

## Creating Common Ground on the Welsh - English Border

The Common Ground Project is an EU Life Long Learning partnership designed to bring groups together from across Europe, sharing a common set of aims and objectives.

*“Partners will seek ‘Common Ground’ across the EU, bringing people together in social engagement and dialogue within and between diverse cultures. Working with learners locally and across Europe, many of them disadvantaged by poverty, displacement (refugee or migrant status), poor education and general social exclusion, partners will create activities in which host and migrant groups develop new social connections, focusing on both Europeans’ and non-Europeans’ ability to live together whatever their origins and social or educational levels, in activities that improve self esteem and the capacity to manage their lives effectively, to learn, to integrate and to be more active members of the local and European community.”*

For most of the partners in the project this situation was largely urban and involved people of very different culture, language & religion and who were also considerably poorer than the existing population.

In the English - Welsh Border the latest ‘wave’ of immigration, was considered rather the opposite of the actions of other partners.

This description outlines an attempt at developing community links within a rural area on the Welsh-English border, focused largely on a small town with a population of c.1,600 people.

This area has, in recent years has become a popular residence for many people of retirement age having a creative background and an interest in active lifestyles. They have settled in an area in which employment is centred on agriculture & forestry & increasingly tourism.

The project aimed to explore ways in which such ‘affluent’ newcomers could be sensitively linked to the existing population without engaging in the frequently experienced unwitting domination, by the newcomers, of existing groups and structures.

The following notes explain the rather surprising results - and offers a few thoughts and ideas regarding the processes required to develop such action within communities.

The project operated between September 2012 and July 2014.

The UK partner, 'Pathways: I.D' is a voluntary organisation & to develop the work a small team was established who took the lead in exploring the theme and developing actions.

In the first year the group used one of the new tourist developments as a means of engaging with people. The Bishop's Castle Walking Festival has become a very successful week, held in early June each year. The Pathways team created a group composed of older 'established' locals and some of the more recent 'enthusiastic newcomers'. They engaged in planning for the 2013 Festival - a process which included formal & informal meetings, supported by social occasions. The process was successful in assisting the development of new relationships within the local community.

During the work and as a result of 'Common Ground' conversations developed around the work, the Pathways team began to discover that there were rather more 'newcomers' and of a differing nature, than had been realised. Informal research (much conducted through very informal links and discussions with parents, literally, at the Primary School gate) uncovered the surprising fact that within the area there were people with origins from over 20 different countries. The figure, though never formally checked, was achieved simply through collected personal knowledge & experience of specific individuals.

Many of these new groups & individuals had precisely the same function as they would have had in more urban contexts - they were employed in health care and service sectors & low skilled (agriculturally related) industries. Members of other EU States were often employed in work that did not equate to their professional qualifications. There is also a tendency for these new residents to maintain close links with others sharing a common origin (even though that involves travel over a wide area) rather than develop relationships with the resisting population.

As a result of this discovery the Pathways volunteers decided to develop an informal and creative programme that would bring together as many as possible of these varied nationalities. 'Crafting a Common Ground' (craft workshop) was held in a local pub and plans were made for an exhibition at the Bishop's Castle Arts Festival that would publicise the positive gentle impact of the new residents.

Many of the actions that followed were comprised of individual contacts & discussions - never, as with most voluntary community related action, formally recorded - and support was given to activities arising through other issues - such as the tragic events in the Philippines.

An invitation to participate in the exhibition was distributed to many of the new

residents.

BISHOP'S  
CASTLE  
ARTS  
FESTIVAL

19 - 23<sup>RD</sup>  
FEBRUARY  
2014



### **Bishop's Castle: Centre Of The Universe 'Let's Face It'**

In November we tried some craft activities and shared ideas for the festival. We agreed to do something at the event in 2014. The ideas are based upon faces and spices from around the world.

We are in the Chai Shop, High Street to create art work using photos and spices. We will be there in the afternoons Thursday (20<sup>th</sup>), Friday (21<sup>st</sup>), Saturday (22<sup>nd</sup>) and Sunday (23<sup>rd</sup>) afternoons (2-5pm) building up 'a face' from photographs and spices and sharing stories as we go along.

#### **You are invited to join us.**

Bring along your photographs of yourself and family members and/or spices and see where they can be included. You can to view the work in progress at any time. Please bring along a copy of your favourite recipe to share – using your favourite spice?

Tara Paul at Chai Shop, Catherine Murphy at 11, New St (01588638795) and Bernard Edwards at Tan House, Church Street (01588638107) would welcome the chance to speak with you about this project – before, during and after.

A local Common Ground project by Pathways Inspirational Development & funded by the EU Grundtvig programme



[The results](#) were impressive.

Despite the success of the exhibition the Pathways team considered that they had not been successful in engaging as wide a range of people as expected. The initial discussions had been very positive but there was no involvement from most of those contacted.

## Conclusions:

1. There is always much more variety within any geographic or social-interest community than ever appears on the surface
2. Developing links with the less public aspect of any group takes time, effort and considerable patience.
  - A short term project such as Common Ground can probably only ever reveal some of what lies 'beneath the surface'.
3. 'Revealing' is a significant gain - without knowing that one does not know, it is impossible to advance knowledge or understanding.
4. Despite the difficulties, for those who at least attempt to develop a new idea (in this case create 'Common Ground') the learning is considerable
5. In this case, attitudes about the nature of the local community were radically changed amongst those to whom the 'revelation' occurred.
  - The impact on those people, active in many others aspects of community life, may be considerable.
  - The knowledge regarding the diverse nature of the local population will be carried into other contexts
6. Though the level of success during the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the project was not as great as desired or even at one stage, anticipated,
  - new activities occurred,
  - new relationships were developed
  - the project formed part of that slow and steady informal process of 'community enhancement' that has helped a small and seemingly insignificant Welsh Border town, gain the strength and confidence that is reflected in the title COTU: 'Centre of The Universe'

As a very particular result - Pathways is more closely engaged in the 2015 Arts Festival & will be promoting a concert.