

**A youth work practice case study on addressing the Inclusion, Diversity and Equality of Opportunity challenges of children and young people who have recently arrived in the region.**

**Epicentre, Armagh**

Epicentre is a fulltime Youth Centre based in Armagh which operates 6 days a week. It is located quite centrally in Armagh City, close to the Southern Regional College.

It delivers a range of programmes such as: drop-in, targeting provision based on the needs of the young people; Inclusion programmes such as the YES programme which caters for young people with additional needs; and programmes for BAME participants. It delivers a weekly homework club with a particular focus on Maths and English. Some already existing members of the Youth Centre attend this programme in addition to some young people referred by local schools. The Staff have noticed that some young people who initially attended the Youth Centre for the homework club now attend drop-in sessions and other programmes. Epicentre identified a gap during weekend provision therefore created a youth café drop-in to facilitate outreach delivery.

Armagh City has a high population of newcomers, therefore there is a need for youth work delivery for newcomer young people in particular those from the Bulgarian Roma community. Through links with City of Armagh High School, Epicentre staff have been able to engage with these young people and invite them to the Youth Centre. They have positive links and partnerships with local schools, in particular the city of Armagh High School where Epicentre delivers OCN qualifications which are worth a grade B GCSE. This is designed to help ensure young people are gaining at least 5 GCSE qualifications.

The Education Authority Youth service within Epicentre has piloted a targeted programme for young people from newcomer communities which is delivered weekly. It is important that the challenges experienced by children and young people that have recently arrived in the region are respected, such as adapting to a new environment, culture and language. Therefore, the sessions are totally dedicated to young people from newcomer communities ensuring an inclusive and safe space to socialise and participate in youth work activities/programme. This environment also allows the young people to build relationships with the Staff Team and to get an understanding of what youth service is and the opportunities which it can offer to them. The aim is to integrate these young people into mainstream youth provision when they are ready. There are 35 young people from Bulgarian/Roma Backgrounds (majority male) attending Epicentre, age ranging from 8-18 years old. Some of the young people have already started to attend generic drop in alongside local young people and it is evident that this has helped to break down some of the barriers relating to prejudice and discrimination. Staff recognise whilst there is still a lot of work to be done, significant progress has been achieved.

The centre has a range of different nationalities and ethnicities in the membership including Bulgarian, Polish, Lithuanian, Portuguese, British, Irish, Chinese, Irish Traveller Community

and Bulgarian Roma. The local indigenous young people are the majority of the Centre's membership however, these other nationalities and ethnicities are well represented throughout different programmes etc. Quite a large number of Bulgarian Roma young people attend Epicentre however, not as many as would be desirable as there is a large population of Bulgarian Roma in Armagh.

When supporting these young people to engage in youth services, the Epicentre Staff Team has encountered a number of challenges regarding inclusion, diversity and equality of opportunity. Particularly, around their understanding and their parent(s)'s understanding of youth services. It has been noticed that many parents see youth workers as social workers and tend to refrain from allowing their child to attend. There is a significant language barrier, it is quite complex to get parental consent. Epicentre has tried to overcome this in a number of ways. There have been meetings with the Intercultural Education Service and the City of Armagh High School to translate the registration forms. Many teachers have helped young people along with their interpreter to complete registration forms in school. There have also been a number of incidents within the Centre due to lack of understanding around different cultures. This has led to the change to run tailored programmes to promote awareness and acceptance and understanding of different cultural backgrounds.

Another challenge is related to how many of the parents of newcomer children and young people are working several jobs or jobs that are on shift patterns. Therefore, caring responsibilities for younger children in the family are placed upon the older siblings. This is a reality that many newcomer young people are presented with which is a challenge to their inclusion, diversity and equality of opportunity in terms of attending youth provision, sports clubs, afterschool programmes and having the time and resources to complete homework and study. One discovery made when facilitating focus groups in a local high school identified that young females were struggling to get their homework completed because they couldn't find the time due to other household and family responsibilities. This was one of the reasons for the homework club initiative and they had hoped to include a teacher from the school to join this programme in assisting newcomer children and young people with homework and study.

Another challenge presented to children and young people that have recently arrived in the region is transport. It is common that their family do not own a car, therefore are reliant on public transport and for those that live outside of the city centre this service is limited. Even for those that do live more centrally, walking is the more common option as it saves money. Experience has informed the organisation that parents have reservations of allowing their children to walk to and from the Youth Centre, particularly for young girls out of fear of what could happen. This is a challenge for their inclusion, diversity and equality of opportunity as they often have to rely on walking to where they want to go and this sometimes raises concerns.

Epicentre facilitates sports activities in its sports hall and encourages young people from all backgrounds to participate as sport can play a powerful role in breaking down barriers and creating opportunities for friendship. Staff have noticed the demand to play sports that are popular in Eastern Europe such as basketball which has been a great success and football

has been another popular sport that brings young people together as it is such a global sport and acts as a common denominator for many participants. An inclusion, diversity and equality of opportunity challenge for many children and young people that have recently arrived in the region would be missing out on opportunities to play sports and belong to local sports clubs. The reason for this may be the lack of knowledge about local teams, fear of discrimination or not being able to attend training due to transport or family responsibilities.

Epicentre staff highlighted challenges for newcomer children and young people regarding online provision during lockdown. The majority of delivery was limited to those that had access to internet and devices. Therefore, young people belonging to newcomer communities and those that lived in rural areas were not always able to attend or participate in the live delivery of the online sessions. One way in which Epicentre staff endeavoured to overcome this challenge was by encouraging participants to engage by other means such as delivering worksheets and capturing evidence by sending photographs. This allowed the young people experiencing these challenges to still be involved in programmes despite not being able to attend the live online delivery.

Staff are aware that children and young people that have recently arrived in the region experience bullying and have noticed this when working in the local schools. Isolation can occur due to bullying and through the lack of speaking English. These experiences can contribute to the mental health of children and young people which is a reason why having youth work staff engaging with them during and after school is important. Being a friendly face, asking questions and having fun are some ways to help interact with newcomer young people to help establish a relationship which can possibly lead to an invitation to join a programme at the Youth Centre. Being a friendly face, asking questions and having fun are some ways to help interact with newcomer young people to help establish a relationship which can possibly lead to an invitation to join a programme at the youth centre. The Newcomer Youth Engagement programme (NYE) is specifically for newcomer young people, to ensure that they feel welcome and safe. This has been really important and successful in introducing youth provision and support to the newcomer communities. Although many newcomer children and young people also attend mainstream youth provision within the centre, there are still many that rely and only attend the NYE programme.

One staff member spoke of the importance of educating young people of the different nationalities and cultures about the journey that some of the newcomer children and young people have been on. They often believe that racist and sectarian comments are due to fear of the unknown, so by informing and educating young people on what it is like to be a Bulgarian or a Roma young person from example can change their mindset and challenge their values, beliefs, and behaviours. Epicentre has completed an Inclusion Champions programme with 6 young people, who are now volunteering and their knowledge and positive attitude towards inclusion and diversity is impacting others around them.

The Roma information day for the Staff Team was an excellent experience and one which staff would recommend for other youth workers. Taking time to do personal research on the nationality or culture is important and there are opportunities to liaise with the Council teams dedicated to support newcomer people as they may have connections that prove helpful in providing support for children and young people.

Having conversations with children and young people that have recently arrived in the region, allowing them to share about their culture, backgrounds and traditions is also a powerful tool in helping them feel respected and empowered while also increasing Staff's awareness and understanding to be more inclusive.

An approach that Epicentre found successful in terms of inviting children and young people who have recently arrived in the region to the Centre was by engaging with them at school. This allowed the children and young people to see who they were, develop a relationship and be consistent with them. This was a lot more successful than relying on an online poster to inform groups of young people.

Promoting volunteering opportunities within the Centre to all young people, including those that have recently arrived in the region, instils a sense of belonging and responsibility in addition to developing many of their skills. Examples include: a Bulgarian Roma young person who provides help during programme delivery and assists with translation; 2 Lithuanian young people who volunteer during drop-in; and a Bulgarian parent will shortly be joining the volunteer team, primarily to help with translation.