

If school is simply not working, we are here, says Bury charity

Innov8 Workshops helps young people struggling in mainstream education by providing one-to-one sessions with vocational mentors – and the need is so great they need to grow. *Barbara Eeles* reports.

Tucked away in a secluded corner of an industrial estate on the edge of a Suffolk town is an extraordinary enterprise where the focus is not on products, but on people.

Innov8 Workshops exists to enhance the lives of children and teenagers who for many different reasons are not succeeding in mainstream education.

They could have learning difficulties, mental health or anxiety issues, or be facing exclusion from school.

Innov8 aims to give them better prospects through one-to-one mentoring in activities from woodwork to mending bikes, cooking, art, music, hairdressing, horticulture, and functional maths and English.

They can learn a skill while building up a trusting relationship. The effect can be transformative.

Earlier this year a former office building was converted into a series of workshops where every week dozens of young people aged from 11 to 16 get the chance to work on their own with a mentor who gives them their undivided attention.

“One to one is important,” said Phil Shelley, chair of the charity’s trustees. “We know it makes a difference because the kids are completely different here.”

“Mentoring and vocational education together is quite an unusual combination.

“The alternative education system



Wood mentor Rory McKenzie works with a student

is growing. We get a lot of children with autism, ADD, school refusers, and some with unmanageable behaviour.”

Innov8 started life as Monkey Workshops during the Covid pandemic and was registered as a charity in March this year.

Soon afterwards it changed its name to innov8 Workshops and moved to a new site on the Rougham Industrial Estate on the outskirts of Bury St Edmunds to help it thrive and expand.

At the moment the team works with around 50 students a week, but

many reasons students come here. Exclusion isn’t at the top.

“A lot are here because there isn’t any specialist provision for them. A lot of the time we are a holding place. In some cases it’s because of mental health issues, anxiety, or emotionally-based school avoidance.

“We have the capacity to have seven in at once, plus horticulture, four times a day.”

Their one-to-one approach limits the numbers but allows each child a say in how they want to work which would not be possible in a group setting.

“It’s student-led provision to a certain degree, and if you have a group you can’t be student-led,” said Daniela.

“Apart from maths and English we encourage them to make their own decisions on what they want to work on.”

She said some of the children would be facing constant telling-off at school. “It’s nice to have this one-to-one respite which is just for them and all about them, and not to have to share that with someone else.”

Innov8’s new home feels calm and spacious with none of the hubbub of crowded spaces that some youngsters find distressing. Its sheltered position means you scarcely glimpse any of the neighbouring buildings.

But the week of their move it was a frantic hive of activity as everyone involved pitched in to get the new workshops ready on time.

“We were lucky to find this. It was



Operations director Daniela Symons and chair of trustees Phil Shelley
All pictures: Mecha Morton

too good an opportunity to miss,” said Phil. “It’s a fantastic location. We moved here at the beginning of the May half term and the kids came in a week later.

“It was a busy time setting up all the workshops. All the mentors helped set it up. We begged, borrowed. Our landlord did us a lease in a week.

All the mentors are employees and have relevant backgrounds plus safeguarding training. The charity is guided by its trustees, Phil and his three colleagues Nigel Gambier, Michael Walton and Teresa Selvey. Laura Walton provides admin support.

Innov8 Bike is led by Shaun Sivertson, who used to work at Model Junction in Bury. They are always looking for donations of bicycles in reasonable condition for students to work on, from simple maintenance to constructing wheels, or hydraulic brakes.

Occasionally they take on other jobs, like repairing a rotovator which will be used by Innov8 Outdoors, and they are also looking to do up bikes for Bury Drop-in.

Rory McKenzie is the wood mentor helping students make things including boxes, benches, boxes, or anything else they want to try.

“We aren’t trying to make stuff to sell. It’s for them and their family, taking something back they have made – and we have a lot of kit now, so there is no shortage of things they can do,” said Daniela. “They also do things like putting up shelves, and helped to make the wooden cabinets the machines are standing on.”



Cookery mentor Scott Broad in the new kitchen at Innov8 Workshops



Arts mentor Piers Symons surrounded by students' work



The well-equipped bike workshop



Mentor Nick May in the music workshop



Ross Douglas in the wood workshop

Music students are mentored by Nick May, who helps them with everything sound-related, from writing and producing their own music, to making podcasts. They have also produced their first album.

In the art workshop, where students’ work covers the walls, mentor Piers Symons coaches them in skills including drawing and painting, photography, videography and fuse-bead work, with their imaginations given free rein.

Stencilling was one of the most popular things, said Piers.

“The kids are diamonds and they absolutely love it. When they are sitting there doing something and you don’t have eye contact, you can have better conversations with them.”

In the brand new kitchen, Scott Broad shares his skills with youngsters, most of whom have never cooked before, with the smell of their creations wafting temptingly through the building.

“It’s like the hub of the workshops,” said Daniela. “A

student will be cooking up there and towards the end of their session they will call everyone on the radio and we all have to go and try it.

“Last week we all had eggs Benedict together. They’ve also made gnocchi, macaroni cheese, lasagne and lovely desserts.”

Ross Douglas mentors in functional maths and English which can guide students towards gaining basic skills and boost Innov8’s ambition to move towards helping them achieve some qualifications. He also helps in the wood workshop,

Innov8 Outdoors is led by Jane Dow who does Forest School and outdoor work in the walled garden at St Edmundsbury Cathedral. “It’s so calming. They can potter about, and do some horticultural work,” said Daniela. They are also setting up an allotment site.

Latest addition to the staff is Melanie Pettit, who starts this month as a mentor in the salon. She is qualified in hair and beauty, has been working in a pupil referral unit, and previously taught barbering at Highpoint Prison.

There are two other team members who are very popular with students – Rory’s spaniel Olly, and Daniela’s dog Buddy. Students are allowed to walk them with their mentors if they need a break.

Students come from a wide area including Bury, Haverhill, Stowmarket, Sudbury, Newmarket, Thetford, and Diss. “We are now a Suffolk County Council approved alternative provider which means they can also send children direct to us,” said Phil.

“We have one 16-plus at the moment and are looking forward to doing more post-16.

“We are trying to give children qualifications that allow them to go to college or even work, or go back to school. If we can find something they are really interested in, it helps with their mental health.

“Each session is one and a half hours, but they might have three back to back.

“Our aspiration is to have more workshops. We are planning and thinking ahead about expansion. We are always looking for mentors and would like to talk to anyone who has an idea for a workshop.”

Funding comes from a variety of sources. “All the people who send children here pay us,” said Phil. The county council is responsible for children who have been excluded from school.

Income also comes through grants and donations including from West Suffolk community chest fund, Suffolk police and crime commissioner, the National Lottery, Suffolk Community Foundation, and individuals. “People are very generous, we couldn’t be here without their support,” he added.

Education experts are due soon to carry out research at Innov8, which they hope will provide proof that their approach works.

“Cambridge University’s Faculty of Education is about to do a study on us. They do a lot of research and it is a good opportunity for them to explore alternative education.

“We are trying to make it work, prove it works, and make sure everyone understands it works,” Phil said.

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