

DALSTON CHILDREN'S CENTRE

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INTRODUCTION

Since the last annual general meeting, the Centre has expanded, changed, developed - it's difficult to write an annual report as each month has been different, has included more activities and more problems. However, the main area of anguish has remained pretty constant - premises. More about this later.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- July 1981 Annual General Meeting
Helen replaces Brad as part-time co-ordinator
Summer Playscheme
- August 1981 Annual Closure
- September. to November 1981 Getting 80 Sandringham Road together
- October 1981 Partnership agree to fund a 2nd worker
- November 1981 Ongoing activities start at 80.
Half-term playscheme
- December 1981 Under-fives playscheme
Christmas party
- January 1982 Manpower Services CEP scheme approved
- April 1982 Nina starts working
- May 1982 Liz Manju and Dee start work (CEP scheme)
- July 1982 Carol, Annette and Ingrid start (CEP)
D of E agree we can spend £93,000 to
buy and convert 68 Sandringham Road
Hackney Borough Council, agree that
112 Greenwood Road be available as
temporary premises.



Manpower Services Community Enterprise Programme

In January 1982, we received approval to be the sponsors of this programme. Manpower Services fund the wages of 6 full-time workers - 2 for under-fives; 2 for over-fives; an admin/outreach person and a supervisor. It also provides some running costs. The workers can be employed for one year only and they have to have been unemployed for a year previously - it's a scheme to reduce the unemployment figures. The workers are supposed to receive training, which presumably is to compensate them for the low wages they receive.

We hope to find the funding to continue to employ these workers at the end of the scheme, but of course, there's no certainty of this.

The scheme also involves a lot of administration and book-keeping and certain other constraints. On the other hand, it has enabled the Centre to expand and we are committed to trying to improve the working conditions of the workers as far as possible.

UNDER-FIVES

LIZ: "The under-fives part of the Dalston Children's Centre is far more than just a mothers and toddlers club or a playgroup. It is somewhere for mothers with children up to five years to go to as often as they wish, once a week or every day. The Centre is open Monday to Friday 10am to 2pm and Saturday from 10am to 1pm. We hope that the children provides a relaxed atmosphere for the children to play in and for the mothers to get to know one another.

Our average attendance is about 15 children per day and our facilities are two rooms with a garden. The children can do any number of things - painting, printing, glueing, sticking, and have lego, jigsaws, playdough, sand, water and also stories and musical instruments.

We also try to go on outings once a month at least - this year we have gone to the seaside which was a cold, windy day but which we all enjoyed. We've visited the zoo, gone to the baby-bounce and swimming; we've visited the Indian exhibition, and both the local farm and the holloway farm. Also someone from Dalston Library comes once a fortnight and reads stories to the children; also we go to Dalston Library with the children to borrow toys.

I think that the under-fives is a huge success and look forward to the next year.

MANJU: " I really enjoy our sessions with mothers and children - it is so nice to see how children play together. It brings together mothers and children from different backgrounds, cultures, problems. It just shows that

mothers too need a place where they can come away from their own environment, where they are surrounded by constant reminders of household chores."



Rosemary de

Rosemary who is a mother using the Centre drew the picture on the page before.

Karen, another user, says, " I live just down the road and have four children. I come to the Centre because Kevin gets bored at home, there's no company for him there during the day. It's just somewhere different for him to go, we get out of our kitchen for a while; you can have a cup of coffee and a natter. The workers are friendly and you come into a nice relaxed atmosphere - most of the time! What would I do without the Centre? Well, what would I do? Where would I go, where would I take Kevin on a rainy morning when he's drivning me beserk? You can't visit your friends every morning."

Susan has a 19 months daughter called Lauren. " I started coming here last week. I saw everyone coming in all the time and a bit about it in the Hackney Gazette so I thought I'd come and see what it was like. I think it's goo here really, it's somewhere for Lauren to go, we haven't any family in the area so we're just stuck at home all the time. I just live a few doors away, so it's easy and near for me to come. "

AFTER-SCHOOL CLUB

In September Ingrid and Annette will be running a daily after-school club for school-age children. This programme is being planned in more detail now.

UNDER-FIVES DANCE

During the year we have run several sessions of dance for under-fives - we have employed different sessional workers out of our running costs. We think dance important because it's nice for children to learn to use their bodies in creative ways, and especially for boys, it's nice to have physical activities that are away from traditional boys areas.



The classes have, in general, been well-attended; and it has been nice to have had visitors from other nurseries and play-groups.

There have been problems, mainly with premises. The classes have to be in St Mark's Church Hall, which isn't particularly suitable. The New Hall would be nicer, as the floor is better and the room looks out onto the garden; however this hall isn't available for use by children. The classes have now stopped until September. Several parents have asked us to run classes for older children on Saturday mornings and we hope to be able to do that in the autumn.

UNDER-FIVES THEATRE

GLAA gave us a grant to run an under-fives theatre season. Again, most of the shows were in the Church Hall and again a lot of nurseries and playgroups came along. Some performances were outstanding, some embarrassing. In particular, we had a Judy and Punch show, which most women in the audience found very offensive. We now feel that even if the performer says there is no violence to women in the show, the whole story of Judy and Punch is so violence-orientated that it's best if we don't show it.

One show was very exciting - TheatreKit's "In one ear...." They blew up a huge inflatable "brain" that children could actually walk into - each section represented a part of the brain and activities especially designed for children with disabilities took place inside. It was amazing to see how this company worked in a flexible manner, adjusting their work to the different children whom we invited - from an ordinary nursery, the Huddleston Centre for Handicapped Children, Ickborough Special School and an ordinary Primary School.

GLAA have now renewed our theatre grant and we shall be putting on shows now about every three weeks. We are trying to find shows which are consciously anti-racist, anti-sexist or dealing with other important issues. We've discovered a great lack of performances which meet our criteria and would welcome help in finding some!

TheatreKit:
17.3.82.



SATURDAY MORNING DROP-IN SESSIONS

Out of our running costs and the additional money made available before Nina was appointed, we run Saturday morning sessions for children up to the age of 9. For a time, we employed musicians to do music with the children too. We now find, however, that the majority of the children who use the Centre on Saturday mornings are aged under five. It's clear that a lot of mothers would like to be able to leave their children while they do their week-end shopping down the market. It's a pity we really can't offer this facility because our premises are too small and we haven't enough money to employ enough sessional workers.

OTHER CLASSES FOR SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Using our running costs and the additional money made available before the appointment of Nina, we have run series of classes and courses for school-age children. Music, yoga, juggling and acrobatics and photography are examples. Again, the problem has been lack of money to employ sessional workers on a long-term basis and lack of premises.

In September, hopefully we shall be able to incorporate special activities of these sorts with the after-school club.

GIRLS' NIGHT

We financed this series with money made available before the appointment of Nina. Women from Lenthall Road worked on the sessions, Becky organised them, made a lot of contacts, Lynne drove - thank you Becky and Harriet and Sue and Lynne. They write about the nights on the next page, but one point they don't mention is the fact that we felt it was very important to provide transport home after the sessions, taking into account how unsafe the streets are for women of all ages. We used Hackney Under-fives mini bus and only had to pay for petrol and the driver, and yet that of course increased quite dramatically our budget for the sessions.

GIRLS
NIGHTS
ARE
GR
8



GIRLSNIGHTS

The girls nights began over three months ago. We organised activities-based sessions one evening a week, aimed at young women 10 - 15 years old. We wanted to give them the space to hang around and do what they wanted and also the opportunity to do a variety of activities. The activities ranged from disco-dancing to juggling and self-defence, and we went on a few outings e.g. kiteflying in Hampstead Heath and to see a play by young women at Clissold Park School.

There was alot of response to the sessions and some nights there was an attendance of about 20. Throughout the sessions the young women said that they appreciated the atmosphere. We felt that it was not necessarily the activities that were so important, but the feeling there was because the group was all women...

'The boys would think you were mad if you messed around like this at the club.' - Jeanette.

We had problems with premises as none were ideal. We used 80 Sandringham Road, St. Marks Church Hall and Centreprise, but each had its drawbacks. We felt that we needed more space - ideally two rooms. One where young women could come to talk and listen to records and another for those wanting to do specific activities. It also didn't help having to move around so much and it never felt as if it was our room to have as we wanted.

Unfortunately money has run out. We are registered with the Youth Office as a club, and we will be applying for sessional hours in September and making applications for equipment.

COURSES FOR WOMEN

We are a Centre for Children. And yet, you can't talk about the needs of children without thinking about the people who are responsible for children - which is mainly women. We want to be able to provide space for women to be without their children for a while; and we want to be able to provide activities that otherwise would be difficult for women with children to get to. Hackney Adult Education have financed several courses for women - women and health, household repairs, photography, alternative health for women, self-defence and movement/relaxation. Some of these classes have had to close because not enough women enrolled. We are unsure why this happens; we only arrange classes that women have said they want. Maybe some of the reason is that some courses have been very short - six weeks. If you miss the first couple for some reason, the course is almost

half-finished and it may not seem worthwhile to attend.

Carol from the alternative health course writes, " We've met regularly on Wednesday evenings to discuss alternative approaches to health. We've had sessions on hypnosis, acupuncture, homeopathy, intuitive massage, shiatzu massage, alexander technique, aromatherapy, bachremedies.. We've worked with a mixture of teaching, discussion and sometimes, practical sessions and have tried to find ways of integrating what we've learnt into our own lives and our childrens. Central to our approach has been the knowlege that it's ourselves who do the healing and we've looked at how different therapiee can actually help this healing process. We've contrasted this with the approach of straight medecine and have relied a lot on our own experiences and knowlege about ourselves."

Anna writes about photography, " The idea for the Centre's darkroom grew out of my own sense of frustration at the lack of facilities for adults caring for young children and from conversations with other women who had similar feelings.

The long-term aim is to have a permanent darkroom as part of a permanent Children's Centre which will be easily available for different groups to use, i. e. adults who are looking after young chil during the day whilst their children use the crache, older children and their adults could use it a ter school. It could also be used for specific projects like book-making workshops, as an activity on playschemes and for printing publicity for the Centre. The aim is to have a users group who will take resgonsability for the darkroom on certain days, in conjunctio with open workshops so it will always be accessible to new people.

The present temporary darkroom has been set up at 9a Sandringham Road with the aid of a grant from Partnership Underspend. So far it has been used for playschems, and for bookmaking workshops. Also since February, I have been running workshops once a week in basic darkroom techniques. The workshops have been quite successful with about 15 women enrolled this term. Some women come occasionally to print particular pictures they want, others come to build up their printing skill. The children are able to use 80 Sandringham Road as a crache. "

We'd particularly like to help Maureen Taylor from Hackney Adult Education for all her help; she's been incredibly patient, warm, organised and support of us.

LESBIAN MOTHERS

We organised a half-day meeting for lesbian mothers and their children in May. Carol writes, " We wanted to discuss what we'd like for ourselves



and our children. Lesbians face the oppression of all women in very direct and brutal ways. To be a lesbian is to risk losing custody of children and to face contempt as well as physical attacks. While we may be out with our friends, many of us feel we have to hide our lesbianism at our children's school, from neighbours, with doctors and other professionals. Following the meeting, we have organised a summer holiday for lesbians and children at a women's holiday home in Wales. We also hope to have regular socials for lesbians and our children when we have premises with more space for this. "

PLAYSCHEMES

We ran a playscheme for four weeks last summer, for two weeks at Easter, for a few days at half-term and for under-fives at Christmas Easter. There will be a three-week scheme this summer. The schemes (we call them "playscreams") are always well-attended and it's clear we meet a very obvious need. Particular thanks to Val for all her help. I know it sounds boring, but the biggest problem again is premises - we have to run the schemes in the Church Hall, which is very expensive; there is no storage; we have to clear up at the end of every day; there is no outside space for games, picnics and so on; it's also difficult to make such a large space inviting. We hope that in the future, other suitable premises will become available.

We've tried to make sure that we work against sexism and racism during the schemes - for example, we don't want to encourage the girls to be "nurses" and the boys "warriors" when acting out plays (which is what did happen once, unfortunately) We employ women workers now, so that boys can see that women can arrange all sorts of activities, not just traditional feminine ones.

We have tried to ensure that sessional workers employed as play leaders have been involved in the planning of schemes; and we try and have regular meetings to discuss how things are going. We need to learn from our experiences; we don't want to have a split between those who "organise" and those who "do" the work.

photogram
done
during
Easter 82
playscheme.



PRACTICAL DETAILS

1. Workers

We are now 8 workers and we also employ some sessional workers. We've grown quickly and we are still sorting out how we all communicate information and work in a supportive, creative way. One of the problems again is premise the office where Nina, Helen, Dee and Carol work is down the road from the other workers and this geography emphasises the difference between the women who work with children and those who work with typewriters and grant application forms. Another problem is that we are funded from different sources; we don't all receive the same salaries; the CEP workers have, for Manpower Services, to work in a hierarchical way. Another problem is how can you involve sessional workers in decision-making? We have workers meetings every Thursday afternoon - can you expect a worker to be paid for only one hour a week to attend a weekly three-hour meeting? We have a minutes book and sessional workers are invited to the meetings; we're not sure how else we can improve the situation, but we are talking. We aim to discuss not only organisation, but also the politics behind what we do and why. For example, we are very critical of the views that see some mothers as "inadequate" and instead we believe it's the world outside, its values, prejudices, material disadvantages etc that are at fault. We try to integrate our feminist politics with all our work.

Our area has a high proportion of afro-caribbean, and asian residents and we believe it's important that a high proportion of our workers are black so that we can be, as a whole, responsive to issues concerning our lives like racism sexism etc.

2. Volunteers and placements

This year, Shona, a full-time student was on placement with us for a year. She was doing research into women's needs in the area. She helped us a lot - was responsible for running an under-fives session a week and spent a lot of talking to mothers and other users of the Centre. Unfortunately, for personal reasons she was unable to complete her year with us.

Annette has helped us regularly on Saturday mornings as part of her Duke of Edinburgh's award. Barbara has started to help with the under-fives on Wednesday mornings.

2 other placements from Hackney College proved less successful. It became clear that we are not in a position to be able to supervise students who need a lot of support and who are not used to working independently.

But we are always pleased when people offer to help - we need to meet them to discuss the aims of the Centre and to define precisely the areas of work we need help with. One area particularly we need help with now is drivers - if anyone is prepared to drive mini-buses with us, we'd be pleased to hear from them.

Order going to All Day!!!

Clowning Day

19

Welcome to
M, W, T, T, F, S, S

For 5-16 year olds.

Face painting
Video - make your own Video Films.

19

TUE 13

Kite making
crafts

games

outing to Leisure Centre 3op

MINIBUS

20

Visit to Freight liners City Farm.

Canoeing.

Darkroom fun.

21

Woodworking.

Print your own T-shirt, cards, pictures.

13-23 APRIL.

THURS 15

Trip to Science Museum
Tip to 2op

SCHEMERY

10-4 p.m

badge making

Cooking

22

Volunteers and Parents

Welcome

13-14-15 April

closed for 16-17-18

reopens 19 - 23 April

Bring packed lunch every day, if you want DISCO

FR 23

Us and the Community

We are in contact with a lot of other local organisations and voluntary groups. We've received a lot of help and encouragement from Hackney Under-Fives, Hackney Play Association Hackney Community Action and so on. We're also in contact with the local schools and nurseries.

A lot of very local people use the Centre; we've noticed that for certain activities, people have come from further afield and we need to discuss this matter further - do we only let people in through the door if they have a Dalston address?

We know the mothers of the under-fives who use the Centre - we are less in touch with the parents of older children. Hopefully this will be remedied when Ingrid, Carol and Annette start their club.

We want people who use the Centre to be more involved in the decision-making. We are drawing up a users procedure so that if a child or a parent is dissatisfied about anything, they know exactly who to contact about it and how to try and get it sorted out. Meetings are often alienating - we need to find new ways of including users in the decision-making processes, within the framework of our aims.

In addition to organising activities ourselves, we want the Centre to be used as a resource by other groups who fit within our aims; we'd like to hear from groups or individuals who would like our support in doing this.

Premises

This has been the major area of concern this year. Briefly:-

New Islington and Hackney Housing Association let us have a short-life licence on 80 Sandringham Road. We've been sharing the property with SAHARA which has not been without problems. The space was very small; we didn't have hot water; no toilets on our floor; the garden was full of rubbish for much of the year, and anyway, there wasn't direct access. Nevertheless it did mean that there was a space for our children's activities. The licence ran out earlier this year; we have been persuading New Islington and Hackney to extend it ever since which they have done several times - many, many thanks.

The shop in Sandringham Road offered by Hackney Borough Council as our permanent premises proved impossible - works were estimated to be very costly and the available space would have been too small.

We therefore decided to look for a property and apply for the money to buy and convert it ourselves. We found 68 Sandringham Road, had it surveyed and plans



drawn up and costed. Hackney agreed the money should be made available; it had to be cleared with the Department of the Environment. They took months and months to decide.

By June 1982, we were frantic with worry - still no news from the D of E; licence running out at the end of July - literally nowhere for us to go.

We took the decision to stop all other non-urgent office work and spend the time campaigning for temporary premises and we all worked incredibly hard on this.

Hackney Borough Council has now offered 112 Greenwood Road as our temporary premises and made grants available for us to do essential conversion work. Thank you. It should be ready at the beginning of September.

Meanwhile the D of E finally made up their minds and agreed to grant us £93,000. We were euphoric. But that didn't last - shortly after, we discovered that 68 had just been sold. We had been told that we were not allowed to negotiate for the purchase ourselves; the borough valuer who should have done it had not been informed that the house was on the open market. We are dismayed by the inefficiency of Council officials on this matter; it seems however that we can still use the money to buy somewhere else, although this still needs confirmation in writing.

These are the facts - they don't describe how demoralising it has been for the workers and users of the Centre. What was the point of thinking about what activities we wanted to organise when we weren't sure whether we'd be out on the street next month? Time and time again, we've been blocked by lack of premises. It's heartbreaking to imagine what the Centre could have been doing now if we'd been able to lavish the energy on it that has gone into hassling about premises.

It seems now however that the pressure is off, at least for a while. We have somewhere to go next month, we have money for permanent premises. We'd like to thank all those people who helped us through this nerve-racking time in particular, Marilyn Lowi, Brian Weller and Martin Whitfield.

Funding £

We have received financial support from the following:-

- Hackney Borough Council
- Hackney Adult Education
- GLC
- GLAA
- Partnership
- MSC
- Sainsbury's
- Marke and Spencers

We'd like to thank them.

We're applying for charitable status at the moment.

Running costs will no doubt increase when we get into our larger building; this will mean that we will be able to employ fewer seasonal workers.

We are making further grant applications at the moment - what we need more than anything is long-term salary funding; but we also need money for books, a washing machine, fridge, drier, tools, nice furniture, toys



CONCLUSION

We know that the Centre helps to meet a great need in the area. We have so many ideas about things we'd like to do over the next year. We know we will not be able to do all of them; we know we'll never be able to do more than scratch at the surface of all the needs in the area especially at a time when savage cuts and inflation mean that bad housing, lack of childcare provision, a poor health service, unemployment etc etc etc put intolerable strains on most people who live around here. We strongly believe that people should have a say in what is provided for them and that they have a right to a decent life. We are a voluntary organisation; we don't want to be providing, at low cost, a sop to what people really want and need.

Over the next year, our activities are still going to be limited by lack of proper premises and lack of proper funding; but in the meantime, we are building up a great deal of knowledge, a lot of contacts, a much better understanding of how our Centre will be in the future.

WORKERS AT THE CENTRE

- Annette Sylvester
- Carol Jones
- Dee Adams
- Elizabeth Khan
- Helen Brown
- Ingrid Pollard
- Manju Mukherjee
- Nina Nissen

MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

- Anne Thorne
- Rad Kress
- Carol Ackroyd
- Jilly Sharpe
- Sandra Shears



It would be impossible to list all the people who have helped us and worked with us this year; we have mentioned some during the rest of this report, but would like to thank them all and the following specially here:-

- Carla, Anne, Susy, Kathy, Hazel, Polly, Carrie, Barbara, Annette, Lesley, John, Folo, Juan, Fish, Khris, Lesley, Elaine

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