities for women, mothers, young people, children, girls and pensioners, but we didn’t have anything for men. To stop people saying the centre discriminated against men, we tried a “men’s drop-in” session. No men dropped in. We then offered childcare courses for men. No men were interested, or were too busy looking after their own children to attend a course on how to look after others. We even started activities for unemployed men, but again no one turned up. They were either happily or unhappily unemployed, or out looking for work.

One morning the phone rang, and our Office Manager Joan, a robust and experienced woman who had grown up in Miles Platting (just “next door” to Collyhurst) put the call through to me. It was an officer from MCC, would we like some bulbs. I imagined an endless energy supply for all our rooms in the building. “No. Plants. Tulip bulbs” the officer explained. “Tulip bulbs?!” I repeated out loud in confusion. I was just about to explain how irrelevant this was our work when Joan waved frantically at me, “Take them, take them!” she cried. The MCC officer said would five hundred bulbs be useful. Joan mouthed, “is that all they can spare?” “Well we’ve got 5000 of the bloody things...take the lot!” Over the next four days the word was spread and men started to stream into the centre, then appeared as a flood. This wasn’t the first or last time that I’d be amazed by the Collyhurst style of “community outreach”.

Thoughts on Induction

When I think back to my arrival in Collyhurst, I now know I was completely unprepared. But I did not know that at the time.



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I am not sure though what might have prepared me. I think, on reflection, there is some value in mixing theory and practice. There is something about being placed in a situation and reflecting on it.

There is something else about placing practical issues in a policy context.

Maybe an added appreciation of what has happened in the past?

And how it affected us.

And maybe not throwing the baby out with the bath-water-maybe to use a local language understanding how the future Big Society grows out of our current little society.

I am reminded of a little story:

Maybe this is nonsense. And even nonsense reminds me of a story:

“A devout man came to the Baal Shem Tov with a complaint, ” I’ve made an enormous effort to serve the Lord sincerely and honestly but I haven’t noticed any change or improvement. I am still the same ordinary, ignorant person as before.” The Baal Shem Tov answered ”You’ve realised you are ordinary and ignorant, and that in itself is a great accomplishment.”

Yiddishe Kop p.22-23