



# 12

Early Childhood Development:  
Practice and Reflections

*The Cynon  
Valley Project:  
investing in the future*

*A report commissioned by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation and  
Save the Children Fund Wales Programme.*

Alain Thomas

### About the series

The series *Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections* addresses issues of importance to practitioners, policy makers and academics concerned with meeting the educational and developmental needs of disadvantaged children in developing and industrial societies. Contributions to this series are welcomed. They can be drawn from theory or practice, and be a maximum of 30,000 words. Information about contributing to the series can be obtained from Joanna Bouma, Series Editor, Department of Programme Documentation and Communication at the address given on the back cover. Copyright is held jointly by the authors and the Foundation. Unless otherwise stated, however, papers may be quoted and photocopied for non-commercial purposes without prior permission. Citations should be given in full, giving the Foundation as source.

### About the author

I was born in Merthyr Tudful in the Welsh Valleys and was brought up as a bilingual French/English speaker by my French mother and Welsh father. I went to school and university in Wales (University College of Wales) gaining a joint honours degree in Geography and French.

On leaving university I took a conscious, though vaguely defined, decision to commit myself to working in the communities of South Wales. This decision took me to a range of jobs from political activity to working as a community development worker. After nine years of this 'front line' work I went back to university to acquire a more in-depth understanding of the theory behind the work. Armed with two postgraduate courses in Social Administration (Manchester University) and in Community Work (Swansea University), I found that I reacted very strongly against a lot of the things I found in academia. But this time I had the experience to argue my case. Struggling to come to terms with the void between practice and theory helped me to define and express my own values and laid the foundation for the approach I take to my work today.

After briefly working for the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, I became a freelance researcher and consultant. This move to self employment in November 1989 was the best I have ever made.

The flexibility of being self employed has allowed me to fulfil a few items on my personal agenda. I did some voluntary fundraising for a clean water supply installed in a friend's village in Nepal. Seeing the water running in that village represents a high point in my community development work. More recently I set up a voluntary organisation to rescue unwanted racing greyhounds in Wales.

My first evaluation contract as a freelancer led to the production of *'Investing in the Future'*. I had found evaluation theory to be unnecessarily complicated, and very little of it seemed relevant to the practical task I was going to carry out. I decided that anything I would write would above all be clear and easy to understand, and that in my approach to evaluation I would aim to enable people to understand and participate in the process. Since that time I have refined my approach to evaluation and have helped others in Wales, Turkey, Israel, Ireland and Poland to plan and conduct their own evaluations.

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## About the Foundation

The mission of the Bernard van Leer Foundation is to enhance opportunities for children 0-7 years, growing up in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage.

The objective is to develop children's innate potential to the greatest extent possible. We concentrate on children 0-7 years because research findings have demonstrated that interventions in the early years of childhood are most effective in yielding lasting benefits to children and society.

We accomplish our mission through two interconnected strategies:

- a grant-making programme in 40 countries aimed at developing contextually appropriate approaches to early childhood care and development; and
- the sharing of knowledge and know-how in the domain of early childhood development that primarily draws on the experiences generated by the projects that the Foundation supports, with the aim of informing and influencing policy and practice.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a private foundation created in 1949 that is based in the Netherlands and operates internationally. The Foundation's income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist who lived from 1883 to 1958. In 1919, he founded an industrial and consumer packaging company that was to become Royal Packaging Industries Van Leer NV, currently a limited company operating in over 40 countries.



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## Introduction

The valley communities of what once was known as the South Wales coalfield occupy a unique place in the political and emotional psyche of the Welsh nation. The landscape with its striking blend of natural beauty and post industrial man made infrastructure still bears testament to past generations. The populations of these valleys drawn from far and near had an immense influence on how people in Wales and the UK thought, worked, played and prayed. Radical politics, religion and the raw industrialism of the pits and forges combined to make these vibrant, fascinating, contradictory and contrary communities. Today, the received memories of these valleys have mingled for three quarters of a century with the harsh realities of sustained decline. A long send-off to a better place and time. In a sense the story of these valleys was the land of song's swan song.

It was to two valley communities that Save the Children and the Bernard van Leer Foundation made a commitment some 10 years ago. Convinced of the needs of children and their families in the poorest communities in Wales, and more importantly convinced of the capacity of local people to develop and sustain their own response to their community's

needs, they established the Cynon Valley Project. The project, aimed at improving the quality of life and range of opportunities for younger children through enabling local people to exercise greater control over their lives, was set to run for a decade. Although organisational changes within Save the Children affected the latter period of the project, that commitment has been the defining force behind 10 years of practice in my organisation in Wales.

The commitment did not end with the conclusion of the project's work, but continues through the publication of this report as we ensure that the experience of these years and the learning gained is shared and explained.

Alain Thomas' commitment to participatory methods and the members of these communities is reflected in the sensitivity and illumination of his work. His work reminds us that it is as easy to be naïve and ignorant about the present as it is to lapse into sentimentality about the past. There is a great deal of learning included in the pages which follow and a challenge to many of us to incorporate that into the way in which we conduct practice and develop policies.

This report shows that amid the broad currents of disengagement and disaffection, there are pools of hope and examples of

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**photo:** If the children are stimulated to learn they will explore their environment, become more confident and learn new skills.

great personal investment. At the heart of these communities there remains a real commitment to children. Amongst the bleakest of communities, people live for, love, worry about and strive for their children and their children's future.

These are tales of power and I am truly indebted to Alain for his work, in helping to tell these tales even when it conveys some uncomfortable messages for my own organisation. I am indebted to the Bernard van Leer Foundation for 10 years of partnership and commitment; and to the people of the Cynon Valley, whose lives occupy these pages. Theirs is a tale, which should enter the psyche of all those who read Alain's report, just as the lives of those earlier generations have taken their place in our nation's history.

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#### Notes

Amounts are given in Pounds Sterling. The conversion rate used is GBP 1 = USD 1.6

Unless otherwise mentioned, all photographs are courtesy of the Cynon Valley Project. The photos on the cover and on page 6 are by Liba Taylor.





## Chapter one



## The beginning

### The idea

*If you are looking around for work, don't forget the Cynon Valley.*

This appeal was made to Save the Children Fund Wales Programme's (SCF) new Principal Officer for Wales by a community development activist in Cynon Valley. In fact, it proved impossible to forget the Cynon Valley.

The Save the Children Fund set up what would become its Wales Programme early in 1987. The aim of the division was to target the most disadvantaged communities in Wales. At this stage however it was not clear where exactly SCF would focus its efforts.

However, 1987 saw the publication of an influential report commissioned by the television company HTV which looked at poverty in Wales. This report presented a very stark picture of acute poverty in some parts of Wales, and three local authority areas were consistently at the bottom of a list of indicators of deprivation.

These local authorities which lay next to each other in the very heart of the Valleys region were: Rhondda, Merthyr Tydfil, and Cynon Valley. One statistic which

caught people's imagination at the time and which illustrated the extent of poverty in the area was that just 12 percent of the people in Cynon Valley earned over GBP 4,000, this would mean that any staff employed by SCF would automatically be among the top 12 percent in terms of income in the Valley.

At the same time as interest was focusing on the heart of the Valleys region a meeting of minds was taking place. The Netherlands based Bernard Van Leer Foundation, wanted to support further work in Wales and two key people from the Foundation had encountered the Director of what was still called the England and South Wales Division of SCF. They found a common interest in early years work, a common priority of working with the poorest communities, and a shared belief that service provision, although important, was a means to an end, and that end was to influence policy makers and to build the capacity of local communities to provide for themselves.

SCF found the Bernard Van Leer Foundation very interesting to work with. The Foundation did not see its role as a grant making trust but rather as an active learning organisation; it was committed to evaluating and learning from experience, and to spreading ideas about good practice. Crucially too, it recognised that community

development takes time and it was willing to think in terms of providing funding for seven years. The common approach and values between the two organisations eventually led to a shared funding programme.

Although the needs which had been identified in the Valleys as a whole meant that the Cynon Valley Project could have been located in any one of at least three areas, the most important factor in the final decision to locate in Cynon Valley seems to have been people. Cynon Valley had some prominent community development activists as shown by the opening quotation. There were also people in important positions within the local authority who were supportive of a community development approach, and there was a new and dynamic Chief Executive at the head of the authority. All of these people actively encouraged SCF to develop a project in Cynon Valley.

It was the support and encouragement of these people which added the second crucial cornerstone upon which a community development project can be built. The first cornerstone may be the existence of ‘a real need’, but the second cornerstone is a ‘a realistic opportunity of success’. The support of a range of influential people in the Cynon Valley suggested that such an opportunity existed,

and the Project was located in Cynon Valley.

## The Community

The Project was based in two communities in the Cynon Valley within the Valleys region of Wales. These were the Perthcelyn and Fernhill estates<sup>1</sup>. The Valleys are neither urban nor rural but are a unique mix of both. Most settlements lie on or near each valley floor, usually in a long line with one town or village merging into the next. To an outsider the impression of each valley is of a single town, about ten miles long and just a few hundred yards wide. People who live there however are acutely aware of the boundaries of the individual communities within each valley and can say without hesitation which community they are from. The overwhelming majority of people who live in The Valleys have strong links of



<sup>1</sup> An estate is a local authority owned housing estate.

friendship and kinship. ‘Belonging’ and ‘community’ are not abstract ideas here, they are so much a part of people’s daily lives that they are taken for granted.

Each Valley is walled by steep hillsides rising in places to over 1,200 feet (about 350 metres), but despite its relatively modest height the hillside behind each village is always referred to locally as ‘the Mountain’. The Mountain, which is always present next to every town and village, is another important feature of The Valleys. It is a natural boundary which divides one valley from the next, it is a visual reminder of a natural world outside the towns and villages which is available to anyone who simply cares to look up, and it remains an important recreational area for those children who go there to play or for the few adults who still walk its paths. ‘The Mountain’ also helps to give The Valleys their unique character. How many other urban areas have open land

within ten minutes walk of most people’s front door?

What else helps give The Valleys their character? Some people may still think of heavy industry, of coal mining or of coal tips. Not so. The heavy industry is all gone, the vast areas of spoil heaps are fast disappearing under reclamation schemes, and there is only one deep mine remaining, which is now owned by the workforce and as such is more a symbol of hope for the future than a relic of the past.

The Cynon Valley is in the heart of The Valleys region and lies about 15 miles north west of Cardiff, the capital city of Wales. The two main towns of the Cynon Valley are Aberdare and Mountain Ash. The population of the Cynon Valley is about 60,000.

The Cynon Valley, like the Region as a whole, is economically depressed. It is in

FIG 1: CYNON VALLEY – SELECTED INDICATORS OF DEPRIVATION

	Fernhill	Perthcelyn	Cynon Valley	Wales	Britain
Percentage of households with no car	77.2	74.7	42.6	32.3	34.4
Percentage of population in top two socio-economic classes	4.1	9.4	24.3	34.0	37.2
Percentage of population in bottom two socio-economic classes	50.2	58.5	23.9	20.3	18.3

- Cynon Valley was the second most deprived local authority district in Wales in 1991, on an index which combines eight indicators of deprivation.
- In 1991 Penrhiwceiber ward which includes Perthcelyn was the most deprived ward in the Cynon Valley and the 13th most deprived in Wales.
- In 1991 Mountain Ash West ward which includes Fernhill was the fifth most deprived ward in Cynon Valley (out of 14) and the 68th most deprived (out of 908) in Wales

fact one of the most deprived areas in the United Kingdom, and it contains pockets of even greater disadvantage. Figure 1 (page 13) provides some statistical indicators of disadvantage.

A different indicator of disadvantage is provided by a group of visitors from a project in Turkey which has similar aims to the Cynon Valley Project. When they came to write up their experiences of the visit they concluded that they had never been to an area that felt so depressed. They said:

*In the developing world poverty still has something to do with hope.*

When they enlarged on this they said that in the developing world there may not be any meaningful system of state benefit but there is land on which people may build their own houses or grow their own food, and there is space in the markets or on the city streets, for them to sell what they make or what they grow, and whatever regulations there may be to control this activity are few and loosely enforced.

Here, the welfare system protects people from the very worst extremes of poverty but all the land is used up, and all avenues towards enterprise are controlled by well intentioned but restrictive regulations and well established and hostile businesses, who are all too ready to defend their

markets. In this situation people are just about kept alive physically but are starved of any realistic hope that they can do anything themselves to improve their situation. In these circumstances, dependency results, dependency on state benefits, dependency on drugs, dependency on there always being someone weaker than yourself to bully or worse off than yourself to pity.

No fair minded person would argue for cuts in the already pitifully small state benefits, but the Valleys desperately need new opportunities, and new hope for the future. The following extracts from a presentation by a resident of Perthcelyn bring home the effects of this situation on the daily life of people in some parts of The Valleys.

**Many people in the Valleys look to the past as a better time, when the mines offered the dignity of employment, even if the conditions of work were hard:**

*It was once a community full of life, where a Welshman was proud to call himself a miner.*

Today unemployment has brought many problems with it. Drug abuse offers a temporary solution to these problems for some people, and adds to the misery of others:

*Drugs, drink, anti-depressants, tranquillisers are all a temporary comfort to the way we*

*feel. Lost, alone, worthless, low self-esteem eventually self-destruction, spreading their destruction throughout our communities. Stealing to feed their temporary comfort. Abuse, threats of violence, spreading their lifeless wind in the direction of other people's lives, sometimes to the point of death.*

Threats of violence and bullying are brutal facts of life for many people too:

*The problem of bullying affects all aspects of our lives. A bully never picks on another bully. The most vulnerable are bullied, those who can't fight back. On my estate, a disabled person was bullied out of his flat by a gang of youths. When you are bullied you feel alone, so alone that even in a room full of people you feel there is no one to turn to. You feel invisible except to those who are bullying you. You feel hurt, angry and you ask yourself, 'why me?' Why anyone?'*

As a result of threats and actual violence some people live most of their lives in fear:

*Afraid to go to the shops because youths gather outside, drinking, swearing, shouting abuse or foul language. Afraid to report a crime that we have been seeing committed, because we know that the criminal will turn on us shouting their favourite words: 'grasser'. Old Mrs Williams reported an incident to the police, her life was made hell.*

And those people who try to take action to improve the situation often find themselves facing new kinds of pressure

*Some of us get involved to try and improve things. However there is a high expectation on volunteers who work in the community. About 20 years ago the local authorities recognised the importance of having a Community Centre in Perthcelyn. Sole responsibility for the running of the building fell upon the residents of Perthcelyn, this included running costs, internal maintenance and so on without any kind of support from anywhere. The local people assume that you are responsible for their children and you can easily turn into a glorified baby-sitter. Your personal life comes under attack, you can lose much of your privacy by people knocking on your door or by phoning you day and night, sometimes to deal with vandalism or by the setting off of alarms. You can even be accused of receiving payment for what you do.*

However some people are prepared to continue to work to improve the community, despite all the pressures:

*Being a volunteer also has many positive aspects. I asked my friend Sandra why she had stuck it for so long and her reply was, 'That despite the struggling there have been almost as many rewards.'*

These quotes describe the community of Perthcelyn but it must be said that Perthcelyn represents a particular type of Valleys community. Although The Valleys as a whole is mainly composed of traditional, closely knit and supportive communities, it also contains some housing estates, frequently built on the steeply sloping valley sides, which are geographically isolated from many services and which have become marginalised and stigmatised. Some families on these estates lack a supportive network of family and community ties. It is on two such estates – Perthcelyn and Fernhill – that the Cynon Valley Project has focused its work.

Fernhill is an estate of some 500 flats and houses built on a steeply sloping hillside, near the town of Mountain Ash. The estate had a very good image for a few years after it was built in 1969. Then a few families began to cause problems, and housing allocation policies made matters worse. Facilities gradually disappeared, and until recently only a primary school, general store and post office remained. The image of the estate declined, and properties became difficult to let with many remaining empty for a long time.

By the time the Project became involved on the estate in April 1991 however, things were beginning to happen: a new

community centre opened thanks to the efforts of local people supported by the Local Authority, and several agencies were becoming involved with the estate. Perthcelyn is an older estate of about 330 houses and flats. The most striking thing about the estate is its position, high on the hillside, looking down on the village of Penrhiwceiber just south of Mountain Ash. Its isolated position led to it being known as ‘the Lost City’. In April 1991 Perthcelyn had a shop, a post office, a pub/motel, an infant school, and a community centre managed by a hard pressed but determined group of volunteers. The attention of agencies, particularly those concerned with juvenile behaviour, was drawn to Perthcelyn in the summer of 1989 by a series of disturbances which are still referred to locally as ‘the Riots’.

### **The Early days of the Cynon Valley Project**

During late 1988 and early 1989 a planning group was set up for the Cynon Valley Project. This group was made up of representatives of key agencies working with children in the Valley: Mid Glamorgan Health Authority; Mid Glamorgan County Council Social Services Department; Mid Glamorgan County Council Education Department; Mid Glamorgan County Council Further Education Department; Mid Glamorgan



County Council Planning Department; Cynon Valley Borough Council Housing Department; and, Save the Children Fund Wales Programme.

The Planning Group explored the potential for working with children and established the first priorities for the Project, including the aim of preventing problems as well as dealing with those which already existed:

*... priority needs are those represented by families of younger children, in particular where families are headed by young parents in their late teens and early twenties ... Problems ... (include) ... low self-esteem, low self-confidence, lack of motivation and high levels of stress. Support is often needed where difficulties have not yet reached crisis point and are therefore susceptible to some solution.*

*Cynon Valley Project Plan 1990*

The Planning Group also decided to appoint a Development Worker to undertake detailed consultation and translate their ideas into a workable project proposal which could be used to attract major funding.

The planning process was conducted sensitively, and ideas were tested against the opinions of a wide range of residents and agencies.

*The Project Plan has to be sensitive to a number of general factors. It has to fit in with existing activity, it has to be seen to address the needs and problems identified, it must be seen as relevant and as enhancing existing activity and not in any way as cutting across existing or planned initiatives’.*

*Project Plan 1990*

One section of the Project Plan dealt with the philosophy and values of the Project. This reproduced SCF’s policy statement on the rights of the child. It also set out the values which made the Cynon Valley Project distinctive within SCF. The Project summed up these values in the term ‘empowerment’ which it defined as:

*‘The process whereby people as individuals, or in groups or communities, acquire skills, knowledge and confidence, enabling them to make choices to effect change in their lives’.*

*Project Plan 1990*

With hindsight it is clear that this section of the Project Plan set out many of the core values which shaped the actions of the Project and which served as a compass to help keep to its true course.

The spirit of the Project is contained in powerful statements like:

*...ownership of a project must lie ultimately with the community it assists ...*

*...activities must be sustainable in the longer term if the aim of enabling people to achieve greater control over their lives is to be achieved ...*

*...People are the real experts in determining their own needs and on how those needs can best be met.*

Four specific aims were also determined for the Project during the planning phase. These declared the Project's intention of promoting child development (aim one), of working in partnership (aim two), of documenting and tackling all the interlinked issues which together add up to 'poverty' (aim three), and of promoting the empowerment of adults (aim four). The principle of working in a community development manner was not stated in clear terms in the Project's aims but was rather like an invisible thread which linked all the formal aims together. The Project's commitment to a community development

approach was however very clear in other important documents. The first Project Plan for example began with the words:

*The Cynon Valley Project will work in the style of a community development project with a focus on younger children.*

Aim number three was more theoretical than the others in that it emphasised the importance of illustrating the effects and processes of poverty. This aim reflected the priorities of SCF's London based Policy and Research Department while the other three aims were more in line with the more practice orientated approach of SCF in Wales at the time.

Project Staff were appointed between April and June 1991. The first months were spent in intensive activity, making contacts with the communities and with partner agencies, as well as making plans for the launch of services on both estates.

## FIG 2: PROJECT AIMS

- 1) To improve the quality of life and range of opportunities for younger children and their families living on local authority housing estates in the Cynon Valley.
- 2) To demonstrate the effectiveness of creative and innovative working partnerships between the statutory and non statutory agencies and local people in tackling the problems of younger children and their families. Models of provision that prove valuable can then be replicated elsewhere should partner agencies so choose.
- 3) To illustrate the effects of Poverty and the links between low income, poor housing, environmental conditions and the health of young children, and to develop effective responses to counter the effects of poverty.
- 4) To enable individuals, families and communities in the Valley to exercise greater control over their own lives.

At its peak, the Project employed five full time and six part time staff (see Figure 3). By October 1991 the preparatory phase was over and the Project was preparing for the opening of its first significant formal activity: the Perthcelyn Pop In, this was followed

in November 1991 by the start of the Fernhill Drop In.

The planning process had been extremely successful. As a result the Project had been equipped with some very important strengths for the future.

FIG 3: MANAGEMENT & STAFFING ARRANGEMENTS 1994

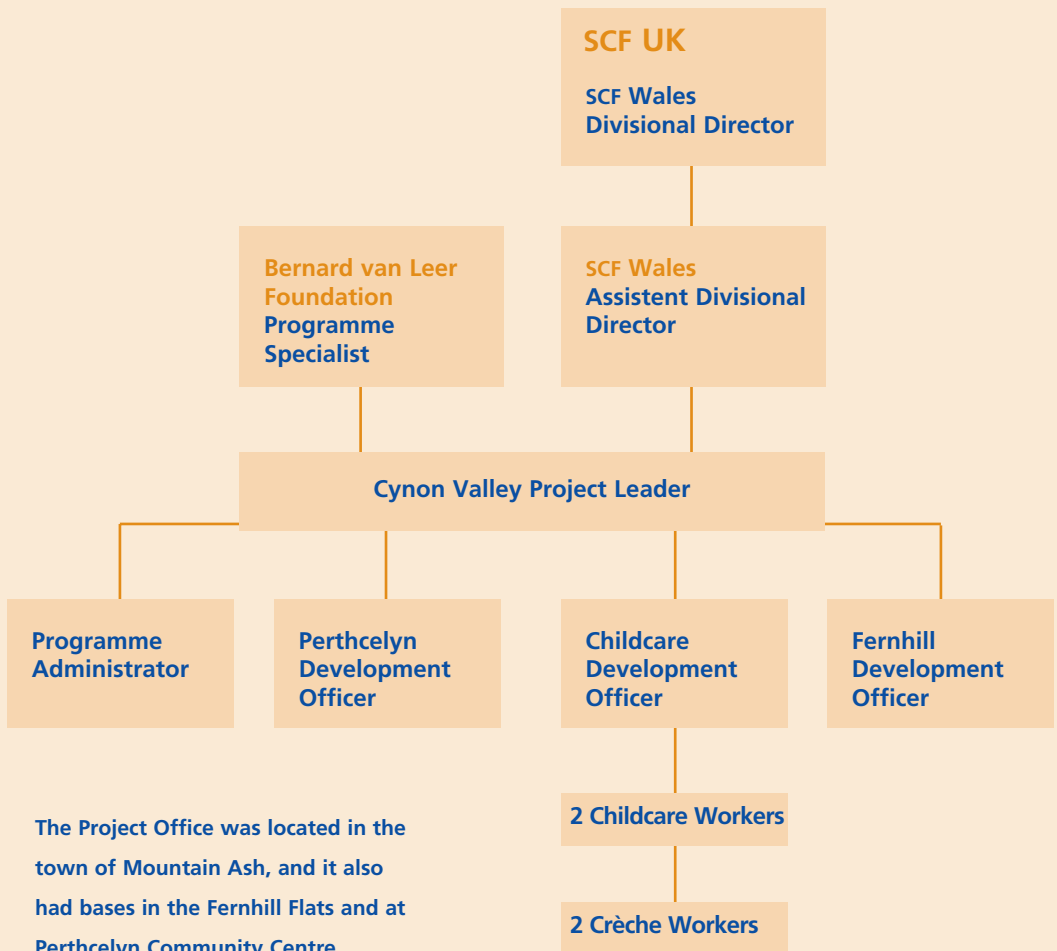


FIG 4: KEY STRENGTHS – THE FOUNDATION STONES OF THE PROJECT

**Widespread consultation**

All agencies already active in the area are fully involved in planning the Project. The Project therefore starts with the consent of all participating agencies.

**Independent funding**

The Project does not need additional funds. It is therefore independent and does not need to ask any local agency for funding.

**A long lead in time**

This allowed the Project to put down roots in both communities.

**A ten year time scale**

This gave the Project a realistic chance of achieving its aims.

**A clear role in providing much needed services**

Providing high quality childcare services gives the Project credibility with other agencies and the community, and the services encourage parents to come to the Project.

**The vision**

Children were at the heart of the Project's approach which was in fact very straightforward. The theory went something like this: the Project would provide services for preschool children which would help their development. Parents would bring their children to a children's open access Drop In and stay in the building in an adjacent room where nothing would be *expected* of them other than to spend time together. *Opportunities* would however be offered to parents, and they would be supported in planning any activities they wanted to

organise. By planning and taking part in new activities together, parents would gain in confidence, knowledge and skills, in other words they would go through a process of personal development which would lead to empowerment. In time some parents might wish to take over the running of the Project's child care services, or to set up some new activities or groups (not necessarily involving preschool children). The Project would put parents in a position to keep running the new groups or activities in the longer term. This would allow parents to put their new power to work for the benefit of the community. The

end result would be new services and activities, planned and run by local people.

The Project evaluation set out the Project's vision as a flow diagram (see Figure 5 on page 25). Figure 5 sets out what was supposed to happen: parents would come to the Project so their children could use the childcare services, then parents would take up opportunities to try out new activities which would lead to their empowerment. Once they had gained enough confidence and skills, parents would become active in community organisations or inter agency groups like the TOPs or the Fernhill Forum, or in running the childcare services previously run by Project staff. In the flow diagram all these stages are shown as self-contained

stages, eventually leading to the end result of new and sustainable services, run by local people and managed by local people in 2001.

Reality of course, is not like that! In reality the Project encountered many setbacks and weathered numerous storms.

Another way in which reality is different is that parents became involved in new activities including volunteering to run Project activities very soon after they started coming to the Project, and they continued to gain new skills, knowledge and confidence through these activities. The process of personal development therefore overlaps a lot with the process of developing new groups. People



**photo:** The Project would provide early childhood development activities, and parents would stay in the building, voluntarily taking part in activities.

## WEATHERING STORMS

Every project has to cope with the unexpected; events which cannot be foreseen or whose timing differs from what was planned.

For example, two development officers, both with responsibility for Perthcelyn, left during the life of the Project. Each change disrupted work on Perthcelyn.

There was also a major reorganisation of local government during the life of the Project and the former District and County councils were replaced by unitary authorities. This meant that many of the Project's partner agencies were in turmoil for several years, and that key contacts changed jobs or even moved into a different authority. This made it difficult to maintain relationships.

The greatest difficulties were caused by changes within SCF itself however. SCF changed its priorities during the life of the Project. This inevitably affected Project work and it meant that some established ways of working had to change. This put a strain on relationships with the community.

*It was very uncomfortable to be in a situation where (SCF was) saying we want you to do it this particular way ... and the community saying I want you to work in the community on needs as they are now.*

**Project worker**

SCF also changed the timetable for the Project as a whole by bringing forward the planned reduction in staff numbers. Residents had been told that staff numbers would be reduced after March 1998 but in fact redundancies were announced in January 1997 which would mean that staff numbers would begin to reduce from June 1997.

Some redundancies were delayed but the staff numbers effectively began to reduce about one year before originally planned.

SCF will maintain a staff presence in Cynon Valley and there will be a Cynon Valley 'Programme' rather than a project, at least until 2001 and perhaps beyond this date. However the early start to reducing numbers was received with a sense of betrayal and anger by Project staff, residents and agencies:

*I was under the impression that the personnel were going to stay for ten years, so I mean personally I was very disappointed.*

*I think it will have a very detrimental effect on the two estates because they have in the past had very negative views about various agencies ... it could undo a lot of the good work that has gone on.*

**(agency representative)**

The Project survived this storm too but it was without doubt the most testing of the difficulties it experienced.

continued to gain confidence, knowledge and skills, when they were involved in a new activity – whether the activity in question was working as a volunteer in a playgroup or organising a protest action.

In reality too, both estates followed more or less the same path, up the middle column of the model, up to the point where ‘Project participants gain skills, knowledge and confidence’. After this point however their paths divided, and it can be argued that Perthcelyn ‘turned left’ on the model, and Fernhill ‘turned right’. Perthcelyn participants went up the left hand path of the model by working alongside agencies and the local authority to secure large scale resources with which to attempt the overall regeneration of their estate, while Fernhill participants

went up the right hand path of the model in developing voluntary childcare services for their community.

To say that Perthcelyn turned left and Fernhill turned right is of course to simplify reality far too much, so it is important to look in more detail at some important developments on each estate in turn to explain the different paths more clearly.

### **How the project developed after september 1991**

The life of the Project can be divided into four phases.

#### **Phase One: planning and preparation early 1989 to September 1991.**

The first pre-start phase of consultation and planning has just been described.



**photo:** Parents volunteered to run Project activities within a short space of time.

This phase also covers the first few months when staff were in place but before any services for children were provided.

**Phase Two: opening the door to the project October 1991 to November 1992.**

This is the first phase of the Project proper. Childcare services are provided on both estates. Parents come through the door for the first time because they want their children to benefit from the high quality childcare services at the Drop In and Pop In, and later at Playgroups on each estate. However, the parents have to stay in the building while their children are being looked after at the Drop In and Pop In, and when people get together, things begin to happen.

**Phase Three: empowering parents, May 1992 to December 1996.**

During this phase parents become involved in more formal activities. Groups are set up, long term initiatives and activities get under way, some people go through various types of formal training. Project staff retain an important role in supporting activities however and staff take a lead role in initiating new activities.

During this phase it becomes clear that a core group of Fernhill residents who are active in the Project are very keen to become involved in providing childcare services but on Perthcelyn, Pop In members are more interested in taking

protest action, which, in time, leads to a more sustained campaign.

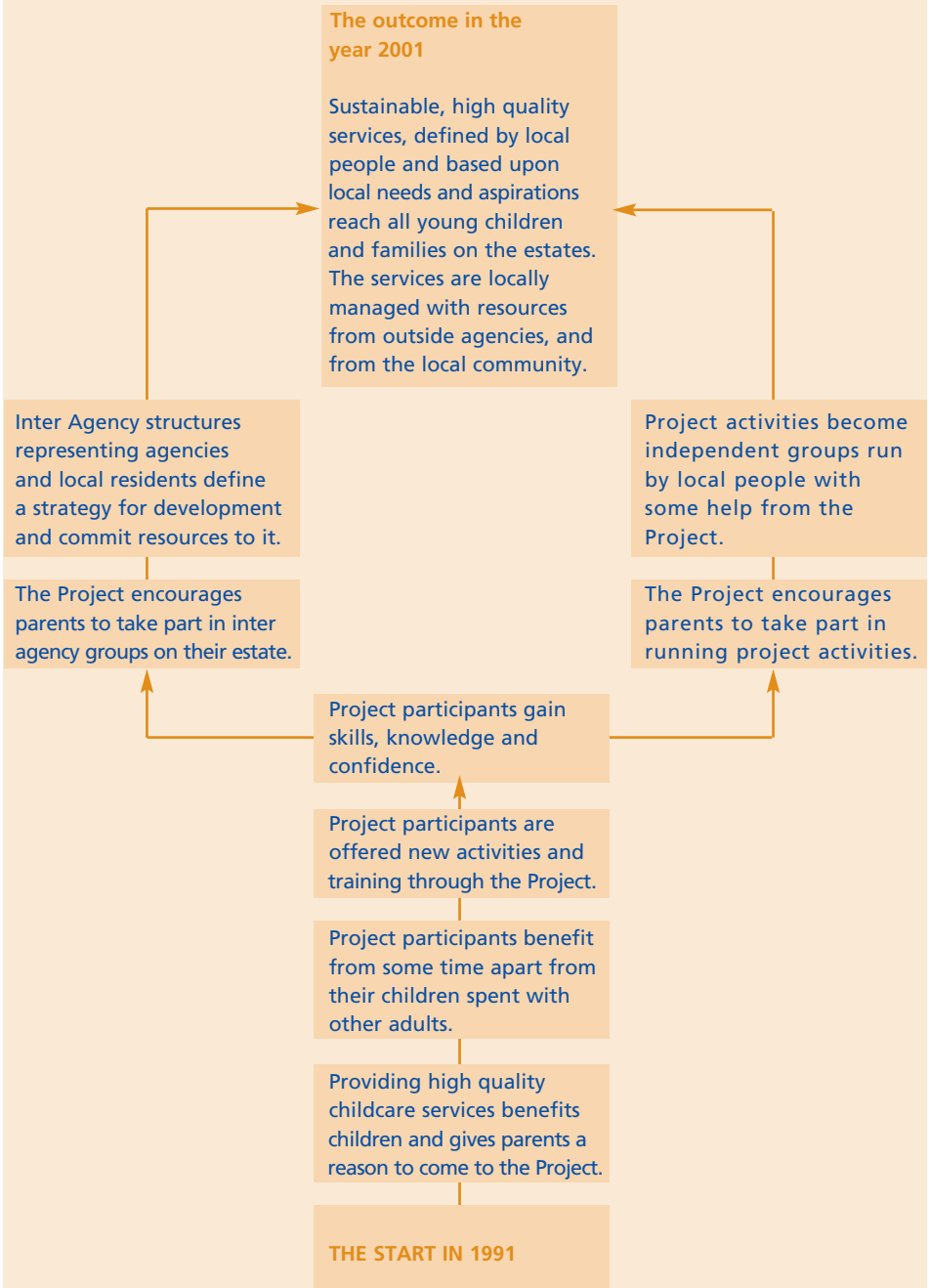
**Phase Four: handing over and moving on, July 1993 to March 1998.**

The Project hands over groups and activities to residents who now act independently. Residents, within their groups now run their own activities and take a lead role in initiating any new developments. On Fernhill childcare groups are handed over to residents, on Perthcelyn a group of active residents works closely with the Local Authority towards the broader regeneration of the estate.

The rest of this booklet will look at each of these phases in some more detail, bringing out the effects on preschool children, on their parents, and on the communities of Fernhill and Perthcelyn.



FIG 5: THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH OF THE CYNON VALLEY PROJECT



## Chapter two



## Opening the door to the project

### But what about the children?

In October 1991, the Perthcelyn Pop In opened its doors, closely followed in November 1991 by the Fernhill Drop In. This marked the beginning of Project work on Fernhill and Perthcelyn. The Fernhill Playgroup then opened in June 1992 and the Perthcelyn Playgroup welcomed its first children in November 1992. The opening of the Perthcelyn Playgroup marks the point when all the main services for children provided through the Project were in place. Other services for parents of very young children were provided later for a time on both estates but these never really took off. The door to the community was therefore fully open in November 1992. It was then up to local residents whether they walked through it or not.

If the Project was going to succeed then parents would have to bring their children to the Drop In and Pop In and they would have to be willing to remain in the room next door, in the parents' Drop In or Pop In. Despite all the preparations there was absolutely no guarantee that this would happen.

In fact, parents and their children did come, in significant numbers, and the Project eventually succeeded in maintaining regular contact with about one third of preschool children on Fernhill Estate (about 45 children), and with about one quarter of preschool children on Perthcelyn Estate (about 35 children).

From the very start it was clear that the Project was meeting a very real need. Far from being apathetic, parents wanted the best for their children, and they were very enthusiastic about the services provided by the Project. Far from being resigned, many parents were desperate for a short break from their children, so that they could recover some energy, regain a sense of themselves as individuals, share their concerns with others and discover that they were not alone.

In short, the Project had got it right. It was offering services and opportunities which people wanted, and the first few years of the Project was a period of great hope and idealism. Staff and parents were full of enthusiasm, and each new initiative seemed to indicate a further step forward for local residents and for the Project.

Staff, Project management, and the Project evaluator were also quite focused on 'the big picture'; talk was frequently about concepts like 'empowerment' or

‘inter agency working’ and it took the Childcare Development Worker to restore a focus on the individuals who were at the very heart of the Project. She did this memorably when, on reading a draft evaluation report she said:

*It’s all right ... but what about the children?*

The first significant benefit which the Project brought to the communities of Fernhill and Perthcelyn was to the children. The Project’s impact began as soon as the Drop In and Pop In opened their doors, and its effects will continue to be felt as the children who attended Project activities go through school and become adults. The Project’s impact on the children was in fact an investment in the future and for this reason it can be argued that the Project’s effect on the children of Fernhill and Perthcelyn will also be one of its most lasting legacies.

So what effect has the Project had on the youngest members of the communities it worked with – what about the children?

### **What services did the project provide for children?**

There were about 130 preschool children on Fernhill and about 160<sup>2</sup> on Perthcelyn at any one time during the life of the Cynon Valley Project In a typical year,

the Project managed to have regular contact with about one third (36 percent) of these preschool children on Fernhill and about one quarter (23 percent) on Perthcelyn<sup>3</sup>.

The Project provided a range of core services for these children. Four of these, once they had been launched, ran continuously. They are: the Perthcelyn Pop In, Fernhill Drop In, the Tiny Tots (Fernhill) Playgroup, and the Fernhill Play Organisation. Three out of these four services were on Fernhill.

Four other services ran intermittently, these are: the Tree House (Perthcelyn) Playgroup, the Perthcelyn New Mothers Group, and the Fernhill Pram Club. The fact that more childcare activities ran on a continuous basis on Fernhill than on Perthcelyn, gives the first indication that work with children was always better supported both in terms of attendance and volunteers, on Fernhill than on Perthcelyn. In fact, the Project model worked almost exactly according to plan on Fernhill. Perthcelyn, however, followed a very different development path to the one planned by the Project. Later chapters will return to the different ways in which each estate developed.

At first, the Project’s part time, sessional staff members were responsible for

<sup>2</sup> Alain Thomas (1995) *But What About The Children*; Save the Children Fund; internal evaluation report.

<sup>3</sup> *But What About The Children*, as above.

FIG 6: SERVICES FOR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

SERVICE	FREQUENCY	AGE RANGE (years)
Tiny Tots Playgroup Fernhill)	Two mornings per week	Two and a half to three plus
Fernhill Drop In	One morning per week*	Zero to three and a half
Fernhill Play Organisation	Holiday Playschemes	Five to twelve
Fernhill Pram Club	One morning per week	Babies under one
Treehouse Playgroup (Perthcelyn)	One or two mornings per week	Two and a half to three plus
Perthcelyn Pop In	Two mornings per week	Zero to three
Perthcelyn New Mothers Group	One morning per week	Babies under one

**Note:** Services in **bold** were continuous, services in normal type were intermittent.

\*The Fernhill Drop In was open two mornings per week until the Fernhill Playgroup opened, at which point the Drop In reduced to one morning each week.

running the children's Drop In, Pop In and Playgroups. On Fernhill however they were very soon helped by parents who became active volunteers. Fernhill parents also steadily took on greater responsibility for running the Fernhill Play Organisation. As time went on therefore Fernhill parents became

increasingly active in providing childcare services so that when the Project ceased to employ part time staff, parents were prepared to take over running the core childcare activities on Fernhill.

There were also other differences, structured assessments of children were



only carried out on Fernhill for example, provision for special needs was only available on Fernhill, and at the start of the Project the specialist Childcare Development Worker worked exclusively on Fernhill.

All of this was of course in line with the Project's original plan which placed a greater emphasis on childcare service development on Fernhill while aiming for broader community development on Perthcelyn.

However the differences in provision for children contributed to an underlying discontent on Perthcelyn which surfaced from time to time as grumbles that Fernhill was getting something that Perthcelyn was not. The differences in provision also, very probably, contributed to the fact that the Project consistently reached more preschool children and their parents on Fernhill than on Perthcelyn.

## What made services for children 'good quality'?

The Project quickly established a reputation for the high quality of its services for preschool children. But what exactly did this mean?

The Project never did define exactly what it meant by 'quality' nor for that matter did it define 'child development' for itself, nor what it meant by 'good practice'. But it was obvious that staff and volunteers were working towards a common aim. Qualified staff were all experienced and aware of what was generally understood to be good practice in promoting child development, and all staff and volunteers had a common basis of training as they had all undergone the Preschool Playgroups Association (PPA) training programme. It was also clear that there was a very strong ethos in the Project of striving for the best possible practice.

One statement of good practice which emerged from the Project's work was the following:

*If the Project is to have an effect on the development of younger children, it must offer an environment where they feel **safe, relaxed, and at home**, and where they will be **stimulated to learn**. If children are being stimulated to learn they will be **imaginative and creative**, they will be*

*expressive, they will explore their environment and make choices for themselves, they will also become more confident, and they will learn new skills.*

This statement was generated from a group discussion involving childcare staff and was used by the project evaluation to generate more detailed indicators of good practice.

So what makes it possible to say that the Project provided a good quality childcare service? The short answer is, a lot!

The evaluation used a framework adapted from a discussion paper by Irene Balaguer, Juan Mestres and Helen Penn. This framework suggested some of the important things to look for in a good quality service: how accessible the service was, the quality of the environment offered to children, how well the services were integrated into the local community, the work of the staff, and the type of relationships between staff and children.

#### **How accessible were services for children?**

The services were very accessible on both estates. They were in the middle of the communities they served and within walking distance for everyone. The fees were affordable and parents had a strong say in setting the charges, no referrals were accepted from Social Services

Departments so parents coming to the Project's services were less likely to feel stigmatised. It was also very important that the Drop In and Pop In had an open access policy so people could literally walk in off the street without committing themselves to anything more than a cup of tea and a chat.

#### **What was the quality of the environment for children?**

The Project base on Fernhill was two former flats, made available by the Local Authority, and adapted specifically for the Project. On Perthcelyn however, the main activities for children took place in the main hall of the Community Centre which was also used by the local community.

This meant that the environment on Fernhill was richer, more attractive and more child centred than on Perthcelyn where every item of equipment had to be



put away at the end of each Pop In or Playgroup session.

The Perthcelyn Pop In and Playgroup were held in the main hall of the Perthcelyn Community Centre. Many parents would be familiar with this environment but their children would not necessarily have experienced it before coming to the Project. The Community Centre was quite run down when the Project began but its appearance and decor improved considerably after funding allowed substantial renovation works to be carried out between November 1993 and March 1994. Nevertheless because the Centre was used by various community organisations it could never offer the same child centred environment as the Fernhill Flats. Its only advantage over Fernhill was that wheelchair access was possible.

On Fernhill, children had the reward of seeing their drawings and friezes displayed on the wall, while on Perthcelyn very little could be displayed. Children on both estates could play with puzzles, small toys, clay, sand, paints and play frames, but only on Fernhill could children play with bigger sit-on toys such as bicycles or cars because Perthcelyn did not have enough storage space. Lack of storage also prevented Perthcelyn children from having the permanent resources for imaginative play such as the shop with scaled down tins and play money, or the rack of clothes for dressing up games which Fernhill children enjoyed. On Fernhill toilets were child sized and each child had a coat peg, at child height with their name on it. On Perthcelyn all such facilities were adult sized.

On both estates, however, the environment was one where children could make their own choices within a broad framework. Activities were structured in two ways: pieces of equipment were set out in the same places, and different types of activity took place at the same time each session. For example, a session might start with free activity until a break for squash and biscuits. After the break the bigger toys are brought out and a final fixed point is provided by singing and stories at the end of the session.



**photo:** Having a centre dedicated to them meant that Fernhill children could permanently display their drawings.



Within this broad framework established by equipment and activities however, children could make their own choices about what they did and who they played with. Staff divided their time between leading play activities, responding to the needs of individual children, and setting out or tidying away equipment. Children chose between playing with staff, with mothers, with other children or by themselves.

The best proof that children appreciated the environment however is that they were keen to return, and some were

reluctant to leave as the following moment, which could have been observed most days with different actors, showed.

### **How well were the services integrated into the local community?**

Regular visits to events and activities in the locality were organised for children and parents through the Project. Links with the schools serving both estates improved throughout the life of the Project and in time excellent relations were established with most schools. This was a major breakthrough for some parents who had bad memories of school.

### **Observation at the Fernhill Drop In February 1995**

12.15 Home time. Zoe is resisting having her coat put on her.

**Mother:** *She never wants to go home.*

Zoe escapes to have another slide. Mother chases Zoe around the slide and this turns into a game.

**Barbara (member of staff):** *Last slide then.*

Zoe slides down.

Barbara purses her lips and Zoe responds by miming a big kiss. The slide is finally put away and Zoe is captured.

All paid childcare staff lived within the Cynon Valley and one lived on the Fernhill Estate. Further, all except one of the childcare staff were *from* the Cynon Valley. This meant that they shared with the people they worked with the same culture, the same background, the same broad history, and the same accent. This helped staff to gain acceptance, to understand and be understood by the people they worked with, (the one member of staff who was not from the area actually lived on Fernhill estate, and had come from a closely knit community in Northern England which had some similar characteristics to Fernhill and Perthcelyn so she could still identify easily with the community).

The fact that the services on Fernhill were located in adapted flats also meant that the internal layout of the building would literally be like home for many children. One little girl made this clear when she was heard asking to go into the painting area. What she actually said was:

*I want to go into the front room.*

On Fernhill, parents gradually became more involved in running services, first of all as volunteers and later as organisers and voluntary managers. This completed the process of fully integrating the services on this estate with the local community.

### **What were the staff like?**

All staff were experienced and gained qualifications through the Preschool Playgroups Association (PPA). All the key volunteers on Fernhill also gained PPA qualifications in due course. The PPA training was important in helping staff and volunteers to acquire common knowledge, skills and understanding. The training also helped staff and volunteers realise that their routine practice was already of a high standard. Observations at the Fernhill Drop In during 1995 noted how smoothly staff worked together with everyone carrying out their planned tasks but also being ready to step in on their own initiative. The following incident was used as an example:

### **Observation at the Fernhill Drop In 2 February 1995**

A girl toddles into the messy play room and over to the easel. Activities are in full and noisy motion all around her but she stands transfixed in front of the line of paint brushes sticking out of pots, fully loaded with paint and with different, brightly coloured paint splashes already all over them. She is wearing an immaculate, light cream coloured wool cardigan. She reaches eagerly for the nearest brush, and is scooped up by a volunteer who comes from the other side of the room but has obviously kept one eye on the situation. The volunteer provides a pinafore before setting the girl down again, now suitably protected, in front of the easel.

### **What were relationships like?**

Staff and volunteers placed a strong emphasis on sharing their skills with each other, and in their daily work:

*... you do what you are best at. We pool our ideas and pick up on each other. It's very good teamwork really.*

***Member of staff***

Staff and volunteers were also very attentive to individual children, especially those showing behavioural or other issues which needed addressing. This is shown by the

diaries of Drop In, Pop In and Playgroup sessions kept by staff and volunteers.

*This sometimes builds up into a picture of the child's behaviour over a few weeks enabling staff to respond to individual needs as they arise.*

### **Childcare Development Worker**

Personal relationships are very important in the communities of the South Wales Valleys. Communities are small enough for people to know each other, or at least to know something about each other. When a young person leaves home to live independently they will very often move into a house which is fairly close to their family home. Families therefore tend to be geographically as well as emotionally close. People also tend to talk to each other more easily in going about their every day tasks, than in most areas of Britain, whether they know each other or not. And there is also a sense of belonging in the Valleys, a favourite 'game' for two people from the same Valley who meet each other for the first time for example, is to search for common acquaintances, and surprisingly often, they will find several, which confirms the bond of community between them! In short, these are communities where people are judged more by the way they relate to others, than by the more superficial trappings of wealth or status.

In terms of providing childcare (or any other) service this means that a professional cannot hide behind qualifications or status to gain approval and acceptance, they must earn this through their behaviour.

This is an aspect of the work where the fact that all but one of the childcare staff were from the Cynon Valley, and that all currently lived there and could identify with the community, was a real asset. It meant that staff were entirely familiar and comfortable with the type of relationships which were expected of them. It was therefore natural to treat parents as individuals, and with genuine interest and warmth.

*Hiya how's Liam? Hello Cerian, how are you keeping pet? Hello, you haven't been for ages.*

### **Member of staff greeting parents and children at the Fernhill Drop In**



## What effect did the project have on child development?

The Project helped to ease the transition into school, it helped children learn new skills especially social and intellectual skills and it encouraged children to be more confident and expressive.

Over 90 percent of parents felt that the Project had helped their children get ready for school. Mothers are always close by when children are in the Drop In or Pop In and they can be called in if their child needs them. This allows children to separate gradually from their mothers

*The biggest change is you don't see them hanging on to their mothers, they are more independent, mine used to cling to every lamp post they passed. They don't cry now, it's the mothers who cry.*

**Parent**

The Project also helped children get used to a routine before they went to school.

*... it doesn't seem to faze them, they go straight into school, they know what's expected of them and they don't realise they are going to school.*

**Parent**

The end result is that practically no children have problems separating from their parents when they go to school and

they can continue to learn straight away in their new environment.

*... it normally takes weeks, they don't have any of these obstacles, they can get cracking.*

**Professional**

About 90 percent of parents also believed that the Project had helped their children to develop their social skills. In practical terms this meant that children were able to form better relationships with adults and with other children as well as being able to share things with other children.

*It makes them more co-operative with other children and other people ... they learn to share more like other toys, and their parents, and they are more respectful. They realise there are other children not only them.*

**Parent**

Many parents also commented that their children had a longer concentration span and were more patient since attending the Project. An observation of the Fernhill Drop In provides an example of one of the ways in which the Project can encourage patience. In this example, encouraging patience involves Sharon (a volunteer) and Marion (a member of staff) averting attempts by a very resourceful and determined child (Shauni) to start a small riot.

OBSERVATION AT THE FERNHILL PLAYGROUP 10 FEBRUARY 1995.

When	Who	What
10.48	Shauni	<i>I want pop – can I have pop?</i>
	Sharon	<i>You can have pop in a minute.</i>
10.49	Shauni	<i>My leg is stuck. It is in fact under the table.</i>
	Sharon	<i>Your leg is stuck is it?</i>
	Shauni	<i>No!</i>
	Sharon	<i>You are ready for pop you are.</i>
		Shauni gets up from the table and runs into the kitchen
	Marion	<i>Get out of the kitchen.</i>
10.50		Shauni returns to the table, looks at the evaluator and slips down under the table until just her head is showing.
10.51	Shauni	<i>Can I have some squash.</i>
	Sharon	<i>It's nearly time.</i>
10.52		Shauni starts drumming on the table, three little boys join her and start drumming too.
10.53		The boys are still drumming and Shauni calls Sharon and asks her to see to her shoe.
		Sharon sees to Shauni's shoe.
	Marion	<i>She's waiting for squash she is, she's waiting patiently.</i>
		Drumming stops.
10.56	Sharon	<i>Do you want to take a message to the other children that it's squash time, say 'squash time'.</i>
		Shauni trots off happily into the other room to deliver her message.
10.57		Shauni back at table waiting patiently.
10.59		Squash is served, Shauni is content.

The Playgroups offer children a more focused and structured programme of activities than the Drop In and Pop In, and many people commented that they thought the Playgroups had helped children to develop their intellectual skills.

*I have been here for 17 years and there is a big difference since the Project started, we are starting from a higher baseline.*

**Professional**

The following case study illustrates how children can be helped to start from a higher base line.

Over 90 percent of parents specifically felt that their children's language skills had improved because of the Project and more than 80 percent believed that their children were more creative, expressive, and more ready to use their imagination.

*He didn't paint much in the house, but the first day at the Drop In he painted a yellow blob and he turned round and said 'look Mummy, Humpty Dumpty.*

**Parent**

Almost 90 percent of parents also felt that their children were more confident. Some parents were in a very good position to assess the effect of the Project because some of their children had attended

## CASE STUDY – Starting from a higher baseline

Child 'A' first made himself noticed by his habit of biting other children in the Perthcelyn Pop In. A little later the Pop In diary noted that he had made progress:

*A is still going around biting and pulling hair but is saying sorry after doing it!*

By 1995 however child 'A' had left the Project and gone into school. His teacher received a very different child to the one who first came into the Pop In.

*He settled in no problem, within the first week you would swear he had been here for donkey's years. We started him on flash cards. We don't normally do that at this age, but we had to with him because he is so good. He is so imaginative, he loves building. Yesterday he built a bridge and a swimming pool. His memory recall is fantastic and he loves stories, and his concentration ... he can sit and see it through. You only need to introduce a song and the next day he knows it, and his Welsh songs are fantastic, he improvised one the other day, in Welsh. He is excellent, I've got high hopes for him.*

Project activities while others had not. This is what one woman said whose third child had attended the Pop In while her first two had not.

*It made a big difference. When they went to school, my other two were very unsure. 'N' was confident enough to go in and mix with the others, not take over, but to join in. The teacher told me he's like a bottle of pop, he's the bubble of the class, he lifts everything. He has always been quiet but bubbly. The other two were also quiet but bubbly, but it has taken them more time to come out.*

#### *Parent*

These are just a few examples from many which were gathered during the life of the Project. Together they show that the Project had a very big effect on children. It helped them to develop in many ways, it gave them a flying start in their school life, and it equipped them with a more confident approach to life in general which was a real investment in their future. This was the first and one of the most important achievements of the Project, and it was perhaps the achievement which was most valued by parents.

Having said all of this however, the success of the Project in promoting child development was not, truly speaking, remarkable. True, it provided high quality

services for children, undoubtedly it had a major impact on child development, but so do a lot of other projects. What was remarkable about the Cynon Valley Project was that its services for preschool children led to the involvement and personal development of parents, which in turn eventually led to broader community development.

This chapter began with the question 'but what about the children'. The next chapter will ask the question 'what about the parents?'

## Chapter three





## Promoting personal development

### What about the parents?

Why did parents come to the Project in the first place? When parents were asked this question they would usually say that they came for their children.

They could see that the Project would help their children to develop and they were keen for this to happen. But if they were pressed to say how the Project helped them as opposed to helping their children the first reply was usually

*It gives us a break from the children.*

### A break from the children

Behind that simple sentence, there is a deeply felt need for respite care, for time to rest and to grow:

*With kids (you need) a couple of hours a day, time for yourself. No matter how much you love your kids they can wind you up.*

*Parent*

The Project met this need and because it met it, parents came through the doors, and stayed for a few hours in the Drop In and Pop In having committed

themselves, to start with, to nothing more than a chat and a cup of tea.

### Meeting other people

However, parents very quickly found that just taking the time to have a chat and a cup of tea together allowed them to get to know each other, to support each other, and quite simply to enjoy each other's company:

*We seem all to be able to talk about different things and I think it does help with small children, it does help to be able to talk.*

*Parent*

*We start off very quiet but once we start we seem to run out of time, we start going deeper and deeper, we get side-tracked onto other things then. It's the highlight of the week really.*

*Parent*

For most parents like the two quoted above, the Project offered an extra dimension to their already busy lives, for others like this mother however it offered some vitally important social contact:

*I bring my child every week for the simple reason that I don't bother with anyone; so unless I come here I'm constantly on my own. So I do find it's like a lifeline.*

*Parent*

**photo:** Most parents believe that the Project helps their children develop their social skills.

(Photo by Liba Taylor)

For others again, sharing information allowed them to discover that they were not alone in facing a particular problem:

*I think other people don't give you enough information; sometimes you're too ashamed to go and ask. It's not uncommon for a sixteen year old to wet the bed – a lot of people don't know that.*

*Parent*

The Project offered people different things which meant that a lot of different people were attracted to it.

### Who became involved in the project?

So who were the parents who came to the Project, and how many of them did the Project succeed in working with?

Once the Project was up and running it seems likely that it reached about 40 percent of households with preschool children on Fernhill (36 out of 88 households) and about 26 percent of households with preschool children on Perthcelyn (29 out of 109 households).

The Project was always convinced that personal development for participants from the community would need to precede community development. The Project therefore helped parents to acquire new skills, knowledge and

confidence in a variety of ways. The following table lists the activities which were mainly intended to promote personal development over a three year period between the summer of 1991 and the summer of 1994. The table shows how activities became more numerous as time went on. It also shows the mix of activities which included informal activities such as craft sessions, formal training courses, mentoring for example in book keeping, fun events like carnivals, visits to other Projects, and attending childcare or community development related events and conferences.

### How did the project promote personal development?

The Project aimed to enable parents to go through a process of personal development. There are different views about what the outcomes of personal development will be. A clear definition (formulated coincidentally by someone who has since delivered some well received training courses on both estates) is that personal development will result in: more *self-confidence*, new *knowledge* and understanding, and new *skills*.<sup>4</sup>

So the Project aimed to help parents to gain confidence, to acquire new knowledge and to learn new skills. It would do this by offering parents a range of opportunities which would allow

<sup>4</sup> Gibbon R (1989) *The Stepping In to Education Project*; People and Work Unit; UK.

## LANDMARKS IN PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

### 1991

**June** First regular activities start – craft sessions on Perthcelyn

**October** Perthcelyn Pop In opens

**November** Fernhill Drop In opens

### 1992

**June** First formal training course – for volunteers to run a summer playscheme on Fernhill. More training courses follow over the next few months, including the Lifeskills course on Fernhill. Most of these are funded by other agencies.

**September** First Preschool Playgroups Association training course starts. Three parents attend.

**October** Community Education renew their financial support for the Fernhill Lifeskills course and propose two new courses.

### 1993

**March** Four Perthcelyn residents attend Cynon Valley Inter-Agency day.

**April** Project provides training in book keeping to officers of community groups on the estates.

Nine residents attend launch of Wales Anti Poverty Network.

**May** Perthcelyn Summer Fayre takes place.

**June** Perthcelyn carnival takes place.

**July** Presentation evening for PPA course certificates and selection of applicants for 1993-94 PPA course.

**September** Project carries out a major consultation exercise with residents about its past achievements and future work. New courses start including the PPA training course which attracts nine residents this year, and a new 'Wordpower' literacy course on Fernhill.

**November** Ten week course in Committee Skills starts on Fernhill. Lifeskills starts on Perthcelyn for the first time. Project provides more training in administration and finance to Tiny Tots and Fernhill Play Organisation.

**December** Fernhill parents organise a Christmas Social.

### 1994

**January** An Alcohol Education Group starts to meet on Fernhill. It works with Health Promotion Wales and produces an Alcohol Education Pack which receives national recognition.

**April** The Committee skills course starts on Perthcelyn.

**June** Visit to Togher Family Centre (Cork, Ireland) by 12 residents from both estates. Perthcelyn and Fernhill residents take part in Mountain Ash Carnival.



them to develop, or to become empowered as individuals.

If this was the plan, what was the reality, and did it work? The answer is clearly yes. The evaluation reports written all through the life of the Project are full of quotations from parents who have gone through the Project which reflect this fact. Following is how the plan worked in practice.

### **The Fernhill Drop In and the Perthcelyn Pop In**

The open access Drop In and Pop In were the doorways through which most parents entered the Project. As already mentioned, they offered a break from the children and an opportunity to meet other adults. They also allowed parents to plan other activities together and because of this they served as launching pads for many different activities, some

were intended to be short lived but others including the Fernhill Play Organisation proved to be long lasting.

### **Visits and trips**

The Project helped parents on both estates to attend conferences and other events related to childcare, some parents were able to visit other similar projects including one in Ireland, and as time went on parents organised many trips themselves. Attending outside events and conferences and organising trips were great confidence boosters which helped parents to develop and appreciate their own abilities.

According to the nature of the event parents were able to acquire new information. More importantly however attending outside events put some residents through a difficult test and forced them to step into the unknown. Most of the people who took this risk found a new type of self-worth and self-respect, and they learnt that people wanted or needed to listen to them.

The example of a resident, 'M', attending a childcare conference in London sums up the experience of stepping into the unknown and shows some of the gains which can result.

## CASE STUDY – STEPPING INTO THE UNKNOWN

A Project participant 'M' attended a preschool childcare conference in London. She describes her fears about stepping into the unknown, and how she felt afterwards.

**M:** *I went to London on my own.*

**Interviewer:** *Would you have done that before?*

**M:** *No, I wouldn't go to Cardiff on my own.*

**Other Participant:** *She wouldn't go to Mountain Ash on her own!*

**M:** *My first reaction was 'wow great'. My second reaction was 'What have I let myself in for?' and 'Will I be out of my depth?'*

Going away from home into a new environment means overcoming a high level of fear. But overcoming fear is only half of the problem, there are also practical issues to be resolved, like childcare.

*I explained that my main worry was the children and that if my partner was working away, would he be home in time for me to travel up on the Wednesday afternoon.*

It takes a lot of determination to overcome such very real obstacles which can so easily become a reason for not stepping into the unknown. And once the problems have been resolved, the unknown is still there ... waiting.

*When I arrived in London I walked straight through the station with blinkered vision. I didn't want to appear vulnerable, and I headed straight for the taxi rank. I kept my eye out for Euston on the sign posts.*

Having successfully negotiated the travelling 'M' had another threshold to cross, into a conference full of strangers, many of whom would be 'experts' in child development. A surprise was waiting however, because once she had entered the conference she very quickly found herself 'at home' again. Her experience as a mother, and the Preschool Playgroup Association training she had received through the Project helped her to find her feet quickly.

*I enjoyed (the speaker's) talk, and to my relief understood it. Many of the things discussed like giving children choices and listening to children and their views, I like to think I have already put into practice with my own children.*

*The next speaker gave a different and fascinating talk on children's view of their treatment and how children can very often decide for themselves.*

*I must say (another speaker) did not impress me at all. I felt the message she was trying to put over was not at all clear and her body language was all wrong.*

Once the conference was over informal groups developed as delegates mingled together. 'M' found herself in one such group, along with the speaker who had not impressed her. She could, of course have stayed silent, but by this time she had realised that she was among equals rather than among experts, so she took the speaker to task, and their debate had quite an impact.

*I realised that a few of the group had been listening to our conversation and joined in. I explained that it was nothing personal but that encouraging children to question and feel confident to express their views must only help in their learning and development. One of the highlights of the day for me was when I went to tea a couple from the group approached me and we continued the discussion.*

This example very clearly how the Project offered opportunities to participants like 'M' to extend themselves, to face their fears, to learn about their abilities, and to gain in confidence.

### **Short term events**

Parents organised various short term events through the Project. The most notable was perhaps the Carnival on Perthcelyn. Short term events bring people together and help create a sense of common purpose, and they also create an atmosphere of celebration. This is particularly important in a community which, over many years felt it had little to celebrate. The Project also offered training when relevant, to the organisers of short term events. In the case of the Perthcelyn Carnival for example training was offered through South Wales Inter

Cultural Arts Association (SWICAA).

Events like the carnival allow residents to make a public statement together about their pride in their communities and organising such events allows them to learn new skills and to put them into practice.

The following quotes from parents give examples of the way in which people learnt and used new skills:

*I am getting good at it! I had one letter written for fundraising, realised after three shops that we weren't explaining we*

*needed help NOW, not in July. So I stopped and had another letter printed – much more effective.*

*After the fundraising letter we sent thank you notes for donations – it pays ... I made a mistake on the leaflet, no venue, and wrote them in by hand. I spotted it after an extra 300 had been photocopied. My mistake, I take responsibility for it. It taught me to double check everything.*

*... delegated as much to different members as possible, especially new volunteers, so that they would feel part of the team and they did a marvellous job.*

The feedback is very clear: organising events and activities helped parents to learn new communication, organisation and management skills, and to take responsibility for their actions. This type of informal learning is an important but often invisible outcome of running all kinds of community based events.

### **Training and education**

The Project offered parents a great many training and education opportunities throughout its life. These were usually run in partnership with training providers. The Project provided the venue and the students, the partner agency provided the tutor. Some such as the Lifeskills and Wordpower (literacy) courses offered

vital training in basic skills, and these became regular features of Project work on both estates.

Literacy and numeracy are essential building blocks for personal development, furthermore to be classed as ‘illiterate’ or ‘inumerate’ carries a heavy stigma. Some parents desperately needed to improve their literacy and numeracy but were too embarrassed to do anything about it. The Project helped some of these to take action.

*Since I've been coming here, I've been able to be honest with myself and with them. For instance I'll say to them I can't read and write and spell, I've come out. I couldn't have said it a couple of years ago but since I've been coming here I've been able to say it.*

The Lifeskills training also helped people in many different ways from dealing with bureaucracy to learning to value themselves more:



*It gives you more confidence in filling in forms, like the council keeps sending you. I only had to fill my Family Credit form in once.*

*We made a list of all the jobs we do as wives, mothers, partners, chief cooks and bottlewashers that we don't get paid for, and the list was ten miles long. I was pleased with myself that I could fit all that into one day, every day.*

Yet more courses allowed parents to build on the skills and interests which they already had or which they acquired through the Project. Some of these courses, for example the childcare training run by the Preschool Playgroups Association (PPA), led to generally recognised qualifications.

Project staff were always very careful to make sure that there was a real demand

for training among Project participants before commissioning it. If people did not both want and need the training in order to help them achieve an objective they had set for themselves then they quite simply would not come.

The courses were mainly of three types

- Basic skills courses e.g. literacy, numeracy, life skills.
- Childcare related courses e.g. PPA training, play training.
- Group or activity development courses e.g. committee skills or carnival training.

Parents who were interviewed in the course of the evaluation of the Project described at different times what they gained from the courses. The following comments were gathered in 1994 for example:



**photo:** The Project offered parents many training opportunities - these mothers have earned certificates in food hygiene.



*You learn about yourself, like whether you are a directive person, always pushing everybody, or whether you are a collaborative person.*

*They say you can't get better than a mother but most of the things on this course I would never have thought of, and like (a parent) said, she's brought up kids and she's got grandchildren, and she would never have thought of doing these things. Things have changed.*

*... the explanation of the roles of the committee people, so you get a better grasp of what you are supposed to be doing.*

Course participants also commented on other general aspects of courses which they valued. They said that childcare was important, and they said that the training had to be accessible to them and be held within their community. They also said it had to be flexible:

*What was good about it, it wasn't sort of set for us, we could sort of ask what we would like, it was more us sort of demanding. And if (the trainer) didn't have it on him he would say 'oh we'll do it next week'. It was geared to our needs.*

It is worth remembering too that many of the people involved in the Project had left school with very few, if any, formal

## FIG 7: WHAT MAKES A GOOD TRAINING COURSE?

- Childcare is available
- Training is affordable
- Training takes place at convenient times
- Training takes place in the community
- Training takes place in buildings in which residents feel at home
- Training is offered when people are ready for it
- Training is offered when people really need it and see a practical use for it
- Trainers are flexible and responsive to what participants want
- There is a qualification at the end of the training

qualifications. This made it all the more important to them that any training they engaged in through the Project should be formally recognised:

*I want something with a certificate at the end of it, not just an attendance record'. 'It's something that you can show to say that I did it. As long as you've got a certificate then people can see you've done it.*

Figure 7 puts together the comments parents made about training to create a list of factors which, in the opinion of residents, contribute to a good training course.

### **Voluntary opportunities in childcare in Fernhill**

The Project also provided opportunities for parents to work as volunteers in providing childcare services. On Fernhill in particular, a group of parents took full advantage of these opportunities. This group of parents, the core of which consisted of about 12 people, worked alongside paid staff in the Children's Drop In and the Tiny Tots Playgroup, they helped to provide holiday playschemes through the Fernhill Play Organisation, and they underwent training of different kinds to allow them to better carry out their duties.

Although the core group was quite small their effect on the estate was considerable. They were able to involve friends and family in activities at different times, they applied their newly acquired skills and knowledge in their home environment and in so doing communicated their approach to other members of their family, and took over the running of childcare services when paid staff were withdrawn. Long term benefits of their involvement will also be felt by their children.

The effect of becoming involved as a volunteer in the Project is very well illustrated by the example of 'C', a parent from Fernhill.

### **CASE STUDY – PROMOTING GOOD PARENTING**

'C' is a mother who had been coming to the Project for two and a half years at the time of this case study. Her experience shows how the Project has helped some participants acquire new skills and confidence in their role as parents.

*I had 'D' when I was 18. I didn't know anything about childcare. It was hard. I used to put a few toys on the floor and let him get on with it and when he didn't, I didn't know what to do. I couldn't turn to my mother and say how do I make him play because then I'd feel a failure. I felt professionals would make me feel a failure too.*

Before coming to the Project 'C' was extremely shy, this soon changed.

*Previously I wouldn't say boo to a goose. I've gained confidence and knowledge and have become Secretary of the playscheme. They just turned around and said 'we need a secretary'. A Project worker said 'come on you can do this', and she went through it with me step by step and on days when I felt like giving up she was there at the end of the phone telling me to calm down.*

The Project also helped 'C' to make a stand on behalf of her child.

*I knew something was wrong because he just wasn't speaking, but a professional was just palming me off. A Project Worker pushed me, and told me what questions to ask and gave me confidence to ask them. Eventually I found out ...*

And later the Project encouraged 'C' to work with her child herself.

*The playgroup would encourage him to fetch words out. When the speech therapist told me I'd have to do (the same exercises) at home, I wondered how I'd do it. I came here and they showed me what to do, gave me both confidence and understanding.*

The Project also offered 'C' an opportunity to undertake formal training through the Preschool Playgroups Association (PPA). 'C' took this opportunity and the course helped her a lot.

*The first thing I really picked up on was the PPA course. They said children have rights and they should be listened to. Before I'd say 'yeah yeah' and couldn't be bothered. Before I'd scream at them, now I realise that they're doing it for a reason and I have to find out.*

The PPA training also helped 'C' to change the way she disciplines her children.

*I've got a lot more patience. I used to have more patience with other people's children than with my own. I used to shout at them. Since I started here I can rationalise the situation and I'd rather sit down somewhere quiet and talk with them.*

Formal training has also helped 'C' to place more value on spending quality time with each of her children and to treat them all as individuals.

*I used to take my children together to see my mother. Now I take them one at a time because they need individual time. I've learnt that sometimes it's nice to just sit and talk with them on their own, to treasure this sort of time with them.*

'C' has been able to use her new skills to bring into the open a very difficult situation being faced by one of her children.

*'D' had a personality change, I could see the difference and I was able to pick up on it.*

*Before, I wouldn't have thought nothing of it. He told me he wanted to kill himself. I found out he was being bullied and had been for three weeks.*

'C's personal development has led her to some views which are different to those of the other members of her family. In some circumstances this can lead to conflict but in 'C's case it seems that she has been able to have an influence on her family.

*I was brought up really strict. I like to see my children play. I don't put boundaries up as long as they are not in danger. Mam and Gran have come round in time.*

It is clear that attending the Project has transformed 'C's life and has completely changed her attitude to her children. In her own words:

*To me the Project is everything. It has put me on a par with my husband. I've got friends, a social life, something to talk about.*

*Coming here has made me realise that my children didn't ask to come into this world and I have to give them the best I can.*

### **New groups on Fernhill**

On Fernhill two sustainable community based groups developed because of the Project. Project staff worked closely with parents to develop both groups, and formal training and tutoring for example in committee skills and in book keeping was also provided. The Fernhill Play Organisation offers holiday playschemes to local children of school age. The Tiny Tots Playgroup offers childcare for preschool children.

These groups are of central importance to the Project's community development approach because they are the means of

achieving the aim of establishing new, locally controlled services for preschool children by the year 2000.

It is clear therefore that all parents who became involved with the Project went through a process of personal development which opened new possibilities for them. In the case of Fernhill this occurred more or less in the way which was set out in the Project Plan. Perthcelyn parents however followed a rather different path in that they did not move into providing childcare services, they chose instead to follow a community action path.

## Promoting personal development on Perthcelyn

Parents on Perthcelyn went through some of the same processes as Fernhill parents. On Perthcelyn too parents attended an informal, open access Pop In where they could have a break from their children, meet other adults, discuss issues together, and give each other support. On Perthcelyn too parents became involved in organising short term events, and they took part in visits to conferences and to other projects.

Two crucial differences however were that fewer parents from Perthcelyn took part in formal training and that very few parents indeed from Perthcelyn showed any real interest in volunteering to provide childcare services for the rest of the estate. For the Project, this was potentially very serious. Formal training was an important component of the Project's development model and, as previously stated, involving parents in providing services for preschool children on their own estate was a crucial element in the aim of achieving sustainable, locally run services by the year 2000.

On Perthcelyn however there is a spirit of protest, and community development can best be encouraged by enabling people to say what they want and then to helping them to fight for it. The Project experienced this spirit of protest at a very early stage when Pop In members began to make

demands to provide more respite child care. At first staff dismissed these demands as asking for 'a baby sitting service' and said this was 'just a bit of testing' on the part of parents:

*Early in the session mums had a discussion about their role vis-a-vis children at the Pop In. Some mums are trying to argue that they are not responsible for their children but that staff are. It's just a bit of testing going on.*

*Project worker 1992*

Within one year however Project staff had changed their position. Staff had come to accept that Perthcelyn parents had valid reasons for wanting respite child care and that these reasons were to do with allowing them to develop as adults.

*They feel they are losing out. The main issue seems to be they are so hungry for skills and knowledge themselves, they feel resentful if their kids hold them back.*

*Project worker 1993*

This early change of position was important not just in terms of meeting a real need for childcare but also because it showed parents that the Project was prepared to listen to them.

With hindsight however this was the first example of parents from Perthcelyn making demands. At first the demands

were made of the Project but as time went on more demands were made of outside agencies. This had an effect on the way in which the Project would work with Perthcelyn parents and looking back, this quote from a Perthcelyn parent reported in the 1992-1993 Project evaluation stands out as predicting the way ahead.

*We want someone to come up here and, if we want to complain to an agency, to tell us which way to go about it, the right way. And we want practice sessions because it's all right saying it, but doing it is a different thing isn't it'*

This chapter began by asking the question 'What about the parents?'. Parents on both estates followed personal development paths which started as soon as they walked in through the doors of the Drop In or Pop In. On both estates parents had a break from their children, they were able to socialise together, to plan events and carry them out together, to visit other projects and attend meetings and conferences and in so doing they gained in confidence, knowledge and skills.

After this point the development paths of the two estates separated however. On Fernhill a core group of parents undertook formal training, and became childcare volunteers in the Drop In and Playgroup.

On Perthcelyn, a few parents undertook training, but the full energy of the core group of participants was focused on campaigning for services for themselves and more particularly for their children.

This moving away from the Project Plan was noted by the 1994-1995 evaluation report which said:

*Some Perthcelyn residents are demotivated, partly at least by circumstances such as low pay and lack of opportunities for work which they feel are beyond their control. They seem to prefer short term, focused activities such as campaigns and protests which they see as leading to clear results. The Project will need to take into account the particular motivation of Perthcelyn residents.*

Both paths allowed parents to develop and to gain greater control over their own lives, and this in turn means that the Project will leave behind it on each estate a group of newly skilled, newly confident parents who, in different ways, are actively working to improve their communities.

Beyond this however, each path had very different effects on each community and it is also clear that in terms of group development the Project will leave behind it a different situation on each estate. The

different things which the Project will leave behind in the communities of Fernhill and Perthcelyn are described in the next chapter which asks ‘What about the communities?’

## Chapter four





## Handing over and moving on

### What about the communities?

#### Fernhill

The Project will leave at least two organisations behind it on Fernhill: Tiny Tots Playgroup and the Fernhill Play Organisation.

The Project has also had an important role in the development of many other organisations notably: the Fernhill Forum; the Fernhill Young People's Drop In; the Childcare Enterprise; and the Fernhill Flats Management Group.

None of these organisations however have developed to the same point as Tiny Tots and Fernhill Play Organisation. The Fernhill Forum has only allowed agencies to exchange information, to run some small scale or short term initiatives or at most to consult the community. The Fernhill Young People's Drop In may become an important, and sustainable organisation, but at the time of writing it has only fairly recently been relaunched after a long gap since a pilot project.

The Childcare Enterprise (Valleys Childcare) which is very much the creation of the Project, has suffered from many

setbacks but is now up and running and delivering commercial childcare services to a number of organisations.

The Flats Management Group too is currently being developed and, not least because of its close links with Fernhill Play Organisation and Tiny Tots which now have a lot of skills and experience between them, it is likely to succeed.

The Project's lasting effect in terms of creating new community organisations on Fernhill will therefore be through Fernhill Play Organisation, the Tiny Tots Playgroup, and the purpose designed flats in which Tiny Tots and the Fernhill Drop In are based. The Childcare Enterprise is also likely to be a lasting contribution to the broader Valleys area. This organisation is dealt with under 'Fernhill' because it has always had closer links with Fernhill than with Perthcelyn.

The table on the next page charts the development of the most important groups which have been launched or assisted through the Project.

### How did the project provide support to new groups?

The list of key events could suggest that Tiny Tots and Fernhill Play Organisation in particular developed smoothly, almost inevitably, until they finally achieved

## LANDMARKS IN GROUP DEVELOPMENT – FERNHILL

- 1991**     **November**   Fernhill Drop In opens.
- 1992**     **May**     Fernhill residents set up a group to run the first Fernhill Summer Playscheme. This group will later call itself 'Play '93' and then it will become the Fernhill Play Organisation Fernhill Play Organisation.
- June**     Fernhill Playgroup opens run by permanent, part time staff. Later in Project life residents will become involved in running the Playgroup which will become 'Tiny Tots'.
- 1993**     **March**     Tots Playgroup develops from the Fernhill Playgroup. Residents elect a committee to run the Playgroup and rename it Tiny Tots
- April**     Tiny Tots and Play '93 receive training in book keeping through the Project.
- August**     Play '93 runs the Summer Playscheme with very little help from the Project but it experiences some difficulties.
- 1994**     **February**     Tiny Tots adopts a new constitution.
- April**     The Lifeskills group which includes the longer established and more active parents separates from Drop In group. This makes room for new members to join the Drop In.
- July**     Play '93 becomes Fernhill Play Organisation and runs the Summer Playscheme again with help from the Project.
- 1995**     **January**     The Project runs the first crèche for a parents evening at Mountain Ash Comprehensive School. More parents are therefore able to attend the parents evening. This initiative identifies a new kind of childcare need and marks the first steps towards the Childcare Enterprise.
- The Young People's Drop In Pilot opens. This will run for 12 weeks, providing social and developmental activities for young people. The pilot proves there is a demand for a Drop In for young people.
- July**     Fernhill Family Circle is first discussed with residents. The Family Circle is seen by the Project as an umbrella organisation for all activities which take place at The Flats.
- Fernhill Play Organisation Committee take the lead role in organising and running the Summer Playscheme this year.
- October**     The Project begins to develop ideas for a Childcare Enterprise under the

working title of 'Rent a Crèche'. Residents are kept informed of developments but the planning is carried out by the Project.

**November** A meeting of the Project's Evaluation Advisory Group highlights the importance of resident's participation in the process of handing over services to the community.

**1996 March** Stormy meetings between Fernhill residents and Project personnel over residents' concerns about the Childcare Enterprise.

**July** An external consultant prepares a feasibility study for the Childcare Enterprise. A steering group is set up for the Childcare Enterprise. Fernhill Play Organisation runs a highly successful Summer Playscheme entirely independently.

**September** Tiny Tots Committee take over running and managing the playgroup on a trial basis, the trial is successful and the committee remains in charge.

**1997 September** The Childcare Enterprise begins to provide commercial childcare services.

**October** The Childcare Enterprise defines its aims and its target groups, begins to prepare its registration as a charitable company, and changes its name to Valleys Childcare.

**November** The development of the Flats Management Group begins in a concerted manner. The group defines its role and adopts a name: **Fernhill Family Flats**.

independence. This impression, is of course completely wrong, the development of any group is a complex and long term process with many difficulties to overcome, and Tiny Tots and Fernhill Play Organisation were no exception.

Parents were very keen to become involved as volunteers but they needed guidance and encouragement from Project staff, especially in the early days. For this kind of support to be effective volunteers would have to trust and respect staff,

otherwise their guidance would not be valued. In fact staff were very effective at building good relationships with parents, and this was widely recognised:

*... it was the personal contact with SCF staff and the confidence they give by talking ... you can talk to them.*

**Resident**

It was also important to provide training in practical skills. The childcare training provided through the Preschool Playgroups

Association was of course invaluable, but so was the Committee skills training and the one to one tutoring provided by the Project's Administrative Officer. The art in making such support available was in offering the opportunity at the right time, if it was offered before people had felt the need for it then no-one would attend, if it was delayed too long after the need had been experienced then problems would result.

The Project also paid attention to developing a leadership capacity in volunteers who had the interest and the personal resources to take on a leadership role.

Another important element was the ability to respond quickly to problems when they occurred. Most of the time, and increasingly as time went on, volunteers were entirely capable of running activities, but every now and again they would feel out of their depth when faced with a particular problem. In situations like these staff would need to step in.

It is also important to note that it takes a long time to support a group from its first forming stage, all the way through to the point where it is entirely independent. In the case of Fernhill Play Organisation this took just over four years from May 1992 to July 1996; in the case of Tiny Tots it took three and a half years from March 1993 to September 1996; the development of Valleys Childcare has already taken two and a half years and the organisation is still in its early stages; and the development of the Flats Management Committee has only just begun.

In the case of all these organisations, development was not smooth, there were problems to overcome and setbacks to endure and fight back from, and these could happen at any time.

The following case study charts the development of Fernhill Play organisation and shows all of the above issues.

## CASE STUDY – FERNHILL PLAY ORGANISATION

The Fernhill Play Organisation (Fernhill Play Organisation) took five years to develop from a group which was totally dependent on a paid project worker into an independent organisation run by volunteers.

### 1992

The group started, opportunistically, in 1992 and its members still clearly remember the moment of its birth, which was when the Project worker asked:

*Do you want to give me a hand to run something for the kids in the summer holidays?*

Drop In participants responded enthusiastically, and the Project provided them with six weeks training. This enabled them to run one week of a playscheme, which provided valuable experience. One lesson was that it was essential to clear the air after any disagreement and this led to the establishment of what has become a Fernhill Play Organisation institution 'the Beef Session'. A Beef Session is a grievance meeting. In the words of one volunteer it allows people to: *'Say it here or forget it, deal with it then drop it'*.

During this first year, the Project Worker took all the initiatives and was responsible for most of the organisation, by the next year however things were changing.

#### **1992 – 1993**

*'We need a committee.'* During the year volunteers had gained experience of committee work through the Tiny Tots Playgroup and they could see that Fernhill Play Organisation also needed a committee. The Project Worker built upon volunteers' desire for a formal structure by asking them questions which forced them to develop their ideas: *'What do you want to do, why do you want to do it, when do you want to do it, how will you do it and so on?'* In effect the Project Worker was setting the agenda but the volunteers were taking the decisions within the boundaries set by the agenda.

By the end of the year the group, which until then had no name, decided to call itself 'Play '93'. Naming the group reflects its developing formal structure but the title itself suggested that it was not going to be permanent.

#### **1993 – 1994**

During 1994 the group was forced to think about its future, and again the key questions were asked by the Project Worker: *'You know what you've done, but do you know where you are going?'* This question addressed the issue of permanence; was Play '93 going to have a longer term existence, or was it going to remain a successful, but short lived activity?

*'The main obstacle to Play '93's development was that volunteers were worried about taking on more responsibility, as they put it of 'Stepping into the Project Worker's shoes'.* The Project worker had however anticipated this and she worked closely with some members of the group who showed an interest in taking a leadership role. The end result was a committee

of about 10 active volunteers who ran the 1994 summer playscheme with far less support from the Project worker. However the playscheme was far from problem free and afterwards the Project worker, and the volunteers wondered whether it had been a case of too much too soon. The Beef Sessions showed their true worth at this time and a lot of problems were thrashed out straight away which allowed some valuable learning to take place. Nevertheless some members found the whole experience too painful and dropped out of the group.

#### 1994 – 1995

During the following year the Project worker concentrated on developing community leadership for Fernhill Play Organisation, and in particular in working with one key volunteer to enable her to take a leadership role. As a result there were important changes during the year. One of these was that group members, and in particular the new group leader began to take initiatives themselves, the development worker was no longer setting the agenda, the group was. The outcome was that the Fernhill Play Organisation Committee ran the 1995 summer playscheme themselves, but they did not experience the same problems as the previous year.

#### 1995 – 1996

Developing community leadership took two years. During 1995-96 the group leader and other key volunteers took on more and more responsibilities and took more and more initiatives. By the time of the 1996 Summer playscheme, the core group had become used not just to organising but also to delegating work and it was noticeable that they were encouraging new volunteers to take on some duties. As a result, people who were previously on the fringes of the group stepped into formal roles.



#### The 1996 Playscheme

The Project evaluation made the following observations of the 1996 playscheme:

*On first walking through the door it was clear that the scheme was full to capacity.*

*(In fact children were being turned away).*

*The voluntary co-ordinator catches the eye immediately, she is the obvious focal point, standing in the middle of the hall which is*

*crowded with about 60 children and 10 volunteers. She is wearing a Fernhill Play Organisation 'uniform', and a large badge with 'Coordinator' printed on it. There is no doubt about who to go to for guidance and instructions, and volunteers and children approach her with questions every now and then. The Coordinator is clearly in charge.*

*The activities today are craft and painting. Volunteers aged 13 upwards sit on the end of tables where about six children work with lots of cardboard, paint, bright cloths and glittery bits. (Each child will take home a mask from the morning's activities).*

*The atmosphere is busy, chatty but not noisy, and creative. There is very little sign of fractious behaviour or of boredom, everyone seems to be thoroughly engrossed in what they are doing, children and volunteers.*

The 1996 playscheme was planned, co-ordinated and run by members of the community. It was an obvious success and it ran as smoothly as it is realistically possible for such events. The Fernhill Play Organisation was now established as an independent, community based organisation.

As well as the points listed earlier, the example of Fernhill Play Organisation reflects some additional important community development principles.

What created Fernhill Play Organisation was opportunism: a Project worker seeing, and seizing, an opportunity. In this case there was a need for a summer playscheme on Fernhill, and there was a group of parents who had shown that they were keen to work with children. These two factors added up to an opportunity which was skilfully acted upon.

Fernhill Play Organisation was then built upon the motivation of volunteers. Its

development was steered, at all stages, by what volunteers wanted. At one time this meant it tried to do too much too soon, mistakes were made, and some volunteers left. However because it was built on the solid foundation of voluntary motivation, it survived and went on to eventual success.

The Childcare Enterprise can be contrasted with Fernhill Play Organisation, in particular because it was led by the Project not by volunteers. This simple fact accounts for many of the difficulties which were experienced by the Childcare Enterprise. These issues first came to a head in March 1996 with an exchange of

just six words which went down in Project history:

Project Worker: *Is everything all-right?*

Volunteer: *Well actually no!*

The first of several stormy but honest meetings between staff and parents followed from this exchange. The final conclusions of parents made it clear that they felt that the Project had let them down by setting up a new initiative rather than by building on what was already in place, namely the Tiny Tots Playgroup:

*We thought the Childcare Enterprise was going to be set up under Tiny Tots from information that was presented to us, then it was set up under the SCF umbrella.*

The Childcare Enterprise took a long time to recover from this basic flaw in its design.

However by September 1997, the Childcare Enterprise was up and running, providing childcare services at the Fernhill Drop In, with nine sessional staff on its register and a package of support in place from SCF. The support package had four elements: support with administrative and financial systems; development support, an office base with all the usual facilities; and up to GBP 10,000 worth of childcare purchased by SCF for the first full year of operation.

In October 1997 the Childcare Enterprise changed its name to Valleys Childcare and in the following months it has acquired a range of clients including a further education college, a community education service and a local comprehensive school. The services it provides create paid work and they allow parents to attend education or training courses or, in the case of the school, to take part in parents evenings.

At the time of writing Valleys Childcare has decided to register as a charitable company and is in the process of appointing a part time (16 hours per week) paid co-ordinator.

The early lesson from the Childcare Enterprise is clear, that community development projects should be built around the motivation of participants and in this case the motivation of participants was to develop Tiny Tots. However the fact that Valleys Childcare is succeeding despite this early setback shows what can be achieved given sufficient determination and good support.

Tiny Tots was very much built around the motivation of volunteers and it followed a similar type of development path to Fernhill Play Organisation, at least until the very end. A volunteer expressed what happened then in this way:



*It is partly that SCF steps back and gives us some space to come forward, but sometimes we have to seize power too.*

By early 1997 volunteers felt that the Project was in some ways slowing their development to full independence:

*We wanted to get independent and do it ourselves and then when we came to the crunch, hang on, we didn't know who to turn to because we weren't told that information.*

*We are going on a little bit ahead and they are saying 'whoa' come back a bit now, and then in the next breath they are saying well go on.*

As Tiny Tots volunteers became more confident and competent, and as they took ownership of the childcare services operating from the flats, so they began to feel the Project holding them back.

This example indicates one of the reasons why it is extremely difficult to hand over a project to volunteers. One of the strengths of the Project was the personal commitment of its staff, they were not just doing a job, they cared, and frequently went the extra mile if they thought that parents or children would benefit. When the time came to hand over power to residents however, their very commitment became a problem

because the greater the involvement and commitment, the harder it is to let go.

There are many reasons which can be used to justify staying involved in an activity: workers do not want to overburden volunteers; they feel that volunteers are not ready; they want to protect volunteers from making mistakes; and the Project invoked all of these. The underlying reason for hanging on however is usually that a project feels a sense of ownership of an activity, and needs to be needed by it. There is a very close analogy with parent, watching their children grow up and leave home, and the feelings involved are very similar.

In such a situation it may well be that paid staff will not let go until volunteers make it clear, through challenging them that the time has come, and this seems to be what happened on Fernhill.

As for the Flats Management Committee, it has now acquired a name: Fernhill Family Flats, and it has determined its role as providing support for groups using the Fernhill Flats rather than simply managing the flats. This only happened in November 1997 once the Project was satisfied that Tiny Tots and Fernhill Play Organisation were well enough established.

The final outcome on Fernhill is a successful one. Valleys Childcare is

creating local employment and offering a useful service to other Valleys communities; Tiny Tots is running a very well regarded playgroup from the Fernhill Flats and the service is very much in demand with a waiting list for places. The Fernhill Play Organisation meanwhile is continuing to provide high quality summer playscheme activities, and these last two groups will

continue to provide these services for children on Fernhill estate in the future. On Fernhill, the Project Model worked, according to plan – almost.

### **Perthcelyn**

On Perthcelyn, however the Project Model went anything but according to plan.

#### **LANDMARKS IN GROUP DEVELOPMENT – PERTHCELYN**

- 1991**    **April**    The Project begins to pay rent to the Community Centre – effectively offering it a lifeline and saving it from closure.  
**October**    Pop In opens.
- 1992**    **September**    Pop In participants elect a committee to run it.  
**October**    The 'Reformers' youth group produce and show a video about Perthcelyn, the video is called 'The Lost City' and it begins to put Perthcelyn back on the map.
- 1993**    **February**    Perthcelyn Inter Agency Group adopts a formal constitution.  
**July**    Inaugural meeting of the Perthcelyn Inter Agency Group which adopts a new name The TOPs.  
**August**    Successful campaign by parents to reinstate school uniform. Pop In parents play a central role. This is Pop In member's first successful campaign as a group.  
**October**    Parents organise a road block following the latest incident of a car crashing while taking a short cut through the estate. The Project supports the protest by providing childcare. Pop In parents again take a central role in organising the protest.  
**November**    Perthcelyn Community Centre closes for refurbishment following a successful application for grant funding
- 1994**    **March**    Community Centre reopens  
**April**    Perthcelyn School Action Group is established to campaign for a new community school for the estate.  
**September**    Perthcelyn playgroup closes due to lack of numbers. It reopens later but never attracts children in the same numbers as Fernhill.

Two parents are elected to the board of governors of Perthcelyn Infants School for the first time.

**October** The School Action Group meets with the local authority Director of Education. The School Action Group organises a school strike to highlight the case for a new community school.

The School Action Group attends a local council meeting for the first time. The meeting considers the case for a new school. Group members are dismayed at the political games being played but leave even more determined to make their views heard.

**1995 April** GBP 100,000 allocated to fund a planning phase for a new community school on Perthcelyn.

**May** The School Action Group presses its case to be represented in the planning phase of the new community school.

**June** The TOPS begins to prepare a major funding application under the Welsh Office Strategic Development Scheme for a Perthcelyn Estate Strategy. Paid staff of voluntary and statutory agencies are closely involved in preparing the application, residents are effectively excluded.

**September** An outline Perthcelyn Estate Strategy is submitted to the Welsh Office by the Local Authority on behalf of the TOPS.

**1996 January** The Perthcelyn School Action Group, Pop In members, and Perthcelyn Tenants and Residents representatives meet with the new Director of Education. Estate representatives make a presentation of their case for a new school. The Project helps the group prepare for this meeting and the meeting gains extensive media coverage.

The Perthcelyn School Action Group, Pop In members, Perthcelyn Tenants and Residents representatives, and Neighbourhood Watch representatives meet with Police and Local Authority Housing Department representatives to voice their concerns about crime on the estate. The Project again helps residents prepare for the meeting.

The first 'Awayday' is held for Perthcelyn residents. They discuss all issues affecting the estate and look for ways of addressing them. Other awaydays follow, the revised Perthcelyn Estate Strategy gradually takes shape, this time with resident's involvement.

Perthcelyn is awarded GBP 25,000 by the Welsh Office to develop an estate strategy.

**February** The informal Awayday group decides to formalise itself as the

Perthcelyn Estate Management Group (PEMG). The Perthcelyn School Action Group lobbies the local authority Education Committee.

**April** This month marks the start of an intensive period of development for the Perthcelyn Estate Strategy. Outside consultants are appointed to assist residents. Research is carried out to identify needs and opportunities. Adults and young people from the estate are consulted. A comprehensive estate strategy is assembled.

**August** The Perthcelyn Community Strategy document is submitted to the Welsh Office as a bid for funding totalling GBP 4.52 million under the Community Challenge Scheme. The bid includes provision for the new community school, conversion of the existing infant school into training workshops, paid workers to provide development support, and improvements to the community centre.

**December** Most of the Perthcelyn Estate Strategy Community Challenge bid is accepted, (the exception being the improvements to the community centre) resulting in a grant of GBP 3.5 million.

Perthcelyn residents have always been ready to voice their protests, since the very start of the Project.

*If you do something they don't like they tell you straight away, no messing, it's straight out ... but we give as good as we get.*

*Project worker 1992*

From the start too it was clear that residents placed a high value on 'fair play' and on honesty. Mistakes were expected and they could be forgiven but only if people admitted to them honestly. Project staff scored highly with residents because they were perceived as basically honest and ready to admit to their human failings:

*... I was nasty with her the other week, but she was in the wrong. But she will admit when she is in the wrong.*

*Resident about member of staff*

Both estates shared these values but they were perhaps more visible on Perthcelyn, where residents felt that they had more to complain about. Fernhill after all had once been a model estate but Perthcelyn was the Lost City without even a good spell in its' past to look back on.

Perhaps because of this, the voice of Perthcelyn was at first a complaining one, Pop In members were very quick to point out what Perthcelyn did not have and how much better off were other areas, including Fernhill.

Even at the start of the Project therefore Perthcelyn residents were not apathetic, but rather they seemed stuck in a complaining mode of behaviour which did not lead them to do anything to improve their circumstances. At this time the Project helped to communicate the complaints of residents to people who could do something about them:

*If we complain about our houses she gets the housing officer up here and we give him an ear bashing; we went on about the police and she had the police in for us to sort that out.*

*Resident about member of staff*

During these first years the Project had acknowledged that Perthcelyn should follow a different path to Fernhill, but it had not set out what this path was. This was a wise approach which allowed

Perthcelyn residents to define it for themselves.

For quite some time the main signs about the direction which Perthcelyn would take were negative ones: fewer parents became childcare volunteers; fewer children came to the Playgroup; and Pop In members were ready to complain but not to act. Meanwhile the Project was concentrating its efforts on raising funds to refurbish the Perthcelyn Community Centre.

In the late summer and autumn of 1993 things began to change however and parents who attended the Pop In first began to take action.

The trigger for their first successful action was a proposal by the local school to abolish school uniforms. Parents discussed



**photo:** The modern Perthcelyn Community School, the result of sustained campaigning by the community over several years. (photo by Phil Cope)

the issues around this in the Pop In, and decided that they would campaign to have uniforms reinstated, an objective which they achieved.

Two months later in October 1993 Pop In parents were protesting again. They had long been concerned that the estate was being used as a short cut by motorists. Some motorists would drive far too fast and parents feared an accident involving their children. One morning a BMW car being driven at speed by someone who was late for work crashed into a wall on the estate. Parents reacted immediately by contacting each other, then contacting the media and the police, then by blocking the road. The lesson that action could lead to results had been learned.

These two short sharp protests indicated that Perthcelyn residents had successfully taken the step from complaining to action.

The Project had to be careful not to associate itself too closely with direct action of this sort but it provided practical support in the form of childcare for the protesters and it responded to specific requests for advice and guidance.

During the year which followed some Pop In members became more active in expressing their views in various ways. For example in September 1994 two

parent governors from Perthcelyn were elected for the first time to the board of the local school, and some residents also took opportunities to make their voices heard to professionals in events and conferences.

*We told them what it was really like. We told them 'you don't know what you are talking about', and they said 'well we work in the poverty area', 'yeah but we are the ones who live in it.' They are well sussed about us now.*

*Perthcelyn resident*

The next major step forward however, came as soon as April 1994 with the formation of the School Action Group which was established in order to make the case for a new community school for Perthcelyn. This was the first time that Perthcelyn residents had committed themselves to anything more than a short one-off protest. In starting the School Action Group they had launched a campaign which committed them to a sustained effort over several years. The formation of the School Action Group marked Perthcelyn successfully taking the step from one off actions to long term campaigning.

The School Action Group achieved a great deal of success by applying and developing the lessons residents had

## CASE STUDY – THE PERTHCELYN SCHOOL ACTION GROUP

This case study is taken from an interview with a member of Project Staff ‘Martin’, and a member of the School Action Group ‘Sian’, which was carried out for the Bernard Van Leer Foundation in 1997.

*What made you decide to campaign for better nursery and primary schools for your children?*

Sian: *We didn’t have a primary school in our neighbourhood, just an infant school: the primary school is down the mountain. And that’s an old school with health risks. The kids would get upset and cry about going to school. The infant school is made up of three classrooms and there’s no room for anything else. The group I’m involved in discovered that this school as it currently stands, is not meeting the national curriculum for a number of reasons – the school didn’t even have the facilities to do what it was supposed to do.*

Martin: *And beside the problems with the infant school and the whole issue of the primary school down in the valley, we also discovered that very few children from Perthcelyn were doing well. The whole process of education for the children seemed defective.*

*How did you start to overcome these disadvantages?*

Sian: *Our first step was forming a school action group in 1994 with just four of us. It was partly the result of the preschool work that the Cynon Valley Project was doing. We all just decided that we’d had enough. We went to see the Director of Education in Cardiff, but there was no action from Education so we organised a demonstration at the school.*

*Did you manage to get coverage for the demonstration from the local media?*

Sian: *Oh yes. We phoned the papers and they showed up and interviewed all the mothers and took pictures of the kids. And it was on television. I was on nearly every day*

Martin: *They gave the Director a tour of the estate and then they brought him down the hill to actually show him the distance that the children have to travel. I think he’d never actually heard directly from parents like that before. He was so taken aback that at the end of the meeting, he said he would support the school. There was maximum media coverage then too.*

*We often hear from projects that it’s very difficult to capture media interest, but you’ve obviously been very successful in doing this. Sian how did you go about it?*

Sian: *We went to SCF and the staff members gave us a lot of good advice. They taught us what we could do and what steps to take to get the TV cameras in. What we*

would do is just call somebody in the media and keep calling back until they started responding. Now, we've only got to call one of our contacts once and they're straight there for us. We've built up a relationship over some years.

*Beyond involving the media, talking directly to directors of education, and holding the demonstrations, were there any other activities you tried to use?*

**Sian:** *We also threatened them with a legal case. I went to a solicitor to see if we could build a case against the Department of Education, in view of the national curriculum. It seemed that it was against the law for the Department to ignore our complaints. The solicitor thought that a case was possible and that the kids qualified for legal aid. And we made placards and lobbied outside the council office during an education committee meeting.*

**Martin:** *The situation only started changing when the residents got together and set up the School Action Group. Nothing happened until they actually took control themselves and mobilised the community behind them. I think that most people don't want to rock things. They would rather use the existing system to try and get things done. But many of these communities don't have the organisation necessary to get their voices heard. It's the stronger areas with more representation who tend to be heard, rather than areas that actually need to be heard. This kind of approach where the parents themselves get involved and the media is brought in, seems to work. Once this case was highlighted in the media everyone was supporting it. I've had people outside of Perthcelyn say to me 'you know they should get that school there.' That's tremendous. Moreover, I think this approach gives more control to the community. It's an empowering process.*

*What were the actual results of the campaign?*

**Sian:** *We're planning a new model school. The community's really involved in the planning.*

**Martin:** *It's not only that they've won the school. A group has been set up between the local authority, the community and the architects, and everyone is involved in the plans to design a very modern school, one that's going to be a model for the Valleys. The community truly have an equal voice in the decision-making process. And the children are involved in the design as well.*

*How is this happening?*

**Martin:** *At the moment, the planning group has already agreed upon the overall design of the school, the structural aspects of it, where the classrooms will be, what sorts of rooms they will be, and what the rooms will be allocated for. Parents rooms for example. And the leisure area has been decided on, the playing field and so forth.*



*All this has been worked out with the community step by step. There's been consultation and agreement throughout the entire process. In the next stage, the children will determine the internal make up of the building, the decor and how the interior will feel. It all has to do with the principle of ownership; by participating in the design of the school, the children and the entire community will very much own it.*

Sian: *Everything is controlled by the estate now. The new school is only a part of a whole new plan developed by the residents, which they call the Estate Strategy. They've been working on it for over two years now. The community has received GBP 3.5 million for the plan, GBP 1.5 million of which is for the school. Its the largest grant ever given to a community development project in Wales.*

learned through their earlier protests so that by May 1995 substantial funding had been allocated to plan the school, and SAG members were pressing their case to be involved in the planning process. In June 1995 however the TOPS Inter Agency Group began to prepare a bid for large scale funding for a 'Perthcelyn Estate Strategy'. The TOPS was supposed to involve residents alongside agency representatives in planning developments for the estate. In reality however the group was dominated by agencies. An observation of a TOPS meeting at this time found that agency representatives spoke for 68 percent of the time, the Chair of the meeting (a local councillor) spoke for 20 percent of the time, and residents spoke for just 6 percent of the time. The truth was that residents felt completely excluded from any meaningful participation in the group:

*People talk a lot of jargon, agency talk, not down to earth talk. They need to explain what they are saying, perhaps we should say 'stop we don't understand' and not just sit there and take it, which is what we do.*

*Resident*

As well as the off putting use of jargon, there were at least three other important reasons for the exclusion of residents: agency representatives consistently failed to make any effort to encourage residents to contribute or even to make them feel important members of the group, participation in the meeting sometimes required specialist knowledge which residents did not have, and the exclusion of residents was a vicious circle because work tended to be allocated to active participants in meetings who would then report back to the next meeting about what they had done.

Therefore, when the first outline bid for a Perthcelyn Estate Strategy was presented to the Welsh Office in September 1995, residents had made no direct contribution to the proposal. The situation at this time was worrying. Those residents who were involved with the Project were only really representative of the Pop In group, and none of the other community based groups were involved in the Project. Even the Pop In group however was cut off from the TOPs. Perthcelyn in September 1996 was therefore a place of small tightly knit groups who did not talk to each other. If progress was to be made then barriers would have to come down.

In January 1996 the Project brought together a number of community

groups. The groups concerned were the Perthcelyn School Action Group; the Pop In; and Perthcelyn Tenants and Residents. The immediate purpose of the gathering was to present a case for a new community school on Perthcelyn to the newly appointed Director of Education. The longer term purpose however was to get people talking together and working together. The meeting went well and later in the same month these three groups were joined by Perthcelyn Neighbourhood Watch members to make a presentation about crime on the estate to the Police and to the Local Authority Housing Department.

The Project had a crucial role in bringing these groups together in the first place and it worked closely with group members



to help them prepare their presentations. Both presentations were well received but more importantly, the meetings marked the next step forward for Perthcelyn. Until this point the key figures in the protests and campaigns had been, for the most part, members of the Pop In, and strategic developments had been led by agencies through the TOPs. These meetings however drew in a wider cross section of the estate. Action on Perthcelyn was now being led by a broader and more representative group of active residents who were capable of standing up for themselves within the TOPs or outside of it. The Project had succeeded in bringing down some of the barriers and progress was now possible once again on Perthcelyn.

Shortly after these two meetings the Project organised the first 'Awayday' for residents of Perthcelyn who were involved in the various community based groups. These Awaydays allowed residents to discuss issues affecting the estate and eventually to prepare a revised Perthcelyn Estate Strategy helped by external consultants appointed with a GBP 25,000 grant from the Welsh Office.

In February 1996, the informal 'Awayday' group decided that the time had come to give itself a formal identity and the Perthcelyn Estate Management Group was born.

Two months later the external consultants were appointed and the Perthcelyn Estate Management Group found itself on a treadmill of research, consultation and planning, a treadmill which is still running at full speed at the time of writing although the consultants are no longer involved. Nevertheless in this early planning phase the estate as a whole was involved through meetings and questionnaires including one survey which focused specifically on young people. The end result was that a comprehensive estate strategy was put together and submitted to the Welsh Office in August 1996. The bid was for GBP 4.5 million pounds including provision for the new community school; conversion of the existing infant school into training workshops; paid workers to provide development support; and improvements to the community centre.

In December 1996 all the hard work was rewarded with the announcement that the bid had been successful except for the improvements to the Community Centre. This resulted in a grant of GBP 3.5 Million.

At the end of 1996 there was therefore a core group of active residents representing a range of community interests working alongside a local authority which was also committed to implementing a progressive and innovative strategy, and

both groups were committed to working together. Perthcelyn residents had never been so united with agencies and the local authority, behind a common cause. There were still tensions between both sides, but the previous top down approach of professionals working together in committees and the bottom up action based approach of residents organising protests had met somewhere in the middle. The future looked promising.

What has actually happened since has been more complicated. Early in 1997 residents and local authority representatives reaffirmed their commitment to work together through a joint planning day. This day allowed perspectives to be exchanged and led to the production of a handbook which set out the way in which both parties would work together.

Since then however the ideals of close cooperation and shared decision making between residents and the local authority have been diluted by a re-emergence of mutual mistrust, and a heightening of tensions, occasionally erupting into open conflict.

The physical works are now under way, and a new community school is being built even as these words are being written, but there exists on the estate two weary and disillusioned camps composed

of residents on the one side and the local authority on the other, who seem almost entirely resigned to not being able to work together constructively.

The situation on Perthcelyn is still developing and the final legacy of the Project will not be known until all the money for The Strategy has been spent and structures, presumably involving residents, are in place for managing the new facilities. The Strategy to which the Project made an essential contribution may yet lead to a far reaching regeneration of the estate. On Perthcelyn therefore, the stakes are very high and the final outcome is still very much in the balance.



## Chapter five



## Conclusion

This last short chapter will ask, and attempt to answer, a few questions which arise from the experience of the Cynon Valley Project.

### Were the aims right?

A community development project, like any other type of project, needs aims which are measurable, achievable, realistic and time limited. A community development project however does not need specific or detailed aims, it needs aims which are clear but **broad**.

The reason for this is to allow scope for opportunism. Community Development has to be built upon the motivation of participants and exactly what people will be motivated to do cannot usually be predicted in advance. The Fernhill Play Organisation is an excellent example of a specific activity which works towards a broad aim but which was the result of seizing an opportunity. If the Project worker had received a negative answer when she asked if anyone was interested in helping with a holiday playscheme then she would have had to think of another question to ask. As it was people were very keen to become involved and the opportunity was seized. Consequently, because people were committed to

Fernhill Play Organisation they were prepared to stick with it and see it through difficulties when these, inevitably, occurred. On Perthcelyn it took much longer for the motivation of residents to become clear, but when residents said they wanted to follow a campaigning path then the Project responded.

Both paths lead towards the eventual aim of establishing new services under local control, but they are very different paths.

In this sense it can be said that the Project did have the right aims, in that they were clear, but also broad enough to allow the flexible approach which is essential in order to be able to seize opportunities for development which are based upon the motivation of residents.

### Did the project have an appropriate lifespan?

At the start of the Project there was a widespread understanding that it had a 10 year lifespan from 1991 to 2001. This was an important strength which gave it a good chance of achieving its aims.

Any project needs its first year simply to find its feet. Tiny Tots and Fernhill Play Organisation took about four years to develop to the point where they could be self sustaining. The Cynon Valley Project could therefore have achieved most of its

aims on Fernhill within five years. Indeed, given the factors which make it difficult for paid staff to hand over activities to volunteers, a target date for withdrawal after five years, set at the start of the Project, would probably have been easier.

The process of development was only just beginning to take shape on Perthcelyn after four years however, and it was January 1996, four and a half years after the start of the Project before events which would lead to the formation of the Perthcelyn Estate Management group began even to unfold.

The Project had clear objectives on Fernhill, it had a clear plan to work towards these objectives, and it had adequate resources in place to achieve them. The Project did not have such clear objectives, nor was it so well resourced on Perthcelyn. Furthermore, the Perthcelyn Strategy, when it developed proved to be a very ambitious and large scale proposal.

These are probably sufficient reasons to explain why development took longer on Perthcelyn and why a full ten year timespan would probably be required to provide the support and guidance which residents need in order to help them work positively with agencies and the local authority, and to make it more likely that the new

services which are eventually provided truly reflect local needs and are under local control.

In one sense however the timespan was not appropriate. The Project, and SCF were perceived by residents of both estates as having made a 10 year commitment. Despite the fact that SCF will retain a presence on the estates until 2001, residents felt that SCF had broken its promise when staff numbers were reduced before what residents felt was the agreed time. On both estates the perceived early withdrawal caused a great deal of fear and anger. Fear of being abandoned and anger at what was seen almost as a betrayal.

The Project managed the changes as well as it could. On Fernhill a positive outcome was that there was no longer any question of the Project slowing residents' moves to taking full control of services, and the new shorter timespan for withdrawal certainly forced the acceleration of handover on the estate. On Perthcelyn however residents felt the need for the continued support of a Project development worker to help them through their new role as partners, alongside the local authority, in the implementation of the Perthcelyn Strategy. It is therefore likely that the early reduction in staff numbers had more of a detrimental effect on Perthcelyn.



What is also clear however is that the perceived broken promise offended the strong sense of fair play and honesty which is a characteristic of both estates. Residents felt that SCF could no longer be trusted and it is not clear even now that the reputation of the agency has fully recovered in the eyes of some, perhaps most, active residents.

### Did the project reach the right people?

The Project reached about a quarter of its target group on Perthcelyn and about one third on Fernhill. Some more can be said however about the people the Project involved, and those it did not reach at all. Almost all of the parents who became

involved were women. There were exceptions: some male partners of women participants did become involved, and on Perthcelyn some men did take a very active part in the Perthcelyn Estate Management Group (PEMG) independently of their partners, but in the main the activists were women. This imbalance between the sexes was probably unavoidable.

The Project did not set out to involve men and women equally and given the Project's focus on preschool children it was always inevitable that less men and more women, who are the prime carers in Valleys communities, were going to be involved.



photo: Through the Project, parents become more involved in their children's development.

The Project did not reach the most isolated and hard to reach families who were likely to be the most in need. This was a setback to some extent because the Project had specifically targeted the most vulnerable families. Looking back however it seems unrealistic to have expected families facing extreme problems to become heavily involved in developing their own community, they had enough to do in coping with their own lives.

What the Project did on Fernhill was to involve the more motivated families who had hopes and aspirations for themselves, for their children, and for their community, and to enable them to provide services for the whole of the community. What it did on Perthcelyn, was to mobilise a group of parents who were demoralised and demotivated after a long struggle to ensure the survival of their Community Centre, (the only significant resource the community had), and in time to encourage links between this group and other groups on the Estate.

The problem therefore is that the original project aims to involve the most isolated and vulnerable families were unrealistic. For the Project to reach this section of the population it would almost certainly have been necessary to concentrate far more on visiting people in their homes, and this could only have been done at

the expense of some of the Project's other objectives.

With hindsight it is clear in fact that the Project could either aim to work in the manner of a Community Development project and to involve people who had commitment, energy and personal resources in working to create services and resources for their communities; or it could have aimed to provide services itself, which would benefit the most vulnerable families. It could not realistically do both.

It chose to emphasise its community development approach and if the most vulnerable families are to be reached in the future then this will be achieved by the new volunteers and services which have been created through the Project.

### **Did the project model work?**

The Project model worked almost exactly according to plan on Fernhill. On Perthcelyn however it took a different turn. What the Project has in fact done is to operate two different types of model. On Fernhill, the Project implemented a child centred community development model whereby residents were enabled to create new services for their community. On Perthcelyn however the Project followed a community action model whereby residents were supported in their efforts

to persuade the local authority and other agencies to provide new services for their community. The Project had intended to achieve broader community development benefits on Perthcelyn but it responded flexibly to residents' priorities, and to other factors, to determine the exact path it took. Had the Project not been flexible enough to adapt its model on Perthcelyn then no progress would have been possible.

A key turning point for the Project was the refusal of Perthcelyn residents to become involved as childcare volunteers. There are different views about why Perthcelyn parents did not become involved in this way. Some parents from Perthcelyn would say that they were never offered the same opportunities or encouragement to become volunteers as were Fernhill parents. The Project however would argue that Perthcelyn residents were in fact offered very similar opportunities but did not take them up.

Other reasons might be that the physical facilities for preschool children at the Perthcelyn Community Centre could not match the quality of the purpose designed Fernhill Flats, or that the Project's Childcare Development Worker, worked exclusively on Fernhill for the first part of her employment. Perhaps most importantly, however, the post of

Perthcelyn Development Worker was held by three different people during the life of the Project, while on Fernhill the same person was in post throughout. The changes of post holder with gaps in between when there was no-one in post inevitably caused a great deal of disruption.

However one question remains which cannot really be answered, which is that even if the Project had offered exactly the same opportunities and resources to residents of both estates, even then, would Perthcelyn residents have taken up these opportunities?

It is clear that there is a culture of protest on Perthcelyn which is not present in the same way on Fernhill and the weight of evidence suggests that Perthcelyn followed the path which was right for it. This adds more weight to the argument for a flexible approach to community development. The experience of Perthcelyn suggests that a local culture is capable of being strong enough to overrule any plan, and that the only way to deal with this is to enter a community without too many plans, and to be prepared to listen to people, and to react appropriately to their real needs and aspirations.

### **What will be left in 2001?**

There are four dimensions to the success which the Project achieved: promoting

child development; empowering adults; setting up community groups; and promoting large scale regeneration.

### **Promoting Child Development**

The Project helped preschool children to develop on both estates, between 1991 and 1997. Preschool children on Fernhill are still receiving these benefits through the Tiny Tots Playgroup and through Valleys Childcare who run the Drop In.

There is no longer any preschool provision on Perthcelyn however.

### **Empowering Adults**

The Project enabled a core group of adults to go through a process of personal development on both estates.

These two core groups now contain many of the present day community leaders of Perthcelyn and Fernhill. These people are having and will continue to have a positive effect in their communities.

### **Setting up new groups on Fernhill**

The Project has set up Tiny Tots, the Fernhill Play Organisation and Valleys Childcare, and has enabled volunteers or paid staff to run them. These groups will provide high quality services for preschool children on Fernhill and in other parts of the Cynon Valley in the future. In this sense the Project has achieved its

aim of setting up sustainable services, on a small scale, and under local control.

### **Promoting Large Scale Regeneration on Perthcelyn**

The Project made a major contribution to making the Perthcelyn Strategy a reality. It was a key player in preparing the plans and in enabling residents to become involved in the planning. The strategy will provide major new resources, including a new community school for the community in the future. In this sense too the Project has achieved its aim of setting up sustainable new services for the community, on a very substantial scale. What is still unclear however is how far these services will be under local control, or indeed whether local residents will wish to participate in their development and management.

To conclude, it is worth recalling the words of a Turkish visitor to the Project which were quoted early in this booklet:

*‘In the developing world poverty still has something to do with hope’.*

As well as all the tangible outcomes, the work of the Cynon Valley Project also means that, for the residents of two local authority housing estates in Wales, poverty now has a lot more to do with hope than it did a few years ago.















