

APPG Nursery schools and nursery classes 10 Oct 2-4pm committee room 14

Steve Wyler

My background

- *Not* in the education sector
- Community development and social enterprise. Ran Locality. Chair of Community Links (Newham, Early Action Task Force).
- Better Way, a Carnegie UK Trust initiative – network of social activists
- Panel member inquiry into future of civil society.

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I want to start with a well-known community development principle, which is this: Never do anything for people that they can do for themselves.

What lies behind this principle is the simple but profound insight that people, given the right conditions and sometimes a bit of support, *can* do a great deal for themselves. That it is a grave mistake to suppose that in the poorest communities and in families which are struggling there is no capability, no insight and no solutions, no potential to act to make things better.

And that takes us to another useful community development principle: that it is also a grave mistake to focus simply on problems and weaknesses. So much better to start with strengths and aspirations.

All of this I am sure is very familiar to all of you. But those simple ideas: ‘Never do anything for people that they can do for themselves’, and ‘Build on strengths not weaknesses’, do seem to me to have profound consequences for the debates about the future of the public services we most cherish.

And clearly there is a great deal to be cherished about the nursery schools movement. As you all know better than me 60% of maintained nursery schools are rated as outstanding by Ofsted, and perform just as well in poor areas as in affluent ones.

And I know from my own experience working with community organisations across the country that there are also outstanding examples of nursery schools run by local charities and social enterprises, and they too need to be cherished. I am thinking of places where there is little money around, where public services are struggling and sometimes failing, and where the private sector has long retreated.

I’ll give you just one example, in Croxteth in Liverpool. The Alt Valley Community Trust started in 1983 when residents of a vast council estate occupied the only secondary school, which the council had decided to close, and started running their own classes there. After a few years the council reinstated the school, but the residents now had the bit between their teeth and went on to achieve much else. They now run an extraordinary range of activities including a Communiversity, a Creative Campus, the North Liverpool Community College, with adult education classes, skills training, as well as a community run library, community

run leisure centre and sports and well-being centre, and an enterprise hub for start-up businesses. Two years ago they set up their own community-run nursery, opened by Ken Dodd of all people. And alongside the nursery the Trust runs nursery care apprenticeships, offering placements at their new nursery, as part of its programmes to build the skills of its community.

This way of working depends highly on collaboration, with the local council, with local schools, with other voluntary agencies. In Croxteth the Community Trust brings money into their community, grant finance and social investment and trading income, and they keep it circulating there. The nursery school is not a separate enterprise, it is part of a wider effort, a local micro environment dedicated to the prosperity and well-being of the community.

Above all it is local residents in control – making good things happen on their own terms, and with local people as the work force, as learners and apprentices, as users of the services, as volunteers, as the management board. In effect a modern form of mutual aid. And a good example of the principles I started with – never do things for people they can do for themselves, build on strengths not weaknesses.

As I mentioned I am very interested in what the future might hold for civil society, and in particular how we might shape that future. I'm aware of the truism that the future is already here, but it is on the margins. So looking forward, it seems to me that our challenge is to bring the future we want to see from the margins to centre stage.

So, I'm thinking about the wonderful maintained nursery schools, diminishing in numbers despite their educational excellence and their ability to work with people facing the greatest levels of disadvantage. And I'm also thinking about the best voluntary sector and social enterprise models like the Alt Valley Trust in Croxteth, and in particular their 'whole community' approach to public services, their entrepreneurial flair, their spirit of mutual aid, continually 'igniting the impulse to act'. Can we imagine a future where the prevailing nursery school model contains the best elements of both? And if so what do we need to do to make that happen?

You are the country's experts on nursery schools – I am sure the answers lie in this very room.