

**Athlone Community Task Force
Update
February 2010**

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ACT Mission

ACT is a business led, anti-dependency community organisation formed in 1992 to engage in “----- employment and enterprise-----and measures leading thereto-----“.

In pursuit of our mission ACT has had the generous cooperation and support of almost every organisation, body, group and agency in the Athlone area. It is that support which sustains us in our work.

Management

ACT has a voluntary Board representative of business, community and local authority. The members give freely of their time and their skills to guiding ACT. They receive no remuneration or expenses.

There is a highly competent executive team numbering three.

Development

Over the years ACT responded to the needs of the community that were within its remit. Some 5,000 programme places were provided. Many lives have been positively influenced by those programmes.

ACT is anti-dependence. It firmly believes that being part of the working world is essential to human dignity and a bulwark against poverty.

Cash

Funding has been provided by a very wide variety of agencies and institutions.

ACT has not engaged in any form of organised local fund raising since the initial funding operation.

ACT has a high-quality financial management system providing timely Statutory Accounts, Board and Management Information and also particular information required by individual Funders. ACT is a registered charity.

Business Start-Up Accommodation

The great expansion in the economy during the “tiger-years” significantly reduced the number of “start-ups” seeking accommodation. Following many months of vacant units general tenants were accepted. Rents earned are applied to ACT projects.

However current circumstances may again present a need for readily available start-up accommodation on supportive terms. ACT along with other interested groups is actively pursuing this.

Education Drop-Out= Unemployable

ACT’s experience is that young people leaving school without certification are very likely to be unemployable. This is especially true in a “knowledge economy”. Exclusion from the world of work is generally recognised as having considerable social, health and financial downsides for the individual and the community.

This is further confirmed by the great majority of participants in ACT employment-oriented programmes seeking “catch-up” having left school without certification.

There is a local assessment that some 40 young people “drop-out” of secondary school each year while up to 5 don’t even arrive.

It is our estimate that an unemployable young person will collect in excess of €1 ml. from the State to their “retirement” at age 65.

To the cash cost must be added the social cost which can be further increased where life-style leads to increased demands on the health service or where a life of crime is pursued.

ACT and Education

ACT in support of its remit “...employment and enterprise.....measures leading thereto” committed itself to specific employment-driven interventions in education.

ACT appreciates that “drop-out” is a multi-dimensional problem. It understands that its contribution can be effective only when delivered in close collaboration with the schools and the many agencies that have experience in education and in education support

Education Action Research (EAR) Project.

Sponsored by the Midland Health Board (now HSE) the EAR project was established in 2005 using the skills and experience of The Grubb Institute. Its first task was strengthening the ability of disadvantaged pupils to successfully transfer to secondary school.- “Going to Secondary”. It is recognised that successful transfer is fundamental to the capacity of the pupil to complete secondary school and enter confidently into the world of work including further education.

EAR is fundamentally child-centred. “Going to Secondary” examined from a young person’s perspective the experience of transition from primary to secondary school.

That process identified eleven initiatives directly responding in a holistic way to the needs expressed by young people.

ACT facilitated the development and implementation of these initiatives by very broad collaboration between schools, statutory and non-statutory organisations.

78 agencies/organisations collaborated in providing 540 programme places for 340 participating young people.

The detail supporting this is in the “Evaluations” referred to below.

Vacation Activities

Disadvantaged young people generally have an unproductive summer.

Most cannot pay for the various sporting camps, they do not go on vacation nor do they visit relatives or have relatives visit them. Employment is not open to them due to age. The upshot is that they return to school at low ebb and drop-out looms. Summer Connect was launched to address that problem by facilitating a productive summer vacation.

As with all ACT programmes it is child-centred and insists on participants taking responsibility for their decisions and behaviour.

The participants requested a “Winter Connect” and ACT supported by APT Tullamore organised it on the child-centred principle of responsibility for self.

The 2009 Group explored drug and alcohol use among teenagers using young people as researchers. Their published work “The Good Life” is available from ACT.

Peer-Ed

In 2008 the young people 14 /17 who were over-age for Summer Connect requested a programme.

Peer –Ed was the response. There was also a Peer-Ed in 2009.

The essence of Peer-Ed is again child-centred. Young people decide on their projects and take responsibility for their projects and for their behaviour. There is an appropriate ratio of staff to help address project difficulties and behaviour issues.

In 2008 the project was a history of the “Army in Athlone”. This was formally accepted by the GOC. Custume Barracks. By way of thanks the GOC invited the group to participate in a specially designed 3 day Army training exercise.

2009 Peer-Ed selected the Gardai as its project.

For disadvantaged young people to “go there” was quite remarkable.

In the “Ed” element the participants briefed the younger Summer Connect group on their experience. It was an interesting briefing as it showed the empathy which had developed between the Garda and Peer-Ed.

The interview on local radio of various Garda by members of the group is very interesting, firstly in the sense that it actually happened. In addition the interviewing standard is high. A CD is available free from ACT

With limited resources Peer-Ed can deliver only to the few. Indeed it was a substantial private donation that funded the '09 event.

So positive is the evaluation of Peer –Ed that it merits being expanded year-on-year until it ultimately embraces all 14 to 17 young people who have a need for it and would benefit. The young people, the economy and society would all be winners!

Athlone Had a Good Halloween!

Westmeath Community Development facilitated a “Monster Ball” organised by the young people on ACT programmes.

A Street Parade and a Marquee Music Event were the highlights. All the entertainment was provided by the young people. The attendance was large and the behaviour excellent. The young people “policed” the event. Alcohol and any attempted ant-social behaviour were excluded. There were no bonfires, fireworks or disputes, with the usual annual A&E consequences.

Once again these young people highlighted their capacity to be responsible citizens.

The challenge remains with the adult community to ensure that that capacity continues to be fostered through further development of child-centred opportunities.

A Place of Their Own

A survey on the needs of the young people in Athlone was carried out by participants in the Winter Connect Programme and the Peer-Ed Programme .The survey highlighted the need for a “Youth Cafe” in Athlone.

The young people approached ACT for help in securing a place of their own in which they might pursue their interests, hobbies and togetherness within the “Youth Cafe”. This would be on child-centred principles for all young people in Athlone

ACT put together a Partnership of St. Mary’s Parish, Foroige, Barnardos, Young Parents Support Group, Parenting Alone Support Group, Merchants Quay Ireland. This Partnership proposed a Youth and Family support centre to be called the “Gateway Project”. It would incorporate the “Youth Cafe” and be managed by the young people themselves with whatever adult assistance they request being made available to them.

Premises and capital funding have been secured and training for the young managers has commenced.

ACT sees the “Gateway Project” as an opportunity for young people to have real life experience of exercising leadership, authority, accountability and cooperation. Valuable skills which reinforce the resilience essential to remaining at school and entering the working world.

Funding

ACT is deeply grateful to APT Tullamore for its continued support. We are also deeply grateful for a very generous confidential contribution from an Athlone source and to the Dept. of Health and Children for the Capital funding for the Gateway Project.

Evaluations

An independent evaluation by NUI Galway of the three-year EAR project testifies to its effectiveness and its value for money.

NUI Maynooth positively evaluated the IT element of “Going 2 Secondary”. This is an interactive website launched by Marist Transition Year to directly answer on a one-to-one basis the concerns of primary school pupils anxious about their forthcoming transition to “big school”. These positive and constructive evaluations have led ACT to decide to further develop its policy of focussed intervention in education based on **child-centeredness** and ever-broadening **collaboration** with interested and relevant organisations.

Vision

ACT works to a vision of an Athlone where all young people have completed secondary education and enthusiastically seek a place in further education/ training or an immediate job. In a “knowledge economy” appropriate further education is ACT’s ideal for all Athlone young people.

So Little Amid Great Need

ACT is delighted that so many elements of EAR have been adopted by schools and other organisations. However there is a huge challenge to ACT and the collaborating groups to extend the “out-of- schools” programmes to all Athlone young people whose education and employment prospects would be greatly enhanced by their being included.

Employment Emergency

The community generally is very concerned about the rising level of unemployment in Athlone. It is sadly reminiscent of the circumstances of 1992 and the founding of ACT. The Board is anxious to draw on local experience by entering into collaboration with relevant agencies and organisations to generate hope and encouragement in those affected. It is through hope that enterprise and employment opportunities will be encouraged and created.

An ACT “Working Paper” suggesting an integrated community response to the current “Employment Emergency” is now in general circulation with specific circulation to those in leadership positions.

The feedback is galvanising ACT to forcefully address adult unemployment. We will meet with interested elements of the community as soon as it can be organised.

Opportunity Day

In March ACT organised an “Opportunity Day” for those who had recently become unemployed or feared they might become so. Its purpose was to assist them to restate their skills and experience and so identify and exploit new opportunities to re-enter the world of work.

Some 200 people visited the many Information Points, manned by local and State agencies and A.I.T. Many completed questionnaires detailing their work/study interests which ACT is pursuing.

Submission on Crime

ACT was invited by the Department of Justice to make a Submission to a “White Paper on Crime”. We were delighted to get this opportunity to present our anti-crime pro education / employment proposals. These are based on our experience and our action research. Were our proven proposals to be supported by Government young marginalised people would be facilitated in developing their talents and becoming valuable citizens rather than the current very real prospect of life-long unemployment and the lure of a life of crime.

A copy of our Submission is attached. **Appendix 1**

Resources

The Board is risk-accepting and capable of rapid response to demands and needs of Athlone that fall within its remit.

ACT has an experienced and competent staff which can where necessary, be augmented to address new demands and challenges.

ACT Enterprise Centre continues to be available to deliver employment and enterprise related services to the community.

Track-Record

The record of ACT is of generating successful collaboration with an ever-expanding range of local and national organisations and institutions to secure an agreed objective. That success is based on the principle that each collaborator (including ACT) recognises itself as better able to deliver on its own agenda when strengthening the understanding and capacity of others.

Commitment

ACT was given its resources in trust by the Athlone community. It has applied and developed those resources over the years in response to the changing circumstances.

The Board will continue to do that and to hold them available to the community for “.....enterprise, employment.....and measures leading thereto”

On behalf of ACT

John Ronaghan.

Chairman.

Board Members: Mary Daly- Scanlon, Martin Egan, Gerry Johnson, Fergal Lynam, Gabrielle Mc Fadden, Kevin Moran, Frank Murtagh, Vivian O’Connor.

Athlone Community Taskforce

Submission on “White Paper on Crime”

Please Note.

The formal Submission had Appendices of authoritative Research supporting ACT proposals. These are separately available from ACT

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The Penny Dropped

In the course of our work it became apparent that young people who dropped out of school were likely to be unemployable.

When older, the structured efforts to help them orient their lives towards the working world had very limited success.

Almost all would likely be totally dependent on the State for their support and because of their life-style would place significant demands on the Health Service.

The world of crime could be attractive to them at a further cost to the State and the community.

Cost of Drop-Out

Some 11,000 young people drop out each year nationally. ACT calculates that each drop out will receive some €1ml from the State by the age of 65.

The community (social) cost is not included in our €1ml. nor is the opportunity cost of these wasted yet potentially talented lives.

It would be very useful were the Government to prepare a comprehensive cost estimate. That would put in context any investment aimed at eliminating drop out.

“Drop-out” is a complex issue. ACT has evidence that shows how major inroads can be made to that complex issue. It could also be a bulwark against the attraction of criminal life

The Evidence --Transition to Working Life (TWL)

Our evidence comes from Transition to Working Life.

TWL was designed for us by The Grubb Institute.

Athlone employers released valuable employees during working hours, some to act as “Working Coaches” others to be trained as “Advisors” to those working coaches. ACT used its ADM (POBAL) funding to pay cash costs

The Programme was directed at young people aged 15 to 19, who had dropped-out of school. Recruitment of young people was a real challenge. It was met by unorthodox methods of time, place and approach.

The purpose of TWL was ideally to stimulate a desire to return to school or alternatively enter into training with the declared ambition to join the working world.

ACT and all the parties involved were quite stunned by the success of so many of these truly marginalised young people who participated in TWL.

This success is confirmed by ACT's own tracking of the participants and NUI Galway's independent evaluation of the entire programme.

Why Drop TWL?

ACT had used all its available funds in proving TWL. We sought Government funding which was refused. We got the feeling that there was no "budget –line" anywhere for such a programme.

This could have been overcome by Government providing a budget-line or by a number of Departments combining to fund it. Neither happened so with great reluctance ACT abandoned TWL.

Intervention at the Fringe of Education

ACT continued to develop its involvement in education intervention.

We acted as catalyst in organising Breakfast Clubs, Homework Clubs and Psychological Assessments. All directed at helping young marginalised students remain in education and develop a positive attitude.

We were struck by the extent to which young people at primary school suffered considerable trauma arising from their home experience. Home can be a very unsafe place indeed. That sad reality is not exclusive to disadvantaged homes.

The placing of a psychotherapist in all primary schools especially in disadvantaged areas would in ACT experience greatly help young people to cope with their emotional difficulties from an early stage and go on to complete their education with a positive attitude.

That this investment would yield an excellent return in economic and human terms is unlikely to be challenged.

ACT Thrust.

In 2004 ACT felt further intervention was required from it.

While continuing our direct efforts towards "enterprise and employment" we decided on an education intervention under "-- measures leading thereto--"

We had to get in deeper. It was essential that marginalised young people would develop a sense of personal responsibility towards their own education and a positive attitude to the world of work. Lacking this they would not be able to break free of their life of disadvantage, dependency and possibly crime.

Our TWL experience taught us that this could be done.

We had learned that the great majority of these marginalised drop-outs were young people who wanted to be part of the working world and had latent talents to do so.

With appropriate child-centred development of their resilience factors, they could do so.

Education Action Research Programme (EAR).

ACT involvement in helping young people remain in education had been a series of ad hoc responses to immediate needs presented to us.

We decided that a structured programme was required to help these young people and prove to decision-makers that they could be helped.

With the assistance of the Grubb Institute we designed EAR This is a child-centred programme initially to help young people transfer successfully to secondary school. This transfer is recognised as a major stumbling block for disadvantaged pupils.

APT Tullamore followed by The Midland Health Board (MHB) generously agreed to finance the initial stage.

APT / MHB appreciated that the programme was based on proven Grubb experience, it was well designed, focussed and would have had competent management supported by the Grubb Institute.

Also the Working Group controlling EAR had a membership representative of those involved in the sector.

MHB no doubt felt that reasonable success would directly reduce the demands on a hard-pressed sector of the Health Service and would more than remunerate its contribution.

A Steering Group was formed to manage EAR.

FIRST STEP was to help disadvantaged 6th class pupils prepare for that transition.

Working directly with the pupils, a “Going to Secondary” programme was designed and implemented with the full support of the teachers.

This programme has been evaluated by NUI Galway and viewed to be a success.

A direct follow-on was a request from the transition pupils for a computer link to allow them interact directly with individual secondary pupils. This was provided.

Again the teachers fully cooperated and undertook special training.

This IT element has been evaluated by NUI Maynooth and viewed to be also a success.

The lesson drawn from this Step was that young disadvantaged children can be relied on to identify what will really help them. They will also act responsibly in availing of that help.

It was difficult on occasion. However, child-centred focus by skilled programme staff and the professionalism of the teachers kept the programme very much on the road.

ACT works on an “inaugurate, evaluate and transfer” basis.

Programmes which are proven to be of value barehanded on to a willing local organisation which feels it fits their bill.

“Going to Secondary” and its IT element has been adopted by the schools and is now an embedded practice.

ACT on behalf of these disadvantaged pupils acknowledges the generous and professional approach of the schools and teachers to the challenges EAR presents.

SECOND STEP

The Transition Group requested some form of summer activity.

The Steering Group recognised that during the summer vacation disadvantaged young people were generally left to their own devices and maybe abuses. They did not have the family opportunities of most other children - summer camps, family holidays, visiting extended family and extended family visiting them.

This resulted in disadvantaged young people returning to school at low ebb and lacking the re-start ability of their better-off peers.

A "Summer Connect" programme was arranged for them.

This was a three-day a week programme for the entire summer holiday.

The young people themselves decided on the projects in which they would engage and would identify and arrange the expert assistance that would need to be invited in to help. They prepared their own food from provisions supplied.

This way of life was generally new to them. It was a huge challenge.

They did need help. There was a high staff ratio and that help was given.

However it was given in a child-centred way and on the basis that the young people continued to develop their sense of personal responsibility.

The staff's approach to personal behaviour was similar.

The now annual "Summer Connect" has been greatly supported by Athlone Institute of Technology Social Studies Dept.

ACT is grateful for this generous response.

THIRD STEP

The "Summer Connect" group who were now in secondary school asked for some winter activity. They did not feel able to present themselves at the activities that were open to them.

The "Steering Group" arranged a "Winter Connect" programme.

This was appropriately staffed and again conducted on the principles of personal responsibility for activities and behaviour.

During the winter they undertook projects/studies in Media/IT, Radio Skills, Safety and Drug Awareness.

One group undertook a study "The Good Life?" This explored drug and alcohol abuse amongst young people using young people as researchers. Their work has been published.

FOURTH STEP.

The age group 14 to 17 presented themselves as beyond the age of "Summer Connect" and requested a summer programme for their age group." Peer-Ed" was the response. This was again child-centred and conducted on the established responsibility and behaviour basis.

An additional challenge to this older group was to brief the "Summer Connect" participants on their projects.

Peer-Ed 1 compiled a "History of the Army in Athlone". **(Copy available on request)**

It is a mighty tome and was formally accepted by the Army as authoritative.

We understand that elements of it could well be used for recruiting.

By way of “thank you” the OC Custume Barracks invited the group to a specially designed 3 day training course.

The current year Peer-Ed group completed a project on the Gardai.

In ordinary circumstances for young people to do that would be worthy of comment, for disadvantaged young people it was quite remarkable. Two student Garda joined the programme as part of their placement and assisted the Project Manager during the duration of the programme

The “Ed” element of briefing the younger group was also remarkable in the portrayal of the empathy which had developed between Peer-Ed and the Gardai.

The group conducted a local radio interview with a variety of Garda and subsequently produced a CD of the interview. The CD was presented to the Community Garda Sgt.

The evaluation of the project highlights the positive change in attitude towards the Gardai.

FIFTH STEP

Peer-Ed recently came to ACT for help in finding a place of their own to pursue their interests, hobbies and togetherness by establishing a “Youth Cafe”.

ACT in collaboration with many other agencies such as Foroige, Barnyards, Merchant Quay, Westmeath Community Development, formed a working group to pursue this on their behalf and established the “Gateway Project” which included a Youth Cafe.

This group has obtained suitable space in St.Mary's Hall from Bishop O'Reilly and St.Mary's Parish for their use. Initial funding of €85,000 for capital expenditure on the premises and equipment has been granted through the Young Peoples Facilities and Services Fund. Further grants may follow.

The young people will be trained to take front line responsibility for managing the Youth Cafe. That will include equipment specification, decoration and agreeing and enforcing a code of conduct for themselves and the members.

The child-centred principles will operate here as well.

Gateway is an inclusive project open to all youth (aged 10 to 21) in the area.

ACT is confident that this project will encourage and support many young people in taking increased responsibility for themselves, strengthen their resolve to continue their education and enhance their capacity to join the working world.

In keeping with ACT principle of “inaugurate, evaluate and transfer,” Foroige will be the Lead Agency for Gateway in 2011.

WORKING WORLD v DEPENDENCY and CRIME

This engagement is a continuous one played out on the turf of home and school.

The Working World should win out but sadly it has substantial losses.

While eliminating those losses is a complex task our experience is that significant advances can be made quite quickly.

ACT experience is that thought-out, joined-up investment in young disadvantaged people from an early age would deliver them a quality of life that would bring significant human and economic value to our country.

We see three major obstacles to that happening.

First is the absence of a national figure for the total economic, community and human cost of “drop-out”. That figure would likely be horrendous and would compel resources to be made available. Without an appreciation of “total cost”, resources will be inadequate and spasmodic.

Second is securing an integrated, joined-up approach by all those currently addressing the issue.

Combining adequate resources and allocating responsibility and accountability to address the drop-out issue is a major challenge. Public policy appears to be” mission impossible “.

However the stakes are too high for that.

ACT takes heart from the successful combining of Departments to meet particular criminal activities.

Third is the absence of a code of best practice.

CONCLUSION

ACT is grateful for the opportunity to make this Submission.

We are prepared to make our experience readily available to interested parties.

On behalf of Athlone Community Taskforce,
John Ronaghan
Chairman

15th February 2010

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