

PSST!  
**PASS  
IT ON**

An **OPENUP** Initiative

# PROJECT REPORT



**OPENUP**  
An Open Up Initiative

**mind**  
For better  
mental health

**time to change**  
let's end mental health discrimination

**LOTTERY FUNDED**

## The concept:

The original idea for this project was to challenge stigma and discrimination by starting the process in education, providing young people with the tools and knowledge to be able to have a better understanding of mental health, how important it is to look after it, to challenge the media image vs reality and to then produce a magazine to “Pass It On” to others. The original idea was to have focus groups in 11 schools across Essex and then choosing a representative from each group which would then form an editorial team for the magazine. This would also help to mix up schools in a bid to link groups of young people who often become “enemies” with “rival” schools.

## The reality:

This project has had many ups and downs. The reality and what we were able to achieve was quite different from the original idea or at least a scaled down version which will still end in a magazine. As a firm believer that everything happens for a reason I think it ended up as it should but as a learning experience. As the project now, finally, comes to an end here are a few of the highs and lows of the whole experience including what we would do differently if the opportunity ever arises to do this project again (fingers crossed) and what was best left to fate.

Starting with the negatives - that way it ends on a positive...

**Problem: Meetings.** The first few meetings we had about this project were really helpful, although acted more as a steering group rather than an Action team and even a couple of those went off and took a part of our project doing it for themselves. These meetings were fairly helpful - although considering the cost involved I'm not sure they were the best use of our resources so that is definitely something I'd do differently next time. I don't think the project could be done with people who have other full-time jobs. Fitting people in and making sure everyone was free on the same day and time was quite a feat - and with little achievement in each meeting that was tangible (although great sound boarding) this could've been something better done via email - although I don't really like that kind of communication.

**Problem: Education System.** Our **BIGGEST** and most frustrating problem was getting access to schools. This was most frustrating when people said they could help, but after much patience, then chasing - discovering that in actual fact they couldn't. Everyone we spoke to thought it was a brilliant idea but then after going through their channels came back with a blank. This held up the process and we were behind our plan very quickly. It was really frustrating getting into schools but it was such a vital part of the project. It may have been easier to have contacted more scout groups or youth clubs, although they weren't very forthcoming either and I had such a clear vision of what this project should be that I stuck to my guns and insisted we waited for a break in the schools for as long as we could. I wouldn't change that - I think it worked far better in a school with a mixed array of young people. What I have since discovered is that getting into schools is an art

of it's own - one I am hoping to master more successfully in the future. It does take patience and relationship building.

I also think (although this is opinion only) that the thing that may have put schools off a little bit was the amount of work the project first appeared to need by the young people. Timing was also vital and our older group were taking their G.C.S.E's at the same time but did still manage to contribute because they were part of a mentoring group. I think this worked because the lady who ran this group had experience of mental ill-health through a family member so she was really keen.

We also managed to get a slightly younger age group than we had anticipated but this was because they were the year before doing their G.C.S.E's. Luckily the English teacher in the school also had experience of mental ill-health in her family and decided to take on our project instead of doing travel writing in her class.

### **SOLUTION:**

Plan the project around the school calendar and aim to start it at the beginning of a term but contact the school well in advance and not just via post or email. Ring and make appointment to see someone there.

### **Problem: Other departments linking too late**

Another problem that came to light close to the end of the project was the involvement of other school departments. The media studies group was going to design the layout for the magazine but then changed their mind because of some of the restrictions I had to stipulate for inclusive design, something everything we do has to meet.

**SOLUTION:** I think this would've worked better if the media studies group had been on board right from the start so that they understood these stipulations and also perhaps to have given them free reign on design and adapted the ideas for the finished piece. They didn't get involved until after Nikki Grahame came in though but this may well have just been because they weren't asked.

I had suggested originally that this be a project for media studies but English was just as good. I think there are so many links that there could've been more scope in the schools - some in media from one school then English in another, perhaps Art somewhere too then pulling all in.

### **Problem: Getting Work from students**

The work was done in the class while I was there but getting this to me was another matter. The students had to write their answers in their exercise books and then type them up at home and email them over to the teacher. This proved to be quite problematic. They had already done the work and unless you can touch type this could take a long time. I'd have been happy with photo copies of their books. We missed out on some great work because of this so it was the most disappointing problem.

Alec Hunter Humanities College was too focused on Nikki Grahame coming in so I had lots back after their interview with her - although as no one was taking notes this was often incorrect. I had lots of articles about this which is why I'm going to write it so that they are quotes from each otherwise it will end up as a condensed version of Nikki Grahames book.

The other problem with the work was that what we did get sent didn't have names to them. When I asked about this I was told that we weren't allowed to use their names because it was a school project - although it wasn't really as we are independent. Had the group been an editorial group in their own time this wouldn't have been a problem. The group of older students did put their names to what they produced and because they were meeting in their own time (and because the school hadn't raised it as an issue) this was okay.

**SOLUTION:** Now that we know this and had we known sooner, we could've perhaps issued the class with a letter home to their parents asking for permission for their child's name to be included with their piece of work.

I felt this was really a large part of this experience for the students that some will miss out on. I remember the first time I had something of mine published and it was amazing!

### **Problem: Getting it finished**

Layout now left to me. The work that we received all needed editing and the whole thing fell on my shoulders. I think I may well have gone into panic over this - and endings are not a strong point of mine. With my own health going down hill after some tragic news this then made it worse. The task was too big for me to see and kept being put off.

**SOLUTION:** Therapy and break into small parts.

# NOT ALL DOOM AND GLOOM...

Not all of this project has been doom and gloom, although there have been quite a few challenges that we didn't consider (although to be perfectly honest I just thought of the idea and gave it a go not really thinking we would get it). I think as a pilot project we learned so much about processes, the system, and ourselves. I found that I don't like endings very well and learned that finishing projects was less about goodbyes and more about opening new doors without leaving a cold draft behind while the last one lay open.

The best thing about this project has been working with young people and taking over the lessons was an amazing experience for both me and all of the team who went in to share their stories. I really enjoyed the lessons and the work that was produced in them was fantastic. What the students gained from these was also really important and not to be overlooked because of the end produce, the magazine. Meeting the visitors was the only thing the older students got to do because of exams and we also thought that they would be more mature to deal with the stories they would hear. The articles they wrote were also really good - although in some places just like the articles printed in papers, with some things wrong so did need to be edited. Can't expect them all to be established writers though. Some of the students really shone through for me and I'll remember some more than others. In fact after the first session (which I was extremely nervous for - it's one thing telling your story to a room full of adults. A room of teenagers was scary to begin with) one lad came over to me and told me he had Aspergers like my son. No one else knew. I asked him if he felt that people would understand him more if they knew and he said no - "it would be social suicide". What a shame for our society I thought.

The young people we worked with in the actual lessons were harder to engage at times (they were only 13 - 14) but they did do very well. This group didn't meet the visitors until after their research and article writing and was at the end of the project. I asked the group after if they felt this was better or whether they would've preferred to have met them first. This was quite personal to each student with some saying that they felt more able to ask questions and talk now that they knew more about mental health. Others felt it would've been nice to meet them first, then write about the subject. One thing is for sure - the opinions the groups had about the term "mental illness" certainly changed hugely once I admitted I had a mental health condition. One of the most used phrases was "you wouldn't know, miss".

One shocking statement I heard from a 17 year old was "what's mental health?". To get to that age without having heard of it or what it means, negatively or otherwise was rather worrying to me. Mental health is as important to look after as physical health is. Why aren't we talking more about this in schools already?

The reason I came up with the idea for this project was because for years we've been trying to challenge stigma with people who already are set in their opinions. Unless someone has experienced it for themselves why should they understand. When you are young you are like a sponge and you learn through experience or by seeing. This is what I wanted for them. It doesn't matter what you read about celebrities, or what the symptoms of an illness are. Unless you hear a personal story of someone's life and how they dealt with their challenges and turned them around, you won't learn what the reality is. You won't feel empathy and compassion from a list of symptoms. You can't see how your words can affect someone until you see their eyes and the journey they have been through.

I hope that this is what we have done with this project. We shared our shoes with some young people and let them walk in them for a while, over all the cobbled stones and cracks.

And once the magazine is completed we'll be able to pass those shoes on to another 10,000 pairs of feet. It may have taken a while but that will make it all worthwhile.