

Resilient Communities



Bio: Ross Podjma has been working in community development in the voluntary sector since the 1980s, followed by local authority officer roles within the realm of community work, but not achieving the same level of authentic community ownership. Since 2012 Ross has returned to the voluntary sector as Director of Sporting Communities CIC, a highly regarded non-statutory youth service provision in Derby City. Through this work he is re-visiting and re-igniting the philosophy, values and approach of community development within universal community provision with adolescents.

'Placed Based Approach' although often thought of as contemporary, has its ascendancies in the past. Such approaches have been coined many things by different professional services, across many different neighbourhoods. However, the sentiment has always remained the same to the average person, that 'place is our community'.

The history of Sporting Communities CIC today originated from the emergence of a Charity Called Hanley Youth Project located in the Bothen neighbourhood located in Stoke-on-Trent back in 1971. The project was formed as result of a desperate need for services to support the local community who were impacted by systemic poverty and neglect. The situation facing the community at this time was a result of a lack of jobs, and opportunity limited to the local industry, which were traditionally manual, and low paid, and the absent of professional opportunities and so too any new developments. This created a stagnating landscape for many. Unemployment and decades of local authority disregard served as the constant backdrop, which meant that the outlook for young people was often bleak.

Hanley Youth Project Charity (HYP) was born out of this moment. Residents' polarised anger and determination gave rise to community action and taking charge, and thus began a collective process of power transformation. The community came together to acquire a local derelict plot of land, a community building and with it a wraparound adventure playground. This was all built with the sweat and toil and investment of the local community who were now the custodians of the welfare of their own community.



Construction of HYPs Bothen Adventure Playground 1971. Then project worker and now CEO of Sporting Communities Kevin Sountry seen sitting with young people

This act of human determinism was not only timely for the people of Bothen, but it caught the attention of the local authority who saw a potential avenue for collaboration, and the possibility of Hanley Youth Project benefiting from early intervention investment. Unusual for the time and not seen since, the local authority social service team responded by committing some of their annual budget into the first ever holiday 'playschemes' in North Staffordshire to stave off the constant battle of child hunger, family pressures and risks of harm young people were facing in the local area. Importantly these schemes were funded by the local authority but were otherwise autonomous from them.

This was an innovative (and some would say risky) approach by the local authority to invest money into a community run children's service, however their visionary outlook saw the potential benefits of expanding and reaching into disconnected communities further. The 'Playscheme' service run by the charity was then enhanced with additional funding through an 'urban aid' grant to develop a pioneering non-statutory 'detached youth work' service that worked with young people in Bothen and was run by HYP's streetwise staff and volunteers. It was apparent at the time that the universality of such service provision was the key to helping to address potential risks to young people in spaces beyond their homes.

The community was determined that the young people of Bothen needed a space to come together and recreate, and this galvanised the community into action. The asset transfer of the land into the community ownership was as a result of lobbying and campaigning and the subsequent acquisition meant that the erection of a building and an adventure playground could start in earnest. After completion of the build a quick succession of groups started to emerge such as coffee mornings, toddler play and stays, junior and youth clubs and weekend activities and events. The holidays were a particular pressure point for the social work teams locally and it was they who saw the potential of a localised 'hub' in a hot spot area meeting the needs of children and families, and reliving pressure. This was the starting point and then year on year the services started to expand from that point onwards. The initial funding ignited change and empowered the voluntary committee to build additional services beyond their immediate neighbourhood. In essence they became a voluntary sector service provider for the wider community.

This was the late 1970s and early intervention and multi-agency collaboration hadn't a particular name at this time, but it was evident that the residents of Bothen had rolled up their sleeves and begun to build 'contextual safety' - since described as 'community development'.

Investment and recognition

By the late 1980s HYPs services across Stoke-on-Trent had branched out into to 24 neighbourhood open access holiday playschemes and a comprehensive detached youth work team covering the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent with a weekly street-based presence working with young people in 'hot spot' areas. It was felt by young people, and evidenced by their street presence, that the role of many centre-based youth work provisions often had educational or religious agendas not compatible with the needs of all young people. In lieu of suitable youth provision young people were being exposed to harm.

The proceeding years that followed saw the organisation grow in stature, its impact on communities was being noticed by the local authority and national youth organisations. The knowledge and the recognised experience elevated the organisations professional standing, the years of investment of frontline delivery and development saw nine annual national Detached Youth Work training seminars hosted and supported by Keele University. This presented the organisation with the opportunity to export the approach and philosophy of working in community settings with under-invested young people, to other street-based intervention services. This subsequently became a national network, which evolved in later years into 'The Federation for Detached Youth Work' a charity in which today we hold trustee status, and which leads nationally on this specific aspect of youth work.

This alternative method of reaching vulnerable young people was gathering momentum and culminated in the local authority absorbing the charity, giving it its very own Leisure and Recreation services department and budget to grow across the city in 1988. The work then accelerated both in service output provision and for the proceeding 12 years expansion and co-production saw many innovations emerge. One such was the academically acclaimed services of 'Playwork' and 'Streetsport'. This project used sport within community environments identified by professional agencies as a corridor into marginalised neighbourhoods, providing a vehicle to build 'trusted' relationships whilst effectively intervening and steering young people away from potential harmful influences from peers.



Academic Publications of the work of Sporting Communities and Hanley Youth Project

Investing in and empowering communities to act for themselves was a central part of the development of this work, unlocking human assets within communities and leading to city-wide community-led social action groups emerging. Potteries in Play (PIP) was one such community-led pressure group that formed a network of local community groups who were championing the right of children to play freely in their communities whilst supporting and safeguarding children through trained local volunteer playleaders. This collective of social action volunteers generated significant notoriety and played a part in the later de-selecting of the political leadership of the city council, such was the nature of people power at this time.

The relationship with the local authority abruptly ended in 2009 when the then political leadership made a fatal decision to dismantle and compartmentalise the whole system of approach which were intertwined and interdependent in both staffing and budget. This had a reversing effect on a now established community development approach, reducing services to zero in many cases. This had a detrimental effect on the wellbeing and community cohesion of many children and families who were reliant on the universal nature of the play and youth provision.

Re-inventing the wheel

This fracture in the public services that had kept children and young people safe has had and continues to have a long-lasting detrimental effect in Stoke-on-Trent as evidenced in many since publicly produced documents. However in 2012 the founder members of HYP alongside a new generation of impassioned workers reformed into an ethical company Sporting Communities CIC. Brandishing the same philosophy, energy, and commitment for community development the team began to build up the process again from the vestiges of HYP. Working across Staffordshire, Cheshire and Derbyshire the team at Sporting Communities embarked on delivering detached youth work and holiday provision - seeking to provide a meaningful alternative against the growing tide of societal disconnection.

Today, Sporting Communities CIC represents the largest Detached Youth Work provider across Derby City and Derbyshire. Through an evolutionary process we have developed a 'hub and spoke' approach, centralising our operations in the heart of a city park called Normanton. This small park has its fair share of difficulties, and social challenges, however it's not a no-go zone, the daytime footfall is high, and on the surface, it is a model for what parks should represent.



Sporting Communities Community Service provision 'hub' at Normanton Park Derby

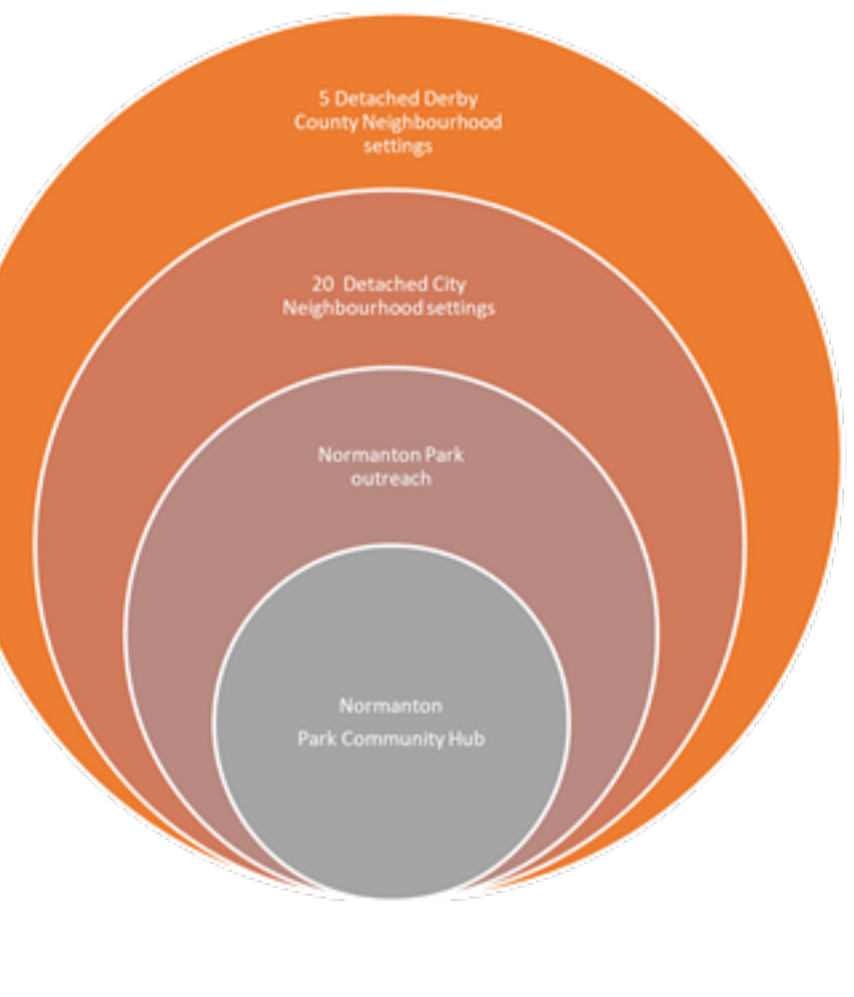
However, at night time the use of the park by predominantly young, male drug users and discarded apparatus and needles creates an anxiety within the community with many raised concerns from local residents and frequent 'call outs' of the local PCSOs. Our services being 'placed based' within the neighbourhood is not therefore by accident, it is by design we have purposely transformed the building located in the centre of Normanton Park and designated it as a 'community hub' upgrading the resource both inside and out, and have made the space universal with a therapeutic aspect providing a focus on counselling, family support, youth work and playwork delivery and training. The messaging is clear to the community that our services are omnipresent, designed with their needs in mind and are there to provide challenge, support, and sanctuary for those who needed it.

Our outreach and detached team then work as a 'spoke' model with young people both within the park and beyond, either taking services or resources to them on our mobile units encouraging self-referral into our support team. From the Normanton Park 'hub' we are then able to act as the bridging link to more specialised services if required.



Our specifically designed Youth Work Vehicle which provided both universal and specialised services within communities.

This correlation is key to the success of the delivery, the trust and stewardship of relationships between the young people our staff and specialist services is delicate but skillfully negotiated within this environment.



Holistic Service Menu

- Counselling
- Family support
- Mentoring
- Volunteering
- Training
- Social Action
- Diversionary Activities
- Youth work
- Playwork

Conclusions?

So, nearly 50 years later we find ourselves repeating our approach, albeit in a new location, but heartbreakingly dealing with the same issues across all our delivery areas. The question I find myself musing with, is why our society has progressed so little, with the same issues remaining unresolved, if not deepened?

Investment into nurturing genuine face to face relationships within communities is critical to moving forward to build human resilience and protective factors. Providing a universal supportive family/community environment would surely be more economically astute than costly targeted interventions. If COVID 19 has taught us anything, is that when pressed as a society the natural human condition is to act with empathy kindness and compassion. So, if this is the case how do we continue resource that genuine spirit of community self-determination and safety, fundamental to a contextual safeguarding approach?

Do we need as a society to change our focus from the 'Me to We' and lean into the discomfort of becoming less risk adverse and put more trust and investment into the voluntary sector or communities?

Present initiatives such as 'levelling up' should be the blue touch paper which ignites change not only in the physicality of a place but in the opportunities for the people occupying that space. There is an opportunity to move towards a society that invests in universal services that could prevent a range of harms that young people might face in extra-familial contexts.

Should we lobby our leaders to re-examine what really works and embrace a new commissioning approach? Or demand that we unilaterally co-design with communities' new statutory services, moving away from traditional approaches that always seem to be drowning in caseloads, towards alternative community-led approaches?

The services that exist that are often delivering safeguarding initiatives in extra-familial contexts are often organisations from the VCSE sector - widely acknowledged as providing soft outcomes and universal services. It is these organisations which effectively and consistently deliver early intervention, and who are by and large solely reliant on meagre grants to maintain any service continuity. This highly skilled and nuanced workforce is of significant fiscal and human value, treasured by the communities they serve but at times viewed by the state with a benign ambivalence. It seems that the innovation of the social services teams in the 1970s who saw the value of working with the root causes of social problems, has somehow been forgotten.

We need as a society to rethink not only our priorities toward community life but also the proportionality of available resources to support the operations of voluntary led early intervention, not as a separate entity but integral to an overall system approach. Is it not time that there is a political consensus that young people, communities, and families are all intrinsically linked, worth our commitment and investment?

None of us can afford another 50 years of service disconnection and risks to young people in their peer groups, schools and communities, before we realise that the answer lies in aligned statutory investment into localised community driven projects. True partnership is urgently required, investing and devolving budgets and responsibility into those within the VCSE sector with the skills and localised knowledge to make a real difference to their own communities is surely the future?

