

## Cluster Group Meetings October 2021

### Introduction

On 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> October 2021, 13 people from 12 organisations attended 2 online LINKS Cluster Group Meetings.

During these meetings attendees shared updates regarding how they were coping with the restrictions that the COVID 19 pandemic has placed on everyone, the challenges they faced and issues arising from this unusual situation.

The Cluster Group Meetings were also a way of checking in with staff in the grant aided organisations to see what other support NCB could offer at this time as well as a way of giving and receiving support from peers. An update on the LINKS Young People Advisory Group was also provided.

### LINKS Young People Advisory Group

Further information on the LINKS YPAG can be found here:

<https://www.ncb.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/ncb-northern-ireland/links/links-young-people-advisory-group>

If interested, please contact Gill Hassard on [gassard@ncb.org.uk](mailto:gassard@ncb.org.uk)

### Engaging Families

There was some discussion on how grant holders are providing more support to families, not just young people. One organisation working with families of children with SEND started training for parents on the autism journey and the diagnosis process as they were overwhelmed with the lack of support. Some families were waiting 18 months before their children were being assessed.

One grant holder engages parents at the start of the process, contacting them first, asking for their child's phone number and then all contact continues with the young person through a programme WhatsApp group. This gives the young person ownership as they are at an age that they want more independence and are less likely to drop out of the programme. They also send update emails to parents to keep them in the loop.

Another organisation has helped to support a lot more families during the pandemic in navigating the universal credit system, which they hadn't used before. Families were going 6 weeks without any income. This type of support opened some doors in working with whole families.

Organisations have also been supporting young people with setting up bank accounts etc.

### **Impact of COVID on Organisations**

Many organisations were experiencing staff shortages due to COVID which resulted in having to cancel youth club sessions etc.

Some organisations are still not able to do face to face work as they young people that they work with have severe complex needs or illnesses such as Type 1 diabetes.

With more organisations continuing or re-starting face-to-face engagement, there was discussion on the increased work involved in risk assessments and COVID declaration forms etc.

Some organisations found that it has been hard to work on a project online with young people and to keep up engagement. With one organisation, this drop in engagement resulted in looking at their structure – they recruited Young Leaders with support from staff and 2 co-chairs carried out a review of the project to find out what the young people wanted from the project.

Some organisations found emergency funding from the government and the Lottery helped to fund activities to keep in contact with young people during lockdown.

There was some discussion on volunteering during COVID. Recruiting volunteers is a large time investment and some grant holders have found recently that there is not as much uptake. Regional recruitment rather than localised targeting may also have impacted the level of volunteering. They have been trying to adapt their programmes with fewer volunteers as people don't have the same availability as they had pre-pandemic.

Organisations were also not using volunteers during lockdown as it didn't work with online delivery. Some organisations noticed that, when face-to-face engagement re-started, lots of volunteers dropped out as lives had changed and people weren't going out as much during the week. Young people are also able to earn a lot more money than they used to for part time work due to the current labour shortage. Young people getting decent paid work is the priority.

Teresa suggested circulating opportunities to geographic Lottery group via their Lottery grants officer. LINKS can circulate recruitment information also.

Some organisations are finding that staff retention is a problem. There are plenty of jobs available at the moment and turnover seems to be high.

Another challenge for one organisation coming out of the pandemic restrictions has been partnership working. Different organisations are working at different paces and have different guidelines post-COVID. This can be frustrating if a project is funded for a finite timeline of 2/3 years. They have been delivering online but are keen to get face-to-face sooner than some of their partner organisations would like. Extensions from the Lottery are often welcome to organisations in this type of situation.

### **Impact of COVID on Young People**

Many organisations are finding that the young people they work with are a bit lost and they are excited to have somewhere they can go to, to socialise.

One organisation working with bereaved young people are inundated with requests from schools for support through group work or one-to-one support. There is a huge impact of COVID on families through bereavement and loss. This organisation is also seeing interest from schools for children with autism. They are working with the schools on how to connect with the young people to deal with their grief and loss.

There was some discussion on the support young people were getting from their further education colleges. One organisation found that some young people were going back to courses for qualifications that they had already achieved.

Another organisation has been offering corporate family care awareness training as they have found that government departments don't understand the depth of needs of vulnerable looked after young people in FE settings.

Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was taken away when young people were not engaging with courses but the removal of EMA didn't take account of the effect of digital poverty, when young people had to share phones etc.

### **Human Trafficking**

One organisation works with young people to discourage them to make choices that are bad for them and to spot signs of trafficking. Some of the young people in secure care are court ordered to take part in the programme but some make the choice not to turn up.

One grant holder is doing lots of lobbying work on the Modern Slavery Act and the DoJ's National Referral Mechanism (NRM). To be legally considered as having been trafficked, a victim has to fill in an NRM form but young people cannot fill it in themselves. The young people end up re-telling their story and re-living their trauma again and again.

### **Suggestions for the LINKS Programme**

- Recorded workshops

### **AOB**

The group shared information on the following:

- Upcoming LINKS workshop on self-care for practitioners in November.
- The new approach for the LINKS YPAG and the new Lottery young people's group
- Taking Boys Seriously conference run by Ulster University, via Zoom <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/conference/taking-boys-seriously-2021>
- Lottery funding, Living Places and Spaces <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/living-places-and-spaces>
- Lottery funding, Together for our Planet <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/together-for-our-planet>
- NCB's research project on the Impact of COVID-19 on Young People with SEND: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/news-opinion/impact-covid-19-children-and-young-people-special-educational>