

2010

Bloomsbury Cyber Junction (BCJ), Nechells



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Winner – Successful community engagement

Summary

Set up by local residents, BCJ expanded from youth activities to providing computer-based learning, and now works with almost 700 individuals each year. To demonstrate the impact its services have in the local area, it quantifies economic benefits using social accounting techniques. A case study of a Level 1 CLAIT computer course client who gained employment showed that, over five years, the £3,657 invested in support and training translated into £33,086 of economic value added – £9 generated for every £1 spent, a calculation known as Social Return On Investment (SROI), which in 2007 totalled £3.92m, over 20 times BCJ's income.

Background

The Nechells ward of inner-city Birmingham is high on the index of multiple deprivation. Although it has a comparatively young population, the district's health and mortality statistics are high in comparison to the rest of Birmingham and unemployment is more than 20 per cent. The Bloomsbury area of Nechells has approximately 900 households; 66% of the population of the Bloomsbury and Bordesley area is from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.

The original terraced housing of the Bloomsbury area was demolished shortly after the Second World War and replaced by multi-storey flats and maisonettes, including a new Health Centre and shops during the 1950s. This neighbourhood soon showed a range of problems; the Heartlands Development Corporation carried out extensive refurbishment, and in the 1990s, the Bournville Village Trust undertook redevelopment which included a new Health Centre, shops and housing.

In 2000, petty vandalism, nuisance and crime in the area were the subject of constant comment and concern, and in response to the lack of facilities for young people, residents resolved to provide diversionary and educational activities for them. Their motivation from the beginning was to secure a better more integrated and inclusive community in an area of mixed race. The group set about their task by engaging positively with disadvantaged, excluded and isolated ethnic groups living within the neighbourhood.

The work was led by one resident, the current CEO of BCJ, who encouraged other local residents to volunteer their time. Initially they provided local young people with informal and formal activities such as sport and computing, based at premises in Oliver Road, Bloomsbury, acquired on a rent free basis from Nechells United Reformed Church. The activities were both novel and otherwise inaccessible to the young people; they included,

despite minimal funding, educational visits outside their immediate surroundings. Charity registration was obtained in 2001.

Having demonstrated to themselves that they could successfully engage with young people, the group began to turn their attention to the number of unemployed or economically inactive individuals in the area, and the isolation faced by certain ethnic groups, notably amongst young mothers with families. Successful bids for funding were made in 2003 in order to employ staff to support the considerable voluntary effort and develop the organisation and its services. Although limited in scale, the premises have been developed into a very functional drop in resource centre which provides an informal environment now well equipped for introducing people to ICT and receiving formal training in using the medium.

Additional funding was secured through ESF programmes, enabling BCJ to employ seven staff at its peak in 2006, when its annual budget rose to £200,000. Of the individuals helped during the course of the year, 85% were from BME communities and 75% of these were not economically active.

Significantly the organisation:

- Was accredited with OCR to deliver ICT vocational training courses
- Was accredited by Matrix for its IAG services
- Became a UK Online Centre
- Became members of Nextstep and Aimhigher Birmingham and Solihull
- Achieved Level 2 Quality Standard PQASSO

Against this background of achievement and local recognition of its effectiveness, the organisation was invited to manage the Phoenix Learning Centre (PLC) in Bordesley and since 2006 this has been an integral part of BCJ. Together the two centres offer 30 computer workstations, 18 of which are at Bloomsbury and 12 at Bordesley.

Case study detail

Currently the organisation has one full time member of staff and two part time tutors, as well as six volunteers. Between them, they provide services for about 700 individuals a year – comprising approximately 300 young people and 400 others who take advantage of the computer training and advice and guidance. In 2007 BCJ worked in partnership with 11 other organisations, for example holding outreach sessions at Neighbourhood Offices and Jobcentre Plus, to ensure a good service to its clients.

Using its IT facilities, the charity provides the following services:

- CLAIT computer courses (Level 1 qualifications) four times a week, Pre-CLAIT courses (Entry Level 1-3 qualifications) twice a week and CLAIT Plus courses (Level 2 qualifications) three times a week
- European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) courses
- Outreach computer courses at Employment Preparation Team for individuals with learning difficulties/disabilities
- Employment Support Services – including providing references and making telephone calls on behalf of clients
- Information, advice and guidance
- Free internet access and computer usage during twice-weekly drop in sessions
- Help with job search skills, interview techniques, CV preparation, completing application forms and writing formal letters
- Workshops on using the internet, sending emails, using Word and Spreadsheets

- Literacy and Numeracy Support
- Development of personal skills (self confidence, motivation, aspirations, self esteem, team working skills, problem solving skills), with one-to-one mentoring available
- Youth club - including internet use, web site design and art and graphics workshops

During 2007, 163 computer qualifications were achieved, with 134 local residents increasing their qualification levels. In addition, BCJ supported 47 clients in job search and job interview training, provided information for 73 clients on job vacancies, and supported 34 clients to develop their CVs, resulting in 42 clients gaining employment.

Other work included providing over 250 advice sessions and 139 outreach sessions, and dealing with more than 2,400 information requests. The project supported 288 clients to develop their 'soft skills', was able to refer 79 clients to other services, and helped 44 clients with letter writing, completing application forms and passports. Another 43 clients were given support with IT queries.

Funding for youth activities was in short supply in 2007, but £12,700 from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) enabled twice-weekly football and Kung Fu sessions, and other one-off activities. The project's training and advice services were able to support eight young people who were not in education employment or training (NEET) and another six young people who were not attending school, with the result that three returned to mainstream school, two progressed to further education courses, and eight gained employment (with only one subsequently leaving that employment).

Evaluation and performance measures

Through its "Achieve" project (funded through Birmingham City Council) BCJ helped 187 individuals against a target to assist 100 individuals. For its "B Ahead" project (again funded by Birmingham City Council) the target was to help 185 individuals, but BCJ assisted 270 individuals, with 130 progressing to other training and 52 securing employment.

BCJ has developed clear statements of its mission, values and objectives which allow it to measure whether it is fulfilling its aims. These are laid out in its annual report (see link below) and cover partnership working, organisational sustainability, and a range of help for young people and other unemployed and disadvantaged people in the local community.

The Birmingham Chamber of Commerce REALISE programme made BCJ aware of the potential of social accounting techniques to help evidence the impact of its work. BCJ's annual report summarises the opinions of its stakeholders about its services, and Social Return On Investment (SROI) calculations enable it to quantify the social benefits it produces.

A young man who had been unemployed for a long period chose to cross the road and arrived outside BCJ's centre, where he saw and took up computer training. From Level 1 CLAIT, with the support of BCJ staff, he progressed to enrol on Hardware and Software computer courses at the University of Birmingham, and now volunteers at the centre because "I reckon that I have to give something back to the centre which has totally transformed my life".

The progress of Freda, a Level 1 CLAIT client, illustrates how the calculations work. Freda was very quiet and nervous when she first enrolled on the course, but she gradually became more confident, her self-esteem and communication skills improved, and she successfully completed the course, which led to her gaining part-time employment in an

administration role. The investment by BCJ in her support and training was £3,657 – but the economic value added over five years was £33,086, calculated as follows:

- improved ‘soft skills’ provide savings of £3,310 for an employer through reducing the need for training
- improved qualifications improve an individual’s earning potential – this is valued at £2,756 per year
- the value of obtaining employment is calculated from income, plus additional tax and national insurance contributions received by the Treasury, minus tax credits; the resulting figure is reduced by 40% to take into consideration what would happen anyway and the proportion of clients that drop out of employment

The result of the calculation can be expressed as SROI of £9 for every £1 invested. For some of BCJ’s other clients the SROI is far greater – for example, for a young person who returns to education or gains employment, the SROI is nearly £40 for every £1 invested.

Overall for all services, in 2007 BCJ achieved SROI of over £20 for every £1 invested, with a total economic impact of £3.92m from an income of just over £189k.

What has worked well

Mainstream agencies use BCJ to help them engage with ‘hard to reach’ groups. BCJ is so successful at engaging the community that it has become the first port of call for local residents regardless of what their query is. Residents contact BCJ for support with wider issues such as neighbourhood disputes, immigration problems and debt issues as well as for support with developing new skills and employment advice. BCJ listens to local residents and delivers its services in a flexible and individually-tailored way but also professionally and to a high quality. Its youth activities and outreach sessions bring it into contact with people that would not otherwise receive support.

BCJ has been successful at engaging with a wide range of ethnic groups from the local community, including newly arrived communities from Europe, Iran and Somalia, because it treats everyone as an individual and cares about the issues each person is facing.

The community benefits from social impacts through building self esteem, confidence and motivation, and other ‘soft skills’. Appreciative comments from local residents include “the centre helped me to become motivated and develop necessary skills for employment” and “I am able to move forward with my disability because of the skills I gained through the centre”.

The challenges

Local residents had seen a number of regeneration projects come and go over the previous ten years, promising much but delivering little impact on the lives of local people, who were understandably disengaged and apathetic. Setting up the centre was a step in the right direction but it took a lot of persistence, particularly since mainstream organisations also were very sceptical about what residents could achieve.

Although some of the activity described above was the subject of funding by Enterprising Communities, the Big Lottery, Birmingham City Council and Nextstep, the remainder was not funded. The charity also has no funding which specifically covers work with the community to encourage participation, for example, attending community events, community cohesion and community facilitation activities such as conflict management support for neighbour disputes. In addition, funding has tended to be relatively short term and this introduces an unwelcome level of uncertainty to the project.

Despite all this, the charity has worked with thousands of local people, enabling their personal development and providing a stepping stone to a brighter future.

Learning Points

- BCJ ascribes its successful engagement with the community to an emphasis on outreach, treating everyone as an individual and caring about the issues each is facing
- Trust and honesty are used to build positive relationships
- For young people who return to education or gain employment, the SROI is nearly £40 for every £1 invested
- Be Birmingham (the Birmingham strategic partnership) funded intensive support and training in social accounting for social enterprises such as BCJ
- Social accounts are independently verified

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