

SPRINGBOARD AN AGENT FOR CHANGE

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Background

Springboard is a unique organisation. It is a cross community; cross border programme initiated and funded by the International Fund for Ireland's (IFI) Wider Horizons Programme and has been operating successfully amongst young people from areas of intense disadvantage. For six years it has been the only enduring vehicle by which community organisations and Catholic and Protestant young people from West Belfast, with their counterparts from Tallaght in West Dublin, have been able to work and train together. Since 1992 Springboard has been acting '*as an agent for change for the people and communities it serves*'.

As an organisation it strongly believes in the potential of every individual to learn, develop, grow and change. It promotes self responsibility and the notion of lifelong investment in learning.

Springboard is committed to its belief that *"socially and politically the pathways to an equitable and peaceful society can be achieved and underpinned, through supporting the development of young people into becoming full stakeholders in their communities. It is the young people who are our future and to direct it they must have a stake in it."*

This commitment to equality and participation derives from Springboard's values which are as follows:

- A person-centred ethos, responding positively to individual needs and geared to positive outcomes;
- A community-based empowerment approach responsive

to the needs, potential and 'dynamic' within our communities and society;

- A quality driven service monitored on a continuing basis to incorporate learning and flexibility of approach;
- An open style geared to promoting an appreciation of diversity;
- An innovatory and proactive approach which meets the changing needs of individuals and our communities.

Springboard expresses its values through enabling young people from Northern and Southern Ireland to meet and train, experience life and work in an international context together.

Springboard's Training Programme

Springboard is run by a Board that was developed as a partnership of community and public sector organisations. These include training, enterprise and community development agencies, along with the Training and Employment Agency and FAS, its Irish equivalent. Community representation reflects the grass roots experience of the target areas in Belfast and Tallaght, and the public sector provides potential linkages and experience of statutory provision. The partnership between Belfast and Tallaght started following IFI's initial contacts with local training and community groups in the early part of the 1990s, to establish a new initiative.

Springboard has delivered 45 training programmes since 1992 involving over 700 young people. Within West ►



Belfast trainees are recruited from the mainly nationalist/Catholic Falls and the mainly Loyalist/Protestant area of the Shankill. Trainees from Tallaght, a large estate to the west of Dublin city, are recruited on the same basis by Springboard's partner organisation, the Tallaght Partnership, a local organisation working with a range of individuals, groups, community, voluntary and statutory agencies.

Recruitment and access to the programme is open to unemployed people, aged 18 — 28, who wish to undertake training in specific work related areas. Programmes are advertised in local papers, but following the success of the programmes more young people are finding out about Springboard by word of mouth. Applicants for each programme have to undertake an interview to secure a place. Most groups consist of between 16 and 20 people, with a Group Leader. Programme recruitment is organised on an agreed proportionate basis. A quarter of all participants come from the Tallaght estate, and the remaining three quarters are drawn in equal numbers from the two main traditions in Belfast. Particular attention is paid to equity and diversity issues such as male/female, Protestant/Catholic, Belfast/Tallaght, to ensure recruitment to each programme has a balance of participants from different backgrounds.

Programme Models

Existing programme models include:

- Options — generic personal growth and work experience programme for unemployed young adults in their chosen specialism
- Skills — an accredited personal development and skills training programme, open to young people within a defined skill sector.

Each programme varies in length with most courses lasting between 18-20 weeks, although some may be longer or shorter.

The programmes have a three stage structure:

The first stage involves initial training in Belfast building co-operative relationships, self confidence and skills. Participants also start work on their goals and expectations in preparation for the second part of the programme. This provides the organisation the opportunity of identifying the types of placements that are required during the second phase. This part of the programme lasts about six weeks.

The second stage involves an international placement usually in the USA, Canada or Europe. These placements usually last about six or eight weeks and provide participants with an opportunity to train, gain practical work experience and learn about independent living and cultural diversity. Placements and local arrangements are undertaken in partnership with local contacts with links to employer, community and training organisations.

In the third and final stage back in Northern Ireland, individuals complete training and prepare future action plans over a two or four-week period.

To date Springboard has achieved excellent results for its trainees with 90% of participants employed or in further training/education.

The organisation is developing its goals in other ways, in particular in its commitment to young people. All Springboard's workers are young, with some being drawn from former graduates of the programme. A range of follow-up programmes have been initiated such as an Apprenticeship

Scheme and a Graduate Programme, to offer support and further opportunities to past participants of the programmes.

Springboard Group Member experiences

To find out more about the actual reality of the programme an interview was undertaken with seven young people who spoke openly and enthusiastically of their experiences. One was from Dublin, the rest from both nationalist and loyalist communities in West Belfast.

Some participants had learnt about the programme through an advertisement in the local press. Most however had learnt about the programme through word of mouth from friends. One young person recounted how he learnt through a friend whilst they were carrying a coffin at a funeral.

They had been on different programmes with different destinations, including Michigan, Toronto and Boston. Some of these programmes were general in their training targets whilst others were more specific. For example work/training was related to trainees' specific areas of interest such as retail and sales, tourism, community skills, working on drug prevention programmes, outdoor pursuits and leadership development. Where possible there was choice and alternatives on offer in the range of placements for participants, both within Northern Ireland and during the international part of the programme.

Each programme is broken into different blocks with the first block being based mainly in Belfast. Following recruitment there is a period where the group can get to know each other, including the Group Leader who will be an experienced Springboard employee.

Each group undertakes a residential which takes place early in the course to help break down barriers and develop team building. It was felt that the residential provided a good balance of training and activities, the latter including cycling, archery and caving.

Was the training useful?

"Yes, life skills, assertiveness and understanding cultural differences had real benefits on placements"

Work experiences were provided for participants within their own communities during the first part of the programme with local employers and community/voluntary groups. As many of the participants had not experienced employment, getting into the routine of working 9-5, was found to be useful. There was also the opportunity of hands-on experience organising events and work with volunteers.

The programme has a core commitment to cross community work which leads to contacts across communities and the opportunity to make warm relationships. During programmes, training components on reconciliation and mutual understanding centre around the participants' communities. Group members are encouraged to discuss the areas they live in and plan host visits for fellow members. These visits effectively undermine stereotypes and provoke animated discussions.

Speaking about their shared experiences they remarked on how everyone — no matter where they were from — visited friends in different communities — and not just for serious matters!!

One participant has a reputation for being a good baker so when groups visit her home,

"it's a cattle stampede for Mary's home made wheaten bread."

Another element of the programme that challenges stereotypes and lifts cultural blinkers is the cross border link between Belfast and Tallaght. Trainees from Belfast spend time in Dublin, although this is limited due to funding constraints. The Belfast participants felt that the experiences they had of seeing some of Dublin and its historical sites was interesting. There were opportunities to see and discuss different cultural symbols between the main Nationalist and Unionist traditions in Ireland.

For some participants who had never been to the south of Ireland staying in Tallaght with host families was also a useful and successful experience,

"they treated me like one of the fancily, it was brilliant"

With most of the course being Belfast based, the participants from Tallaght stay and live in Belfast, returning home at weekends and during placements.

This in itself was challenging as participants have to look after themselves and come to terms with living in a different environment and making new relationships.

Whether dealing with someone snoring, or the demands of the course, there is an emphasis on participants learning to live together and getting used to travelling outside their own communities.

With people from different backgrounds, experience and personalities some differences arose, which provided learning opportunities.

"During the residential the group was split into male and female. We had to learn how to look after ourselves with a limited budget in self catering chalets."

This gave participants the opportunity to suss out who they could get along with and how to cope with budgeting.

"there were eight of us living in the house, we blew all our money on sweets, then we were stuck with beans and toast."

The International Experience

Going to a new environment such as Toronto or Boston, with a different type of cultural and social experience is viewed by Springboard as providing a whole range of learning opportunities, which help to promote personal growth.

With an emphasis on training and employment the work setting provided both opportunity and challenge for participants. Not all placements were exactly what people had expected them to be or wanted, but all agreed that they were good, in the experiences and opportunities they provided.

Some placements provided very basic work skills training

"you had to learn to arrive on time, travel on your own, I had to travel an hour every morning and then travel that same route back to the apartment."

"it was frightening being somewhere strange"

Others had the luxury of having placements that were convenient,

"my placement was only two minutes around the corner"

These issues have a direct bearing on the cultural and life experiences of participants from close knit communities where the expectation is that you don't work, or that you don't go out of "your" area.

Participants felt they were really supported into the placements,

"we got interviews and we were taken to where you were to be on placement."

The placements were undertaken in a professional and supportive way, thus very few of the participants had problems or felt they had been exploited. Trainees are supported by local contacts working on behalf of Springboard and they also have mentors and the support of the Group Leader. Occasionally there were problems with accommodation, difficult work environments, hosts or employers. One case cited was of someone working six days a week from 6 am to 4 pm, in a restaurant,

"but he did like it and the hours were cut after a while."

Problems of this kind were dealt with by participants or through the support structure. Much more usual were reports of the positive experience gained and the opportunity of being able to develop work skills,

"one person got sales person of the month."

"I was given two weeks excellent training, then worked in a cabin at a summer camp with ten kids, then we went on a two week expedition by Lake Superior."

Again, the experiences that people faced in living in different environments, either with host families or independently, also provided an insight into life that was unique and different,

"my host family got busted for drugs, and their kids were from hell."

"my family left us alone for a week with a note that said feed the dog, they left the dog in the basement, you should have heard it, it was so aggressive."

Some people lived in flats making their own choice about flatmates

"you take a risk living with someone for two months."

Money was tight, so whilst everyone got by, it was hard to budget. Some people ran up phone bills because they were homesick.

There was also a problem about coming back as the change was another form of culture shock. There were some who felt disorientated or depressed at the end of the experience.

"it was like looking in... that we were back in it again it was so depressing, on the plane landing in Shannon, they were all from Belfast."

Outcomes from the Experience

Despite the recognition of the difficulties of returning to the realities of life in West Belfast or Tallaght, all the interview group stressed that they felt the experience was helpful or beneficial to them, in terms of the work experience, understanding and living in another cultural situation.

"Just the experience of living abroad, makes you understand that you have to have a positive outlook."

"Getting away from Northern Ireland you can look at the problems in a different way. -

"You find out things about yourself, become more independent."

"One person developed a relationship with a local person and is now living there."

As in any programme some people have maintained the relationships that have formed over time, developing

friendships not just with participants but with their families. Thus people are more mobile, more willing to cross over into the areas that previously they might not have felt comfortable in.

The group are keen to see the programme expanding taking in other areas and encouraging people, especially from Protestant/Loyalist areas, to join the programme.

"I don't know why more people don't go for a course like this, you are going to learn something and the whole course is a way of making friends."

"I learnt a lot about the field of work I chose."

"You become more accepting of people, of different points of view, you go to America or Toronto you may be one of the few white people in your area, or you may live in a gay community, the food will be different, where we lived there are 96 different ethnic groups."

Future Involvement with Springboard

Recognising the need to develop a support system for trainees returning back to their communities, a number of initiatives have been established which go way beyond the 'open door' or 'call in anytime' approach of some programmes.

Graduates of the programme have the opportunity of becoming re-involved with Springboard in a range of ways. For example this can be through the Apprenticeship scheme where past participants or graduates will shadow a group leader as a trainee.

This programme provides opportunities for graduates interested in Community/Youth work to work alongside a Group Leader for the duration of a programme.

They are involved in all aspects of the programme — recruitment, programme design, delivery of training, co-ordinating residentials and overseas supervision. It is planned that each co-worker will receive a training allowance to further their own development.

Graduates can also become members of the Graduate Committee. Membership is open to former participants of the programme and has the active support of the Programme Manager and staff. The group started in 1996, developing out of a strategic commitment to develop the participation of young people in the programme. The group feed into the Springboard structure in a number of different ways. Graduate Committee members are involved in staff training and contribute to programme feasibility and organisation. Another way is through their role in supporting trainees in the follow up part of the programme and by their involvement in a graduation event.

However, what may be more significant in terms of participation and empowerment is the intention of the organisation to facilitate graduate involvement and youth leadership at a strategic level. The implication of this is that three Graduate Committee members are elected to the Managerial Board of Springboard. This number will increase each year to the point where the organisation is run by young people for young people.

The Graduate Committee are presently supported in a limited way by funding from the main Springboard programme. However independent funding is being sought through a number of applications the group are making to funding agencies. Members of the Graduate Committee also

take on a range of activities such as marketing, publicity and recruitment, fund-raising and the production of their own newsletter.

The group has a learning focus based on people learning by doing — such as committee procedures and organising their own activities. One significant example of this was the group's first major initiative the 'Making a Difference' conference. Over 100 people attended what was a very special and successful event, organised for young people by young people. Held during a weekend at a local hotel, graduates from different Springboard training programmes discussed, debated and analysed their common ground, shared problems and dreams.

The Springboard organisation develops each year and one of the latest initiatives started in July 1997. Funded by PROTEUS, a European Union programme, eight graduates have been offered full employment for one year, within a variety of grass roots community organisations in West Belfast. New programme models, volunteering programme and a new initiative on citizenship and leadership linking in with organisations based in Hungary are also in development.

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