

SNOW SQUADS EVALUATION REPORT

2010/2011



East Durham Trust
Moving our community forward



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1. Introduction

During a three month period from 1st December 2010 a project known as “Snow Squads” was delivered in East Durham.

The project was managed by East Durham Trust, the lead Voluntary and Community Sector organisation for the area and was funded directly by Durham County Council with the initial investment coming from County Durham and Darlington Primary Care Trust.

Essentially the aim of the project was to mobilize community volunteers in supporting vulnerable people during periods of adverse weather conditions.

This evaluation is intended to reflect:

- The background to the project (why it was done)
- The methods of delivery (how it was done)
- The impact (what was achieved)
- The added value (what were the “spin offs”)
- Retrospective analysis (what was learned)

2. Acknowledgements

It is widely accepted that the most successful community interventions are, by their nature collaborative.

There is irrefutable evidence that the Snow Squads project benefitted significant numbers of individuals. With this in mind it should be noted that without the support and contribution of the following individuals, the project would never have come to fruition:

Anna Lynch	County Durham and Darlington NHS
Tim Wright	County Durham and Darlington NHS
Brian Kitching	Durham County Council
Shealagh Pearce	East Durham Area Action Partnership
Robert Blair	AAP Forum Member
Alison Paterson	Blackhall Community Association
Pat English	Thornley Residents Association
Rona Hardy	Shotton Partnership
James Naylor	Spyral
Councillor Alice Naylor	Durham County Council
Alan Miller	Easington Millennium Luncheon Club
Councillor Alan Napier	Durham County Council
Sonia Newhouse	Sure Start Seaham
Rev. Jenny Pride	Thornley Methodist Church
The Trustees and staff of East Durham Trust	
The individual volunteers	
The staff at County Durham Community Foundation	

3. Background

A number of factors conspired to produce the seed that ultimately germinated into the Snow Squads project.

Perhaps the first of these – as the name would suggest – was the onset of inclement weather! Forecasts during the later months of 2010 began to suggest a particularly bad winter and thoughts began to focus on how the wider community would look after the vulnerable and socially excluded in adverse weather conditions when their isolation became exacerbated.

In the summer of 2010 East Durham Area Action Partnership (AAP) held a meeting to reflect on its priorities and a general discussion centred around a historic observation that in times gone by volunteers – including the unemployed – would clear snow from paths during the winter months. It was suggested that East Durham Trust (EDT) should consider a proposal to manage an initiative which could potentially encourage and promote such activity.

It was also noted that County Durham had benefitted the previous winter from the investment by the PCT into the winter gritting programme. Although this caused a degree of media consternation it was generally regarded as far sighted and as a significant contributor to Health and Wellbeing given that:

- The treatment of additional pathways would mean less falls.
- Increased access to services and increased mobility would mean obvious benefit to individuals in terms of both physical and mental wellbeing.

It was felt that an extension of this concept at a local level would be extremely beneficial.

In terms of pulling together a potential project, and indeed securing funding, it was felt that East Durham Trust were the best placed organisation locally to lead on such activity. The Trust was established in 2007 and absorbed the roles of the local Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) and the local Empowerment Network.

Additionally, East Durham Trust had quickly established itself as a provider of services and deliverer of contracts in a manner which was beyond the core CVS model. By 2010 the Trust was delivering a significant number of projects and interventions and had developed a reputation as a proactive and business like organisation. Formal contracts and Service Level Agreements were in place with the Local Authority, the Primary Care Trust, Fire and Rescue covering a range of social issues.

Consequently East Durham Trust produced an outline proposal based on a manageable ‘pilot’ approach which sought to establish four village-based ‘squads’ of volunteers.

It should have also been noted that at this point in time East Durham AAP were focusing on Social Inclusion, following an assertion by the vice chair Councillor Alan Napier – (well placed as Deputy Leader Of The Unitary Authority and as portfolio holder for resources) who observed that austerity measures and the effects of cuts by the coalition government should not be underestimated.

It should be noted that there was an acceptance that despite the use of volunteers, the assumption -often made by national government under the banner of 'Big Society' - that services would therefore be free was incorrect and that funding to support any proposal must be secured.

To this end, the first chapter in the story of Snow Squads was the securing of funding.

4. Project Narrative (The Story)

4.1 The Delivery Model

At the point of conception it was agreed that the project should concentrate on four discrete communities. The major influences in this decision were:

- Timescales: the imminent cold weather would not allow for the widespread recruitment of volunteers over the whole of East Durham.
- Funding: Coverage of the whole of East Durham would prove extremely costly and it would be unlikely that such levels of support could be secured in such a short period of time.
- Development: It was felt that a 'pilot' approach would be more sensible as this was a relatively new concept and there was a potential learning curve.

In general it was always perceived that the model - if successful could be rolled out to cover additional areas of East Durham or indeed on a County wide basis in the future.

The key features of the established model were therefore:

- Four villages or neighbourhoods.
- Four volunteers to be recruited in each area.
- Each group would have a base or meeting place.
- The volunteers would be professionally trained.
- Each group would meet regularly and decide a plan of action.
- Each group would establish a list of vulnerable people in their own neighbourhood.
- The groups would be brought together to share good practice.
- The groups would 'log' details of all supportive contacts.
- Whilst the primary function of the project was to clear snow, grit paths etc it was expected that the support provided to individuals would vary significantly.

4.2 Funding

In seeking funding to support the project East Durham Trust had established costings under the heading of:

- Training
- Room Hire
- Staff Time
- Resources(shovels, rock salt, high visibility clothing etc)
- Promotion
- Telephone
- Photocopying

- Stationery
- Management Fee
- Volunteer Expenses
- Insurance

East Durham Trust pursued a number of funding sources but the most natural port of call was of course the statutory sector whose mainstream services would be supported by the proposed activity and who therefore stood to benefit.

In the event East Durham Trust was advised to approach the local authority Durham County Council and ultimately this proved to be a successful strategy.

On 6th December 2010 the Senior Highway Engineer confirmed that funding would be made available. However, whilst the far-sightedness and confidence in the Voluntary and Community Sector was to be applauded two specific issues raised concern.

Firstly, the time taken to gain County Council support meant that the bad weather had started in earnest already. To be fair this was partly due to a request from DCC for a County-wide approach and the failure of other CVS organizations to respond to an approach from East Durham Trust to collaborate. (Also the individuals concerned were understandably preoccupied with issues around the bad weather!).

Secondly despite earlier assurances from DCC about support there was a subsequent refusal to pay a management fee meaning that East Durham Trust was faced with underwriting the cost of overheads, (or not proceeding with the project). Given the pilot nature of the project and the potential of future activity East Durham Trust did agree to proceed.

4.3 Volunteer Recruitment

As managers and hosts of the local Volunteer Centre, East Durham Trust was well placed to recruit individual volunteers.

However, it was clear that individual volunteers, when brought together as a team, would need a base and a supportive infrastructure. Consequently the initial approach was to groups rather than individuals with a belief that a group who wished to be involved would subsequently bring forward potential volunteers.

East Durham Trust employed an established strategy of utilising the existing communication lines to the 300+ groups from within its membership, this included the Trusts regular newsletter and the standard agenda item 'Opportunities for Members' in its regular member forums.

In terms of recruitment therefore it was more a case of recruiting an individual community group rather than volunteers. This was employed on a first come first served basis with the

obvious caveat of meeting the necessary criteria. In the event the communities chosen (with the host organisation in brackets) were:

- Blackhall (Blackhall Community Association)
- Murton (Spyral)
- Thornley (Thornley Methodist Chapel)
- Shotton (Shotton Partnership)

Each organisation confirmed that they had identified volunteers from their respective communities who would be involved in the project.



Three of the Blackhall Snow Squad ready for action

There were interesting contrasts in how the groups chose to engage their volunteers, this included the recruitment of volunteers from existing community groups (Murton), the recruitment of new volunteers (Thornley and Blackhall) and a mixture of the two (Shotton).

There were also contrasts in relation to the age and gender profile of the volunteers. Initial thoughts as to the likelihood of the project being dominated by men for example were quickly dispelled. Similarly original expectations of this not being the kind of project that would attract younger volunteers were proven to be unfounded. Profiles could be described as:

Shotton – predominantly female, mixed ages.

Thornley – mixed gender, young to middle aged.

Blackhall – mixed, two young men, one young woman, one middle aged male.

Murton – all middle aged men.

"We recruited four volunteers - we expected that they would be mature gentlemen with time on their hands - we were so wrong!"

Alison Paterson, Blackhall Community Association

Individual profiles included the recruitment of:

- A young man who was a student at a local college and whose career aspirations involved the RAF.
- An aerobics/Pilates teacher from a local community centre who felt she could give some time to the project.
- An ex-miner who felt he had time on his hands and wanted to be 'kept busy'.
- A young lady who had by her own description 'gone off the rails' and had experienced problems with the authorities.

What became clear at the outset was that volunteers themselves would benefit greatly from the project in terms of personal development and social inclusion (see section 'Added Value').

4.4 Training

Two volunteer training days were held at East Durham Trust on 17th December 2010 and 13th January 2011.

The training had three elements, i.e.:

1. Induction to volunteering: Including legal implication, CRB checks etc.
2. Manual handling: Designed to cover the aspects of snow clearance etc. and delivered by an HSE approved tutor.
3. Referral information and protocols: The volunteers were given a range of information and guidance around services and agencies that would potentially benefit individuals as well as a selection of 'Do's and Don'ts' when dealing with vulnerable people.

Periodically throughout the project the selected 'Team Leaders' were brought together for update purposes.



*Qualified HSE
training delivered to
the volunteers*

4.5 Delivery Models

All four groups approached the project in slightly different ways. Much of the approach was dictated by the availability of the volunteers which varied from group to group and indeed volunteer to volunteer.

The spread for this included:

- Murton (daily).
- Thornley (selected days).
- Shotton (daily).
- Blackhall (selected slots on various days, usually Wednesday mornings).

East Durham Trust was not over prescriptive with the groups in recognition of the fact that the project was by nature developmental and there was a learning element expected.



Groups met on a regular basis to decide upon a routine for the week and also complete diary sheets

In general there was a common practice of meeting daily to decide upon a routine, however there were various approaches to this theme ranging from formal (Shotton who strategically highlighted some key areas from the outset) to spontaneous (Murton who took referrals from a Council Member for example).

"After recruiting the volunteers and discussing the project, it was highlighted that the clearing of pathways for vulnerable people would be helpful but would only enable them to reach their front gates. The squad decided to improve accessibility for more people in Shotton by targeting vital links to facilities such as the Post Office, School, Doctors Surgery, shops and community buildings which provide social activities, i.e. Community Centre, Alcote House, and I.T. Centre. There were a number of other areas identified including the Wooden Bridge and Victoria Showground."

Rona Hardy, Shotton Partnership

At a mid point in the project East Durham Trust became aware of funding available from a one-off crisis fund which was specifically for hot meal provision – something which could significantly enhance the project. A bid was submitted to County Durham Community Foundation which meant 320 hot meals could be provided. Two of the partners, Blackhall and Shotton ran Community Cafes and were therefore well positioned to provide a food delivery service by utilising the Snow Squad volunteers; this addition (see 'Added Value') was a significant factor in the approaches adopted by the two squads in question.



Food delivery to an Aged Miners home

5. Impact (what was achieved)

Between the four groups just over 120 individual snow clearing activities took place during the lifespan of the project.

It should be noted that although snow clearance was the initial concern the general cold climate was equally problematic for a number of vulnerable people. Indeed, it was only in the initial stages of the three month period that snow featured.

Snow was cleared from:

- Paths of individual residents.
- Outside the Post Offices (Murton and Shotton).
- Outside of the Chemist (Shotton and Thornley).
- Around Community Centres (Blackhall).
- Around old people's homes (Murton, Shotton, Thornley and Blackhall).
- Other identified hot spots (e.g. 'the wooden bridge', Shotton).

16 Volunteers were recruited.

16 Volunteers were trained.

392 individuals assisted by way of one or more of the following and on one or more occasion:

- Improved access.
- Shopping collected.
- Prescription collected.
- Medical appointments arranged or re-arranged.
- Assisted with form filling (including Census).
- Phone cards topped up.
- Yards cleared of recyclable waste.
- Families contacted with specific messages.

"During the project lifespan the telephone lines went down in Shotton due to cable theft. This meant that many people were left with mobiles as their only means of communication. Unfortunately the top up services in local shops ran out but the volunteers drove to neighbouring villages to top up peoples phones"

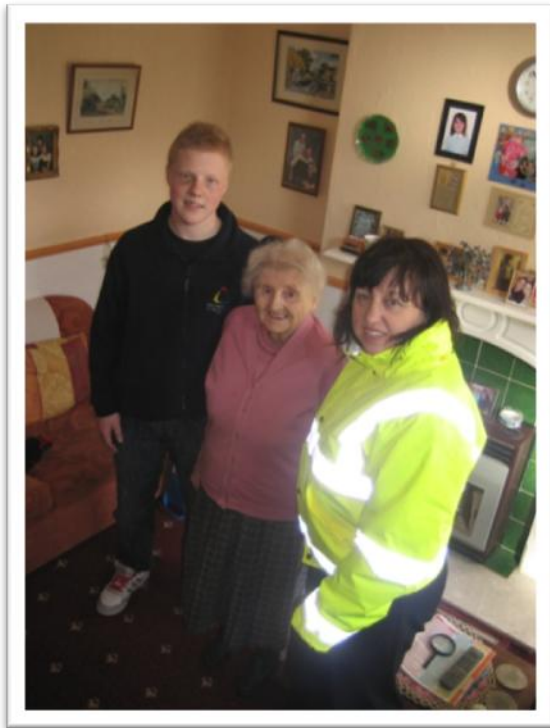
Abby Thompson, East Durham Trust

Although some of the above instances may appear relatively minor it is clear from the reports that they had a major impact upon the personal circumstances of the individual beneficiaries.

In addition to the 392 individuals mentioned above, a further 320 received hot meals which were delivered to their homes.

6. ADDED VALUE.

Perhaps the most significant example of added value brought by the Snow Squads project was the securing of a further sum of money (£1419.50), from County Durham Community Foundation's Winter Relief Fund supported by the Northern Echo. This allowed for the supply and provision of 320 hot meals to homes of isolated and socially excluded people. Without the existence of the Snow Squad teams in Shotton and Blackhall and the established infrastructure that the volunteers offered it would not have been possible to justify the bid.



"One of our ladies said "I am 89 years old and no one has ever helped me like this" she was absolutely over the moon with the service. She cried with happiness almost every time we knocked and spoke with her. It was often the highlight of her day. She lives a few doors away from a member of staff and she had waited for her to come home so she could tell her how happy she was."

Alison Paterson Blackhall Community Association

The other main examples of added value would include the unintended outcomes element. Whilst the project proposal concentrated on snow clearance it soon became clear that the majority of the vulnerable and socially excluded people with whom the project was coming into contact were vulnerable regardless of the weather conditions and their needs were varied, (see the examples listed under 'Impact' section of this report).

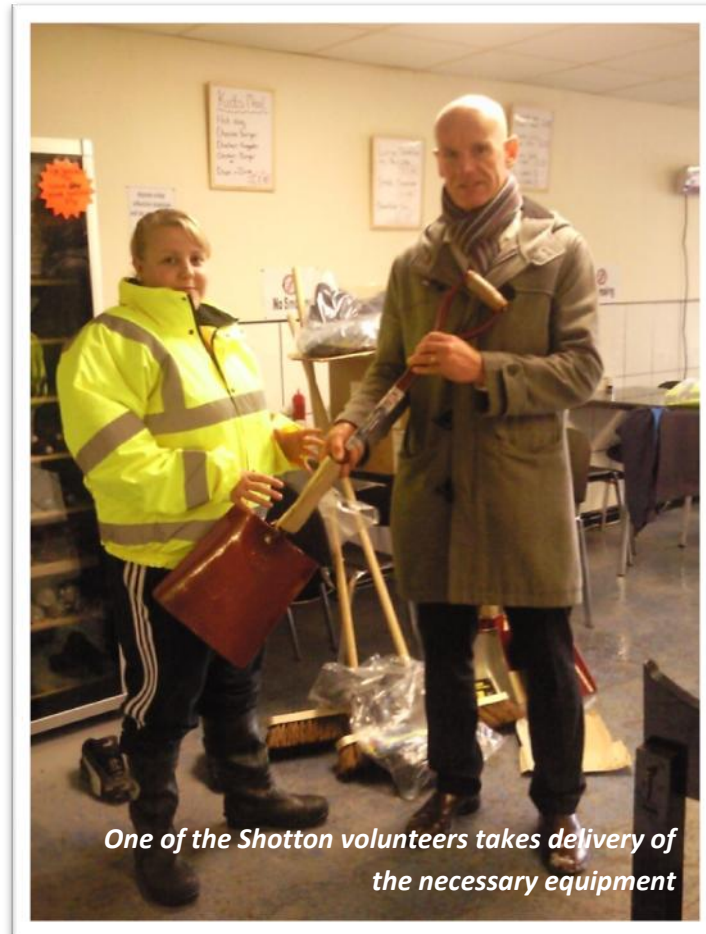
A significant and valuable additional outcome of the project can be found in the form of post-project legacies, this would include:

- The trained volunteers; all of whom have enhanced their personal CV's and some have gone on to other volunteering opportunities or employment.

"I am hoping to join the RAF and thought it would be good to get some experience like this but generally I like helping people where I live"

Nathan Wales, 18, Volunteer

- The contribution to the continued sustainability of the community buildings used as bases. This came not only in the simple form of room rental for the bases but also the contact between volunteers and isolated individuals which often led to awareness raising of community activity that people signed up to.
- The retention of the equipment (e.g. snow shovels) by the organisations.



Significantly, the project gave rise to consideration of other similar activities and indeed made a case for continuation and roll out. Specifically:

- The project has constantly featured in discussions of East Durham Area Action Partnership who have established 'Maintaining the Social Fabric of our Community' as a priority.
- The project was cited as evidence for the telephone 'CHIT CHAT' project which has successfully attracted support from the Health Network funding and will assist vulnerable people by way of telephone befriending.
- The project has featured in the rationale behind a proposal that EDT has submitted to three potential funders for a project which involves the provision of emergency food.

7. THE LESSONS LEARNED

As part of the evaluation process East Durham Trust staff, volunteers and beneficiaries' were asked to consider what, with hindsight, they had learned from the Snow Squad experience.

By far the most dominant response was centred on timing and the fact that although the project was successful the impact could have been far greater if the project had begun earlier and the volunteers were trained and in place 'before the bad weather hit'.

It was also suggested that establishing links with care services and health professionals would encourage referrals.

A number of respondents alluded to the fact that vulnerability and social exclusion are not a result of bad weather, many of the people who were supported are vulnerable 'all of the time' and there is a case for a year round version of the project.

Finally, and perhaps slightly tongue in cheek, one respondent suggested that a 4X4 vehicle would have been a valuable addition to the project!

Appendices

Appendix 1	Blank project involvement record
Appendix 2	Sample project involvement record
Appendix 3	Press coverage

Appendix 1 Blank Project Involvement Report

Appendix 2 Sample Project Involvement Record

Appendix 3 Press Coverage

