

# RECOGNISING AND REDUCING HEALTH INEQUALITIES

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION IN A COMMUNITY YOUTH GROUP

### ABOUT US

We are a community-based group providing support and information to young people in care. We had been set up by a few volunteers who wanted to do something to support young people in an interface area in Belfast.

### COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & HEALTH INEQUALITIES

We got involved in the Elevate programme after hearing about it from one of our funders. Over the past couple of years, additional funding meant we had employed two staff members and increased the services we offered. Taking part in the Elevate training helped us **learn new skills and build our confidence**. Talking about community development values helped us to understand more about **power** and challenged us to think about what we needed to change.

Talking and listening to other people in the group helped us understand what health inequalities looked like in and for our community. We shared experiences about:

- An increase in suicide rates in our community of young people
- High numbers of young people not in education or work
- Influences from others - 'gatekeepers' who held power and control
- Lack of confidence, purpose and choice for many young people

The training helped us **understand the root causes that sit behind inequality**. We listened to others sharing their stories and quickly realised the value of **lived experiences** and **relevance** in how we approached our work.

Through the Elevate workshop we were given the opportunity to learn from other community groups and to share ideas and challenges with professionals working in healthcare and education. **We all agreed that if we want to tackle health inequalities, we need to focus on the social issues facing individuals and communities as well as the medical ones.**



Listening to the unheard



Use of tacit knowledge



Move from individual to the collective



Opportunity to understand root causes

## REDUCING THE INEQUALITIES

As we developed new skills, knowledge and confidence through the training, we knew that we needed to **focus our energies where the greatest needed existed**. This was challenging for us as our funding is all about reporting on the numbers of young people - how many activities, how many volunteers and what difference have we made but without the **focus on reducing the inequalities**.

As we worked on an action plan in day two of the Elevate training, we started to think about:

- the **connections** we had and others we needed to make
- how to involve and be led by the young people's experiences
- how we encourage the wider community to get involved
- how we would work with the **wider determinants of health** not just around access to services.

There were some **uncomfortable and challenging conversations** during these processes. Some people felt defensive, scared and unwilling and gave plenty of examples of why a new approach would not work. More people though felt **excited, empowered, motivated** and knew that positive change would mean everyone working together. Since then, we have facilitated other events led by the young people. We have worked together on plans and funding applications. We have increased our volunteer numbers. We have enabled more young people to take control and have a say in what works or doesn't work for them. We have created partnerships that bring everyone together in a way where **everyone feels valued**. It's hard work, needs a lot of energy but it's the only way to **address the root causes and tackle inequality**.

## SHARING THE LEARNING

When we had completed the training, we felt excited and daunted about the opportunities and challenges that lay ahead but we were reassured that others felt the same. One quote that stuck out for us was '**Why treat people then send them back to the conditions that made them sick?**' (Sir Michael Marmot). We knew from young people who had been through the health and social care system in a range of referral pathways that other options had to be available.

## NEXT STEPS

We asked young people if we could share their stories with the wider community

**We brought together interested individuals and groups to our youth centre - we listened, shared and came up with ideas that everyone felt part of**

We talked to our funders about a more flexible approach to using and reporting on funds

**We invited representatives from health, education, housing and leisure services to meet with the young people**

**ALONGSIDERS** Proscriptions of an Alongsider

1. Don't pretend to know, ask.
2. Don't assume to know, ask.
3. Don't offer answers, ask
4. Then...Don't talk, listen.

@CormacRussell

The nine catalyst questions  
Based on the work of The Resilience Research Centre

1. "What would I need to know to grow up well here?"
2. "How do you describe the people who grow up well here despite the many problems they face?"
3. "What does it mean to you, to your family and to your community, when bad things happen?:"
4. "What kind of things are most challenging for you growing up here?"
5. "What do you do when you face difficulties in your life?"
6. "What does being healthy mean to you and others in your family and community?"
7. "What do you do, and others you know do, to keep healthy, mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually?"
8. "Can you share with me a story about another child who grew up well in this community despite facing many challenges?"
9. Can you share a story about how you have managed to overcome challenges you face personally, in your family, or outside your home in your community?"