

Engaging with hard-to-reach groups is, after all, what tackling social exclusion is all about. But how do you reach the unreachable? **Heather Maitland** makes some suggestions.

Reaching the unreachable

The Government has set its agencies working with young people the target of reducing the proportion of 16 to 18 year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) by two percentage points by 2010. NEET young people are by definition hard to reach as they are not engaged with any part of the formal infrastructure. It reports that “the reductions [to date] in the proportion of NEET young people are the result of a wide range of organisations working effectively together to target the issue.” This multi-agency approach is adopted by most arts organisations that form partnerships with groups already in contact with NEET young people. But this means that arts organisations only work with young people already engaged in some way with the support system. Should they be targeting the genuinely unreachable instead of focusing on partnerships?

Connexions is the Government’s support service for young people aged 13 to 19 in England, although it is currently being replaced by a children’s trust in each local authority area. Their research indicates that hard-to-reach young people are best identified through referrals from partner organisations. These partners include schools, Youth Offending Teams, Social Services, Youth Service, ‘detached’ youth workers engaging with young people on their own territory and on their terms, and the voluntary sector and community groups. Self-referral and referral from peers are also important.² Local communities usually know exactly who the hard-to-reach young people are and where to find them. Connexions suggests talking to local faith centres, shop keepers, residents and tenants associations, parents groups, estate managers, community support officers, publicans and school staff.

Although Connexions has a database of every 13 to 19 year-old in England, research by the Carnegie Trust has shown that direct mail is neither cost effective nor certain to reach the targeted young people.³ The report recommends that going out to meet hard-to-reach young people on their own territory is best done alongside a youth worker the young people already know and who in turn understands them. They also suggest becoming a familiar face in community venues where young people hang out to begin to earn trust. Connexions points out that the young people you meet may belong to a larger group of similar young people and that these groups may meet other groups so your contact with them could snowball. They emphasise patience.

This is all sensible advice but takes time to implement. It’s not much help to the local authority arts officer I met yesterday who was asked in the last week of June to use his rural touring cinema scheme to provide diversionary activities in six villages to reduce crime rates in the school holidays that start on the 20th July.

There are drawbacks to partnership working. I



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talked to a group of Deaf people who had regularly attended performances at their local repertory theatre as part of an audience development project. They pointed out that the way the scheme was set up meant that they could only attend if the (hearing) organiser of their deaf club decided that it was their turn to get a ticket. They pointed out that this gatekeeper was denying them choice. They were happy to pay for their own tickets but didn’t have access to the information they needed. The solution was simple: to approach people through a partner organisation but then collect contact details for individuals and develop a relationship directly with them.

Many disabled people are full and active participants in society but others are hard to reach. Annie Delin points out that institutional culture can mean disabled and Deaf people can find it difficult to make choices between different experiences; that the limited perspectives of gatekeepers can mean that disabled and Deaf people don’t get the information sent to them; that limited educational opportunities may mean disabled and Deaf people find it difficult to read and understand the information that is available; and, above all, that disabled and Deaf people with no experience of the arts believe that it is not for them.⁴

Shape, the arts and disability organisation, has identified that the best ways to engage with hard-to-reach disabled and Deaf people are to use mass media that creates awareness and to give talks to

groups, societies and institutions such as day care centres so they can persuade face to face. But that’s not enough. Their research identified significant numbers of people who joined Shape Tickets but never actually went to an event. The practical problems and high levels of anxiety involved in this very new experience were too big to overcome. Now Shape has set up an advocacy network so that old hands can give newcomers the advice and support they need.

Again, partnerships with other organisations are important. But what if the people you want to engage with don’t have any distinguishing characteristics that enable you to spot them? Playwrights’ Studio, Scotland aims to develop the quality of new plays, increase the number of new plays produced and identify new talent. They are very good at finding people who have expressed an interest in writing for the stage and developing strong relationships with them. They also want to find writers who have not yet considered writing plays and people interested in theatre who have not yet considered writing at all. They could be almost anyone. Playwrights’ Studio doesn’t have the resources to raise its profile to make sure that almost everyone in Scotland is aware they exist. The team has an important resource, though – they know the people they currently work with, very well indeed.

By tracing back the development of their existing members, they can spot things that they have had in common in the past. They may have completed a substantial creative writing course, perhaps at a university; they were members of a student drama group; they were very active in an amateur theatre group; they have been frequent attenders of contemporary drama and so on. Playwrights’ Studio does have the resources to raise awareness among people at a much earlier stage before they disperse and become invisible. It means communicating with more people, only a small proportion of whom may become interested in writing for live performance, but because they are in groups it is easier and cheaper.

Again, partnerships with groups and organisations outside the arts is the key. ■
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¹ www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/ete/neet consulted 4/7/2007

² Involving Hard to Reach Young People in the Connexions Service: guidance for practitioners and Connexions Partnerships, (Connexions and Crime Concern), p 4

³ Finding the Missing, Carnegie Trust, National Youth Agency and NIACE, 1998

⁴ Annie Delin, Disability in Context, (Resource, 2003) part of the Resource Disability Portfolio downloadable from www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets//D/dis_guide01_pdf_6507.pdf

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