



CUBE Engagement Report – July 2023

Written by Mark Jones, Director, Higher Plain Research & Education and Visiting Professor of Criminology at University South Wales

Introduction

Community United Barry 4 Everyone (CUBE) is a community enterprise in Barry, South Wales. CUBE was developed by professionals and the local community to create a community space to support local needs that was sustainable and this led to the development of a central space for these purposes called 'The Gallery.' The Gallery is a multi-functional space that offers a 'one-stop' service centre and events setting embedded within a coffee house. CUBE is a safe and trusted space where the local community can meet up to socialise, use or learn about services and support, and feel part of the community.

CUBE has been developed and continues to develop using a strong value base with coproduction and restorative approaches at its core, ensuring that the local community feel empowered and real ownership over what CUBE is, what it does, and where it might develop in the future. CUBE recognises the lived experience and expertise that the local community have of their own lives and the challenges they face and so believe that this should guide their practice and service provision for individuals and families.

Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University partnered with CUBE between 2021 and 2022 to evaluate the model of practice, the services, and the experiences of the CUBE team and the local community who engage with CUBE (Williams, Bayfield, and Lyttleton-Smith, 2022). One of the Key findings of the report (Williams, Bayfield, and Lyttleton-Smith, 2022: pg 3) stated that "The community have voiced a desire for extended services and must be included in honest discussions about what can be provided and co-produce how to make it happen." It was clear that following the findings of this report further engagement with the community of Barry was needed to understand what new and or extended services they felt were needed to meet their needs.

CUBE Community Needs

Since 2023 a potential range of needs had been identified with members of the CUBE / Barry community and the CUBE team. There seemed to be three main demographics of the community that needed further support services and these were identified as:

1) *Adult men aged over 25* who due to a complexity of factors do not access services to support their needs including: mental health, self-harm and suicidal ideation, masculinity and identity, parenting, socialisation, neurodiversity, family/partner relationships, cost of living, and employment.

2) *Young Adults aged 18-25* who like the above adult men group are struggling with a range of issues, with perhaps a central feature being identity and belonging.

3) *Children/Young People aged 11-15* who are also facing challenges and issues outlined above, including sexual identity issues, and due to covid have missed out on 'usual' transition experiences from primary to secondary school. These children/young people are presenting as disengaged from education, family, and healthy prosocial relationships.

Although the CUBE team have observed the needs of these groups, as well as hearing this from the local community, and so were confident that these three groups needed specific support; the values, ethos, and ethics of CUBE ensure that all new provision should be co-created with members of their community to ensure best practice and appropriate service development. To explore the possibility of engaging with these groups of people and the wider community the CUBE Chief Executive contacted Higher Plain Research and Education Ltd, an independent academic working within youth and community practice, to discuss the potential for a small-scale engagement to test, challenge, and better understand the needs of the three groups identified.

It was agreed that a small series of focus groups would be an appropriate approach to listen to and hear the experiences and needs of the three 'targeted' groups. This approach was viewed as being able to sense check experiences and let their lived experiences guide any development of new projects and practice. CUBE agreed to facilitate the 'finding' of appropriate community members and services so that the focus groups could run over a two-day period on the 12th and 13th of July and that ideally there would be three focus groups for each 'targeted group' of up to 1.5 hours with 6-10 people per focus group for these purposes.

The agreed idea behind this process was that depending on the themes found within these discussions and narratives CUBE would then develop a project proposal to meet the needs (if any) of these community members.

As can be common with community practice, that rightly meets the needs and experiences of the community it serves, the reality of finding three groups of the 'target' groups outlined above to be able to meet at the same time was difficult. The approach to engagement was modified and quickly became more of an engagement of the whole community and this was supported by CUBE team members where appropriate to ensure the discussion space felt safe and known to those taking part. There were also some engagements with service providers which were not currently working directly with CUBE but may do in the future and who were seen as offering insights into potential needs of the wider community.

This brief report captures the narratives from the two engagement days and will be used to facilitate a proposal of activity for future work at CUBE. The report will be presented and discussed with the directors and key stakeholders for agreement on what the next steps will be in CUBE continued evolution.

CUBE Community Narratives

Over the two days there were 18 separate focus group / informal interview engagements with 38 people across an intergenerational age range of 9 years old to late 50's (Although I didn't ask for risk of offending people). All children were supported by a main carer and where appropriate those who engaged were also supported by a CUBE team member. All discussions were 'private' but in a public and open space. As stated previously the people who engaged were from; the Barry community, CUBE team, support services within Barry locality. The following themes and quotes will not be liked to

names and where possible context will be edited to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity are maintained.

The narratives across the two days have been arranged into five groupings of experiences: General Experiences of CUBE, Children aged 8 to 11, young people aged 12 to 17, adult men aged 21 and over, parents, and Ethnic Minority needs. Each of these groupings have then been separated into specific themes supported by direct quotes or a 'hybridisation' of common narratives. The quotes contained below are from the experiences of people from that grouping / age range but also from people offering their experiences and observations, both professional (service providers and CUBE team) and personnel (friends, family, parents), on the experiences and needs of that age range / grouping. During the two days there were multiple conversations and so not all of the quotes are captured below.

General experiences of CUBE

High quality inclusive service provision

It was clear from all those spoken to over the two days that CUBE is a highly respected and needed provision and community hub that positively changes the lives of those engaged with it. One person said that *'CUBE helps a lot of people in the community'* with another stating that *'this place is life saving and more people need to know about it.'* Everyone who engaged highlighted how *'the staff are amazing and they really care'* and that this has created a safe and secure space where it feels *'like one big family here.'* People passionately spoke of how CUBE offered everything they needed to get their lives back on track or gaining support for parenting and or their children who were going through a difficult time, in fact many viewed CUBE as *'a one stop shop and it's all you need.'*

It was also evident through observation that the CUBE team are skilled practitioners that build strong and powerful professional relationships built on respect, sharing of power, and choice. CUBE practitioners were always authentic and 'real' and were open about their own life journeys and how their lived experiences helped them in supporting people who engaged at CUBE. The relationships observed were also what could be called 'professional friendships' and this meant that the support they gave to community members was trusted as they knew the CUBE team genuinely care about them and are invested in their positive development. This type of practice is arguably difficult to negotiate but the CUBE team achieved this with high expertise.

Greater awareness raising and increased service provision

Several people felt that because CUBE was so good at what it does it needed to be known about more in Barry and so there was a need for 'more awareness raising as so many don't know about it.' Over the course of the two days a high percentage of those spoken to also said that the provision was *'amazing'* and that *'they need to keep doing what they are doing but do more of it so they can help more people'* and so the need for more frequency of current provision is a wanted need from the community. This theme was constant throughout the two days and it is captured more specifically in the age range analysis below.

Children (8-11)

During the two days only a small number of children were spoken to directly but they offered some strong and important narratives and these were supported by the perspectives of parents and practitioners that worked with children, parents, and or families.

Parental 'abandonment' and school bullying creating complex needs

The most common experiences for children in the community seemed to be dealing with the breakdown in the relationship with a significant family member and or dealing with the future transition to secondary school. Due to these two challenges, there were resultant behavioural, emotional, and psychological experiences including anxiety, anger, stress, depression, feelings of abandonment, and isolation and loss of control over their life.

One practitioner said that *'children need their basic needs supported, so feeling safe, feeling they belong, feeling love, and food and a home too. I think a lot of kids don't feel safe or that they belong'* and many agreed and also pointed out that children are still treated as not fully human and that this needed to change and that *'children need to know how to be more assertive with adults and know their rights to say no and have choice'* and that *'parents, family members, and teachers all need to know this too'* and the feeling was that this power dynamic and treating children this way was a key reason so many children felt they couldn't speak up and ask for help.

One child talked about how they *'keep getting angry with it all and I need to learn to control my anger'* but that they were *'getting better at it and I know it's not my fault now.'* Indeed, the therapeutic work that CUBE offers with children, as well as the wider parenting support, and the welcoming coffee house environment meant that *'CUBE makes me feel safe and listened to'* and so it's *'helped me overcome what's happening and understand it more.'* There was real understanding of self from children and one child said that *'I need to be able to express myself and I used to be closed and not talking to people but CUBE helped me open up and talking about it makes me feel more in control.'*

The impact of the CUBE therapeutic work was particularly powerful and all children spoken to felt they had changed positively with one child feeling much more confident and enjoying their life more and that *'I'm better at school now and not so upset, I'm enjoying school'* and another stating that are *'feeling more calm, less angry, I talk about my feelings more.'* The children who engaged were extremely articulate and showed real depth of understanding about how they were before support and where they were now they were accessing support and where they wanted to go to be fully happy and feeling positive. It is an observation as children do not use such language and terminology but the children illustrated a real reflective approach to their own development and a growing self-agency and empowerment over their own personal growth.

Increased need of services

Despite the clear positive experiences of children who are engaged with CUBE many felt that they *'need more of this type of support (one to one therapy) but I'd also like group stuff, fun stuff, the summer activities look fun.'* Other children agreed, as did parents and some of the practitioners, and so an increase of current provision is arguably needed at CUBE as well as development of different more social and informal activities like those within the summer project.

Many parents and practitioners who were involved in discussions believed that CUBE could have even more impact if they worked with children transitioning to secondary school with one practitioner stating *'I see the younger ones, like 9, now starting to get worried about secondary school, its like this big thing in the near future and it causes anxiety and stress.'* Another agreed and said *'Yes totally, the younger ones who are a few years from secondary, they are maturing so much faster these days, starting puberty at 10 and all the social aspects too.'* During this discussion several people spoke of the need for earlier transition work with children and many said that *'CUBE should work in schools helping transition*

to secondary and have stuff on at CUBE too including in the school holidays.’ In relation to school themed support there were a great deal of conversations on bullying in schools and how there is so much work that is needed to challenge this negative experience for many within the school system. Many parents and practitioners said words similar to that there is *‘so much bullying in schools if you are a bit different or even a bit quiet. More work is needed to support children in schools both primary and secondary’* suggesting that CUBE could enter this space and offer such support services.

Young People (12 – 17)

Several young people engaged over the two days as well as perspectives gained from parents and practitioners offering some clear themes for consideration.

Feelings of belonging and mental health challenges

Young people seem to be experiencing *‘so many challenges like social anxiety, isolation, relationship advice needs, you know what is a healthy relationship’* as one practitioner summarised whilst another agreed and added that *‘mental health especially, after covid, it’s still not like it was, it’s had a lasting effect’* and that there *‘is so much bullying in schools it’s awful.’* Other practitioners also highlighted how *‘Cyber bullying is everywhere and it’s so dangerous as they can get to you anywhere. It destroys young lives. So yeah something that helps young people with that is needed.’*

Many parents and practitioners felt that *‘there needs to be more for 13–16-year-olds so they have support, there is nothing in Barry’* There were also some parents and practitioners that raised that a lot of young people, due to a range of reasons including the pandemic experience, family breakdown, bullying, and struggling with identity and belonging, were experiencing trauma and needed therapeutic intervention as well as wider young people’s support services. Finally, many also felt that *‘toxic masculinity stuff in young boys (aged 11-15) and you can see them living up and acting up to the stereotypes’* and how these negatively affected girls and boys understandings of what was usual, *‘normal’* and expected in relationships.

Therapeutic support and self-agency development

When asked what services young people needed to support the challenges identified and discussed above many agreed, and although using different phrases and words, stated that they need services that supported *‘anger management and positive displacement of anger with positive activities like football, or exercise, or music, or anything that’s positive’* and informal education work that explored *‘gender stuff, sexuality, healthy relationships, consent, choice and respect.’*

Several practitioners stated that in respect of LGBTQIA+ identities and gender identities *‘there needs to be more education to simplify it all so there is choice, but not so it is so daunting that the choice can cause mental health issues, like anxiety and stress. You know for children, then young people, then adults too. Age-appropriate depth and simplicity when it is with children and young people.’* Practitioners also felt they need support in understanding this more so they could support young people more effectively with one practitioner stating that *‘practitioners find it difficult in the LGBTQIA+ and gender space as there are so many gender identities, I think I was told there are 100 now. Imagine having to think you need to choose a gender identity at 9 years old and thinking which of these 100 am I. It must be so stressful and overwhelming.’*

Everyone agreed that more services were needed and perhaps the key needed service was therapeutic support such as counselling or child therapy. One practitioner stated that *'there's no hope going through your GP as it's like a year or so waiting list and unless your child has actually tried to kill themselves they often refuse to refer them, it's a joke, and then it can be too late.'*

The young people who discussed their lives and challenges were very open and outlined their experiences which reflects those captured above. What was needed they felt were a range of services that gave them *'a toolkit really to help myself as there is so much going on'* at CUBE where *'I feel safe, as it's friendly and known with familiar faces.'* Young people also wanted somewhere they felt they belonged and more social 'fun' opportunities, with one young person illustrating this and voiced a want for *'more activities and social stuff like an open mic night, stand-up comedy, DJ workshop, day's out, sports stuff. I'd come and if people knew about here they'd come too. There's nothing like that for young people in Barry.'*

Emerging need for support for neurodivergent young people

Although only one parent and two practitioners stated this need it is important to raise the issue of neurodiversity. One practitioner stated that *'It's new to me this, but I'm understanding that there is a lot of support needed with neurodiversity, so not just autism but all of it, you know.'* The other practitioner agreed during this conversation and one parent said that *'a safe space for neurodivergent teens is needed'* and that perhaps offering *'social opportunities to learn life skills.'*

Adult Men (21+)

Several men were spoken to over the two days and some were parents and some were not, but in a relationship. Practitioners, partners of men, and parents (women) also had strong views on the experiences and needs of men in the local community.

Men specific services and support

One partner stated that *'we need more support for young men like him (points to partner)'* and many people felt that *'men just seem to be scared to come out and socialise'* and *'the stigma is still there isn't it. You know. Men should be tough and all that so they just don't ask for help or support or even admit they have any issues. Then it's too late and some are gone.'* It was viewed that because of this *'there are a lot of young angry and isolated men who don't know what to do or where to go'* and *'so many don't know what a healthy relationship is with other men or with a partner and it's not good.'* One parent felt that *'Men need a bloke space and support. They just don't talk, so anything that helps that really, or it just rots and too many young men are killing themselves or just in pain and dealing with everything on their own.'*

The men openly talked about how they *'have felt quite isolated really'* and one man explained that *'I've just had so much child trauma and I did anything to drown it out and quieten it down. So much drugs it's unbelievable. I've almost died so many times.'* These men were accessing support from CUBE and so their outlook was starting to change with one summarising that *'I'm getting help now and I feel different. CUBE has done this'* and another stating that *'I needed someone to listen to me and open me up and understand me. I was just angry and disinterested, no social interest at all, that's starting to change because of CUBE.'* One partner explained *'I think you need it (partner to young male and parent) you never ask for help until it's too late and you're ill, like last time when you had a bit of a breakdown, but you're starting to change and know when you need help now, it's good.'*

All the men (and other participants) agreed that *'there is too much stigma around mental health for men especially. They need to know it's good to talk'* and we need more services here at CUBE and elsewhere to offer this to men. When discussing what was needed a safe informal space for men was a common suggestion and men commented that *'I know I need social relationships. Yeah, a men's group would be good'* and another felt that *'I'm not really social, but yeah, I would like to if it was easy to, as I feel quite self-conscious really'*

Informal social opportunities with support offered

Suggestions of what it was that men needed to feel less isolated and gain positive social connections included a range of ideas. One parent said that *'Men's walking, mindful walking, that is something I heard about and that sounds good as your doing something but can talk easily'* whilst another felt that *'Men need support and activities like sports where they can feel part of something and alongside that they'll start to talk and then you build the support in.'*

Parents & Families (women unless stated)

The highest number of participants in the two-day engagements were women parents who used CUBE support services and women that provided services within CUBE or in the Barry community. Three fathers were part of these discussions. During these discussions some young children and or 'toddlers' were present but not in every instance and so the conversations were regarding family life, parenting, and parents own needs as individuals.

Parenting support and community

The most dominant theme for all of the women who engaged was how the parenting support programme had positively changed their lives. Many of the issues parents faced with their children were to do with their children being angry, bullied at school, poor family relationships, and mental health. One woman stated that *'therapeutic parenting is amazing, it's changed me and what I do, it just works'* whilst another said *'The parenting stuff just opens up your eyes. I'm calmer now, I have strategies.'* The therapeutic process and general experience of being engaged with the parenting programme and the family focused model at CUBE (side by side) meant that families were happier and better able to communicate with each other (whether parents were together or not). Parents spoke of having to make sure their individual and family needs were met, and understood now that if their personal needs were not met and they didn't work on themselves then they couldn't be a positive parent and role model for their children. One woman spoke of how she needed to *'understand myself more, my triggers, so I can communicate better with my ex-partner, so we don't argue, especially in front of our children.'* As highlighted earlier in the general overview of the experiences of CUBE, many parents felt CUBE offered a *'one-stop-shop for all my needs.'*

The environment and community feel of the parenting work was key to its success as one woman explained that the group is *'so friendly and calming so you feel safe and can really be honest and relate to other parents, you don't feel alone. Everyone understands'* and we get to *'share our thoughts, how we parent, knowing we all are learning'* and *'we develop new skills and strategies. The connectedness is so powerful and I feel that I belong.'* The fathers who talked of feeling quite isolated (as captured above) also commented that *'I've started wanting to socialise again. I've started living again and I'm having new positive experiences'* and another stated that *'I'm actually looking forward to some of the summer*

activities that CUBE are running. I'll have a look and see.' It was reflected that *'everyone is on their own journey, either by themselves or as a parent and a family'* and so *'there is no judgement and it's just so positive'* and so the community strength and connectedness was powerfully evident.

Personal discovery and empowerment

The parenting and family support experiences at CUBE not only focused on how to parent effectively but on supporting the journey of self-development and healing from previous negative experiences which in turn supports better parenting and for those on the side-by-side programme the bringing together of the family through individual to whole family support. One woman captured many of the discussions and experiences of women at CUBE when she said that she had experienced *'so much trauma from many things like domestic violence, health and mental health, and substance use. Like me, many have PTSD, I think, not diagnosed but it's obvious. There is a need for support and therapy so people can get better and gain control, self-esteem, and make good decisions.'* Many felt that by engaging with CUBE they had got to a place where there *'now know and feel that I am enough'* and that *'It's taught me self-love.'*

The impact of the work that CUBE is doing was so powerfully clear and this again is captured from one woman who said *'Having the support here has changed my life and my partners. We were both heavily addicted to substances and we lost our kids. But we are getting back to where we need to be. We are different people. I can manage my anger and I know there are steps to this and I have to take them to get to where I want to be. I might be dead now if it wasn't for CUBE, serious, I was that bad. I used to be so impulsive and now I can calm my thoughts and emotions. I know we're going to get our kids back now.'*

Greater Awareness and increased provision

Parents also felt they needed more engagement time with CUBE and that so many more families could benefit from CUBE's approach if there was greater awareness of the services of CUBE and if CUBE offered more of the services they currently did. One parent said that *'So many parents need that tailored support and to come and ask can be daunting and some don't even know about CUBE, there needs to be more awareness out there.'* It was also felt that *'the other services from the council, well they aren't much use, long waiting lists or it seems they don't get it or care like CUBE does.'*

All of the parents just wanted *'more of the same please'* and so wanted *'more parenting sessions and for a bit longer, twice a week for two hours at a time would be great. It's needed.'* There were also a few parents who want to see *'benefits appointment support'* and *'coffee mornings to socialise more.'*

Ethnic Minority needs

Apart from a few people all of the people who engaged in the focus groups and informal interviews were from a White UK ethnic background (or at least seemed to be). Several practitioners raised the need that people from ethnic minority groups were also in need of support and that they believed, and some said they knew, that the needs of ethnic minority people were often hidden and so the true extent of need was unknown. One person stated that *'I think that asylum seekers need help too and somewhere to go especially the kids and young people'* whilst another with more specific ethnic minority support experiences stated that *'there is a lack of ethnic minority understandings about self-harm,*

suicidal ideation, and suicide and so more needs to be done to meet the needs of these groups for children, young people, and adults.'

Conclusion: Key Learning, Strengths and Future Considerations

The two days of engagement at CUBE has provided a useful, poignant, and layered range of understandings and learning. The narratives in this report included some of the community members of CUBE, as well service providers who work with CUBE, some of the CUBE team, and those that work in the wider community but not currently with CUBE.

The five main groupings of narrative within this report include; General Experiences of CUBE, Children aged 8 to 11, Young People aged 12 to 17, Adult men aged 21 and over, parents, and Ethnic Minority needs. Each of these groupings were separated into specific themes that have been supported by direct quotes or a 'hybridisation' of common narratives.

In light of the analysis in this report there are some key areas of learning and strengths in the CUBE model of practice and areas for consideration of future practice and development.

Key Learning and strengths of CUBE:

- 1) Offers a holistic, therapeutic, and supportive range of services that meets the needs of children, young people, parents, and families.
- 2) Creates inclusive spaces where people and families feel safe and feel that they belong
- 3) Is experienced as an essential community hub for Barry.
- 4) Develops powerful professional relationships/friendships built on respect, trust, sharing of power, and choice, to support greater self-agency and empowerment of community members.

Considerations for future practice / development:

- 1) Increased current provision to support increasing needs especially with community of parents / families.
- 2) Greater awareness raising of CUBE services to Barry community .
- 3) Primary to Secondary school transition project working with 9-11 years olds.
- 4) Young People service development at CUBE offering social activities and support services.
- 5) Male specific project to support men's needs.
- 6) Exploration of Ethnic Minority Needs and services and if there is need for a project at CUBE.
- 7) In-depth evaluation of family 'side-by-side' model of practice to support CUBE development.

References

Williams, A., Bayfield, H. and Lyttleton-Smith, J. (2022). Launching the CUBE: a restorative approach to a co-produced community centre. [Project Report]. Cardiff: Cardiff University.