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Case Study: Liverpool Lighthouse

Overview

Liverpool Lighthouse is a proposal for an Alternative Provision Free School for 100 secondary school aged pupils. The school will cater for young people who have been excluded from school or who are at risk of exclusion for a variety of reasons including emotional or behavioural problems. The school would be divided into six groups - a small group of Year 9 pupils, four groups of pupils in Years 10 and 11, and a small group for post-sixteen provision. The school would aim to work with younger pupils for one or two terms and prepare them for reintegration to mainstream schools. The older pupils would likely find it more difficult to return to mainstream school and would remain with Liverpool Lighthouse full time to pursue qualifications. The Free School would grow out of an existing urban arts centre that has been running since 2003 and would offer a range of urban arts qualifications as well as providing training in core subjects and personal development and employability skills. The school would also focus on the three main industries in the city - football, horse riding, and the arts - and look at employment and internship opportunities in these industries.

Background

Liverpool Lighthouse has been running Alternative Provision since 2003, initially with funding from Connexions and the Learning and Skills Council. In its first year the programme offered urban arts opportunities for excluded young people for a period of six weeks, with the idea of reintegrating them to mainstream schools. They found, however, that the young people were not returning to school, so the next year they started a full-time programme. This programme quickly expanded and has been running successfully for a number of years, with an excellent track record of positive outcomes for young people. They have worked with 475 young people in the past eight years. The Liverpool Lighthouse team wanted to find a way to take on more young people and raise the standard of achievement of young people by offering **“more qualifications, more subjects, and more learning enhancement programmes.”** When the opportunity arose to apply to run an Alternative Provision Free School this seemed like a good solution.

“There are 600 excluded young people within Liverpool. We believe that Liverpool Lighthouse is a model of good practice that really works; our vision is to formalise this model.”

Two years ago the Liverpool Lighthouse team started to look into registering as an independent school, in keeping with DfE requirements. While they did have learners with them full time, they were committed to changing the lives of disadvantaged young people and were reluctant to charge fees. ***“It is not in our ethos to charge for places.”*** To date the project has been funded by the Local Authority and by referring schools, but the group is aware that they are subject to the cuts that have been taking place. They hope that as an Alternative Provision Free School, with the backing of the Local Authority, they would be in a more secure position.

The Group

The key members of the Liverpool Lighthouse proposer group are the CEO who runs the organisation and comes from a teaching background, and the Director of Education and

Training who also comes from an education background and has experience of managing alternative education projects. ***“I have a passion for alternative provision; it is very rewarding working with these young people.”*** The current manager and year group tutors are also part of the proposer group. However, if the application is approved the school would be a new company, separate from the existing Liverpool Lighthouse, and they would appoint a new headteacher, business manager, etc.

The team has been assembled largely from existing Liverpool Lighthouse and LJM Ltd staff. The organisation was given some transition funding from the Government. Within this tranche was funding for people to cover some of the work of the CEO and Director of Education so that they could spend time restructuring the organisation, which included working on the Free School application. Supporting the application are a number of other organisations providing essential skills including Brabners Chaffe Solicitors, Moore and Smalley LLB, Liverpool Hope University, AFC Liverpool, Versed Associates, and Pinehurst Ltd.

Application Process

Liverpool Lighthouse have recently submitted their first Free School application. Since this was the first year with a distinct application process for Alternative Provision Free Schools, the group felt strongly that they needed to submit an application this year. ***“We felt it would be more competitive next year - we knew we had to catch the boat this year.”*** Their approach to the application form was to split the sections up between different people. They also had access to consultants through a YSDF funded project that they had been running for the past few years. This project included an element of capacity-building and they were able to use the consultants to look at the Free Schools process and help with the application. They also accessed help from the organisation’s solicitors, who were also able to put them in touch with builders who had experience of working with schools. A visit from another Alternative Provision expert, through NSN, also contributed to the application.

For Liverpool Lighthouse, the most difficult section of the application was the curriculum model. They found that there was quite a lot of detail for them to work on.

“We really had to think about what we would be delivering, how we could enhance it, how many young people we would be working with, and how many groups we would have.”

Relationships

Unlike Mainstream Free School applicant groups, Alternative Provision groups must secure support from Local Authorities before submitting an application. Approaching their Local Authority was the first thing that the Liverpool Lighthouse group did. They had an existing and ongoing relationship with the Local Authority as a result of the alternative education programme that they had been running for the previous seven years, and were therefore confident of getting a fair hearing. This led to a formal letter of support from the Liverpool Local Authority. The group also approached other neighbouring Local Authorities but found this more difficult because of recent restructuring. They did eventually get pledges of support in letters and emails from surrounding Local

Authorities. A number of local secondary schools have also got behind the plans for the proposed school and given their full support.

The group has been developing relationships within the local community, particularly with partners in industry that they are hoping to work with collaboratively. The school would like to give young people the opportunities to take on internships and work placements in the city's three main industries in order to learn more about the industries and identify possible career pathways.

Liverpool Lighthouse accessed a lot of support from NSN. They attended conferences and were given access to specialist advisers. ***“NSN took us through every step of the way.”***

Education

Liverpool Lighthouse Free School would offer three strands of qualifications. The main strand would be urban arts, including courses in subjects such as music technology, lighting and sound, and GCSEs in performing arts and dance. The second strand would focus on the core subjects of English, mathematics, and ICT, working up to GCSE standards. For younger students, this second strand would also take on other parts of the National Curriculum including a language and science, and combining geography and history into world studies. The third strand would focus on personal development and employability skills.

Premises

The Liverpool Lighthouse Free School would be based in a refurbished former church building across the road from the existing Liverpool Lighthouse site. The church building - owned by LJM Ltd and leased to the school - will need a significant amount of refurbishment work. While the cost will not be insubstantial, the refurbishment would provide excellent facilities over three floors. These would complement the existing facilities that pupils would have access to in the Liverpool Lighthouse building (including a 430-seat auditorium, dance studio, and bistro). The organisation will also soon take control of an area of land within easy reach of the proposed site. They hope to use this green space to ***“get young people out of the urban area that they are trapped in. They don't get taken to parks. Taking them out of their environment really has a therapeutic effect.”*** Liverpool Lighthouse would like to set up a lodge on this land to run environmental projects as enrichment to the other proposed activities.

Reflections

For the Liverpool Lighthouse led group the greatest challenge has been freeing up the time from other commitments to work on the application, including looking in detail at the curriculum model and the plans for the next five years. Despite the time constraints, they were determined to submit the application this year. They have been heartened by the support from the Local Authorities, and have been surprised by the number of Alternative Provision applications that have been submitted. ***“There are three other groups in this area.”*** Their thoughts now are on what format the interview stage will take, and what preparation they should be doing.

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The piece of advice that they would offer to groups considering a Free School application is to work in collaboration with New Schools Network. ***“They gave us really good advice and they were able to put us in touch with specialists. We couldn’t have got through the process without them.”*** They would also suggest that new groups assess the local needs, and work to get the Local Authority and schools on board.

“It is really difficult to work in isolation.”

Liverpool Lighthouse is pleased that the Free Schools policy now includes specific plans for Alternative Provision.

“Mainstream education doesn’t always provide for kids who want vocational training, or kids who have been bullied, or who have a lot going on at home, or who can’t cope for some reason. Alternative Provision is really needed for them.”

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