

changing places with stories

a way of using stories for regeneration

what is this pack?

Lots of people have stories about trying to make change happen in our towns and communities. Such stories, about the highs, lows and everyday dilemmas of working together to improve things, often contain truths and insights that give us the confidence to take action.

Unfortunately stories don't always get shared in ways that lead to learning. Stories are often dismissed as anecdotal or subjective. Yet evidence shows that story-telling can and does change the way we think about problems and solutions:¹

"Sharing different people's stories helps us to understand their perspectives. That is a vital ingredient in involving people more in shaping and running public services in the future."

Sir Harry Burns, Chief Medical Officer

Changing Places with Stories is a new resource aimed at helping groups of people to work with stories in a systematic way that supports learning and inspires action to improve our places.

¹ Wadsworth, Y., Wierenga, A. and G. Wilson (2nd ed. 2007) Writing narrative action evaluation reports in health promotion – manual of guidelines, resources, case studies and QuickGuide, State of Victoria, Department of Human Services and the University of Melbourne, Australia.

Bate, P and Robert, G, (2007) Bringing User Experience to Healthcare Improvement, The concepts, methods and practices of experience-based design, Radcliffe pp59-70

who is this for?

We hope this pack will be useful if you are:

- » a **practitioner** – planner, developer, architect, regeneration professional, youth worker – working to improve the built and natural environment.
- » a **policy maker** charged with encouraging good practice in how we build resilient places and communities.
- » a **local activist**, of any age and experience, with a passion for improving the places in which we live, work and play.

We think this pack will appeal to you if you are:

- » Committed to working with others to make change happen.
- » Excited about ways to tap into different skills, strengths and perspectives.
- » Serious about giving young people the space to share responsibility for changing our towns and communities.
- » Looking to kick start local conversations and find out where there is interest and willingness to make change happen.
- » Convinced about tuning into real life – the possibilities and the pitfalls.

The pack is designed to help you draw on the experiences of others and also to generate stories of your own. We'll be delighted to hear your feedback and your stories.

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what is this about?

It's clear that people build places and, in turn, places shape people.

In a period of changing lifestyles and with many of our cities, towns and villages in transition, some places are proving more resilient than others.

Given this powerful relationship between people and place, a community-led approach to regeneration sounds attractive. But there are real challenges in practice. Those with power are accustomed to leading and often find it hard to step back. Those with no power may want to lead but may lack experience and knowledge. Each side, uncertain in their role, can struggle with confidence and grow frustrated. It requires high levels of energy and resilience from everyone involved, and a genuine openness to enquiry and learning.

Space Unlimited has pioneered youth-led enquiry as a catalyst to generate fresh insights and trigger new action. Young people see things differently, explore problems imaginatively and aren't afraid to say what they think. Over the years, we have supported groups of young people to collaborate directly with statutory and voluntary organisations and to share responsibility for improving the places

in which they live and work. Stories have become an integral part of our work. Participants in our projects often use stories to illustrate the way that better relationships and different roles make a real difference in our capacity to transform our places. Stories are also a key part of our approach to evaluation, helping us to check whether and how we are meeting our outcomes.

In creating this pack, we have worked in partnership with Research for Real and drawn on our wider collection of stories concerned with place-making. Research for Real seeks to find ways to tell and re-tell stories in order to challenge habits of mind and help us all to realise our shared goals.

All the stories in this pack are true. All names have been changed, although some places may be recognisable. We are grateful to all those who shared their stories with us and hope we have done them justice. Any errors or omissions are our responsibility.



why do stories matter?

Stories are descriptive accounts of something that has happened. Within organisations and communities, stories are told often and in lots of different ways.

Telling stories is not a complicated process. It comes quite naturally to us humans.

Stories matter because they can surprise us and challenge our perceptions and assumptions, especially those we might not even be aware of. They can provide new insights and help to shape deeper understanding of other peoples' experience.

Much of the time their full value is lost because they are told informally and not recorded or analysed in a way that allows lessons to be identified. Sharing stories and making links between them often allows new meaning to emerge.

This pack helps the process of story sharing and sense-making to be more thorough, more complete and more democratic than it might otherwise be.

"It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are."

Ben Okri

1 what's in the pack?

This pack contains instructions for two different processes, each of which support groups of people to analyse stories together.

It also contains a set of ten stories that can be used to kick start the process of story sharing. We hope it will inspire you to develop and share stories of your own. We are keen to hear how you get on using these materials in your own efforts to be better at changing places together, so we've also included a feedback section.

2 what makes a good story?

It's an interesting question. Our view is that the best stories:

- » are told in the first person so they are credible and authentic.
- » don't tell the whole 'back story' but give the listener just enough to form a picture of the situation.
- » focus on describing what happened, what was said and how it felt, rather than rationalising why things were that way.
- » are honest, even messy (i.e. not overly dramatic or too tidied up).
- » are easy to tell and re-tell

You might like to answer this question for yourselves – once you've had a go at using the pack.

3 getting ready bring people together

The processes in this pack work with small groups of people, as few as three, and also in bigger gatherings with people forming several small groups.

- » Groups of 3-8 people are ideal.
- » If possible the participants should be from different organisations.
- » If you're working with a large number of people with varying levels of confidence about speaking out, you may wish to think about how to mix the groups so that people, perhaps especially young people, feel comfortable to talk and share.
- » Find a suitable venue where people can relax and feel at ease – with refreshments if you can!
- » You'll need to get people together for between 30 minutes and a couple of hours.

agree a general theme

It will be helpful to agree a broad theme for the session to attract interest and give attendees a sense of purpose. Keep the theme fairly general so as not to pre-judge the outcomes and ideas. It is good to phrase the theme as a question that feels open, inviting and future focused. An example might be:

- » What do we think we ought to be doing to change our town for everyone?
- » What are the good things about our neighbourhood and can we focus on them so that it can be even better?

decide which process to use

Confirm who is to take part in the story sharing exercise and how long you will have.

Decide which process suits your purpose and the time available.

Process 1 is designed to lead to actions for people to take. It may work best if there's already a bit of shared history amongst the group where you think people will have some stories of their own to share.

Process 2 will also generate actions, but is more reflective. It would be good to use where there is a need to find positive things in order to move forward. It is also good when discussion is needed about shared purpose and values.

short story dialogue process 1

Useful for groups of about 5-8 people.
Needs 1 to 1½ hours.

enquiry cycle process 2

Useful for groups of 3 or more.
Flexible & may take 30 minutes to 1 hour.

tell us what you think!

We want to hear how you get on with these processes and would love to have your feedback so that we can continue to learn and adapt this pack.

This pack includes a feedback form which you can email to us or return via the postage address below.

Thank you.



please get in touch...

hello@spaceunlimited.org

Space Unlimited
42 Nithsdale Rd
Glasgow, G41 2AN
Scotland, UK

0141 424 1403

short story dialogue:

process 1

the basic idea This is a structured and disciplined way to discuss and make sense of stories. It takes people through a timed process so that they generate individual and collective insights from the stories. Insights can be a new fact or idea or just a new awareness or feeling. Individuals and groups can decide on whether and how to take specific action based on this new information.

numbers of people Useful for groups of about 5-8 people, but could be scaled up to involve multiple simultaneous groups.

materials needed This process will need blank paper or large post-its, large marker pens and flip chart paper.

time needed Timings below are based on a session lasting 1-1.5 hours. This could vary a little depending on numbers and time available.

source & further information This process is an adaptation of the StoryDialogue process. See Labonte, R. and Feather, J. (1996) Handbook on Using Stories in Health Promotion. Ottawa: Health Canada.

in advance

nominate a host for the session

The host should organise the session and read through all the instructions in advance and familiarise themselves with the process to be used. The host doesn't need any particular specialist skills or experience.

prepare story tellers for their role

Decide how many stories from the pack you want to use. We suggest that you use at least three. Recruit people from the group attending the session to be story tellers: one per story. These people need to be able to read the chosen story aloud in the group setting, and so will probably appreciate advance sight of the story.

- » Our advice to story tellers is to take their time in 'telling' the story. The story from the pack is not strictly a script but story tellers should not alter the essential details in the story.
- » You may want to have some printed copies of the story available so that people who wish to can follow the story as it is told. Some people may prefer just to listen. Either approach is fine.

1 explain the process & ground rules

To start the session, hosts should:

- » ask for quick introductions.
- » give a quick overview of the process: hearing stories from the pack then timed process to analyse them and share insights.
- » appoint a time-keeper and agree signals to keep to time.
- » explain the 'ground rules'.

Ground rules:

- a** each person should take their own notes.
- b** focus on 'ah-ha' moments, thoughts or issues the story prompts; don't record the detail, just sufficient information to remind you of it later.
- c** listen carefully and don't interrupt during the story.

2 story telling (approx. 10-25min in total)

The host hands over to the first **storyteller**, thanking them for taking on this role.

The **storyteller** tells the story for **about 3-6 minutes**; the rest listen. The timekeeper may want to give a 1 minute warning before time is up.

Once the story is finished, the **host** asks each person to give a **quick, gut or heartfelt response** (10 seconds max!) – nothing more than that.

Repeat this stage for each subsequent story.

If time allows, people can offer their own stories, of similar style and length, rather than using further stories from the pack. The host should use their own judgement about what feels sufficient to move to the next stage.

3 structured dialogue (approx. 15min in total)

When all stories have been heard, the **host** takes the group through the following stages – with help from the **timekeeper**.

a on the stories – what? why? (up to 5 mins)

Together, take up to **5 minutes** maximum to clarify any details of the stories.

b on the theme – so what? now what? (approx 10 mins)

The host shifts the focus from the individual stories to a more general discussion by re-stating the theme/ purpose and inviting people to ask questions of each other about the implications of the stories.

- » avoid 'Q & A' style interrogation of each story – focus on the stories as a whole.
- » draw out wider lessons and implications. What is this telling you about your theme? Think about 'so what?', 'what could this mean for future actions?'

6 reflections & next steps

The host completes the process by thanking everyone for their contributions.

As a group, take some time to reflect on the session:

- » the value of story sharing and who else might be involved.
- » creative ideas to encourage further sharing.
- » how such processes might be used more routinely to enhance learning.
- » any feedback you wish to give to the creators of this pack.

5 analysis & actions (approx. 10-20min in total)

The host asks the group to:

1. spread out all Insight Cards (floors and walls great for this task) and take a few moments to read through them.
2. look for common themes – move the Insight Cards around and create clusters of related cards. Ask: What seems to go with what? Are there unique insights that seem to be in a category of their own?
3. through discussion, give each cluster a name or label.
 - » don't force cards into clusters where they don't really fit.
 - » don't neglect a card – it's fine to let it sit on its own.
4. write all names/ labels up onto a flipchart.

The host reminds people of the theme again & supports discussion to:

- » identify clear and specific actions relating to each cluster that will help to tackle the overall theme.
- » be precise about who you expect to take the actions; don't be vague, do name individuals or organisations.

4 generating insights (approx 10 min)

The host asks people to work on their own to identify key insights and potential actions.

Based on the discussion and their own notes, each person creates their own set of **Insight Cards** as follows:

- » think about any key insights (say 4-5 from each person).
- » avoid truisms ('communication is important') and be specific ('we need to explain jargon in simple words and check that our messages have been understood').
- » write the insights down in big writing – 1 insight per card or sheet of paper.
- » write so it makes sense to someone who hasn't heard the stories.
- » don't get caught up in the particulars of any story.
- » do this fairly quickly – don't agonise!

enquiry cycle

process 2

the basic idea This follows a core four-stage structure to promote collective observation, reflection, planning and action, based on stories that are shared.

numbers of people Useful for groups of 3 or more.

materials needed Paper for note taking.

time needed Can be flexible and may take 30 minutes to an hour or more, depending on numbers of people and time available.

source & further information This process is an adaptation of living systems inquiry cycle Wadsworth, Y (2011) Building in Research and Evaluation, Human Inquiry for Living Systems, Allen and Unwin.

in advance

nominate a host for the session

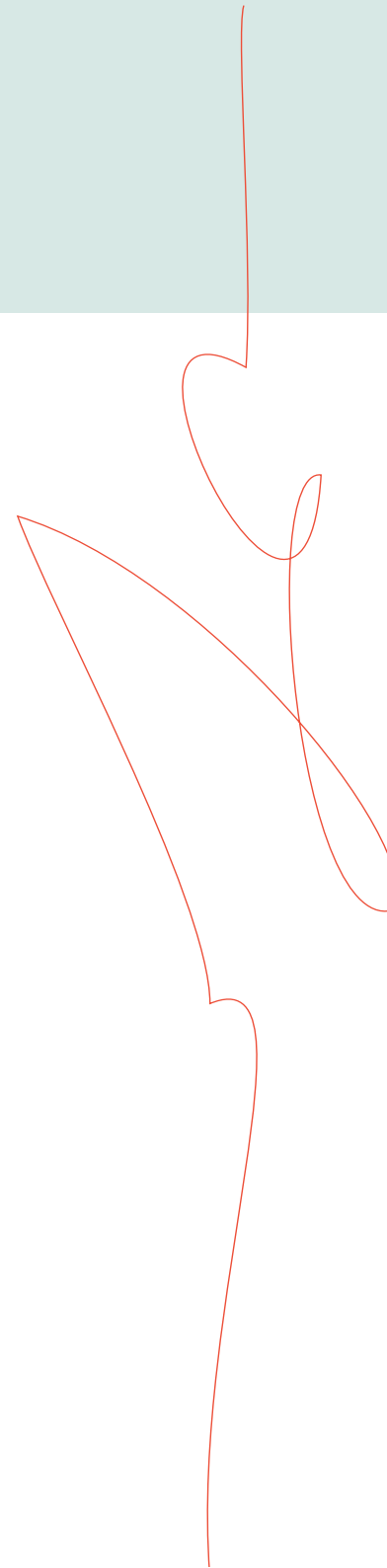
The host should read through all the instructions in advance and familiarise themselves with the process to be used. The host doesn't need any particular specialist skills or experience.

On the day, they need to keep an eye on time and make sure that the four core stages of the process are followed in order. The host may also want to make a note of the stories that are shared and the key insights and actions that follow on.

prepare for story sharing

Select stories from the pack that you would like to share with the wider group. We suggest that you use at least three.

Stories can be shared in different ways: they could be read out or 'told' to the group, or individual members of the group can read them silently. Decide how you would like to do this, and choose who will read them out or print enough copies for everyone.



1

story sharing

Share stories from the pack within the group as agreed in advance. Ask people not to comment on them at this stage.

Ask for any further stories directly from the group from their own experience, relevant to your agreed general theme. Ask people to tell them in a similar style and keep to about 5 minutes each.

2

work through the cycle

Work through the next four stages of the cycle, starting with the questions about **observation**.²

It can be helpful to remind people that each of us has a preference for different stages of this cycle. For example, some want to go as soon as possible to action, whilst others are happier to reflect for some time.

If you find yourselves jumping ahead to a further stage, just check with everyone that they feel that you have sufficiently covered the current stage and, if so, then formally move onto the next stage.

reflection

- c What does this show about what matters to you and others?
- d What surprises you?
- e What do you think is or could be taken for granted?

planning

- f What are you now thinking about?
- g What possibilities for action do you see (however small)?
- h What would it take to get from how things are now to what we'd want instead?

observation

- a What interests and excites each of you about what you've heard in these stories?
- b What are you noticing?

action

- i What will you do (tomorrow even) that's different to make the collaborative change you are interested in be more effective?
- j How will you know if you're on the right track?
- k What will convince you and others involved that it's been worthwhile?

3

appreciation & reflection on the process

- » Complete the process by thanking everyone for their contributions.
- » As a group, take some time to reflect on the process.
- » Agree how the identified actions can be the basis of ongoing and future work.
- » Consider how there can be further story sharing and who else might be brought into the process.
- » Be creative about how you might encourage further sharing.
- » Consider how such processes might be used more routinely to enhance self-evaluation and learning.
- » Consider any feedback you wish to give to the creators of this pack.

² Note that completion of the full cycle naturally leads back to further observation.



story 1 fear of the quiet

It's the mid afternoon break on the first day of the youth enquiry. Whilst the young people are busy doing an activity, Fran and I, the facilitators, sit down to talk about how we can help the participants decide what projects they might like to get involved with and take forward themselves.

We are feeling pleased. There's bags of enthusiasm in the air. Lots of good ideas were floating about, from mountain biking and skating to more music to using vacant buildings for music and clubs. But for us facilitators, the clock is ticking. We're nearly halfway through the enquiry. By tomorrow afternoon, we want the young people not just to have worked out what they want to happen in Haddington. We want them to have worked out what they themselves are going to do to make that idea happen. So we admit to being a being concerned that this might not happen.

The break ends, and everyone comes back together. We carefully explain where we've got to – and where we'd like to get to by tomorrow afternoon. Then, my greatest fear....the room goes quiet. I imagine people's thoughts: "More gigs or a new skate park would be great. But volunteering to help make it happen... I've no idea what that might involve. It sounds big and scary. No thanks."

Expertly, Fran encourages the group to open up. I don't know if people are reluctant or thoughtful but, one by one, everyone speaks. Most say they'd like to take something forward. Building a new skate park and organising a contest for local bands are the most popular

ideas. It's becomes clear to me that it's a big thing to volunteer for something like that when they don't know what the commitment might be – or the personal embarrassment if it's a flop.

Bob is the last to speak. He doesn't volunteer for anything. He finds it difficult to make eye contact as struggles to explain why he doesn't want to put himself forward. But it takes courage deciding not to put your name forward, especially as one of the youngest in a mixed group of teenagers.

The first day of the enquiry finishes shortly after. Everyone heads home, and we wonder who will come back the following day. Will we see Bob again? Did we put too much pressure on him in front of the others? Was it too much to ask everyone to sign up to taking something forward?

The next morning, we arrive bright and early. Someone has arrived before us. It's Bob. He stays all day, quiet but committed. I hope it the enquiry was as much a learning experience for Bob as for me.

story 2 holding it together

I am Warren and I've been a Police Officer for 25 years. I'm enthusiastic about what we call 'assets based policing' which is really about making police work more about prevention and early intervention than constantly responding to crime and crises. I'm interested in both the theory and the practice and I've been influenced by work done in Cornwall and what they've learnt about community transformation.

I strongly believe that people who live and work in a community are best placed to know what the real inherent issues and challenges at the heart of a community are, and given the opportunity, they will also know how to resolve them by using their own, often hidden, talents. This seems to me to be our best chance of making changes that really last.

I was working in a part of town that had some pretty bad 'reality TV' publicity. The area had received Scottish Government funding in the past to make it safer and more attractive, but things didn't seem to get any better for the place itself or the generations of families living there. Sometimes, despite their intentions, the way that services responded seemed to add to the difficulties of local people. Whilst this might sound grim, it wasn't the full picture and there's no doubt that the TV programme wasn't a fair reflection of life within that community. Certainly people were incensed that the area was being labelled in such a negative way and folk started to talk.

Even so, at our earlier meetings it was disappointing that there were no residents present, although there were a

good number of people from local agencies that could provide services there. I'm not sure they actually knew each other so it was good they got a chance to meet and become better connected. They were full of ideas and solutions and services that could be delivered to people.

But I went away thinking that it didn't feel quite right to me.

So I checked out the Cornwall work and what seemed to have worked for them. To cut a long story short, I recruited Robert as a facilitator to help me to manage a series of 'listening events' for residents. I was really pleased that these attracted 100's of people through word of mouth and by engaging key residents able to get others along.

It was great to watch Robert in action – he wasn't fazed by any of the challenges or questions that came up, helping people find their own way through them – and he put the ideas into themes that seemed to resonate with the people there. He was constantly scribbling away, recording things on flipcharts so that people could see it all as they were talking, prompting others to contribute too. I realised at the end of it all that he was dripping in sweat because whilst I'd been enjoying myself meeting people and immersed in the discussions, he'd been holding it together.

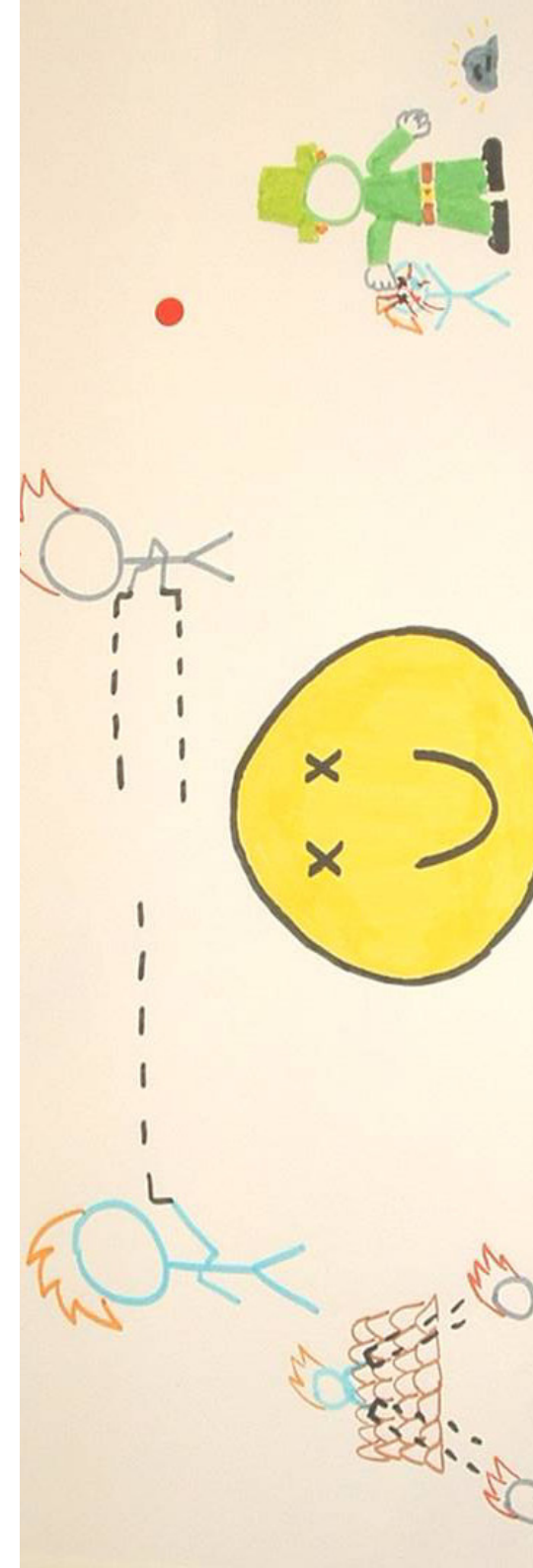
Whilst some of the events felt a bit chaotic I had some brilliant conversations. It was pretty informal, and yes, there was an 'agenda' though it wasn't like the rather set piece events you sometimes get. And the buzz we created was revived soon afterwards, because he quickly

converted all the ideas and opinions into a series of images, text and graphics that were simple to read and gave people rapid feedback.

This helped us to move straightaway to thinking about the implications for action. Then the suggestions and ideas were overwhelming. The residents quickly ditched some of the earlier ideas that had been mooted. I remember one of them said: "You're way off the mark there!"

People started to talk about what they could do; and others then suggested what they also could do to help make those ideas work even better. Not everyone completely agreed with everyone else, but at least we all knew what we were about and what mattered to each of us. People had been honest, given their opinions and ideas about how we might get where we wanted to be. Driving home I thought that whilst there was not a consensus, we'd really made some great connections.

These early crucial steps have led to new energy and commitment to change within a short space of time. As a result, there are lots of things getting off the ground now that are led by residents. Whilst none of this would have been possible without the support and commitment of the local residents and agencies, to my mind, it also would not have been possible without Robert who had that knack of just setting the right tone and getting the best out of us all.



Community

story 3 the turning point



I was kicked out of the house when I was 19. I'd got pregnant and my parents didn't want to have anything to do with me. That was it – out.

They'd never had any time for me anyway. Too busy seeing their friends and doing their own thing. Not off their heads on drugs or anything – although friends' parents were like that. Just drinking, football, arguing, that sort of thing. If I wanted anything, they would just say "Go away".

They'd had me when they were young too – perhaps that was the problem. I haven't spoken to them since.

I'm 27 now and I've got 2 kids. I don't drink, don't smoke, nothing like that. I'll never do that to my kids. My partner and I have both got jobs. We've got two cars. All from our own hard work.

If I'd had somewhere like the youth project

when I was still at home, I'd have loved it. That's why I come in here to volunteer. There's lots of us, all from the scheme. Some had abusive backgrounds – I guess I did in a way. But all of us wish this had been here when we were young. That's why we come in every day.

Thinking back, there was a turning point that got me involved. When wee Ethan was born, looking at his little fingers and toes, it made me think about the neighbourhood – his neighbourhood. For him to have a good life, his neighbourhood needs nurturing just as much as he does.

For kids with hectic home lives, the youth project is a safe place that they can come and find out who they are. We don't tell them they need this or that. We ask them questions and let them find things out themselves. Some of them come in and can't choose between blackcurrant juice and orange juice – they're not used

to making decisions. We listen to them, and let them decide what they want to do. We don't ignore them. You can see them getting more confident, more self-esteem.

We don't have many rules here. In fact, one of the few rules is no football tops – adults or kids. It helps make it a safe area, helps the kids to trust the adults.

Shona, who volunteers here like me, was saying that her daughter was getting bullied at school and was self-harming – but not telling anybody, not even her mum. She's only ten. It was only when she (the daughter) started coming to the youth project that she started to open up about it. Now she's stopped self-harming and the bullying is getting sorted out.

Maybe that'll be her turning point. I hope so.

story 4 everyone can do it

It was all football, football, football... okay, some of the boys loved it, but hardly any of the girls did. I would have loved to do something different, but I couldn't think what. Then one day, one of my neighbours came in. She didn't usually get involved in the youth project. But she thought it was really letting the community down. Particularly the kids, she said.

That's what really stung. I was on the new committee – a few of us had taken over running it a year earlier. But now I realised that we were really just carrying on with what had happened before – football, football, football. So we decided it was time to really make a fresh start, to put our money where our mouths were.

We decided to look forward to see what we could do, rather than argue about what had gone wrong. We looked at different angles. Anne-Marie looked at government objectives for young people and community development, to see what we might get funding for. John said we should look at it from the children's perspective, ask them what activities they want to do. Somebody else started speaking to other people on the scheme to see if they wanted to start any new activities themselves – things they enjoyed doing, that they might want to get others to do with them. That's when Jim popped up. Lots of us knew him already – he'd lived on the scheme since it was built. "Let's do archery!", Jim said. What? Archery? None of us knew a thing about it. But we soon realised Jim was our man: he was a qualified archery instructor.

That was a year ago. In the summer, we organised "come and try" archery sessions

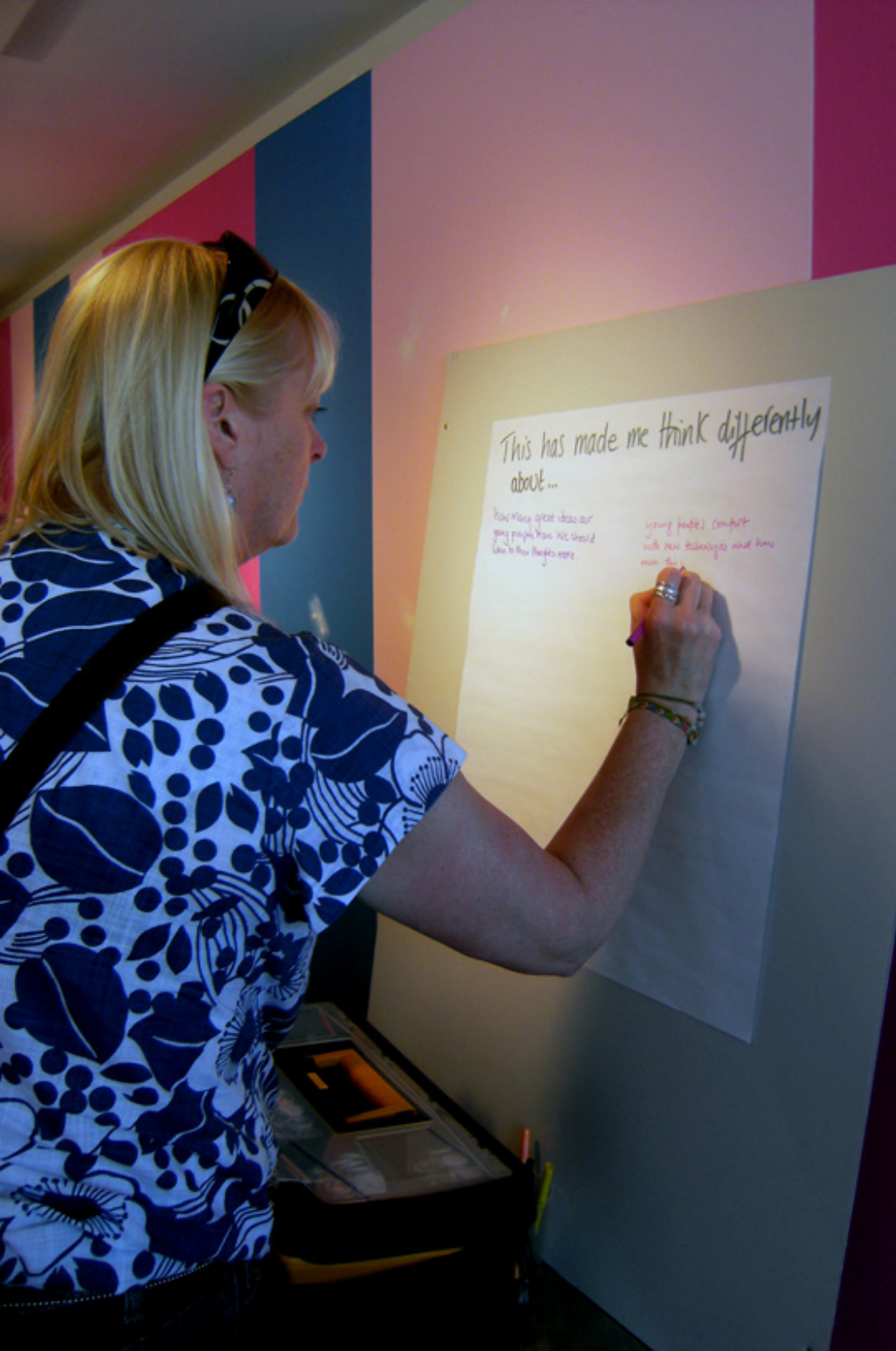
every Friday. They started out just for young people, but got so popular that we ended up organising three sessions a week – two of them with adults too. They were in the big hall, just over there.

I've been going myself. It's different. Everyone can do it. No-one's done it before. You get better as you develop more muscle and practice, just like anything I suppose. If you keep at it, it's wonderful. Teaches you self-reliance, discipline, safety, all that stuff. Everyone has an off day, but that doesn't matter – you get better again.

We haven't started having competitions yet, but we might do soon. What's good is that a few of us have qualified as instructors – so I'm a qualified archery instructor now! Who'd have thought it – a grandma and an archery instructor!

It's great for everyone. Boys and girls all do it, there are no barriers. And some of them are helping Jim make the leather armguards and stringing the bows. We were going to buy them but we didn't have the money, but Jim can make all this stuff. It's great to see Jim, aged 82, sitting with teenagers and passing on his skills. No-one's going to make any money from it, but it's not about that. It's about confidence and sharing. The Scottish Government Minister came to see us doing archery the other week. No-one got him with an off-target shot, luckily. I think he was impressed with what we were doing to bring the community together and give young folk some confidence. So maybe this kind of thing will happen in other places too. Football, football, football? Now it's archery, archery, archery!





story 5 the thing you did last week

The wee girl was standing in the school corridor sobbing her eyes out. My heart went out to her. I could see, being a mum myself, that she just needed a hug.

But we were in school. I was on teaching practice as a trainee primary school classroom assistant. We were in the corridor with nobody else about. We'd had 'boundaries' drummed into us from the very start of our training – especially about touching pupils.

I only wanted to give her a hug. I knew it was what she needed. But what if someone came round the corner and jumped to conclusions?

What the hell, I thought. As a human being, I can't ignore this poor wee girl. It might be a bit unprofessional, but I'll take the consequences. I put my arms around her and gave her a little hug. After a minute or two, I asked if she was okay. She gave a little nod and ran off.

The next week, I was back in the same school again, on playground duty with the deputy head teacher at break time.

The same wee girl came up. "Can you do that thing you did to me last week?", she said. I was miles away. "What was that?" I asked. "You know, that thing. You know."

She put her arms out in front of her in an imaginary hug.

Just as I realised what she meant, it dawned on me that this having this conversation in front of the deputy head teacher perhaps wasn't very clever. But I couldn't back off now.

"Yes, of course", I said. I gave her another wee hug – just for a few seconds.

This time I broke away first. I asked her again if she was okay. She didn't run away. In fact, she smiled – and said quietly, "No-one's ever done that to me before." Then she turned away.

I was shocked. But not as shocked as when the deputy head teacher said, "I wonder how many other children in this school don't know what a hug is?"

story 6 the greater good

We were working with eight young men and women aged 15 to 25. They were quite a mixed group - some of them were still at school whilst others were working, but each of them was starting to make their adult mark on the world in their own way. At the start of a two day youth enquiry, we asked them "How we can work with young people on a new plan for our town centre?"

One of them was Paul, a 23 year old. As part of the enquiry, we asked them to think of something which they personally would like to commit to. At first Paul wanted to do something around his music, his big interest. He had ideas like organising more gigs, a music shop and band contests - all things that he would really enjoy and thought were really important.

But over the two days of the enquiry something seemed to have changed in Paul's mind. He was still keen on the music stuff, but he started speaking far more passionately about giving all young people in the town the opportunity to do this youth enquiry.

Over a coffee, I asked him why - was he giving up on his music ideas? His reply surprised me. He said "because that group of us at the enquiry shouldn't tell all the other young people in the town what they should get. They need to do what they want to do. So we've got to ask them. Which means more youth enquiries."

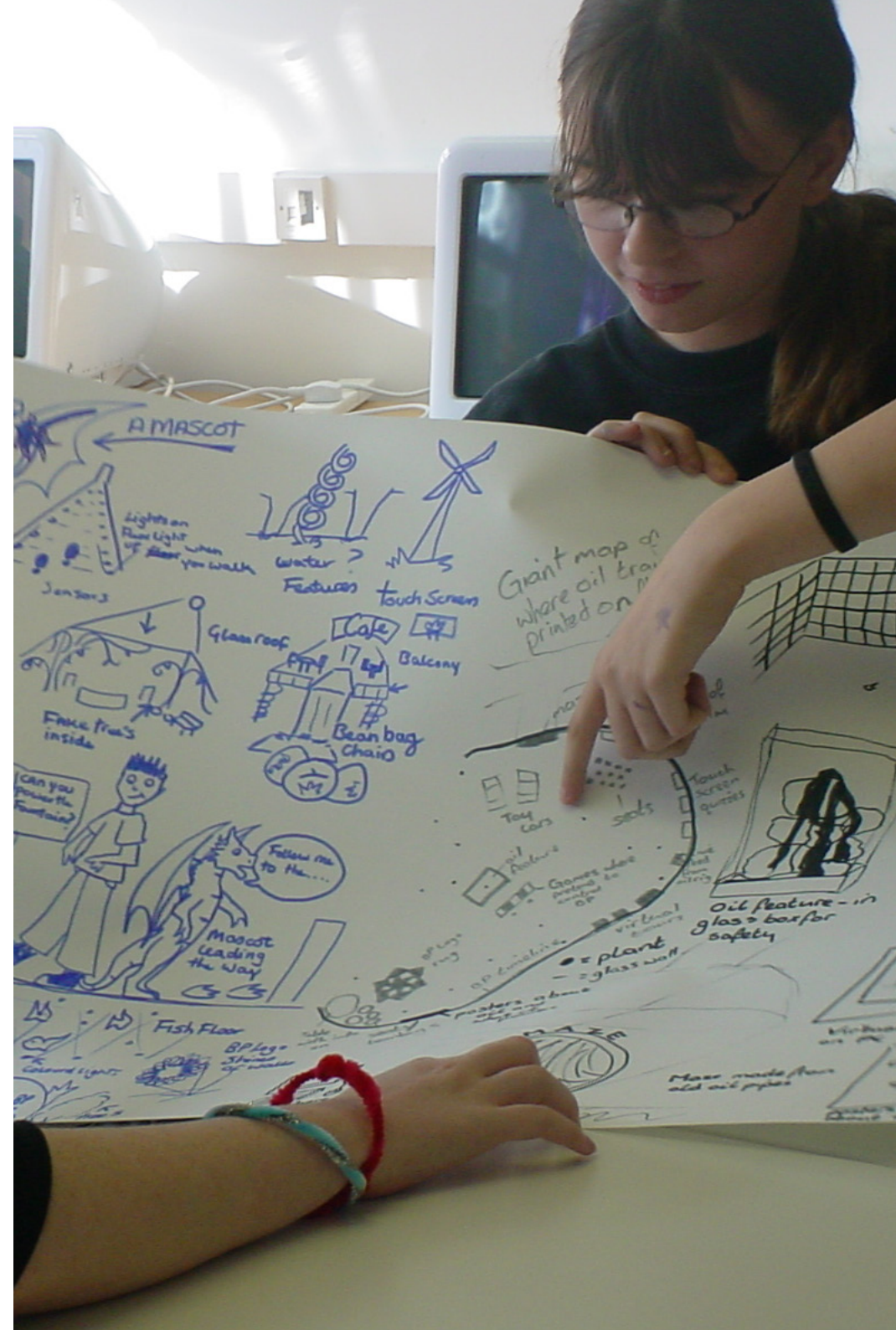
He was more enthusiastic than ever. He volunteered to come along to a steering group meeting with a group of senior people from the Council and other organisations, who might be able to make it happen. As we walked to the meeting

together, he said he was nervous. I explained that I thought that the people there would be really keen to hear what he had to say was good about the youth enquiry and just to put it in his own words. You would have to say, it wasn't an obviously youth-friendly environment. The average age was probably fifty plus, with everyone sitting quietly and dressed quite smartly. Paul started talking, explaining about some of the ideas that had come out of the enquiry - gigs, band contests, skateboarding, BMX, that kind of thing. A few folk asked interested questions.

Directly across the table sat a pretty serious looking member of the committee. He didn't say a word. With some anxiety, I began to imagine what he was thinking about all this 'youth' stuff, whether he'd bring himself to speak, what he might say...

Meanwhile Paul was talking about having more gigs in the Corn Exchange - a Council-owned listed building in the centre of town, the height of Victorian civic pride - and the difficulty of getting decent sound in there for bands, even with good amplification.

The serious gentleman interrupts. My antennae twitch. Will everything unravel? Then he said, "Would you like a sound report? I can do one for you. It'll tell you exactly what modifications are needed for decent sound quality for bands, so we can get some money from external funders. Reports like that normally cost around £5,000k but I could do it for free. How does that sound?"



story 7 local intelligence

"This isn't going well", said Jim, the urban designer. "How can I think of ideas to make a place better if I don't know what local people think about it? What shops do people go to the most? Where do they stop and chat? Where do young people hang out?"

He was right. We were doing an improvement plan in a pretty downbeat part of town, and my job was to get some of that local insight for him. I hadn't got anything like as much as I'd hoped. Getting input from young people was a real worry for me. The schools were just breaking up for summer, so my usual avenue wasn't going to work. I said I'd see what I could do, but the truth is I was struggling for ideas.

A couple of phone calls later and I'd tracked down a youth group leader with a few boys and a few bikes. We fixed to head out the following Friday for a bike tour of the local canals. I was still worried, as it wasn't my usual way of sitting down with groups of young people in a nice controlled environment.

Friday morning dawned warm and dry – always a plus in the west! I dusted my bike off, printed off some images of improvements that were planned for the canal network, and pedalled up to the youth club. Six local lads and the youth leader, Charlie, were ready and waiting. There was a brief health and safety talk about the dangers of cycling along canal towpaths – more relevant for me than the boys, with my middle-aged bike handling skills – we headed off on our exploration.

First stop was at a canal junction where a big three-way pedestrian bridge was proposed, capped with a massive iconic sculpture. I produced a picture and asked them what they thought.

"What's the point of the big statue thing? Everyone will just fall off it into the water."

"The wee neds'll trash it."

"I suppose I can see the point of the bridge, it's a long way round just now."

"Why not spend the money on something else?"

We get back on the bikes. A few wobbles and near misses later, we pull up at a point where the planners are encouraging developers to build waterfront flats.

"Who'd want to live here? Think of the racket from the canal."

"Your garden'll be full of Buckie bottles."

"See the old guys drinking under that canal over there? They're always there. But they're fine with us – we know them."

"I'd rather live round the corner on the main road – it's where the gossip is and where everything happens."

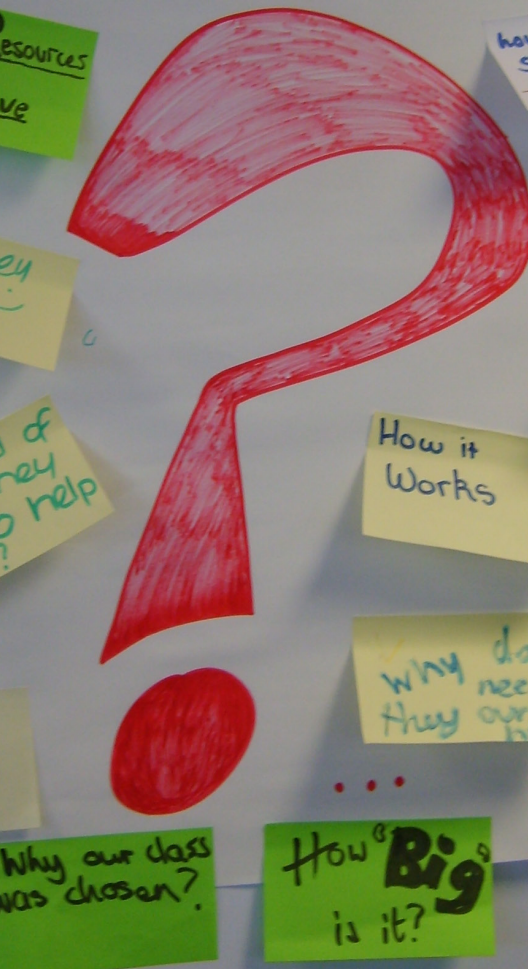
One of our last stops was at some open space next to the canal. Did they think there was enough open space? "Naw. The blaes pitches at the Drive are too far away." "There's nowhere to kick a ball around here. Not a pitch with goals – just some flat grass, that's all we need."

After a welcome Irn Bru, we headed back to the youth club. I thanked the boys, who shrugged and headed off.

My worry returned: would this be any help to Jim? This was one group of six boys aged 13 to 16. What about other young people?

I needn't have worried. He immediately started to say how useful it was. I was pleased but curious "how?", I asked. "Now I know what they think about the main street, how people behave along the canal", he said, "and that we need to make sure there's somewhere to kick a ball about. Simple stuff that I would never have known otherwise."

do we NOT Know



story 8 the family who don't like their town

We're in a medium sized Scottish town in November 2011. It's reeling from the recent closure of a major local employer, adding to the struggles of the town centre businesses. It has been decided that a plan is required to give the town centre a brighter future. A team of planners, designers, traffic engineers and business consultants is appointed, all of them experts in their field.

The team decides to kick off by hearing what local people have to say about the town centre. Rather unusually for a bunch of experts, we decide to start with young people. The first place we invite ourselves to a Primary school in the town centre to ask twenty P6/P7 children what they think about the town centre.

They like the Subway and the Noodle Bar, they like River Island, and they like the Christmas lights and bonfire night. (Remember it was November...) They don't like the roller shutters, graffiti and people asking for money. And they'd like to be able to get into the sports centre without being accompanied by an adult, a ceilidh in the town centre, 'town monitors' to help people find their way around, a nice restaurant, and loos that are open on Sundays. Lots of good ideas which would make the town centre a nicer place for them.

"Not unlike what the grown-ups might say", I think. "Maybe we'll actually be able to build some of these things into our plan. Wouldn't it be good if we could go back in a year's time and say their ideas have happened?"

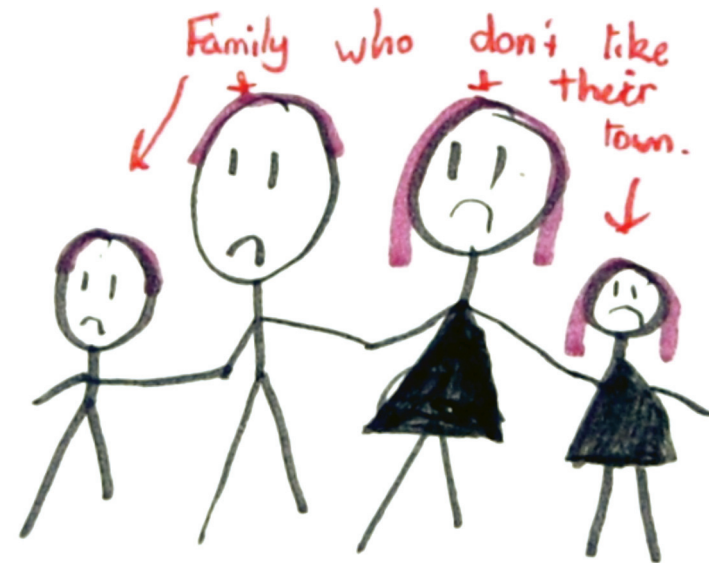
I got back to the office and flicked through the pictures that the children drew to describe their town. There were pictures of closed up shops, people smoking in the street, litter, that kind of thing.

One picture really jumped out at me. There were no buildings, no litter, no streets. Just four people: mum, dad and two children. What struck me was that they all had glum faces. And the picture had a title: 'family who don't like their town'.

That picture made me sad. It was like a dose of reality to me. We'd been thinking about how to make the town better, with lots of great positive ideas. But here was the reality of the town for one child. I don't know why that child drew that picture – maybe it was the talk of roller shutters, graffiti and people asking for money.

Sad though it was, that child's drawing proved to be immensely powerful. In the following months, we showed it to express to adults why they needed to take action to improve the town centre. We also shared the children's good ideas, which people liked because they would help all generations, like keeping the loos open on Sundays and having 'town monitors'. All these things helped to ensure that the plan reflected young people's aspirations.

But I wonder if the one thing that made the most difference was that picture – by its power of uniting people to make their place better for the next generation.





story 9 surprises

I always like getting out and about in my work. It was a lovely autumn day last year and I headed out to be part of the final day of youth-led enquiry in a small town that had been recently making a bit of splash because of some really good work in community-led change.

Some 7 or 8 years ago the community had been shocked by a murder of a young girl and a public meeting was called to address the issues that the town faced. Since that time great work had been done to recognise the good points about the town and build on them. I'd read about this because it had been shared widely and quoted as an example of good practice. The town now has a fantastic community centre, with a shop and gallery, with new businesses and community activity supporting both physical and social regeneration.

As I arrive, I am impressed. The building itself has a great feel about it. There's obviously been lots of attention to the design and it's welcoming and light. So I'm curious to learn more about their success. Lots of places would be keen to know how it's done.

A small group of adults and some local teenagers have spent 2 days together over the last week to develop their ambitions that the town should be a place where young people want to be, where they get involved, not just with activities that others organise for them, but in designing, running and managing the buildings, businesses and workshops themselves. I've been invited to help the group give their feedback about the

overall process so I get a great chance to listen and observe what's going on.

It's a very good natured day. The young people seem to like getting a voice and working in groups. The adults say that they young people are 'refreshing' and that they have been reminded how much they enjoy passing on skills onto others. One boy said 'it's turned my mind to my town' and another one later admits that he has a secret ambition to be an architect.

After lunch, there's a surprise hands-on session with some clay. The young people seem a bit self-conscious in their aprons, but are given a quick lesson by one of the local adults in making a slab or coil pot. We left them to it, but got to see the results – each young person talked about what they'd done and how they'd approached the task they'd been given. I thought the results were pretty astonishing. But hearing them talk about it was the best, they were clearly very thoughtful and perhaps a bit surprised at themselves.

As we checked out, everyone was asked if there had been any surprising or unexpected things that have happened over the 2 days. The clay tutor admitted 'I realise we didn't think carefully enough about the design of the building in terms of young people'. We were pleased that there was enough goodwill and commitment amongst both adults and young people to want to continue to work together. Someone mentioned that the old train station needed a refurb, so you never know.

story 10 the youth café – a tale of trial and error

When I was first asked to take part in the event at the Parliament with some other S3s, I hadn't really thought much about changing places. But once we got into the discussion, I thought it was really interesting. I see now how places affect people, especially young people.

We all felt the same: that a lot of places for young people don't actually welcome them. That's why we end up meeting outside. That's why we end up meeting outside. It's not just me and my friends sitting outside the High School in the shelter – there's lots of us in the same boat. We can't get turned away or criticised there. But we all said we'd like a cosy indoor space where we could meet friends and be comfortable.

We took our ideas to the MPs. They seemed to take a genuine interest. But they thought there were already places for young people. They are supposed to be the people's people so it was strange that they didn't know. Lots of the adults said we should go along to our Community Council or take our ideas to the Local Authority, but it's obvious that's not going to happen. You have to be 16 even to get involved in the community Youth Forum.

After the experience at the Parliament, we got a chance to work on our idea for a youth café. It was us leading it – the S3s. Some of them saw it as a bit of a skive, but me and Josh were really interested. I liked working on the business plan. It was hard though, because we couldn't fix on one idea. It kept moving.

Joan came along to one of our meetings. That was fantastic. She had experience of setting up a café somewhere else. And

there was some money to help get things started in the community. So I started going to the youth club meetings in the library.

The meetings were good, but the people from the Youth Forum were irritating. They only had one thought running round their head: that the café should be in the YMCA. It's hard trying to brainstorm when really you only want one thing. And I knew the YMCA wasn't the right place. It's like a big warehouse, a huge open space. We wanted a cosy, colourful little café where we could be sociable. No one wants to go the YMCA – I kept saying: people just won't go there. I think they just wanted it there because they work there. They thought it would be easier.

But it felt like it was just me against a bunch of other people. I brought some of my friends to come along to back me up. I think I've got a way with words, but there's only so much you can do. The older guys' voices had more weight. They've got more influence, because they are part of the Youth Forum

The Community Learning and Development people were good. But they wouldn't give us their ideas. That's fair enough, but it's annoying too, because they had experience of setting up a café in Edinburgh. They were worried if they got too involved it wouldn't feel like it belonged to the young people. But that's not right. Just being involved and having my say would have made it mine.

I felt a bit disheartened to be honest. It felt like only the people who already have a say can have a say, if you know what I

mean. Maybe I'm being a bit cynical. I should have stuck with it, but I couldn't be bothered any more. I think the idea has just fizzled out. It's interesting talking to some of the local youth workers about it. They're not bothered. They've seen so many things tried and failed. It's made them a bit indifferent.

I'm glad I did it though. I've thought about a real business plan, and not many people can say that when they are 15. I think it built my character. I feel like I can deal with things not working out a bit more. And I've learned to voice my opinions better. I've never been quiet or nervous, but I didn't know how to get my opinions over without arguing before. Now I think about what I'm going to say and make sure it has basis and weight.

I'm thinking I might go into politics. And I'm involved now in a project at the skate park, putting together ideas for new designs and learning how to spray paint. It's going to look great by the summer.

