



Side By Side: Commissioning

Side by Side has been established for two years. It has four management committee members and around eight regular volunteers, and one sessional worker on a freelance contract. We are 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.

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.

Summary of experience

Over the past two years Side by Side has been commissioned to deliver the following:

- 1) a total of four awareness-raising workshops in schools for Refugee Week – commissioned by the Children's Society
- 2) three performances followed by workshops in two schools and one special needs college – commissioned directly by the schools / college
- 3) an awareness-raising workshop for mental health workers - commissioned by Sheffield City Council
- 4) Documentation of Sheffield's Summer of Sanctuary – commissioned by Sheffield City Council
- 5) the curation of the Summer of Sanctuary closing event – commissioned by Sheffield City Council

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

- 1) Four awareness-raising workshops in schools:
In Refugee Week 2009, five Side by Side members each delivered one or two creative awareness-raising workshops in a total of four Sheffield primary schools – each with around 30 pupils - commissioned by the Children's Society. The sessions explored issues of asylum and immigration. Our

members planned and delivered the sessions themselves, and received very positive feedback from pupils and teaching staff.

- 2) Three performances followed by workshops in schools and colleges:
In July 2009 Side by Side performed their devised play 'Hopscotch: a Choice without Choice', to over 100 year 7 PSHE students, 30 year 10-11 drama students, and 30 special needs college students. 'Hopscotch' was based on their own experiences of arriving and settling in the UK, the obstacles they faced – from language barriers to stereotyping, isolation to uncertainty – and on discovering a new side to their identity.
Two of the performances were followed by a workshop exploring the issues addressed in the play, run by our members.
- 3) One awareness-raising workshop for mental health workers:
In 2009, three Side by Side members jointly ran an awareness-raising workshop for mental health workers, with Sheffield City Council and City of Sanctuary. The session aimed to highlight the specific experiences and needs of refugees and asylum seekers with regards to mental health. Side by Side members presented exercises, scenes and forum theatre models for discussion.
- 4) Documentation of Sheffield's Summer of Sanctuary
Two of Side by Side's members were commissioned by Sheffield City Council to document the UK's first and only Summer of Sanctuary movement in summer 2010. A skilled film-maker and photographer documented events and activities going on all over the city, and put these together in a film and photo display respectively, for the Closing Event.
- 5) The curation of the Summer of Sanctuary closing event
Side by Side was commissioned by Sheffield City Council to curate the Summer of Sanctuary's closing event in September 2010. Members planned and organised the night's events, running order and guest musicians, took on roles including Master of Ceremonies and pianist, displayed the photos and showed the documentary film, and facilitated a 10-minute interactive drama activity.

Positive impacts:

We have reached over 300 people* to whom we have raised awareness about migration issues; we have gained more contacts and raised our profile; we have also increased motivation and confidence amongst our members, as well as skills in leadership, facilitation, public speaking, event organisation, marketing and publicity and administration.

In schools: Many demonstrated a lack of awareness and knowledge prior to the sessions and felt that, by coming into contact with the 'human face of asylum', they were able to understand their situation far better.

There was very positive feedback from the organiser of the mental health training, and we have been asked to deliver more training this year as a result. We have also received very positive praise from Sheffield City of Sanctuary for our role in the closing event.

**This number is raised to over 800 people if we include all of our performances over the last two years, over 90% of whom have said they have learned something new from our events.*

Negative impacts:

Several organisations have approached us to carry out more work and - whilst we see demand as a positive thing - we are currently not in a position where we can meet this demand due to financial, time and resource constraints; particularly from those agencies who want us to perform free-of-charge. However, we are also very excited about the opportunities that this has presented and are always looking for ways of expanding.

Feedback from our schools performances was mixed. While there were positive responses to the cleverly thought-out scenes and the comedic parts, negative comments ranged from lack of understanding amongst the younger pupils, to the expectation of a smoother, tighter, more professional production amongst the older drama students. Members sensed this criticism and, as a result, their sense of achievement was diminished. However, two thirds of the pupils said they had learned something new from the performance.

Cultural differences: Members who have delivered awareness-raising workshops in schools have encountered a lack of empathy or understanding amongst some pupils in certain schools. These pupils have demonstrated hostility and prejudice towards our members as a result - they feel - of a lack of knowledge and information. We are aware that this can be damaging to our members, some of whom are already vulnerable and lacking in confidence.

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

Cultural differences: see above. This year we hope to deliver more awareness-raising workshops and would aim to combat these problems by forging longer-term relationships with the schools, which would involve repeat visits and having discussions about the sort of information and teaching the pupils are receiving prior to, and outside of, our visits. We would also ensure we show an adequate duty of care towards our members, preparing them for – and protecting them from – hurtful and abusive remarks.

Performances in schools: I have mentioned above some of the negative responses we had from students regarding our performances. We have learned a great deal from this experience and, in future, will assess the target age-group of our performances much more carefully (the difficulty being, schools like to arrange well in advance, and we often do not know the outcome of our devising process until a much later date!). Performances delivered to schools need to be clearer, more simple and more polished. Our focus on process over end-product must not undermine the quality of the performances we take out, particularly if this can impact negatively on both the level of understanding amongst audiences, and on our performers' sense of achievement.

Time: Extra time is often needed to plan, prepare and deliver performances, workshops or events. Many Side by Side members have outside commitments or personal issues which make them unable to give up time 'outside' the regular weekly drama sessions, or to meet tight deadlines. These include issues of childcare. Remuneration of planning and preparation time, as well as delivery, offers a great incentive to our members, but is not always possible. We have had to be realistic

with the amount we can expect our members to do, including touring less performances than we otherwise might do. As time goes on and members become more confident, more familiar with performance skills, and with each other, we are able to prepare scenes much more quickly. We are also building up a bank of scenes and activities which we can deliver on request. In the future, we are hoping to deliver formal, accredited training to our members in facilitation skills so that they are more equipped to respond to briefs from outside agencies. However, one concern is that, as the number of workshops we offer increases, so does the amount of organisation and administration time needed – for which we do not have the capacity. Again, we are at an interesting, transformational stage, where we are considering options regarding social enterprise.

'Cultural time-keeping' has also been stated as an issue. It is extremely important that when delivering work, particularly commissioned work, all members arrive ahead of time.

Logistical problems: These include time, childcare, and travel arrangements. We always pay members' travel expenses as the majority are on low incomes. Weekly meetings in the same venue do not present a problem, but when the venue changes regularly such as in outreach sessions, it is a factor we have to consider and organise well in advance.

Financial problems: We have experienced various problems relating to Bank accounts. Amongst others, these have included finding suitable signatories (bearing in mind asylum seekers cannot be signatories, and many of our members have poor - or no - credit ratings, given their situation). One funder insisted we changed Bank accounts, which brought on further, ongoing challenges, all of which have been sorted now!

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 had support from City of Sanctuary, the Children's Society and Sheffield City Council Asylum Team, who have all offered us these different contracts. Northern Refugee Centre's REACT (Refugees Extending Awareness through Communication and Training) project provided us with contacts from schools and service-providers.

We have also had help from outside professionals such as a lighting technician and photographer. Support in kind has come from our film-maker, and students who helped with technical aspects of our performance.

Side by Side is currently seeking advice from the Director of Point Blank Theatre Company on becoming a Company Limited by Guarantee. We may very soon be getting support from Business Link who will offer us a mentor to guide us through the process of becoming a social enterprise, generating income, and tendering for larger contracts.

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

'Be realistic in your time-scale': Side by Side has slowly built itself up to a position where it can tender to deliver services more 'officially'. We have not taken on too much too soon, and are currently using experience we have gained informally over

the last two years as a building block to develop this aspect of our work now. We are now ready to consolidate the skills and confidence that some of our members have gained in workshop delivery / event management through accredited training; we are ready to formalise ourselves as an organisation which can tender to deliver services. We would not have been in this position two years ago. Networking and raising our public profile have helped us to get there.

Liaison and relationship-building with service-providers: Having learned from our own mistakes, we recommend clear communication with schools and service-providers about the content/length of the performances/workshops, and the target age-group. We suggest sending them an information pack about your group and about the issues you plan to address, so that they can prepare students in advance and link it into their teaching plans. We would hope to stay in touch after sessions and to develop close relationships with them.

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