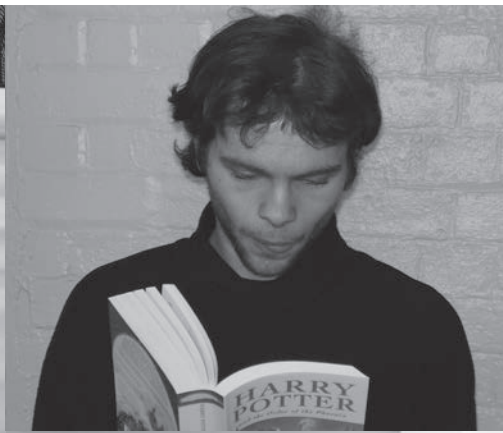




Learning the Lessons



how young people taught us everything we needed to know



Centre for Lifelong Learning
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The Warren - Hull
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INTRODUCTION

Hull has been my home for ten years. It's a city that persistently comes low in the league tables, at the top of the worst tables and the bottom of the best ones (see Appendix A). Despite the millions of pounds being invested in regeneration, Hull still faces enormous problems. None of these is more pressing than the issues in the educational levels of the population:

Despite significant improvements since 2000, Hull has one of the lowest skilled populations in the sub-region and a low skill occupational structure. The percentage of working age people with NVQ3 or above in Hull is 33%, against a GB figure of 45%. (Hull City Venture, 2006, p36)

Yet Hull is a pioneering city. There have been many notable changes in recent years. The GCSE pass rates in some schools are increasing; the basic skills levels are improving, and communities have visibly improved through the investment of time and resources. Morale is increasing.

Employment is seen as a priority in Hull: how to attract employers to Hull, and how to make sure that the local workforce has the necessary skills to fill these vacancies. A great deal of emphasis is placed on employment - and rightly so, since it is certainly a significant part of the process of economic and social regeneration. It still needs to be asked, though: what are the employment opportunities? What are employers looking for? Are the right steps being taken to support people in developing these skills?

My area of interest is young people, particularly those young people who feel as if they cannot leave school quickly enough, who never want to return to education, and who have no idea about what they are going to do with their lives. These young people are so disengaged from education that they cannot simply do a 12-week intensive course with a training provider and be levered into employment. Their needs are complex and wide-ranging, and the journey to becoming active, constructive citizens is set to be a long one. In my opinion, these young people are a 'missing layer' – missed by schools,

by colleges, by training providers, and thus also by employers. They are unlikely to enrol into courses voluntarily, and do not comply if they are forced into learning through a government scheme. If they do actually end up in a classroom, they may soon find themselves being asked to leave because they lack the skills necessary to managing in this environment.

Mainstream education providers are working with thousands of young people. However, despite some excellent teachers and exceptional projects, the emphasis is still on one-size-fits-all – but it does *not* - one size does *not* fit all. One size fits some, and the remainder are left to flounder on their own. The commitment to 'widening participation' is well-founded, yet in practice, providers have not yet cast their nets wide enough to engage all young people.

The Warren is a community resource for young people aged 16-25, based in the city centre of Hull. For its 25 years of existence, The Warren has particularly targeted socially-excluded young people, including those disengaged from education and learning. The Warren is interested in all young people; however, it will focus resources on those who are on the margins of society. Hull is unusual to have a Warren - a voluntary sector facility for young adults which is independent and autonomous.

I have been employed at The Warren for ten years, and have managed the Can Do Learning Project for the past five years. The project is funded through Single Regeneration Budget funding (SRB6) and has tough targets about engaging socially-excluded young people in learning. The project is funded for work within The Warren, but it also focuses resources onto ten areas across the city - areas that have been identified as being particularly deprived and in need (e.g., North Bransholme, Boothferry, Bilton Grange, and Greatfield).

The Can Do Project is unique. It is not modelled on any other projects, although lessons have indeed been learned from other such initiatives. It was developed out of The Warren's previous experience with young people, and is located very much in this

context. This pamphlet is written because we feel that we have learned so much, and would like to enter into dialogue with others. We do not claim to have all the answers, but through many experiences of trial and error, we feel that we have at least started to ask the right questions.

OVERVIEW OF PAMPHLET

- Process of development, including philosophy
- Structure of the Can Do Project
- Experiences with young people:
 - What in the first instance engages young people?
 - Building confidence and changing self-concept
 - Raising aspirations
 - How challenging is accreditation?
 - Involving young people in decision-making
 - What is the impact on young people of learning?
- Development of Methodology
 - Are the issues around adult learners the same as those around young people?
 - Quality of relationships, quality of experiences
 - Addressing individual needs & learning styles
 - Grounding the experience – what really happens in practice?
- Influences of theory
 - Importance of reflection: Kolb's learning cycle
 - Carl Rogers and the person-centred approach
 - Paolo Freire and the student-teacher-student
- Conclusion

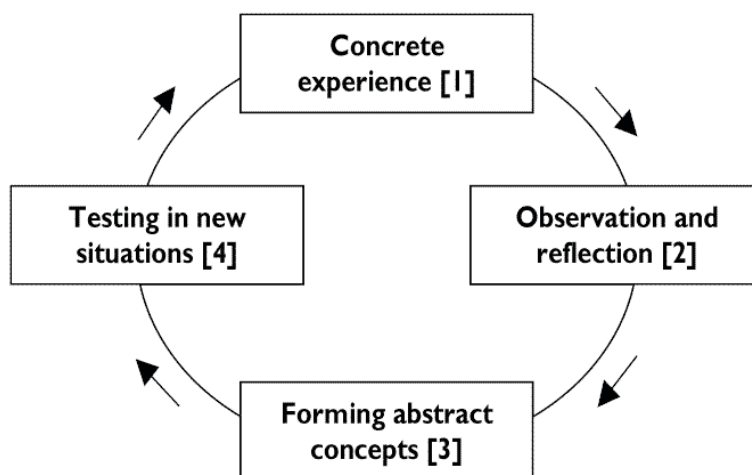
PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT OF CAN DO PROJECT, INCLUDING ITS PHILOSOPHY

Which came first: the theory, practice, ideas, values, philosophy, experience, young people, workers, or targets?

When the Can Do Project began, we were asked to do two things: to find out what would engage socially-excluded young people in learning, and then to do it. The Can Do Project has not developed as a replica of any pre-existing project. We were not given a model to emulate or a theory to follow. We were not asked to establish ourselves as a mini-college or an alternative to training providers. We were given almost free rein to find out what worked and to develop our own methodology.

This pamphlet has grown out of our experience. It is written in the order that the steps have happened – experience came first, and methodology developed from here. This can usefully be seen as a mirror of David Kolb's Learning Cycle:

Diagram 1



Kolb's Learning Cycle
(After Smith, 2005, p1)

In brief, we have tried out approaches and activities with young people [concrete experience], then reflected on and evaluated these [observation and reflection]. From here, we have started to draw some conclusions about what works [forming abstract concepts], and then we have offered some new experiences to young people [testing in new situations]. The cycle continued until we have reached some firmer conclusions that we have started to describe as being our methodology.

There are two additional influences which should be added into Kolb's cycle if it is to be accurate in this context:

- A Philosophy and values
- B Theory.

The theory that has influenced this project will be explored later. However, the guiding philosophy holds the essence of the development of the project, and so will be explained here.

The Warren holds beliefs about young people, and about the potential of young people. These are the 'guiding principles' of the Can Do Project, and are the root cause of why the Can Do Project is structured in the way it is, and why it offers learning in the way it does. In brief, these are:

- We believe that, given the right environment, young people are motivated and want to learn
- We believe that young people are the experts on themselves; as workers, we do not know best
- We believe that young people are more likely to trust, respect and value themselves if they feel genuinely trusted, respected and valued by others
- We believe that young people are able to make their own decisions about themselves, their learning, and the project as a whole

- We believe that there are many factors that will affect a young person's ability to engage in learning; young people will need different types of support to be able to identify and overcome their individual issues
- We believe we can all learn from making mistakes
- We believe that workers can only work in genuinely empowering ways with young people if they too feel empowered. They also need to be trusted, to be able to take risks and to make mistakes, and to be able to be involved in decision-making.

While you are reading this pamphlet, I urge you to hold this philosophy in mind. If you, the reader, hold a different set of beliefs about young people, then this pamphlet may be interesting, although there is a chance that you may disagree with the practice or the theory - you may view us as naïve, ineffective, or even irresponsible. If, however, you concur with this philosophy, then I hope that you will find this pamphlet informative and thought-provoking, and that you may take up the challenge to contribute to the further development of practice, methodology and theory.

STRUCTURE OF THE *CAN DO PROJECT*

Although the Can Do Project has been established as a specific project, it does not stand alone. It is part of The Warren, which has been crucial in terms of structure and development. The Warren has provided a strong infrastructure and support system, and has also made a conscious decision to allow the project its relative autonomy.

The Can Do Project has five staff members paid for by SRB6, and one additional staff member funded by Hull's Connexions Service. All members of staff are recruited through The Warren's well-established recruitment processes; these give young people the majority decision-making powers on interview panels.

Relative autonomy means that project staff members have a great deal of influence in decision-making. Through negotiating with young people, decisions are made about

which courses, workshops and learning residential courses to offer. In turn, this leads to decisions about what equipment and resources to buy, and which sessional tutors to employ. The Can Do Team recruits, manages and supports an extensive bank of sessional tutors, all of whom are employed for their skills in communicating with young people as well as for their specific respective areas of expertise. Volunteers are also recruited and trained. Most of them are these very young people who have previously been involved with the Can Do programme.

In addition to SRB6 funding, the Can Do Project has received additional funding for specific pieces of work, such as vocational training. We also have established a partnership with Hull College enabling the provision of Open College Network (OCN) accredited courses.

When the original funding bid was written, targets for the five years were agreed. The project staff members have responsibility for ensuring that the strategy of the project meets these targets. Autonomy is therefore relative rather than absolute because project staff are accountable for everything that they do - this includes being accountable to the Warren Co-ordinator, to the Warren Management Committee, to individual young people, to The Thing (The Warren's young people's parliament), and to funders and other partner agencies.

EXPERIENCES WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

What in the first instance engages young people?

Helena Kennedy issues a warning in the 1992 Kennedy Report; *"If at first you don't succeed, you don't succeed"* (Kennedy, 1997, p21). She paints a stark picture, supported by research, which suggests that young people who leave school with no qualifications will continue to be excluded from the system. She makes an impassioned argument for a sea change in the agenda for 'widening participation', and

argues that education “*is the likeliest means of creating a modern, well-skilled workforce, reducing levels of crime, and creating participating citizens.*” (Kennedy, 1997, p7)

Our experience is that young people can be easy to engage – *if you find the ‘hook’*. What is going to interest this person? What will be sufficiently motivating to inspire them to get involved? What will get them out of bed and onto the bus? Finding the hook is the hardest challenge, particularly as it differs from one individual to the next.

Vicky and Shelly are in their local park, as they are every night because they are too young for pubs and too old for staying in. Tonight, they see a crowd they don't know, sitting by the football posts. They approach curiously, and within 10 minutes are sitting down painting their names onto a 10 ft canvas. They are talking - yes, they want something to do; yes, they are bored! What is the hook? It's graffiti art for Vicky, nail art for Shelly, and drumming for Vicky's brother, who she will bring next week. In a few weeks' time, because they have met some staff and volunteers, Vicky and Shelly will get on the bus and come to The Warren, and they will sign up for their first accredited course.

Finding ‘the hook’ for young people forces staff to be creative and innovative; what works with one group will not always work with another. Over the past five years, popular choices have been DJ-ing, graffiti art, circus skills, drumming, nail art, dance, cookery, film-making, and outdoor pursuits. More unusual choices have included making skateboards, fashion design, creating time capsules, building brick barbecues, and plastering walls. If staff and young people are encouraged to be creative and take risks, then there is no end to the suggestions of what young people want to do.

Building confidence and changing their self-concept

Eleven years of compulsory education has an impact on young people, for better or for worse. Even Albert Einstein is quoted as saying, “*The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education.*” In my experience, the most devastating long-term impact of the educational system is on young people’s confidence in themselves. Many

will leave school with low self-esteem, believing that learning is not for them, or that they are not for learning. Changing young people's self-concept, "the person's view of themselves" (Tudor & Worrall, 2002, p128), can be a long-term process. The following example illustrates this:

I remember the first time I met Stacy. She was sat in the Warren café with a group of friends. She seemed confident, even brash, making jokes and entertaining the crowd. She met my eyes with a strong, questioning gaze, almost as if she were asserting her right to be there. She did have a right to be there. She was 17, and she needed a place to be.

When Stacy started using The Warren, we did not run accredited courses, but were offering an increasingly wide range of informal, unaccredited workshops. She was active in The Warren's weekly parliament at the point at which the decision was made to form a partnership with Hull College and to offer Open College Network qualifications within the building. I do not remember what she thought at the time, but she would have had an opinion. She always did. She probably thought it was a good idea for The Warren and for young people in general, but not for herself.

Stacy had been a sporadic attender at school, partly through her own non-attendance and partly through being excluded from several schools. She left with no qualifications, with the label of dyslexia, and with a firm belief that education was for other people. Her life was to proceed down a predictable path, including drug use, becoming a parent, losing custody of her children, the threat of being sectioned under the Mental Health Act, and prison.

Stacy would have chosen to be a youth-worker if she had been given the chance to start again, with a clean slate and a sense of confidence in herself. She had recently started informal voluntary work in The Warren, and she knew she was good - she could communicate with people, she was empathic, and she could deal with volatile situations. She enjoyed the work; she had energy, passion, and commitment to make the world different. On a good day, she could almost visualise herself being employed as a youth-worker. It was on a good day that she finally decided to sign up for The Warren's Level 3 Youth-work course.

Stacy attended every session of the course. She found it hard, but I met her every week to offer support with the written work. It is difficult for many young people to express themselves on paper, and Stacy's dyslexia and her lack of confidence in her own academic ability made this even more challenging.

Today is deadline day. The course finished two weeks ago. Stacy's portfolio is finished; I know it is finished because I have read it. There is nothing left for her

to do. I am waiting for the portfolio. My deadlines are looming, I need to assess the completed portfolios, add my feedback, and support some learners in adding a bit more. The Hull College Moderator and the OCN Moderator are booked to visit, and I want my achievement rate to be good; for the funders, for the young people themselves, and for me.

But Stacy's portfolio is not on my desk. Stacy's portfolio is in the bin.

I'm not handing it in. It's in the bin. It's my portfolio and you can't make me hand it in. I'm going home.

She turns to go. She is angry, almost daring me to question her. My head is spinning, racing from one thought to the next. "I don't understand. I am missing something here. What is going on? Your portfolio is finished." I feel angry, frustrated and confused. I don't even know which bin it is in. It could be covered in someone else's coffee by now.

I pursue her, both of us furious by this point. This is not cool, calm conversation - this is war, and time is running out. It might already be too late.

What the ? Talk to me, Stacy! What am I missing here?

She turns to me. I am pushing her too far - I know it and she knows it. Is she going to hit me?

There are tears in her eyes.

Max, I have never achieved anything in my life. I am crap. I am stupid, I left school with nothing. I'm not clever. If I give you that portfolio, I will get a qualification and from this moment on, I will never be able to say that I haven't got any qualifications, I will have achieved something. And I'm not ready for that. It's not me.

I am crying. The anger has gone. I feel overwhelming sadness, love, and hopelessness. Neither of us can speak. She walks downstairs with me. I wait at the door as she crosses the café. Why is the café so big? It feels like a long way for her to walk, and for me to watch her walk. She picks the portfolio out of the bin, brushes it off, and she brings it to me. She looks me straight in the eye and she hands it to me. Then she goes.

She gets her qualification. She still thinks that she is no good at learning.

The Can Do Project explicitly aims to challenge young people in two different ways: we want to offer learning in such a way that it challenges young people's perception of education and learning; we also want to question and ultimately change their view of themselves. It is the latter which is by far the most difficult.

Raising Aspirations

Dave has aspirations. He wants to be a hit man.

The Warren's weekly parliament meeting starts with a question: if you could do anything with your life, what would you do? One person wants a big house, another a good job, another to be happy with themselves. Dave says just six words; "I want to be a hit man." He gets a laugh, but he is not joking - this much is clear from his face.

I corner him later, asking whether he is serious.

I am serious. I really want to be a hit man. They make loads of money. They get respect. People are scared of them.

They also kill people, Dave

I want to kill someone. I want to have my own gun. I wouldn't mind killing people.

What about getting caught and going to jail?

I'm not scared of jail. Everyone I know has been to jail. You just have to do your time and get out again.

Dave was 16 years old. He had officially left school six months earlier, not that this made much difference as he had not attended for nearly three years. The main difference it made to him was that he could start using The Warren, rather than getting asked to leave when he sneaked in with older friends.

If he had had his way, Dave would have come to The Warren whenever it was open. He had nowhere else to go. But his way included aggression, and an extremely short fuse. Even the slightest provocation, such as someone looking at him for a second too long, or bumping into him as they walked past, could cause him to explode. Consequently, his six-month Warren career had already included several periods of exclusion, and a number of agreements about his behaviour.

Dave's relationship with The Warren is changing. He starts to get involved with activities; he signs up for day trips. He regularly uses the computer facilities and joins in art activities. Dave is making new friends. He is starting to communicate more openly about how he is feeling. He participates in a 24-Hour Learning

Challenge, and completes a qualification in cookery. He does a two-day 'taster' course in bricklaying.

Then Dave disappears. No-one has seen him for a few weeks, and this is unusual. Is he OK? Is he in trouble? Has he been arrested?

Dave has been at college. He has started a bricklaying course, and is enjoying it. Yet his behaviour has got in the way again, and he has been asked to leave the course. He wants help; will someone help him complete his application form to get on to another bricklaying course? He desperately wants to do this course, and he won't get kicked out again.

Dave wants to be a bricklayer. No-one forced him or made him do this. It was his decision, made through the process of seeing another side of life, of understanding that he has choices that he can make, and of realising that he could wish for something different for himself. Dave has raised his aspirations.

What does it mean, 'to raise young people's aspirations'? On the surface, it seems obvious: it means to increase their hopes and ambitions for life and to aim for something higher than they expect for themselves.

This is based on the assumption that young people in Hull have low expectations for themselves, that they live in communities with generational unemployment, or that everyone they know is on benefits. It is assumed that not one of their family members or peer groups has been to University, or even to college. For some, this may be true, and raising aspirations may be a case of offering an alternative view, a different role model; really, a challenge to have the courage to choose a different life.

But what are their new aspirations to be? Creating an alternative life in Hull is difficult, especially for young people with no qualifications and little self-confidence. There is an extremely narrow job market. Some employers are prejudiced against employing people under 25 years old. Young people tell numerous stories about poor wages, bad conditions and exploitation. Is this what their new aspirations are to be?

Are we encouraging young people to be who they want to be, whether or not that has realistic job prospects? There are so many young people who, given even the smallest

encouragement, will reveal their hidden ambitions about being musicians, artists, filmmakers, youth-workers, computer technicians, and graphic designers. Many young people in Hull have aspirations, fabulous aspirations. Sometimes, they are told to lower their aspirations. They are told to be realistic and get a job in a factory. They are told they cannot do the course because they have not met the entry requirements, or that they cannot get the job because they have no experience. Where do these aspirations go? They become hidden again, as young people try and fit into society's expectations of them.

The Warren's approach to raising aspirations is grounded in our philosophy. We want young people to achieve their potential, and to be the person that they want to be. We believe that they are capable of making decisions that are right for them, and that our role is to support them in doing this. Mistakes can be made, and these can be instrumental in the learning process. Some young people need help to see the world from another angle - to realise that they can wish for more - and that they have the power to achieve their potential. We are not naïve. We do not want to set young people up for failure. We believe that being honest is the best approach: not everyone can be a successful rock star, even if they are talented. Young people know this, too, so they can and will make the right decisions about their futures, whatever that may turn out to be. As workers, we do not know best.

How challenging is accreditation?

The decision to go into partnership with Hull College and run Open College Network-accredited courses was made by young people - literally. If staff had been able to vote, the decision could possibly have gone the other way. Staff were suspicious of accreditation, anxious that it would be inflexible, bureaucratic and over-structured. We were concerned about the amount of written work that young people would have to do, the commitment expected of them, and the fact there was a danger that non-completion would reinforce their perceptions of themselves as failures. Young people

listened to the concerns, and made the decision themselves. They were prepared to take the risk: the benefits of doing accredited courses within The Warren were too tempting. The young people knew what they wanted, and it now became our job to deliver.

We have discovered that some young people are motivated by the thought of qualifications. They want to prove that they can do accredited courses: they rise to the challenge; they want to know about the learning outcomes and what they will be covering on courses. Even if they have never gained a qualification before, they see their value in the wider world. They sign up for courses with enthusiasm, asking the question, 'Which of these are accredited'?

Other young people are wary of accreditation. They worry that the courses will be too demanding, too dull, and too structured. They want to undertake learning opportunities that are fun and active. They are frightened of being asked to undertake a lot of reading and writing. Their perception of qualifications is largely negative, even if they also realise how qualifications may have value in the wider world.

Offering accredited units in a way that meets the needs of both of these categories of young people is demanding. With the first group, recruitment may be easier, but retention can be difficult – even if young people are enthusiastic to sign up for the course, it does not mean that they will find it easy to participate. They may still have pre-conceptions about themselves and about courses, and tutors have to be creative in the way that they plan and deliver their sessions. Producing evidence for portfolios, particularly written evidence, needs to be carefully embedded into the learning activities. Recognising and supporting the individual needs of young people is crucial. It may include offering additional support time outside group sessions.

Attracting the second group of young people to sign up for accredited courses presents a different challenge. The 'hook' for them may not be the thought of gaining an

accreditation, so it needs to be the learning opportunity in itself – the qualification is a secondary outcome. For example,

“Would you like to do an accredited drama course this weekend?” ... “No, I was never good at that sort of thing ...”

“Would you like to come on a Murder Mystery weekend, where we all go and stay in a spooky house, and play different characters in a performance, where we’ll have a 5-course meal, and we work out whodunit?” ... “Yes, and can my mate come, too?”

‘Murder Mystery’ is an accredited learning residential. By the end of the three-day course, all participants will have at least one OCN Level 2 qualification - in drama, team-building, or cookery. The format was devised by staff and tutors in the Can Do Project, and has been distributed among several youth-work organisations around the country following an article in *Young People Now*.

Young people work in two groups: the larger group does drama, and a smaller group does cookery. The drama group spends ten hours in workshops learning about improvisation, acting techniques, and character development. They each adopt a role for the ‘Murder Mystery dinner party’ and work with this character at depth. Meanwhile, the cookery group are planning a menu, shopping within a budget, and preparing a five-course meal. The main event is the dinner party. The drama group turn up dressed as their characters and start a three-hour improvisation. The cookery group is operating a restaurant-style kitchen. Tutors and staff are stage-managing the event, ensuring that everyone stays in character. Someone is dead: the host never turned up! Clues are being given, but they are subtle. Will anyone work out the identity of the killer?

The following morning, staff members meet with young people to reflect on the Murder Mystery. Through this, the young people will each complete individual portfolios of evidence, including information about their individual characters, the group process, their thoughts on the character they played, and the improvisation. The young people

are shocked at how much they have learnt about drama. They have enjoyed themselves; the learning has been active, they have made new friends - and yet they have also all produced enough evidence to gain their qualification. The qualification may not in itself have been a motivating factor for them on this occasion, yet it may be next time. They realise that accredited courses can still be active and fun, and that the amount of reading and writing can be minimal.

If the decision about offering accredited courses in The Warren were being made today, I feel confident that Warren staff would now agree with the decision of the young people – offering accredited courses alongside the unaccredited programme is the right thing to do. Young people *do* value qualifications, and we have learned that it is possible to run the courses in ways that are empowering, creative and innovative. Accreditation still has a price, though, as there are real issues to address – with literacy, confidence, chaotic lifestyles, perceptions, anxieties, or any combination of these. The amount of individual support needed by young people is huge. It takes far more than ten hours of staff time in order for learners to complete a ten-hour course - and in an environment with competing demands, this can be challenging.

Involving young people in decision-making

Traditional models of education come from a belief that teachers know best, and that students are here to learn. Harris & Bell explore the consequences of this, stating:

“Learners are seldom included in decision-making about their own course, yet there can be an experiential difference between their own background and that of the adults involved in organising the learning.” (Harris & Bell, 1990, p40)

The Warren has an Empowerment Policy which guides all of its work. It outlines that young people should be given the power and control over the decisions affecting their lives, including decisions about their learning. This does not mean that staff cannot be involved in decision-making: we have experiences, thoughts, and ideas which benefit

young people. Combined together, and through genuine dialogue, the most creative and appropriate decisions are made. An example follows:

The Warren has an organisational decision to make. We have been offered the chance to participate in a pilot project with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Funding is available for the voluntary sector to run accredited courses - in return, the LSC will inspect and grade all provision. The criteria are tough, the inspection will be very thorough, and they will expect to see a lot of personal information about young people. Shall we do it? How shall we make the decision? What are the factors to take into account? What is the long-term impact if we do - and, of course, if we don't - participate?

This decision was made by the Warren's weekly parliament (The Thing), who listened to opinions given from the staff meeting, the Management Committee and individual Can Do project staff.

The young people understood the consequences of the decision, and voted to participate in the pilot project. It was one of the most difficult decisions that some of the young people had ever made.

Young people becoming genuinely involved in decision-making can be challenging, particularly when the decisions have far-reaching consequences. It is particularly difficult when young people's experience levels differ – it may be one person's first time in the Thing meeting. Staff members have to find clear and accessible methods of involving people, and need to ensure that all young individuals have their voices heard.

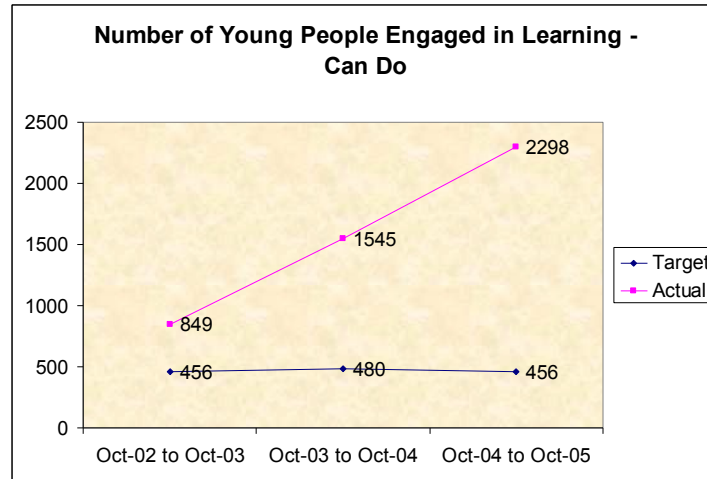
What is the impact on young people of learning?

According to an independent evaluator:

"The participation of the respondents on the 'Can Do Project had given many of them the opportunity to reconnect with education and to find new learning opportunities. Respondents seemed to have responded positively and to have relished the fact that they were totally responsible for their own learning. (In other words they were learning for themselves whilst learning about themselves.)" (BMG Research, January 2006, p4)

The Can Do Project has engaged hundreds of young people across the city in learning, as these statistics demonstrate:

- Nearly 5000 young people were involved with learning during the first three years of the Can Do Project. This massively over-achieves the target set by SRB6:



- The Can Do Project has worked in all ten Community Target Areas, both Geographical Priority Areas plus the city centre. This has included partnerships with nearly 50 different agencies
- More than 325 young people gained Open College Network qualifications in the first three years, with the targets increasing for the next two years
- Sixty different young people have gained access to tailor-made, one-to-one, basic skills support. Young people have been able to take the National Test in numeracy and literacy within The Warren since December 2005.

However, the statistics themselves do not demonstrate the impact of learning upon any of the young people. The following individual stories are more meaningful:

We met Paul in a school exclusion unit. He was highly charged, and lacked concentration, which led to chaotic sessions when combined with the other eleven young people in the group. During his last three months in the unit, he was involved with the Can Do Project. As soon as he left school, Paul came into The Warren, and within two weeks was undertaking his forklift truck driver training. According to the trainers, Paul was a model learner: he turned up on time and he did everything that was asked of him. He got his licence, but was too young to be employed in a factory. The Forklift Training Company worked with The Warren to find Paul an apprenticeship. He worked hard, stuck with it, and he is now a full-time forklift driver. He may be working in a factory near you!

Chris walks into a shop and heads for the birthday cards. He flicks through the selection, reads the messages, and picks one for his brother. He pays for the card, and walks out of the shop, grinning broadly. Chris is 22 years old. This does not sound remarkable, unless you take into account that Chris did not know his alphabet when he first came into The Warren. Reading birthday cards was beyond him. It has taken three years of tailor-made, one-to-one, basic skills sessions to get him to the point where he can. He started by moulding every letter of the alphabet from clay, and moved onto to computer-based packages and interactive games and activities. He started to write, to spell, and to use grammar. Chris is a young person with complex needs, and the process has been long, slow, and frustrating. However, learning to read and write is changing his life. He will still not register as a success on the government's literacy targets.

Mandy is 25 and has been a Warren volunteer for several years. She has successfully completed accredited courses, has dealt with many personal issues through counselling, and has been improving her literacy and numeracy. She wants to get a job, ideally linked to the courses she has done. She struggles. She hasn't got enough experience, her qualifications are not quite right, and her literacy is still not good enough. She is frustrated, she feels like a failure, and she wonders why she has bothered to do anything at all. She talks through her options with staff and, after much consideration, she enrolls on a Counselling course at College. She loves it, she passes, then she enrolls for the next level. She is thinking about an Access Course next, and she is leaving her position as a Warren volunteer to give herself the time.

In January 2006, Hull CityVenture commissioned an independent evaluator to facilitate a focus group of young people at The Warren. His summary was this:

Without doubt the whole experience of the Can Do Project has made a major impact and influence on the lives of almost all of respondents. For many of them it has been a life-changing experience. Respondents were very honest and open with respect to their personal experiences and individual circumstances.

The Can Do Project had totally transformed their outlook on how they saw their own lives developing and moving forward. For some of them, they indicated that it had given them a positive hope for the future; others suggested that it had given them a focus and a sense of direction in life. (BMG Research, Jan, 2006, p5)

DEVELOPMENT OF METHODOLOGY

Are the issues around adult learners the same as those around young people?

The commitment to re-engaging people in learning in Hull extends beyond young people. Many adults, and for the purpose of clarity, I am defining adults as over-25s, also have issues with exclusion. They also left school with few qualifications, they are disengaged from education, and they need opportunities for lifelong learning.

Some of the needs of adult learners are the same as those of young people. As human beings, we all need respect, and to be treated as equals. We need our individual issues to be addressed. We want learning to be relevant to our lives. We want to feel good about ourselves. We want to make the most of our potential. We want good relationships with tutors and peers.

But are there any differences between older and younger people? Is there anything specific about working with young people? I am suggesting that there *are*, and not just that some tutors will relate better to young people; I also think that the structure and process of learning might be different.

As a generalisation, young people have a more current experience of compulsory education. Their disengagement from the education system is recent, memories of school are vivid, and their feelings about teachers are strong. They may have been desperate to finish school, and are enjoying the first opportunity in life [legally] to reject

the classroom. Engaging with these young people requires an active commitment to providing a different learning environment to that of school; any reminders will alienate this or that learner. In turn, this will affect the way in which rooms are set up, the way that tutors dress, and the way in which conversation takes place.

According to research, learners under 25 years old are more likely to be drawn towards kinaesthetic learning styles, which involve a hands-on approach, exploring the physical world around them (Fleming, 2006). Consequently, tutors who are working with young people need to choose different teaching styles and learning methods from those who are working with older learners. Young people may respond well to learning about photography by climbing trees and photographing their friends from the tallest branch – the ‘act now, think later’ approach. Older adults may respond better to looking at the camera and thinking about the photos that they would like to take, then undertaking individual photographic projects - the ‘think now, act later’ approach.

Quality of relationships and Quality of experience

The Can Do Project holds strong beliefs about young people, as already outlined. Young people are motivated, they want to learn, they can be trusted, and they most certainly can make their own decisions. Taken to their natural limit, these values lead to one conclusion: **the quality of the relationship between learner and facilitator is crucial**. It is not possible to adopt a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, as young people need to be recognised and treated as individuals; as such, they need to be known as individuals.

Young people recognise the importance of relationships. The CityVenture independent evaluator who met with young people wrote:

All of the respondents consistently commented upon the importance and the quality of the relationship that they had as learners with their course tutors.

Tutors were often perceived as being friendly and very supportive in meeting the needs of the individual learner. (BMG Research, January 2006, p3)

The Can Do Project recruits staff and tutors with the personal qualities to be able to build relationships with young people. They need to be able to develop a *rapport*, to form a trusting relationship, and to be able to understand the individuals well enough to be able to offer a learning environment to each one. This fits with a person-centred view of learning, explored later in greater depth. Tony Merry, a person-centred psychotherapist, explains:

The person-centred approach to education suggests that underlying attitudes, values and personal qualities are at least as important as technical skill in the job of teaching. (Merry, 1995, p96)

However, having merely the personal qualities is itself not enough. In order to successfully engage young people in learning, the learners need to be inspired, hooked, and motivated. This means that the **quality of the learning experience is equally important**. Creative and innovative methods need to be devised in order to attract initial interest. The creative idea needs to be reinforced by well-planned, well-structured sessions, paced appropriately, with enough stimulation for all young people.

The following 'formula' might be helpful:

Quality of relationship between learner and facilitator

PLUS

Quality of learning experience offered

EQUALS

Young people successfully engaged in learning

The Can Do Project has successfully run a 'Pop Stars' course for young people interested in music. A tutor is employed to work with a group of five young people, some with no musical skills, and some who like to sing. They are given the challenge of performing an original song at a young people's music festival in six weeks' time. The 'learning experience' is a six-week course, planned by the tutor. He is experienced in working with diverse groups, and knows how he can take this group from A to B in the time allocated; they will need to write a song together, to allocate roles, to have individual tuition in instruments and vocals, and regularly to review progress together as a group. He must pace it well so that they young people remain motivated until the end, but he must not make it so hard that they become anxious. He must develop good relationships with every individual so that he can support with their individual needs, and so that they will trust him and be able to believe in the faith he has in them. He must be able to balance individual needs with those of everyone else, and with the task in hand - learning.

Addressing individual needs and learning styles

There is extensive theory about learning styles (see, for example, Honey and Mumford, 1982). Individuals can undertake numerous tests to try and establish their preferred learning styles. Teachers are encouraged to identify the learning styles of individuals within their groups so that they can tailor their teaching methods to meet the needs.

Learning styles theory has influenced the Can Do Project. It has been useful to recognise that young people learn in different ways, and to challenge tutors to be creative when devising sessions. Tutors have developed their teaching methods to meet a wider variety of needs by incorporating practical, visual, tactile, theoretical methods. For example, The Warren's basic skills worker offers tailor-made sessions to develop reading, writing and maths. She has many learning activities which meet the needs of learners with different styles – handouts, worksheets, computer-based

packages, audio tapes, practical exercises or discussion-based activities – she will develop her tailor-made methods according to the individual. It has also been useful to talk to young people about learning styles, particularly as a way of explaining why they might have felt unengaged at school if their individual style did not fit with the predominant teaching method.

The Can Do Project does not, however, systematically assess individual learning styles. This is for two reasons: firstly, it can take a considerable amount of time, and by the time young people have undertaken the test, they have disengaged from the learning process and left the room. It works better for them to get involved with the topic they are interested in straight away. Secondly, the Can Do Project believes that young people can make decisions for themselves. If the environment is well facilitated, they should be able to articulate their preferences to the tutor: they should be involved in a constant dialogue about what kind of learning they would like. They might not call it 'learning styles', but it means the same thing; *"I like getting hands-on with the equipment"*, *"I like to see it written down"*, or *"I like you to show me first so I can see how it's done"*. When tutors are as skilled as we expect them to be, the learners can be genuinely involved in deciding how their individual learning styles are met.

Grounding the experience – what really happens in practice?

Every young person, group, and tutor is different, and it is therefore impossible to come up with a 'recipe' that tutors can apply in every situation. Tutors need to be creative and flexible to meet individual needs, and offering high-quality learning opportunities which will engage socially-excluded people takes more than just a set of techniques. However, in an attempt to ground this pamphlet in experience, the following is an attempt to show what happens in practice:

Ingredients:

- Group of young people
- Tutor(s) / Staff member(s)
- Scheme of work and Lesson Plans
- Box of resources (various)
- Suitable venue.

First, **think about the young people** whom you are likely to be working with – how many are there? How old are they? Have you met them before? Is this a one-off session, or will you be meeting them again? Why have you been asked to do this workshop – what do the young people want, and what can you as an individual bring?

Second, **work out a plan** of what you want to do. Think about how much time you have, and what resources you will need. Think about health and safety, and whether you have enough staff resources. Come up with a plan that will motivate and inspire young people – make it challenging, but also make sure that everyone will be able to participate. Incorporate a variety of activities to suit different learning styles – such as demonstration, hands-on, discussion, interactive activities, or practical work. Make sure that there is time for reflection and evaluation. If the sessions take place over several weeks, come up with a ‘Scheme of Work’, a rough outline of the whole programme – then break this down into more detailed individual ‘Lesson/Session Plans’.

Third, **prepare your resources** – depending on what your session is – possibly handouts, flipcharts, art materials, musical instruments, and/or interactive games. Make sure that you take more than you need in case extra people turn up, or in case the group gets through the material quickly. Think about your reflection and evaluation methods, and take any materials you are going to use for these.

Next, **proceed with confidence into the room!** Assuming that the young people are there, start with a **welcome** or **icebreaker** – choose something that will get everyone to introduce themselves and start to give you an idea about how they will interact – do

not choose something that might make people feel uncomfortable. Talk to them about the session, and ask what they want to get out of through being here. Now, either proceed with the activities that you have planned, or **think on your feet and adapt** your session to meet the needs of the young people that you are with. Do not be afraid to ask them what they think, or to make decisions with them.

Continue through the session, making sure that you are **communicating well** with the young people. Is the pace right? Are they getting what they wanted? Is their body language communicating anything else? Is everyone involved or are some people disengaged? Try and find ways of making contact with everyone in the session.

Deal with issues as they arise. If there is **tension or conflict** within the group, then find ways of getting the support that you need – are there other staff in your session, or are there other people in the building? Some tensions can be handled within a group and the session can proceed, while other sorts of tension need to be taken outside the room and dealt with separately – make your judgement on this, and ask for support.

Towards the end of the session, introduce your **reflection activities**. What have the young people learned so far? Has anything surprised them? What would they like to learn next? Find ways of reinforcing the learning if they are struggling to recognise their achievements – remind them of what they have done during the session. Use your **evaluation activities** – what can they tell you that will help you to develop your sessions? Have they enjoyed it? What do they think of the venue? If the sessions are on-going, then remind them of the times of the next one. Say 'Goodbye' with a smile, and exit!

Finally, this is your chance to reflect. **Replay your experience in the room**. Talk to other staff, if applicable. How did it go? What went well, or went badly? What lessons have you learned that you will build on for next time? Did the young people say anything in their reflection and evaluation that surprised you? What can you learn for yourself? If you are working for the Can Do Project, briefly write up these reflections for

our records. Then, also consider whether you need to discuss anything further, or feel as if you need support – this is what the full-time Learning Activists are here to do. If you are working elsewhere, consider your support network – whom can you talk to if you need to, or are you going to be doing the reflection on your own?

INFLUENCES OF THEORY

Importance of reflection: Kolb's learning cycle

The Can Do Project tries to build the reflection process into all learning experiences. This means taking account of the learning cycle when planning sessions. As facilitators, we have to think about how we can turn all experiences into a learning experience. Where is the learning taking place?

The Big Brother experience is a good example of built-in reflection. 'Big Brother' is a reality TV show, loosely based on George Orwell's notion of Big Brother watching over us. Millions of young people have seen the show and they like it. The 'Big Brother' concept is a tool of engagement – the Can Do Project runs a three-day learning experience called *This is not Big Brother ... but it's a bit like it*. Ten young people are taken away to a remote house in the countryside. No one has the title of 'leader'; it is up to everyone to live as a community and to make decisions. During their stay, they are set 'tasks' by the character of 'Big Brother', played by the youth workers, who are not part of the young people's community. Rewards are given when the young people successfully complete the tasks, such as access to cameras, a football, cakes, games or a stereo.

Every evening, there is a one-hour group reflection session, the only structured hour in the day. The session is facilitated by the youth workers, who now leave their 'Big Brother' role. The group are encouraged to think about how they are, what they are managing well as a group, and whether they would like to ask anything of the group for the following day. There are also regular 'diary room' slots where young people can

talk to 'Big Brother' on their own. The following extract is an example of a 'Diary Room' conversation:

Sam is in the diary room. She is crying.

This is so hard, Big Brother. I feel so upset, I want to shout and scream, I am frustrated. I used to think I was good at teamwork, but I'm finding out how hard it is. How can I make everything all right? What can I do?

I look at Sam. I have known her for nine years. She is struggling so much, but as Big Brother, I cannot go into the house. I can talk to her only in here.

Talk to me. Sam. You are doing so well. You are actually leading the group, but you don't know it yet. The other young people are looking to you for support, and you are giving it.

But I'm not. I'm rushing in. I'm impatient. I know how I want to do the tasks, and I am telling the others what to do. I am not listening properly, but I am getting irritated, I just want to get on with it.

Tell me what you are doing well...

Well, I'm really trying to support Sue because she's quiet and she doesn't always say what she thinks. And Katie is having a hard time 'cos she feels excluded, so I am trying to include her.

And what do you want to do now? What can you do to really challenge yourself over the next 24 hours?

I can try and listen. I am going to try and hold back a bit. I'll still say what I think, but I'll wait till the others have spoken first. And if I get impatient, I'll come back and talk to you. I won't kick off in the house.

Sam is reflecting on herself. The process of reflection is a crucial part of the learning process - experience is only the first stage of learning. If it ends there, then it may have still been a worthwhile experience, but it does not count as learning. The learning happens when the reflection happens.

David Kolb's learning cycle has been outlined earlier in this pamphlet to illustrate how the Can Do Project has developed its methodology. However, it is equally relevant when working with young people. The links between the 'Big Brother' experience and

this cycle are obvious. Individuals have an experience, reflect upon it, alter their behaviour, and have another experience. With prompting during the evaluation session, young people link their experiences in the 'Big Brother' house with their experiences as active members of their local communities. They learn about working constructively in communities, and about negotiating to try and meet individual needs. They learn about how to care for people, and how to receive support from others. They can learn difficult lessons about conflicts and disagreement, and coping when you feel isolated within a group.

Thinking about, and building in, reflection activities, are crucial as part of all learning processes.

Carl Rogers and the person-centred approach

Carl Rogers has been an inspiration. He has written some radical statements that challenge teaching in schools, teacher-training techniques, and the structure of colleges. He has made some astonishing claims about how successful he would be if he were given control of the American education system. He has achieved some incredible things with large groups, and he has observed some amazing practice from other teachers. He states:

I am deeply concerned with what is going on in American educational institutions. They have focussed so intently on ideas, have limited themselves so completely to 'learning from the neck up', that the resulting narrowness is having serious social consequences. (Rogers, 1980, p267)

Rogers was an American psychotherapist, and is the founder of the person-centred approach. His brand of psychotherapy was a challenge to the dominant culture of American psychotherapy in the 1940s. He started from experience, from what he thought would work, and from what felt right. He undertook extensive research and he learned from his clients. Person-centred psychotherapy asserts that the therapist should trust the client, such that the role is to be alongside the client, to understand

his/her inner world, and to prize and value their experience. He believes that human beings have innately constructive qualities, which, when provided with the right conditions, would enable the individual to flourish (Embleton Tudor *et al.*, 2004).

Rogers' book *Freedom to Learn* takes the theory out of the psychotherapy field and places it in a learning arena. He argues that his theory translates to a classroom context, and that students have an in-built interest in learning. Given the right conditions, connected to the relationship between teacher and learner, learning can take place. He challenges the dominant culture of classrooms as being teacher-led, about the need for discipline and control, and the need to push students towards achievement. He argues that students are naturally motivated and will work much harder if they are given genuine freedom to learn:

Traditional education and person-centred education may be thought of as the two poles of a continuum. I think that every educational effort, every teacher, every institution of learning could locate itself at some appropriate point on this scale. (Rogers in Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990, p323)

Rogers' values and philosophy about human beings are consistent with the values of the Can Do Project, which is why so much of what he says 'fits' with our way of working. He is sometimes portrayed as a 'Pollyanna' figure with an idealistic view of human nature, yet this is, in my view, a misinterpretation. Some of the situations of person-centred learning that he explores in *Freedom to Learn* involve working with young children in schools, with socially isolated adults, and with high achievers in universities. He reports consistently positive outcomes. People are more highly motivated if they are in control of their own learning. People can be trusted.

Rogers focuses attention on the skills of the facilitator. In his view:

There are attitudes that, in my judgement, characterize a facilitator of learning ... Perhaps the most basic of these essential attitudes is realness, or genuineness. When the facilitator is a real person, being what he or she is, entering into relationships with the learners without presenting a front or a

façade, the facilitator is much more likely to be effective. (Rogers, 1980, pp270-1).

Paolo Freire and the student-teacher-student

Paolo Freire's work also influences the teaching and learning approach of the Can Do Project. He was a Brazilian educationalist (1921-1997) who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this, he addressed issues of power and oppression, and argues that the oppressed underclass has to seize power from their oppressors - they cannot be given it, as freedom is not a gift.

Freire also challenges traditional models of education. He criticises what he calls the 'banking method' of education, where the teacher is seen as the expert with knowledge to impart and the students as empty vessels ready to be filled. He questions the worth of this method, and argues that it is not effective in terms of meeting individual or community needs. He poses the questions, "Who is the teacher? Who is the learner?" He proposes a much more collaborative approach to learning, where the teacher and the students learn collectively:

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information ... through dialogue the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers ... they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow ... here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. (Freire, 1970/93, pp60-1)

The Can Do Project has been influenced by Freire because we, too, are trying to achieve a more collaborative approach to learning. As staff, we learn as much from the young people as they learn from us. We have expertise in particular areas, which should not be withheld. Young people have expertise in particular areas, which should be explored. Collectively, through using experiential learning techniques and genuine dialogue, learning will happen to the benefit of all.

CONCLUSION

Young people have so much to learn. They know it for themselves, and it is also apparent from the Hull statistics of educational attainment. The question that needs addressing is: How can we help them to learn what they need to learn?

Traditional methods of teaching do not work for all young people. Many will drop out of formal education and will feel alienated from learning in general. Some will believe that they are failures, leading to issues of confidence, self-esteem and self-concept. The solution is not to force them to participate in yet more experiences of traditional education, but to find a more effective alternative. In the words of Ignacio Estrada, *“If a child can’t learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.”* (Ignacio Estrada)¹

How do we find out what works? How can we develop our provision to meet the needs of young people, particularly those who are disengaged from learning and from society? In my view, there is only one three-fold response – we have to listen to young people, we have to communicate with them, and we have to be prepared to learn from what they tell us.

The Can Do Project has successfully engaged thousands of young people across Hull in learning. Through the past five years, methodology has been developed so that we can explain the reasons for why we offer learning in a particular way. Academic theory has been influential, and it fits with the methodology. Still, the truth is that we have learned the most from young people – we listened to their experiences and tried to come up with new ideas that would interest them. We made mistakes, we got it wrong, and we tried again.

¹ Quotation taken from <http://www.quoteworld.org/quotes/4607> on 19 October 2006.

Young people have been our teachers.

We hope that this pamphlet will be the start of a dialogue. We are not claiming to have all the answers, but we are hoping that it might serve the purpose of sparking the discussion. We warmly invite all comments.

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All of the above stories about young people are true. The names of the young people have been changed.

APPENDIX A

Hull Statistics

The following are quoted in the Hull CityVenture Prospectus, July 2006:

- The city still has high levels of deprivation, with the Office of National Statistics ranking it the ninth most deprived of England's 354 council areas in 2004
- Despite a remarkable fall of 43% since 1995, unemployment in Hull is still the highest in the sub-region with 9.2% (2005) unemployed of all people of working age. The comparable GB rate is 4.8%
- Despite significant improvements since 2000, Hull has one of the lowest skilled populations in the sub-region and a low skill occupational structure. The percentage of working age people with NVQ3 or above in Hull is 33%, against a GB figure of 45%
- Basic English and Mathematics skills of primary school pupils in Hull have greatly increased since 2001 and are now approaching national average attainments
- Achievement at GCSE level remains well below the national average, despite significant recent improvements. The percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs or NVQ level 2 qualifications was 44% in Hull in 2005, compared to the England figure of 57%.

The following statistics are from the PSA Floor Targets, September 2005:

- The crime rate for the Hull area is going down, but recorded burglaries and vehicle crime are still nearly twice the national average
- The teenage pregnancy rate is consistently falling yet is still well above the national average.