



## **Side By Side - Building Community Resilience**

Side By Side is open to people from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds and nationalities, whether refugees and asylum seekers, new migrants, British-born ethnic minorities or white British. It has been established for two years. We have four management committee members, around eight regular volunteers and one sessional worker on a freelance contract.

### **Summary of activities**

Side by Side is a grassroots, user-led intercultural drama group, originally set up by a group of refugees and asylum seekers and currently run by a management committee of predominantly refugees. We aim to promote intercultural understanding, integration and cohesion between people of all social, ethnic, cultural and faith backgrounds, whilst raising awareness of the issues facing refugees and asylum seekers and the positive contributions they can make. We use drama as a tool for empowerment and building confidence, developing self-expression and building friendships, as well as exploring themes which are relevant to our members. We do this by providing weekly drama workshops and facilitating devised performances and workshops which we take out to public venues, schools and service-providers in order to raise awareness and dispel myths.

### **Briefly describe the experience you wish to focus on in this paper.**

Side by Side is in its third year, and each year we run a project which builds upon the last in terms of building up community resilience and sustainability within the group. The capacity-building, transferral of responsibilities, and strengthening of the group has been a slow, organic and ongoing process, with far-reaching results for our members.

Side by Side has a participatory approach which aims to give a voice to our members and participants, handing decision-making and ownership over to them in terms of content and direction of our weekly workshops and devised performances, workshop and performance venues, times, target audiences and so on. Performances have always been based on members' own experiences and ideas but input has increased over time. In the first year, the drama was a collaboration between the members and the facilitators, but – whilst they still teach new drama techniques - over time members have developed their own skills with less input from the facilitators, and the performances have become more self-directed.

Members and participants contribute to workshops by leading games and exercises, and sharing their own talents in photography, filming, singing, drumming, dancing, visual arts, and writing. At the end of each session we plan the next activities

together and transfer more leadership skills to members so they can run more activities within the sessions.

Member contributions and responsibility over tasks are also increasing: for example, in flier and programme design, event organisation, administrative duties and attending training days. In the future, members have volunteered to design a website, set and costume design. In this, the third year, we are working towards greater ownership by our members, where tasks will be initiated by them.

Over the course of our life-time we have focussed on strengthening the skills of the management committee to a point where they are now taking full responsibility for finances and planning, and making joint grant applications, still with support at this stage.

We are an inclusive group which promotes equal opportunities and which welcomes everyone regardless of age, gender, faith, nationality, or ability. We have had a total of 62 participants ranging from 18 to 65 years of age, from a total of 20 different nationalities, 50% male, 50% female. We work with young people with autistic spectrum disorder from a local special needs college, and they have played an equal part in the devised performances, workshop delivery (i.e. leading games and sharing ideas) and in taking on tasks (e.g. flier design). We are currently working with people with mental health issues and have publicised our activity to the wider community to many different organisations that work with many different client groups.

To make Side by Side accessible to all, we provide travel expenses and refreshments, and there is disability access at our venue.

### **Describe what your RCO did, and what came out of this**

Side by Side was set up by a group of refugee and asylum seeker volunteers from the Northern Refugee Centre's REACT (Refugees Extending Awareness through Communication and Training) project, together with a Drama Facilitator who had been contracted by REACT to deliver a series of confidence-building workshops, culminating in a devised performance. On completion of this project, volunteers were motivated to continue meeting and offering workshops to others in order to aid integration and social cohesion, and to raise awareness.

The members' commitment and dedication was evidenced by their determination to begin the new project even when their grant application had been unsuccessful and, as a result, had to run the first year on extremely limited funds.

Since then, we have held a total of 74 weekly workshops and ten meetings. Workshops have explored themes of identity, difference and similarity, communication, and cultural stories. We have transferred drama skills in improvisation, clowning, street theatre, forum theatre, image theatre, physical theatre, mask work and many more.

We have devised two full-length performances based on participants' own experiences and ideas, and performed these in two public venues and a mainstream festival, three schools and colleges (followed by a workshop), and taken out individual scenes to a total of five other events and venues.

Members have also run creative awareness-raising workshops in a total of five schools, to mental health service staff, and have curated the closing event for Sheffield's Summer of Sanctuary on behalf of the Council. Side by Side's film-maker and photographer have been responsible for documenting the whole of Summer of Sanctuary.

Positive impact: Through the vehicle of drama, we are able to give a voice and a physical platform to those who often do not have a voice, the opportunity to express themselves and to make choices that are acted upon. Those who often find themselves immobilised and powerless are given an opportunity to create something worthwhile. Once on stage, they have a 'captive' audience who will listen to them, and who they can have an impact on – something quite profound for people who often feel they have little or no impact on society.

Members have built up their confidence and capacities, not only in acting and directing but in transferable life-skills such as teamwork, leadership skills, communication, public-speaking social skills, diplomacy and problem-solving. Management Committee members in particular have gained important skills in fundraising, marketing and publicity, chairing meetings, event organisation, and administration. Several members have said that their involvement with Side by Side has helped them gain employment or acceptance on training courses, and one member has said that her significant voluntary work at Side by Side helped her to gain her citizenship!

Other positive impacts cited by our members have included: building friendships, integration, understanding of other cultures, feeling part of something important, English language skills, feeling valued, restraint and thoughtfulness, breaking down barriers and dispelling their own myths about different cultures.

### **What problems and barriers did your RCO face in doing this, and how did you overcome or try to overcome these?**

Personal situations and time commitments: Several of our members have complex personal issues - whether these are mental health issues, disability or situational circumstances linked to their status as asylum seekers – which prevent them from attending every week, arriving on time, or fulfilling certain roles. However, the majority do manage to attend regularly, and this is testimony to their commitment and the amount they value Side by Side. Difficult personal situations can occasionally bring out frustration or negative emotions. We deal with any situations like this as a group and aim to help each other.

Members who have received refugee status often have other commitments such as college or university study, but we have to accept (and encourage!) this as a natural progression for our members.

Because of these restraints, and the fact that it is a very fluid group, with several people joining and leaving each year, there can be a lack of continuity and consistency from session to session, making it hard to build on prior sessions. However, we have had to learn to adjust and to adapt to this, accept it as a natural feature of our work, develop a safe, welcoming environment for new members to be included promptly, and a great deal of flexibility.

Cultural difference: Because people are refugees and asylum seekers doesn't mean it is an homogenous group! Having worked with people from a total of 20 different nationalities (nine of which attend regularly), and over four different faiths, it seems inevitable that there would be a few cultural misunderstandings. For example, some people are culturally more abrupt and direct in their language. However, these are isolated incidents and are dealt with more easily because we are aware of different cultures mixing together. We discuss everything as equals and use it in our drama. The benefits of being a multi-cultural, multi-faith group are great, and any challenges are in fact seen as ways of learning from each other, rather than as disadvantages.

Funding: While lack of funding was an obstacle to begin with - leading to a less-than-adequate workshop venue, no permanent space to hold meetings and store resources, a lack 'of' quality resources, etc – we were in a position to be more creative, to push barriers, to beg and borrow, and for members to demonstrate true commitment.

Ironically, the fact that we have received more funding this year has presented more challenges. Together with the fact that we have begun charging for some of the work that we do, that some members have earned an income through commissioned work, and that we have started paying a freelance fee to our Drama Facilitator, has led to less willingness amongst a few members of the group to take on work voluntarily, including sharing their own skills, performing, carrying out activities which could further develop the group, and attending events. Of course, we understand this ambition to make money and to charge for services, but, as a small, volunteer-led organisation, we do not have the capacity to run without the goodwill and commitment of our volunteers, and therefore longevity and sustainability are under threat. We are at a critical transformational stage where we need to assess what can and can't be paid for and what impact this could have on the group.

This is a catch-22 situation in that funding has been secured for this year's project, 'Inside Out', which has the aim of making the group more sustainable and self-sufficient, and transferring increasing levels of responsibility to volunteer group members, but which also funds our facilitator's sessional fees. Members, as a result, could prove less willing to take on more work and responsibility, feeling that this is the paid worker's job, despite the valuable experience this has brought them in the past.

Rights and responsibilities: There is also the question of getting the balance between rights and responsibilities. Whilst we recognise that members can put in varying degrees of commitment, sometimes expectations from group members exceed what they can put in. For example, there may be a member who wants to earn an income through Side by Side's outreach activities, but is not necessarily willing to put the work in to get to that stage (e.g. fundraising, planning, attending sessions regularly). We, as an organisation, are at a stage where we are trying to reinforce the value and rewarding nature of 'putting in' (e.g. time, commitment, facilitating others) as well as 'getting out' (having a voice, making decisions, being listened to, as well as monetary rewards).

These are isolated cases and our success is mainly as a result of the tireless commitment, dedication and enthusiasm of certain members of our group who contribute a great deal to Side by Side on a voluntary and altruistic basis.

**If your RCO accessed any support to help you with this area of work, describe this support and whether it was helpful to your organisation**

We have received support from Voluntary Action Sheffield's Small Group's Advisor with regards to building our constitution, management committee training, setting goals, and help with insurances and policies.

South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau has given us significant support in writing funding proposals.

Sheffield City Council has given our members opportunities to get involved in City-wide events and City of Sanctuary has helped to promote us, and gain recognition. All these have contributed towards building confidence and capacities in our members, and ultimately community resilience.

**What are your tips for other RCOs considering doing something similar?**

Side by Side's participatory and user-led ethos has been the biggest learning curve for us all. Sometimes this can be difficult to maintain (decisions are often more easily made by one person than a whole group) but we have very deliberately preserved this important aspect of our work, and as a result, achieved outstanding results. By taking on more ownership, our members have become far more involved and taken on a considerable amount of new responsibilities, driving many aspects of our development forward on their own, and very often surprising us all.

Relationship-building and time: As a direct service-delivery to vulnerable people, the most important aspects of our work have been relationship-building with participants, and these have been paramount to our success. Our meetings and workshops are informal, laid-back and enjoyable and we maintain regular contact with everyone by text, email and phone, and organise trips out with the children. We have spent time getting to know each other because we value process over end-product, are not rigid in achieving our outputs, and, as a consequence, gain surprising, unplanned outputs. As a result of patience and friendliness to newcomers, group members have bonded and felt accepted and valued in the group, and this is evident in our end-product (our performance) which is all the more cohesive as a result.

Inclusivity: Because we are open to people of all nationalities, faiths, abilities, gender, age and sexual orientation, members are continually learning to break down barriers and challenge their own prejudices, making for a rich experience from many different perspectives.

Side by Side doesn't see people as simply refugees with a story. They are people with talents and skills. We let people share their stories if they want to and in their own time. We follow the lead of the user, are careful not to make assumptions or project anything on them. This 'labelling' of refugees is been something that has been brought to our attention by our own members and so we are careful not to treat them as such.

Our networking and partnership-building in the local community have also helped us to gain recognition, and will help us to forge more links in the future, if we are to expand and begin new awareness-raising initiatives.

In the current climate of intercultural hostilities, we feel that Side by Side is proof of how different communities can work together – from the bottom up – to create something positive.

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