



Visit to BLESST Centre 9 March 2019

The BLESST Centre brings together education, social enterprise and community work to offer learning in non-traditional spaces, use of the creative arts to support learning and self-expression, therapeutic approaches, research and evaluation.

BLESST is located on the edge of Birmingham city centre and Newtown. The area feels a bit bleak and industrial, though it's Saturday morning so most places are closed up and there's evidence of some creative industry, including a music studio and a garment factory. Proximity to an expanding city centre may see this area develop further in the future.

Birmingham has a higher level of gun crime than London and the third highest rate of knife crime in the country. There have been 99 stabbings in Birmingham in the first 8 weeks of the year. The project workers and entrepreneurs who use BLESST have lived experience of the issues affecting the area, including one who lost his son in a shooting two years ago and another who survived domestic violence. They share a commitment to developing grass roots community leadership underpinned by academic learning and research and mutual support through mentoring and a collaborative network.

BLESST opened their premises about two years ago. The Directors are founder Richard Campbell, whose background is in youth and community work; Dr Martin Glynn, a renowned academic in the field of criminology; Casey Gordon, an experienced psychotherapist; and Kavita Brahmabhatt, who specialises in community and business development in disadvantaged areas. BLESST collaborators are regularly called upon to share their expertise with government, researchers and the media; in the preceding week one has taken part in an NWG Network event in parliament focused on CSE and another has spoken about knife crime on the Victoria Derbyshire show.

Lloyd has (in retrospect, deliberately) not given me an idea of what to expect on the visit and I am pleasantly surprised to be met by a group of people who have given up their Saturday to discuss the issues around youth crime in Sheffield and how BLESST members are responding in Birmingham. The discussion that takes place is hugely stimulating owing to expert practitioners, whose contributions are underpinned by life experience, academic knowledge and reflexivity and a tangible commitment to collaborative practice. It's difficult to capture such a wide-ranging conversation, that in the spirit of BLESST should really be fed back via the medium of theatre or music, but in the absence of any creative talents on my part this report will have to do!

Who did we meet from BLESST?

Richard

*BLESST founder
Work with Citizens UK to put
power into communities via
youth and social work,
alternative education provider*

Darren

*The Epiphany People
Work with families impacted
by trauma and youth violence
Phone helpline, peer support
group, expert practitioners*

Kerisha

*Illustrator, website designer
with a background in social
work with children
Manages BLESST website and
social media*

*Also... (Darren went well over
his one minute intro limit!)
Father deficit programme,
psychotherapists support
contact with children/fathers
after restorative work*

Mark

*Confidence Productions
Work with young people to get
their stories across via creative
media, TV, film. Make
BLESST promo videos etc*

Naomi

*Domestic abuse specialist
Educating teenagers around
violence, knife crime, social
media to express themselves
positively through arts*

Lloyd

Fran

Caprice

*YLAB team and 2nd year of
Black Studies degree
Working on "voice for youth"
with Citizens UK*

YLAB

*Currently five in team, volunteers from Birmingham
universities. Facilitating workshops in schools,
supporting young people to take leadership courses,
engaging YP with inter-generational projects, linking
them with mentors, aim for them to become
community organisers*

What's happening in Sheffield?

Sheffield crime rates 5 years behind comparable cities

Short-term gaps in drugs market has meant dealers from Birmingham, Liverpool jump in

Ignorance in local communities re. county lines

Rehousing gang members in children's homes

CSE under the radar

Police operations have taken out some gang leaders

Sheffield = hub due to link to East coast users

Naïve criminality – gang leaders getting younger – MH issues, egos

Coke is socially acceptable

Unstable leaders means chaos – “headers” willing to go further

Community hubs deal with exploitation issues but with little support

Unstable structures – Pakistani, Somali, Kurdish, no mediation

VCS = kinder face of statutory services

Need for dedicated community workers, properly resourced

How does BLESST respond to youth crime in Birmingham?

Models of practice that are culturally competent

Vision is authentic community leadership

Creative learning – e.g. deconstructing rap into discussion of masculinity

Contextual safeguarding – risks to young people in public sphere

IMPACT

Alternative education settings for traumatised youth – safe, community spaces

Referral routes in from Y9, Y10, Y11 not in mainstream, Youth Offending Teams

Youth input into design of educational spaces

Many grass roots organisations rely heavily on one person who needs education and support

Lack of employment readiness in YP – in between stage before accessing employment services

Apprenticeships, mind mapping – overcoming invisible barriers to employability

Co-design of services – requires education and learning

Community development to support governance in BAME organisations

IMPACT

Understand power analysis

Therapy and counselling to pass on tools to the next generation

Mentorship within communities to develop sense of belonging

Bespoke resources for communities

Need for youth and social workers who come from the communities they work in

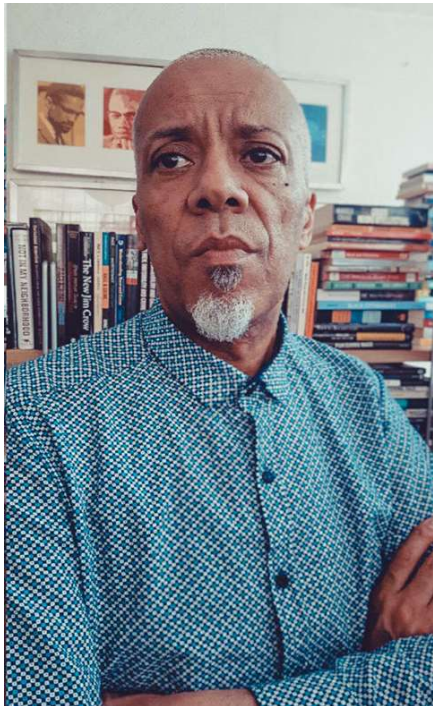
Circle of trust to access personal private spaces

Active listening – “can I work with you?”

IMPACT

Families of exploited YP are not bad – “no shame no blame”

Dr Martin Glynn



Dr Martin Glynn is the inspiration behind BLESST, having taught and/or mentored many of the members. He lectures on criminology, youth, gender and crime and Black studies and is pioneering (and about to publish a book on) “data verbalization” – the presentation of research data back to researched communities through performance arts. He is also a published poet, dramatist and performer. A health crisis in recent years has led him to re-evaluate how to live now, and on the day prior to this visit he has resigned his post at Birmingham City University in order to become a practitioner again and pursue a new interest in the visual arts.

He arrives towards the end of the day and makes an immediate impact with a free-flowing discursive communication style that is hard to keep up with. It’s clear that BLESST members expect a level of challenge from Martin that pushes them to constantly reflect on their practice, contributing to the strong sense of confidence in the room. BLESST Centre is intended to be Martin’s legacy that will go on to empower more community leaders.

Amongst the ideas discussed:



Reflections, questions, next steps, links

BLESST = inspirational model of authentic community leadership – built on years – even decades – of lived experience, collaborative learning and practice – not easily replicable but sustainable

Public health model requires health professionals

Greater emphasis on responsive rather than preventative approach? Reflects more serious levels of youth crime? Some work – e.g. father deficit programme – focused on breaking the cycle

Does the focus on creative arts resonate with different communities? Rich arts tradition in Black/Afro-Caribbean culture – will Pakistani/Yemeni/Roma YP find their own cultural touchstones that support therapeutic work? BAME hub or cross-cultural?

Where will the practitioners / educators / entrepreneurs come from? Is there a “critical mass” of potential collaborators in Sheffield? Can we get academic / health professionals and community leaders to buy in?

Proposed next steps:

Invite BLESST members to run an exploratory research workshop with CYP practitioners in Burngreave:

- ACT
- FVCH
- EYP
- PAP
- Reach Up
- Big Brother
- Nyara Collective
- ...

Links:

[BLESST Centre](#)

[The Epiphany People](#)

[Martin Glynn](#)

[NWG Network](#)

[PACE](#)

[The Interrupters](#)

(watch trailer)