

Francesca Rolle is Project Coordinator for Connecting Communities, an award-winning initiative that turns bright ideas from young people into real projects for local social enterprises.



'The project's worked in three phases throughout the year. Firstly, we work with primary and secondary stage students, who came up with ideas to solve the business challenge. Then, in the second stage, we worked with university and college students, who were working in mixed institution teams, taking those ideas and looking at what works and doesn't work, considering the strategy and doing some market research. In the final phase, we have a university student on placement for four weeks to actually deliver the project.'

'So, the idea is that the social enterprise will have a business challenge solved and the young people get the chance to be involved with a real project ... and hopefully to get more involved with social action.'

'For example, 'Onboard Skate Park' are down on Little London Road. They operate as a normal skate park in the evenings and at the weekend. During the day, they offer a lot of enrichment opportunities for NEETs, helping young people in the area get back into training and education and maybe progress to get into employment. Their challenge, as an indoor skate park, was to increase foot-fall in Spring and Summer, when young people tend to be outside, creating revenue that would enable them to continue offering the enrichment activities.'

'Some of the children's ideas were great and others were a bit surreal. One idea was to turn the skate bowl into a swimming pool, which was completely unfeasible, or installing a retractable roof, which would cost way too much money. Other ideas included improving social media marketing, having loyalty cards, as well as ideas about diversifying, with street dance parties, graffiti sessions or using the ramps for remote control cars. We got more out of the kids than we expected to.'



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‘During this pilot phase, we have worked with a variety of different students, including a group with special educational needs, who really enjoyed the experience. Giving them responsibility made a huge difference to their learning. We also had a group from Sheffield Springs Academy, with students choosing if they wanted to get involved.’

‘The real value for schools in the skills developed by young people: Team-working, project skills and research work. They also had to learn about the constraints of a business environment, particularly within a social enterprise where they have less money than would be the case with a profit-driven enterprise.’

‘We have won the Unltd SEE Change award for Innovation in Delivery of Support to Social Entrepreneurs. This recognises our desire to inspire young people to think about getting involved in social entrepreneurship in the future. Some of the university students we’re working with are talking about including social entrepreneurship within businesses they’re running themselves.’

‘The social enterprises that have been involved have genuinely seen potential benefits. In particular, the primary students exceeded our expectations. For example, we went into St Marie’s Catholic Primary School, to look at how we could fundraise and increase awareness about homelessness for the Cathedral Archer Project. One little girl suggested we could do a sponsored silence. When asked how that lined to homelessness, she turned round and said, ‘Because homeless people often feel silenced in society’. They didn’t just come up with good ideas. They understood why they were good ideas.’

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