

'I guess you could call what we do "socially responsible Monopoly".'

At first, co-founder and coordinator Carl Ditchburn's description of Community Campus '87 may seem a little odd.

Because while that most capitalist of board games champions and celebrates economic domination by a single entity, the reverse is true at the Teesside based voluntary housing group, where the aim of the game is all about supporting the development and life skills of as many individuals as possible.

Formed in 1987, Community Campus was created in response to the housing crisis facing people aged 16 to 24 in Cleveland and other parts of northeast England. A group of young professionals, including Mr Ditchburn and fellow co-founder Simon Virth, had become disenchanted while working in the social welfare and housing sectors.

Dismayed by what they perceived as 'gaping holes'

in the welfare safety net, but buoyed by the region's emerging cooperative sector, the group decided to start out on their own. And, in the enterprising spirit of Monopoly, the voluntary housing group has gone from offering its first supported tenancy to four homeless people in 1988 to housing more than 5,000 people over the years, as well as developing a trading arm and a range of projects in resettlement, personal development and training and skills.

Since leasing its first empty property from Middlesbrough Council in 1988, Community Campus has continued to receive support from the local authority, including financially through its Community Chest fund.

'When we got our first house, we got builders in to renovate it,' explains Mr Ditchburn. 'That turned into a bit of a nightmare with delays and other issues but it gave us the germ of an idea – get the people we are rehousing and supporting to do it themselves. Obviously, we use

MIDDLESBROUGH COMMUNITY



Below: a young person helped by Community Campus learns painting and decorating skills

sub-contractors for gas and electric work but the kids do everything else now.'

Young people can access the key skills project, the property renovation scheme, from a variety of entry points such as a training placement, via New Deal, at a voluntary level or through pupil work experience schemes run by learning and skills councils, Learn2Work or local schools.

It means a homeless youngster who turns to Community Campus for help and advice can find themselves working as a joiner or a labourer or painting and plastering. Manual skills can be picked up along with the keys to a rented property and it is this extra package of support that Mr Ditchburn says has led to the organisation's tagline of 'More than just a roof'. 'It's a culture of self-help and self-discipline structured around training courses and support,' he explains. 'It's planting that seed in people's heads that they can be something else.'

It is also what has led to their 'socially responsible

'Credit to the council,' he says, 'they took the risk with us. When we said we wanted to take over Heaven they told us to come back with a business plan, which we did.'

Adorned with murals created by its service users, the Heaven building provides office accommodation, workshop and drop-in facilities and life skills and learning resources for service users facing all sorts of different issues and problems. 'Many of the people we work with have very chaotic lives and many are spiralling down,' says Mr Ditchburn. 'Unfortunately we can't catch everybody. A lot of young people today have a carer role so when they're not in school they could be looking after mum, for example, and that's a lot of pressure. The availability of cheap alcohol is the biggest problem we see now – ten years ago it was drugs – but we are also seeing an increase in mental health and social care issues affecting the young people we work with.'

'Housing might be the main issue but once they start talking, you find out the other stuff that's going on from budgeting problems to family relationships.'

'We conduct a survey every year and ask people to rank what we do in terms of importance. Benefits advice is always top, then housing and then a sense of belonging which highlights the issue of social isolation. Coming here and just having a chat in the kitchen gives these young people something that is obviously not being fulfilled elsewhere.'

A link-up with local schools has seen a steady stream of excluded youngsters coming to Community Campus as part of an alternative curriculum.

Says Mr Ditchburn: 'They may not be responding in the classroom, but give them a wall and a sledgehammer and they're off!'

Learning placement officer Dave Hall agrees. It is the 'hands-on rather than classroom experience' that appeals to pupils, he believes. 'They might not know what they want to do, but know they want to work in construction,' he says. 'We can usually point them in the right direction. Stockton and Hartlepool colleges pop out to the site to vet what the lads are doing.'

'We also have young people referred to our Neet project by the probation service, rehabilitation services and job centres. A lot of contracts come through the council, too.'

Just across town, Community Campus has used a capital loan from the Futurebuilders investment programme to purchase a new property at Spring Street and labourers and plasterers from the project are on site. Once finished, the empty house will become two flats for tenants who have previously struggled to secure housing and the future residents will be able to access a resettlement package from Community Campus tailored to their individual needs and based on their ability to manage a tenancy, cope with independent living and resettle into the local community.

Along with the standard renovations such as plastering walls and installing fixtures and fittings, the team at Spring Street are also making a number of modifications including insulating the property and reducing the height of the ceilings in each room. Explains Mr Ditchburn: 'Fuel poverty is a real issue. Most of our houses are double-glazed and have central heating but affordability issues mean that often our tenants can't afford to switch their radiators on.'

'If you consider someone is on benefits of £42 a week and out of that they have to pay a bit towards rent, food,

CAMPUS: SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE MONOPOLY

It's been offering disadvantaged people a home, a trade and a job for more than 20 years. **Jill Theobald** visits an organisation in Middlesbrough that's still living up to its slogan 'more than just a roof'

Monopoly' tag, not that Mr Ditchburn is overly keen on branding and pigeonholes. 'We've been doing what we do for over 20 years,' he says. 'It was called community enterprise, it's now called social enterprise. Taking over buildings from the council is asset transfer.'

'It's all just another label – but whatever label we're currently working under, it's what gets us up in the morning.'

'Politicians have started talking about mutualism and people having a sense of ownership of the places they work for. We have former service users who are now well-rounded adults returning to teach and give talks four or five years after they left us.'

Today, the key skills project employs ten people, all of whom are previous trainees or volunteers and who now also provide a range of building and construction services to customers largely within voluntary and community organisations and local government.

In 2000 Community Campus purchased its current headquarters – the former three-storey Heaven nightclub in central Stockton. The takeover of the then-derelict venue was a product of the organisation's 'can-do' attitude as well as a sign of a local authority willing to take chances, according to Mr Ditchburn.



water rates, a mobile phone – the money for energy and heating soon goes. That's one of the reasons we started offering evening drop-in sessions at Heaven so our tenants can come and get warm for a few hours and listen to a demonstration or watch a presentation.'

Once finished, Mr Ditchburn says, the new-look house on Spring Street will be the latest addition to join Community Campus' portfolio of 'quality accommodation'.

Middlesbrough based support manager Simon Virth echoes his colleague's view of the high standards and condition of their properties. Based at the organisation's St Mary's Centre headquarters in Middlesbrough – a smaller hub but with similar office and drop-in functions to Heaven – he says: 'I would live in 98% of our properties and the other 2% we're working on improving.'

Describing Community Campus and its services as 'housing support with a youth work twist', he, like Mr Ditchburn, also credits much of the organisation's strength to its 'open door policy' and focus on involvement and engagement.

'We have had three ex-clients on the board here for over a decade,' he says. 'They will always ask the relevant questions about rent levels and property conditions as they are really rooted in the issues that affect young people because of their experiences. Young people don't always get the access that we can offer. In the last quarter we have worked with 72 young people and every one of them has had access to me if they wanted it. We are direct, very open and straight with them – it is not a "softly softly" approach.'

'It's that contact that is important and that's what sets us apart as a service provider.'

Financially, Community Campus has evolved from its early incarnation as a '100% grant and charitable dependent agency' to its status today where 70% of outgoings are

Youth Project: swapping Teesside for Bangalore

In 2001 Community Campus set up its youth project – an ongoing programme of educational and social activities which has an emphasis on taking young people out of their everyday environment and introducing them to new experiences through team and confidence-building challenges.

Highlights have included a community allotment, sports sessions, working with young mothers' and homelessness pressure groups and the development of a successful drama group. The project also encourages voluntary service placement work that could, quite literally, take the service users anywhere.

'You could be working in our lunch club or you could end up painting an orphanage in India,' Carl Ditchburn explains. 'Some of our young people helped build classrooms for a school in Bangalore and went back out to help build a small community centre. Some of these kids might not ever have been out of Teesside.'

The experience of leaving home and swapping northeast England for southern India can be humbling and give service users a new sense of perspective.

'It can make them realise that life could be a lot worse,' admits Simon Virth. But it can also prove to be inspiring, he adds: 'One lad we worked with later went off to do more work in Hungary as part of a sports placement.'

And the Bangalore experience has also underlined Community Campus' attitude to sustainability and recycling resources. When a local school was throwing away old desks and books, Mr Ditchburn stepped in to salvage and donate them to the school in Bangalore, leaving pupils and teachers delighted with a new influx of furniture and English language books.

earned through letting space, delivery of small-scale construction contracts and the income from its properties. 'In the early stages we all paid subs to get things moving,' says Mr Ditchburn. 'We started attracting charitable monies to employ a development worker, a support worker and admin support and we went through the usual routes.'

He attributes the organisation's current overall position to 'over 20 years of hard work' and building an asset base

Above: the Campus Youth Project in action in Bangalore.

Opposite: a building mentor breaking bricks and mixing cement on one of the housing group's sites



through borrowing money and using various grant regimes including the lottery, Futurebuilders and other government regeneration initiatives. Community Campus has also received financial support from organisations such as the Rank Foundation, Prince's Trust, Key Fund Foundation and Hartlepool New Deal for Communities.

Every year Community Campus needs to raise a quarter of what it spends through charitable sources and the new coalition government's plans to tackle the budget deficit with £6bn of spending cuts are looming large for the housing group.

'The voluntary sector is often forced to look at the short term – its next lottery bid or three-year plan – but if you've got assets you can be a bit more visionary. It helps you to "grow up" as an organisation and think long term,' says Mr Ditchburn. 'But if funding gets cut, that could affect more young people and increase demand for our services at a time when resources are hard to sustain.'

'It's the money in preventative work that's likely to go, which then sets up further problems down the line. Demand is likely to increase and our ability to respond is likely to be slower. For every kid we currently help we already have to turn down two or three so the future could be quite stark.'

'But, putting it in context, we got through the previous recession and have always managed to sustain ourselves. We already work hard for every pound or penny put into the organisation and that money is spent wisely.'

Despite much progress, both Mr Ditchburn and Mr Virth are agreed on one thing – they are still encountering the same issues today as they were when they started out two decades ago.

'There's still a lack of joined-up thinking and a lack of coordination in terms of youth service provision,' says Mr Virth. 'There's still a supply and demand issue when it comes to housing – in east Middlesbrough, for example, there's a lack of single person accommodation.'

'Drugs and crime are still major issues, as is mental health. In terms of local employment, aside from what is left over from the steel and mining industries, jobs tend to be at call centres or in retail where there is high turnover, long hours and low pay. We are working with the first generation of kids where neither parent is employed and could soon find ourselves working with the second. Dealing with a whole different attitude to work and helping young people break out of that cycle is going to be quite hard.'

But while Community Campus may still be 'fighting the same things we were fighting 20 years ago', staff and volunteers alike remain stoic. One support worker describes encouraging young people 'whose aspirations are nil' as not just rewarding but 'the best job in the world'.

Fellow support worker Joanne French agrees. Of the more troubled and difficult clients Community Campus has worked with over the years, she says: 'Sometimes your biggest risks are your greatest successes.'

FIND OUT MORE

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