

toolkit

en-vision action-research
programme:

embedding a youth friendly
culture in galleries

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en-vision this...

Christopher Naylor Director, engage

Not a foreword...

How to write a foreword to a toolkit ! a toolkit intended to practically help people like you in your work with young people – and so a foreword which may be read out of sequence, read only for a sentence or two, or even, most likely not read at all...

So what needs to be said?

en-vision, as set out in the following pages, was – and is – an important **engage** programme with real impact

en-vision – with important help from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Carnegie UK Trust, and funding from Arts Council England in East and West Midlands and the North West – has made new projects for young people at risk happen, and in some cases changed lives. For instance, young people who had never been near a gallery before are now working as Creative Consultants for Manchester Art Gallery, and raising funds as part of a young people-led steering group at Cornerhouse. en-vision has also changed organisations – with new posts resulting from en-vision projects. And en-vision has helped venues and staff develop their skills for working with young people, as one gallery educator said

'we have overcome the 'fear' that often accompanies projects with young people' (source: Warwick University Evaluation)

and we know that en-vision has changed young people's attitudes to art

as one young person, who had thought *'museums were just photos, paintings'*, enthused:

'Exposure to different cultures, ideas, art. Opportunities to express, be creative. Exposure to different people, lifestyles. A living encyclopaedia, giving you knowledge on anything. Not theoretical; an interactive life.' (source: Warwick University Evaluation)

but there's still enormous potential to do more

as **engage** – as the lead membership body promoting access and education with galleries, museums, arts centres nationally and internationally, through programmes like en-vision – knows, the majority of our UK colleagues are still not working with young people as much or as well as they want to: there is enormous potential to do more

as en-vision reminds us, work with young people can be incredibly exciting and rewarding

as you probably know if you're reading this, the sense of achievement which comes – particularly in work with young people at risk, sometimes the least open, the least willing to get involved – is immense. Many other audiences, school pupils or lifelong learners,

can be *expected* to take an interest in some way, but young people really don't need it – so to convince them, to excite them about art is a very special achievement

but it can be – you could say it *has* to be – challenging and risky

young people don't want it too easy either – museums and galleries for them are too static, too dull, too 'not for us' – and to engage young people effectively means going into the unknown, letting them help shape the project, sharing or even losing control, and a key challenge in projects for young people is often to make structures that let them take charge, and make or negotiate something for themselves. Similarly a key challenge for organisations in committing to young people, and turning projects into programmes, is to create organisational structures which can support – and indeed celebrate – creativity, experiment, unpredictability, even what might seem 'failure', in young people's provision.

and there's still remarkably little help and support: we hope this toolkit helps

because work with young people is seen as 'difficult' and 'uneconomic' it is a low priority for many organisations – but because it is a low priority, there is still very little practical training, advice, support for those who want to do more: we hope this toolkit will address this.

Creating a new action-research programme like en-vision is in itself demanding and risky, and I want to thank all the partners galleries, gallery educators, artists and other agencies who joined in and developed exciting new projects with us – addition of course to our key staff, the en-vision Co-ordinator Amber Walls, and Warwick

University, our evaluators.

The next phase of en-vision focuses on training and advice, helping more venues nationally to work with young people by developing facilities and provision with a 'youth-friendly' face, and by reviewing their organisational cultures to commit effectively to working with young people.

introduction to en-vision

Amber Walls en-vision Development Coordinator

'One big exciting roller coaster where you don't know where the next turn is coming – up and down' (young participant)

en-vision described itself – correctly – as an ambitious programme.

The action-research projects brought together 8 galleries, including 17 active partners working in arts, youth and alternative education

...who in turn employed 31 artists, designers, youth and support workers

...who collectively collaborated with 150 'hard to reach' young people aged 14-21 outside of formal mainstream education recruited from youth clubs, volunteer agencies, social and health services, sheltered accommodation, local college, pupil referral unit, school, neighbourhood drop in centres

...who collectively worked towards en-vision's overall aims and objectives and research questions, and also identified their own localised goals

...who aimed to develop constructive new partnerships based on action-research principles of user participation, democratic values, experimentation, shared decision-making and reflection

...who aimed to experiment with new approaches, take risks and identify models of good practice

...who aimed not only to develop new skills and knowledge in engaging with young



people, but who were also seeking to find sustainable ways of involving young people in organisational review, consultation, and decision-making to embed a youth-friendly ethos at the heart of the institution.

This last factor was the distinctive feature of en-vision – that it set out not just to involve young people in creative opportunities, but aimed to support young people to influence and shape cultural provision, creating genuine benefits and relevance to young people's lives.

What we did

en-vision in a nutshell incorporated;

- Action-research projects in 8 venues in 3 regions (West and East Midlands and North West) carried out by arts and youth partners and young people
- Overall evaluation carried out by Warwick University
- Training events within the projects
- Training and seminars for the

action-research partners as a collective

- Training and seminars for other arts and youth professionals in the 3 regions and nationally
- Collation of good practice resources on the website
- Advisory, networking and advocacy activities encouraging colleagues, policy makers and funders to recognise and invest in galleries' work with young people.

This all took place over a 2 year period, preceded by a year consulting, planning and fundraising.

Why we did it

en-vision came about as a result of significant research reports highlighting young people's lack of involvement in cultural activity, the lack of meaningful opportunities for young people in galleries, the value of activities in personal, social and educational terms to young people where they did exist (in particular to young people experiencing or at risk of exclusion because of lack of access to education, training or employment), and the lack of skills, expertise and understanding of young people within the sector.

What happened – some challenges and successes

Recruitment of 'hard to reach' young people was only achieved initially by galleries who had a good relationship with a youth partner or had some existing experience / contacts, though galleries who struggled have now been able to recruit and retain the target group.

Mixed groups worked well, with older or more confident and articulate young people providing effective peer support for others. This has been particularly valuable at helping individuals to participate in decision-making, and in one instance to facilitate a

workshop for arts and youth professionals at a regional seminar.

A flexible and responsive approach was paramount – many partners were forced to modify original plans to focus on motivation and relationship building;

'Though this was a long project and they explored a lot, in terms of creative practice it wasn't about critical awareness. It was more about developing the willingness to take part, to be involved'

Recruitment of individual young people rather than a pre-existing group resulted in a more committed and sustainable group.

Young people identified the benefits of being involved as confidence; new friends; new skills; being in control; opportunity to work with professional artists and in gallery and cultural industries settings; work experience and new opportunities:

'Phenomenal. So many doors opened. Never had such a great and free opportunity.'
(young participant)

The experience was potentially life-changing for some individuals, although the programme was too short to assess long term impact;

'At the ...opening the mother (of one participant) told me that there had been such a significant change in him since he started the project that she could not believe what a massive impact the whole involvement had had on his attitude and behaviour towards everything'. (youth partner)

Young people took on the challenge of a range of roles, and some venues were able to identify how to sustain young people's involvement, e.g. as peer mentors, as volunteers and assistants, as vocational trainees, as employees, as participants and as ongoing consultant and steering group members.

A website for young people will facilitate ongoing dialogue in a more rural location where geography and the lack of dedicated education staff present challenges.

The particular contribution of galleries – the value of publicly showcasing young people's work in public spaces was re-affirmed:

'When I first saw this young man he wore a hooded jacket, with hood up and a peaked cap with peak pulled down over his eyes. When he was showing people around his exhibition he wore no jacket or hat, just a proud expression on his face' (youth partner).

The balance between process and product worked well where the product was determined by the young people rather than being pre-planned.

Young people enjoyed '...being in control. Calling the shots' (young participant)

Supporting active involvement in decision-making depended in all cases on longer time frames than anticipated by all partners.

Partners developed a range of approaches to facilitate young people's role in shaping cultural provision; ranging from participation in consultation to leadership roles where they are steering project activities and shaping cultural provision for peers.

Taking risks paid off – it demonstrated a commitment to and trust in the young people which was reciprocated:

'She was absolutely fantastic. She said they'd show an empty gallery for the period booked for them. If they wanted they could write about why they were not exhibiting. That paved the way for them to move on. The risk of failure had been taken away. It gave them more confidence. By the end they were desperate to get everything up and get it shown.' (artist)

Partnerships were challenging and rewarding. Some projects have found their way through some real challenges, due mostly to sheer determination and to fantastic support achieved through the partnerships. In the words of one of the project partners at times it was 'like knitting fog'.

Youth partners who were involved directly in project delivery provided invaluable duty of care support and expertise.

Struggles to engage youth agency 'gatekeepers' was a common theme, despite interest from young people they were representing.

'Gatekeepers' were targeted as participants by one project, creating a successful replicable model bringing arts, youth professionals and young people together for joint skills sharing, consultation and planning activities.

Artists were felt to be key to a project's success, and adapted to a range of roles in addition to their creative input, including mentors, supervising work placements, positive role models, champions within specific communities to recruit.

Impact on organisational culture remains a challenge with some partners expressing frustration that this work is low in organisational priorities;

'there is very much a distinction ...a people-focused job is an education job'. (gallery educator)

Support from senior management is key to the prospect of embedding a youth-friendly ethos into the institution, and some projects were able to elicit this support through project design – e.g. by creating prolonged contact between young people and staff across the institution, and building staff training into the project.

en-vision has equipped organisations with tools to build on, with visible signs that the work will be taken forward; skilled and knowledgeable staff, new organisational policy and provision, commitment of resources to youth programmes including 2 new staff posts, sustainable partnerships, ongoing cross-departmental training, 'youth-friendly recommendations' and interpretation tools from young people, new young recruits working as volunteers, assistants, mentors and champions, new structures to include young people in organisational development and decision-making, and some staff with a real commitment to attitudinal and organisational change and an increased awareness about how to take this challenge on.

Staff turnover is a big issue. The initial 9 en-vision project leaders saw 31 different members of staff and the delivery of 5 en-vision babies (with another due very soon).

In some instances there were several staff (often freelance) within 1 post in the lifetime of en-vision, and it was evident that work is in many instances personality driven and organisational strategy is subject to individual interpretation. Incoming staff did not always prioritise the work to the same extent and the investment of previous staff was lost. This will inevitably inhibit continuity and organisational development.

The overall programme provided engage with excellent material and research to develop training and seminars; the projects continually identified professional development gaps and opportunities, and fed valuable material and findings into events.

en-vision provided a direct route through which partners could share issues experienced in the delivery and development of the work, which engage could in turn share across the profession and with policymakers.

See the individual case studies and TOP TIPS in section 4.

Finally, a big thank you

...to partners for their commitment, persistence and willingness to take risks

...to all the young participants who have made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up with inspired performances and achievements

...to the en-vision advisory group – Beth Harrison, Rachel Tranter, Steve Little, Paul Gutherson, Veronica Sekules, Tash Goswami, Naomi Horlock, Nathalie Palin – for their enthusiasm and commitment

...and of course welcome to the en-vision babies – may your future's be full of inspirational youth-friendly gallery experiences!