

Engagement to Develop Programs vs. Programs to Develop Engagement: Community Development with Young People

Strelein A*

City of Swan, Western Australia, Australia

Abstract

'Youth development' is widely used to describe types of *activities* that attempt to engage young people in order to assist in their positive development. The City of Swan instead applies the term more as *community development with young people*. The city has developed a model focussed on creating and supporting opportunities for communities to develop their own youth activities, rather than local governments themselves running them.

The City of Swan youth development model, by coming back to core community development principles, is creating active, committed communities working to enhance the opportunities for their local young people. This is most evident by the fact that within the city there are four independent community-based youth services/centres, and other significant community-based youth initiatives.

This paper will outline this approach particularly using a case example of recent youth development work in one local suburb, and outline an innovative new program and practices supporting communities and community groups to maintain independence.

While the term community can be appropriately used to describe a vast range of populations in common, for the purpose of this paper the word community refers to populations sharing a common geographic location.

Keywords

Young, youth, development, Swan, engagement

Exploring a 'problem' — Youth development as activity and program delivery

For a number of years there has been a growing practice of 'youth development', mostly by local governments and community-based agencies, working under community development banners, but where a rapid succession of group-based programs and activities are rolled out in the hope they will 'engage' either new or targeted populations of young people.

More often than not this creates a participation base consisting of young people 'in the loop' or those for who group-based 'programs for all' are of appeal. Often no matter what the variety, this can result in the same young people attending. And for the rest, their non-participation is made up of a mix of unawareness, irrelevance, discomfort with or detachment from the programs being designed for them. Moreover, this continual provision of programs for a community manifests over time as community disempowerment; an absence of any sense of community responsibility for its young people, or of young people for themselves.

The trend for endless programs and activities in recent years may have stemmed from a growing adult-held belief that a 'solution' to ensure young people's successful development into adulthood is a process of 'occupying their time'; that we just need to keep them busy through troubled times.

What we may have lost sight of in this however is any significant consideration for either the relevance of the activities being provided, or the way in which they are targeted. Blanket statements from needs assessments recommending "more things for young people to do" seem somehow to translate in action to "we have solved the problem of you having a lack of things to do — so long as you like hip hop, are free Wednesday afternoons, can get to the community centre, and see this poster in the first place".

Where does this leave the vast majority of young people in a community who don't meet the above criteria? Unfortunately in most cases, the same approach continues in an endless effort to 'engage' — let's try basketball on Tuesdays, kickboxing on Thursdays, and so on.

Before continuing, it should be clarified that activity options *are* necessary. The problem can be where, in an attempt to get all young people 'engaged' we have every agency rolling out option after option, and no one addressing why it is that with a veritable glut of programs, it still seems to end up with only a small percentage of young people participating. The programs and activities are still needed — but we need to overhaul how, why and by whom they are being implemented.

As community practitioners, how can we possibly engage a community and its young people effectively via this approach — by a few of them turning up for a quick fix of activity? What added capacity has been built within these young people or their community? At what point in this widely applied practice are we considering young people to have been 'engaged'? It seems the engagement only occurs at participation. Young people, and in fact their whole community up until the point of participation, are being disengaged from the process and thereby disempowered. Where is their self-determination, their motivations, or their interests being considered in this approach?

So it has to be asked, are we just developing programs to attempt engagement as an end in itself? Or even more of a conversation starter: even if this approach did achieve some significant level of engagement, what is the engagement achieving for the young people or the community involved?

A step in the right direction — Community development *for* young people

As with community development in any demographic, community development in relation to young people isn't a miracle elixir. It doesn't suddenly provide an application to every situation — programs and services at times still need to be provided *for* a community, but it is more that the amount of impetus being initiated *within* a community is much greater.

What we are finding in the City of Swan is that this approach is resulting in more active communities producing more options and opportunities for their young people, while still ensuring base levels of activity and opportunity are always being provided from outside sources where necessary. From a basic perspective, the approach is essentially that *wherever possible*, every support will be given to communities to develop and implement their own initiatives with their young people, rather than provided for them.

The youth development approach is part of a wider, articulated framework of practice supported throughout the organisation in practice, policy and in structure. The city has a dedicated Community Development Business Unit devoid of any service provision responsibilities, and sits within the Strategic Community Planning Division. While cooperation and interaction across the city structure is still ensured, the community services that the city provides instead sit alongside other services including libraries and recreation centres, leaving the community development staff to focus on the application of community development principles within communities.

The youth development approach was only formalised and endorsed by the council in recent years, at a crossroads when many local governments were trending towards in-house service and program delivery. But the decision to go with a community development approach was not difficult, as the city is benefited by a long history of communities working for themselves on youth initiatives. Particularly in our older communities, there are community groups that have been working on less traditional youth initiatives for many years. As an example, two of our older communities with large youth populations have each operated community-based youth services for well over a decade, with one having its young people very significantly involved in determining the programs and activities at the service.

This historical and natural manifestation of community development was more recently threatened however when the rapid development of newer communities began. The trend towards mass estate development, or 'instant suburbs' accelerates the need for activities and options much faster than any speed at which 'sense' of community, or social capital can naturally develop or mobilise itself. This is a key factor responsible in the modern practice of mass-produced activities and programs for communities — as a response where communities have a short history and inadequate capacity to draw on in order to service themselves.

Where the City of Swan was fortunate in this regard was in having strong 'examples' to draw upon from the older communities to model and exemplify to newer communities, rather than trying to sell them a contemporary rhetoric or promise of a 'better way'. We were able to successfully hold at bay loud and demanding calls to 'take over' or 'provide for', by utilising these other local successes.

At this point a potential criticism should also be attended to — that this approach amounts to 'well-worded inaction'. We do not consider this approach in any way a cop-out or a way to reduce our own resourcing of young people in our communities. In fact, to support this community development approach to youth development the city has increased its human and financial resourcing to youth development in the past three years by more than 300 per cent. In addition, resourcing was restructured to focus more specifically on this approach.

The city has four core youth development officers, including a coordinator, whose roles focus on supporting communities to develop, implement and sustain their own initiatives. In specific support of youth services and agencies working with at-risk young people, the city also employs two youth workers who support agency staff and volunteers and provide expertise in working with particular young people. In addition to this, the city currently provides intensive assistance to two developing community organisations, administrating their staff while their capacity to self-manage is developed. Furthermore, we provide financial and resource assistance to support numerous other community groups for their initiatives through our grants program and other partnership initiatives. As such, our structure and our practices reinforce a strong philosophical approach to supporting communities to develop initiatives themselves rather than to provide for them.

By taking such a strong stance, with our standard response to requests to 'do something' clearly stated: "we will *not* do this for you, but we will do everything possible to ensure you are able to do it for yourselves", our newer communities are also starting to mobilise strongly. In the past two years, as well as the older communities, the other two newer large communities with significant youth populations (Ballajura and Ellenbrook) have also successfully rallied around numerous

initiatives for young people, including the beginnings of their own community-based youth services.

Case study: Ballajura

Ballajura was one of the earliest estate developments approved by the City of Swan, and has been fully developed for around a decade now. Originally a suburb of predominantly young families, the children are now predominantly young people — 3954 of them at last count — who grew up in a period where the social planning was nowhere near as considered as the structural planning that approved the isolated suburb initially. This resulted in a highly inadequate level of access to social services and opportunities, which now need to be caught up on.

With community disquiet reaching crisis point a few years ago, the only real mobilisation of community around young people was in the form of a small number of volunteers struggling to keep the doors open on a Friday activity night for young people, plus a few other important local stakeholders — but that was enough to seed a success story.

While the initial calls were for the city to provide services ‘like other local governments do’, the success of community-driven initiatives in our older communities underpinned discussions with community members including young people to build and affirm a commitment to ‘make things happen’ for themselves. Seed funding was initially secured with assistance from the city, for some local staffing assistance to support the volunteers and programs more intensely. The city agreed to administer the staffing for a short period while staff worked within the community to establish its organisational structures to enable it to self-manage its initiatives. This is now being realised and the community is now in a strong position to determine, drive and manage its own youth affairs.

While this group undertakes numerous projects, such as recently employing a new Youth and Family Engagement Worker to work with particular families within Ballajura, in the specific example of the Friday night activity option, this has now expanded into a fully equipped centre with three staff, a management committee including young people, and is open Monday to Friday. This has been achieved to date without any core funding, which is the current focus of the management committee to achieve. Along with this focus is a push by young people for a purpose built facility for the service, to be designed and hopefully managed by local young people. The young people are already negotiating community partnerships around the project, with the local community college donating land and intending to share in the use of the facility with the community-based youth service and other potential stakeholders.

More recent success in a similar facility example is taking place in the much newer community of Ellenbrook, where a developing community group has already secured and refitted donated buildings for a youth centre and engaged young people in developing their own ideas for use of the facility. In addition to this they also have local young people self-determining several other initiatives, for example a local SMS-based employment initiative and local youth magazine.

The real challenge — Community development *with* young people

In reinforcing a community development approach to youth development, the city strives to promote to community groups the need to engage with their young people before programs or initiatives are considered; to allow young people to self-determine priorities they feel their community can assist them with.

This is a difficult step. No matter how mindful they are, the 'best intentions' of a community group can still threaten to manifest locally as another set of programs determined by a select few, "for the benefit of others", as introduced in this paper as the problem in the first instance.

So of equal importance for the city to keep initiatives community-based, are efforts to keep the initiatives themselves youth determined — the result of youth engagement as the precursor to activity, not the end-product of activity.

The city is striving to be highly innovative in this regard, from its localised planning through to the practices of our staff and the programs we implement ourselves — the intent is to encourage and reinforce communities to allow young people to determine for themselves how and what they participate in.

For community groups and agencies this can be difficult to enact at times, and is not supported by most of the other structures and processes they work within. One clear example of this is the grant funding on which they are heavily reliant, and is inevitably focussed on program and activity outcomes — forcing clearly defined and packaged programs that inevitably cater to a certain target group to the exclusion of others.

It was of concern to the city how many separate groups were chasing small funding to run very similar packages of programs and activities — all targeting a very similar and limited demographic of young people.

Case study: Access All Areas

Extensive discussions on the above issues were held with groups and agencies on this issue, which highlighted their shared frustration at this — seeing so many young people ‘missing out’ because they didn’t fit the mould for which the populist activity funding was being provided.

This led to the development of an innovative initiative by the City: Access All Areas. It is a simple but highly effective program that allows community groups and agencies to engage with individual young people first, and then allow the young person to self-determine options they would like to participate in.

It is a highly flexible program that overcomes two major barriers for agencies with limited time and resources but trying to achieve multiple outcomes for young people they work with: a) ready access to information; and b) easy access to small amounts of funding.

Access All Areas has two main components to address each of these barriers: firstly an exhaustive and frequently updated register of activities and programs determined by the interests expressed by young people themselves; and secondly a monetary fund to reimburse recreation providers who accept Access All Areas ‘passes’ as valid tender for chosen activities or programs. In practice, it means a young person can be engaged with and amongst the general discussions an agency may broach with them over time, activity interests can be raised and any barriers to the young person’s participation explored. The young person is free to express their interests and the agency able to use Access All Areas to source information on options within their area of interest, and where monetary barriers exist, utilise the fund to enable a first period of access to an activity. During this first period they are encouraged to save their own resources to be in a position to continue the activity in the longer term, introducing sustainability to the activities.

As well as the advantage to the young person of personalised activity options, it also advantages the community groups and agencies by freeing them up to focus on their core business and efforts for young people, rather than spending time on researching and resourcing group activity options that are inevitably not ideal for each individual.

We are now observing a lot more involvement by young people in the direction and management of local initiatives, which seems to be spurring on more confidence in expressing their ideas and recommending actions they wish to undertake and have supported in future. This is a current development, and the city is now moving to incorporate other new practices to further expand this opportunity for young people to communicate their ideas and self determine their local initiatives.

Closing thoughts

Within the focus of this topic, two steps or challenges are considered important for a community desiring to achieve the best enhancement of opportunities for and capacity of its young people.

The first, and a good achievement even if the second is not fully realised, is that a community's efforts for local young people are community-based, that full control is not given away to external 'providers'. Giving away this responsibility can mean that young people in communities will continually have people providing for them 'in their best interests' and wondering why young people don't engage.

Secondly, that a community's young people are in fact the drivers of the process, or at least are engaged from the outset, to determine for themselves how, when and what should be done.

As potential facilitators and promoters of such an approach, governance bodies, and particularly local government, needs to ensure its structures, practices, processes and programs all work towards the end — to consider youth development not as a limitless list of activities and options for young people, but as a community development practice that engages young people first, so that community can act locally second.

The City of Swan makes no claim to be doing it right just yet. But at present we feel we are able to offer these observations from our communities in recent years, and the approach we have employed. We certainly assess that it has delivered enough positive successes within communities to see us more fully embrace this approach in the future, and see it embedded in all our efforts with community.

The ideal will be to achieve a supportive and empowering enough environment where young people can be given full control as to what takes place in local youth affairs. Whether the city can get to that point, time will tell.