

Queensberry Initiative Final Report – Project Number DG65

Background to the project:

The Queensberry Initiative Strategic Group was formed in September 2008 by Wallace Hall Academy's Parent Council to address concerns about getting children and young people out of the classroom to build their connection to their community and to economic life in Dumfries and Galloway, while improving their health and well-being. A sub-group was formed comprised of two local business people - one a successful entrepreneur, the other a tenant farmer, a local councilor and former parent and the newly appointed manager of the Queensberry Estate, the large country estate with its offices near to Wallace Hall. A member of this group was also a member of the Thornhill and District Rotary Club and the Rotary became key supporters for the Initiative. The strategic group received an open door from the Queensberry Estate to use its premises and policies to further its aims. The project was also concerned about the need to develop skills for work and an enterprising, entrepreneurial approach in children and young people. The leakage of our young people from the land and the Authority when they exit school, the lack of linkage between schools and local employers and the skills gap that employers perceive when young people try to enter the local force were also drivers for this project. Additionally, like all rural areas, Mid-Nithsdale faces the challenge of trying to get children and young people out of the classroom



to engage in a variety of outdoor activities to improve their physical, mental and emotional health and development.

This group, which formed itself into the Queensberry Initiative Strategic Group with the head teacher of Wallace Hall Academy as its chair, then sought initial seed funding support from Dumfries and Galloway Council's Determined to Succeed funding. On the basis of this funding, the Group appointed a Development Officer to take the project's aims forward. Following this appointment, funding applications were made to Dumfries and Galloway LEADER programme and the Fairer Scotland Fund, which were successful. Meanwhile, a variety of unsuccessful funding bids were made to both local and national funding streams. The key costs identified by the project were part-time staffing costs and transport costs. LEADER agreed to fund 50% of certain costs, including crucially staffing costs, a total of £29, 035.81. The Fairer Scotland Fund provided match funding for the LEADER award, totaling



£14,535.81. Queensberry Estate's In Kind contribution to the funding package was valued at £14,500. Without this funding support the project would have been unable to proceed.

The project experience:

The project took place between September 2009 and September 2011. The activities of the project were focused on getting the young people in Mid-Nithsdale out of the classroom and allowing them to make use of the 'outdoor classroom' to help to make the pupils more aware of rural opportunities. Vocational courses, including three Rural Skills courses and Construction Skills, were supported both outside and in the classroom. Class room teachers and subject specialists were supported to plan outdoor activities, linking these to their 'in school' educational plans. Links were made with the community and the cluster's work-related learning programme was re-shaped,

both expanding it and matching it more to the pupil's learning needs and those of the world of work. A business mentor scheme was developed involving community volunteers. Groups of pupils from both primary schools and Wallace Hall Academy were identified as benefiting from an outdoor activities based support scheme and they were worked with regularly both by project staff and by supervised outside providers. During the time of the project, pupils were presented with a variety of presentation opportunities and links between the cluster schools, with parents and with the community were expanded and strengthened.

QI staff and the children and young people with whom we worked took every opportunity to talk with others about what we were piloting. Meetings with other school clusters in Dumfries and Galloway were held and the project also presented at local and national conferences. We entered various competitions, again as a way of letting others know about our pilot and what we were learning.

The benefits of the project were focused on the pupils of the seven schools of Mid-Nithsdale. Their parents and the staff of these schools were also beneficiaries of the innovations we were piloting. As the purposes of the project were to try to model and pilot some new ways of working, we also believe that other schools in Dumfries and Galloway and further afield have also benefited from our work.



Our budget was generally in line with our expenditure. Our total grant from LEADER was £28,558.66. This was slightly lower than expected due to our

staffing expenses being slightly less than anticipated. Our total spend during the two years of the project was £57,117.32.

We have learnt a lot of lessons in the course of the two years. We discovered that the work we planned and directed ourselves was easier to manage than when we expected others to seek our support for their own plans. Our role was clearly more strategic than we had anticipated. In the end this was productive for our staff who have gained much expertise in planning activities and matching them to educational outcomes. We have also learnt that strict time management is crucial as the demands on our time increased exponentially.



The project is continuing into its second phase, expanding its outreach to other schools and educationalists. All targets and outcomes from the project have been reached.

The key LEADER issue which we were addressing in our project was: Link communities and land together.

Throughout the project we focused on integrating the learning experiences of the children and young people with their communities. This was chiefly moved forward by involving members of the community working with these children and young people on a voluntary basis either as mentors or work experience providers or by giving them access to their farms, other work places and businesses. As a result our project became a true community partnership with now over 80 local businesses and training organizations working with these children and young people in a variety of ways. A recent

comment from a member of the Thornhill Community Council about the impact of the Initiative (when discussing the arrangement made that 'Rural Skills classes will undertake winter resilience path maintenance for Thornhill): 'it's great to see young people getting involved in their community.'

The link between the children and young people and their communities is only part of the aim, however. We have also worked very hard to get those children and young people out into their landscapes, either pursuing vocational type courses, extending their self-esteem and confidence in the vast 'outdoor classroom' of the Queensberry Estate or undertaking traditional class room activities outside. We have increased the rural skills type courses on offer to three and have also introduced other courses mainly based outside such as Managing Environmental Resources. The result, we are clear, has been an increased connection for these children and young people with their local landscape and with Scotland as a country they should be proud of. A small measure of the impact of this has been the sharp decrease in vandalism and litter on the Queensberry Estate public areas. As our young people work there, on some occasions maintaining areas of the Estate, they feel a sense of ownership for this space which helps them to feel the land is also part of their life.

Overall, we look back with pride on the steps we have taken during this project and are very grateful to LEADER for its support.