

## Evaluation of the GRIT Experience 2

### Executive Summary

23rd April 2012



### The GRIT Experience

*I appreciate everything and everyone a lot more now...*

*I don't judge people anymore... GRIT made me more confident in all*

*aspects of my life... No words can describe it...*

*I would recommend GRIT to anyone who had the problems I had...*

**During GRIT I had a clear head for the first time in years...**

*It was a life changer...*

**It was absolutely brilliant... GRIT turned my life around...**

*"The resounding success of the GRIT Experience 2 is testament to the importance of supporting initiatives which ensure the most marginalised of our young people are given opportunities to fulfil their potential. This work takes on even greater significance by challenging attitudes and behaviours which negatively impact on community relations. The challenge is now for policy makers to assess the impacts of the GRIT Experience 2, and consider the potential for mainstreaming the very successful delivery mechanism which underpins the initiative."*

**Dr Adrian Johnston, Chairman, International Fund for Ireland**



*Through Neighbourhood Renewal, DSD recognises the importance of social renewal to improve social conditions for people who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland. Young people play an important role in this renewal process.*

*The positive outcomes of the GRIT Experience 2 cannot be fully measured by statistics but will transpire in the positive effect it has had on the young people's lives. This initiative has played a vital role in providing support to young people to help them realise their potential in all aspects of life, whilst developing the ethos of shared communities where people learn, live and work together.*

**Michael McAvoy, Deputy Director, Department for Social Development**



## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Our headline findings

*“Without the GRIT Experience my life would have taken a very different path. I learned so much about myself and am looking to a positive future for me and my family. Without GRIT I don’t think I would still be here.”* GRIT Experience participant

The GRIT Experience targets young people who are substantially disadvantaged and who are at risk of becoming marginalised from their community and wider society. The GRIT Experience specifically targets those young people considered Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) or at risk of becoming so. It is delivered through a one week intensive personal development and skills-based residential, followed by one-to-one mentoring.

### Our conclusions:

- the GRIT Experience has succeeded in reaching and engaging the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people from different communities across Northern Ireland. Referral agencies who share a belief in the young people’s potential have assisted this ‘reach’;
- the initiative has encouraged the young people to think more positively about their futures and provide the confidence and life skills to cope with unexpected events and to challenge themselves in reaching their full potential;
- remarkably 100 per cent of participants engaged initially on the programme have successfully completed the intensive residential. This is an even more striking achievement when the target group of young people face barriers including the legacy of the conflict, long term unemployment, health problems, addictions, teenage pregnancy, self harming, suicide, sexual abuse, violence, poverty and involvement in social care and the justice system;
- the rationale for assisting disadvantaged young people through the GRIT Experience is significant given the unprecedented levels of youth unemployment and associated issues;
- the GRIT Experience has helped young people who were NEET move into education, employment or training. It has also prevented those identified as at risk of becoming NEET, by helping them stay in education or training;
- given the impact of the intervention, the challenge of youth unemployment and NEETs and the potential costs to society, a Social Return on Investment analysis found the £270,000 invested in delivering GRIT Experience Phase 2 gave a return of £1.2 million;
- the programme has developed understanding between young people from the two main communities and has created relationships that have continued beyond the programme;
- the initiative plays a key role in preparing young people for the next stage of their development. Partners working in this area are vital in sustaining longer term support.

### We recommend:

- that the GRIT Experience be one of the options availed of by Government as it responds to the challenge of a growing NEETs population, in particular the most marginalised;
- a strategic and urgent effort in engaging and informing policy makers and practitioners. It is anticipated that Trustees and ex-participants should participate in this effort;
- the GRIT Experience Programme Delivery Handbook be used as a key tool to support and influence policy and practice; and
- deepening understanding of how the mentoring aspect can be developed and applied.

## 1.1. What is the GRIT Experience?

The GRIT Experience is an initiative which commenced in 2008 which targets young people who are substantially disadvantaged, who face major barriers to progress positively in their lives and who are at risk of becoming dislocated from their community and wider society and who, in the main, have experienced the failure of the education system. The GRIT Experience specifically targets those young people considered Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET.

It has been delivered by The Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust which is a local charitable organisation setup in 2006 to promote the recognition that many young people face a range of barriers to progress in their lives. The Trust was established to promote the needs of this group and to provide a means of supporting them to achieve their potential. The GRIT Experience programme has been the main delivery mechanism to date that the Trust has promoted to achieve its aims. The prime delivery agent is Opportunity Youth, who with the GRIT Trustees, has been key to the design and development of the GRIT Experience.

The GRIT Experience is delivered through a one week intensive personal development and skills-based residential, followed by one-to-one mentoring. It supports young people to assess where they are in their lives, to review the choices they have made to date and to encourage, support and motivate them to consider the life choices they can make in the future. It does not profess to solve the underlying issues for the young people but rather provides a toolkit and the life skills to support them to cope and make better decisions for themselves.

The purpose of this evaluation is to undertake an independent assessment of the GRIT Experience intervention and prepare a report on the effectiveness of the GRIT Experience 2 with particular emphasis on the evidence and learning of the intervention. These findings will support the GRIT Experience Trustee Board with its mission to offer the GRIT Experience to as many disadvantaged young people as possible throughout Northern Ireland.

## 1.2. What environment has the GRIT Experience been operating in?

Youth unemployment is one of the biggest challenges facing Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland the proportion is higher than the UK average with more than one in five young people here (n = c. 50,000) classed as NEET. Whilst the recent economic downturn has compounded these levels, further analysis highlights a longer-term structural problem with growth in the number of NEET young people growing year on year in Northern Ireland since 2000. The unprecedented levels of youth unemployment in the current economic climate combined with the longer-term structural problem indicates a higher proportion of young people will fall into the most disadvantaged category (i.e. long-term NEET).

The economic and social costs of dealing with these issues are enormous. Beyond the financial costs are the higher prices of wasted potential, underachievement, low self-esteem, depression and in some tragic cases, early death and suicide. The consequence of this challenge has been described as “*a crisis we cannot afford*”<sup>1</sup>.

The GRIT Experience is not alone in seeking a solution to the NEET problem and by itself could not be expected to solve it. The GRIT Experience has proven to be effective in changing the behaviour and direction of young people most at risk (see section 1.4). Importantly, it has been the start of a longer journey of re-engaging the young people in mainstream processes (including existing training provision, volunteering programmes and employment) and encouraging them to make more positive decisions for their future wellbeing. This is evidenced through findings from the evaluation of the GRIT Experience 1 and the GRIT Experience 2.

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<sup>1</sup> The Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) Commission on Youth Unemployment: the crisis we cannot afford (2012)

The importance of encouraging, motivating and providing opportunities for disadvantaged young people to aspire towards a better future is evident within the various economic, strategic and policy documents across the Executive including those related to children and young people, social development, health, education and employment. During the evaluation period a number of key developments within Government policy have also taken place, particularly relating to the draft Programme for Government, the developing NEET strategy (Pathways to Success) and the draft policy on Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. Alongside these approaches, client focused interventions such as the GRIT Experience help fill the inevitable gaps, with young people who struggle to 'fit' the services.

### 1.3. How has the GRIT Experience performed?

Between April 2008 and February 2012 the GRIT Experience has operated 18 times and supported 270 young people over two phases. Phase 1 ran until March 2010 engaging 123 young people and Phase 2 completed in March 2012 engaging 147 young people. In relation to GRIT Experience 2 it has met or exceeded all of its key operational targets set within its funding contracts with the International Fund for Ireland (the Fund) and the Department for Social Development (DSD).

- **It engages and retains participants** - one of the most striking achievements of the GRIT Experience is that 100 per cent of participants (n = 270) engaged initially on the programme have successfully completed the intensive residential. While there are no direct comparators this retention rate is strong compared with other programmes working with young people facing similar challenges;
- **It is a region-wide initiative** - the spread of participants on GRIT covers 20 of the 26 Local Government Districts (LGDs) in Northern Ireland.
- **It works with marginalised young people often from the most disadvantaged areas** During GRIT Experience 1 the initiative successfully targeted young people who were on the verge of becoming NEET. The GRIT Experience 2 engaged more young people outside of mainstream training programmes. Indeed increasing numbers of young people engaged on GRIT Experience 2 have been referred through agencies within the youth, care and criminal justice setting. This has led to an increased uptake of young people who are already NEET. In addition 39 per cent (n = 58) also live within Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs).
- **It is cross-community** - there has been progress between the interim and final reporting stage with a movement between 29 per cent and 39 per cent Unionist uptake. This is particularly successful given broader challenges of engaging with young Protestant males in Northern Ireland<sup>2</sup>.
- **The residential is not the end** - The residential is the start of a journey rather than the journey itself for its young participants. That support doesn't end with the completion of the residential is another factor that has contributed to the programme's success. There is also important mentoring as the young people return to their normal surroundings in the period post-residential. Mentors are 'in-tune' with the young people and often become role models for them. This aspect of the programme, can be a major contributor to the longer term success of the intervention for young people at a time in their lives when the right intervention can have most significance.

The background / profile of the young people referred onto the programme highlights complex and multi-stranded challenges, often from when they were very young. Many of the young people have had personal or close experience and exposure to:

- Suicide / suicidal attempts or self-harm;
- Bullying, fighting and gang activity;

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<sup>2</sup> For evidence of this see Educational Underachievement and the Protestant Working Class: A summary of research for consultation (2011) Issued by Dawn Purvis MLA and the Working Group on Educational Underachievement and the Protestant Working Class

- Physical and mental abuse;
- Underachievement at school and expulsion;
- Broken homes;
- Drug and alcohol abuse; and
- Crime and trouble with the authorities.

**The profile of participants and the challenges they have faced in their young lives provides the context for how well the GRIT Experience has performed.**

#### 1.4. What impact has the GRIT Experience had?

The evaluation has brought together a range of evidence which collectively highlights the impact of the GRIT Experience. This has included feedback from the young people themselves through consultation and with key referral organisations including those from training, youth, care and criminal justice settings.

For the participants themselves through a combination of physical, emotional and social challenge GRIT has positively influenced their attitudes and behaviours. This includes:

- **supporting the young people to believe in themselves** - 100 per cent (n = 23) of young people consulted as part of the final evaluation indicated GRIT had given them more confidence in themselves. Using questions guided by recognised approach<sup>3</sup> all the young people indicated a positive influence of the GRIT Experience on their mental well-being. All the agencies indicated increased confidence and self esteem as a key impact on the young people when they returned to their setting;
- **showing the value of respect, both to themselves and others** – 95 per cent (n = 22) of young people consulted as part of the final evaluation indicated GRIT had given them a greater understanding of other religions and backgrounds. There are many examples of friendships continuing beyond the programme;
- **providing opportunities to test themselves and importantly to achieve, often for the first time in their lives** – retention of all young people across the 5 day residential is significant for the GRIT Experience. This achievement is even more significant for the young people themselves. This manifests itself in the longer term with increased commitment and motivation from participants in terms of attendance, participation and engagement on training courses where that was applicable;
- **changing attitudes, behaviours and mindsets in relation to their ambitions and aspirations** – 100 per cent (n = 23) of young people indicated during consultation that GRIT had helped them make decisions about their future. In addition, 95 per cent (n = 22) feel more confident about the future and can now see more opportunities for themselves. Ten of the 23 young people consulted were classed as NEET prior to GRIT with only one of those continuing to be in the NEET category. Eight are now in education / training programmes and one is in part-time employment. Seven referral organisations consulted reported that out of 99 young people considered at risk of dropping-out of training and education, only one dropped-out in the period following participation on the GRIT Experience; and
- **Supporting improved relationships with peers and with families** – 83 per cent (n = 19) of young people indicated improved relationships with friends and family following the GRIT Experience. Referral organisations also confirmed improved relationships with staff and peers following the GRIT Experience.

“GRIT made me more confident in all aspects of my life”

“I don’t judge people anymore”

“I use what I learnt everyday in school – contributing more and not being shy”

“I appreciate everyone and everything a lot more now”

“I talk to my younger sister about her feelings now”

<sup>3</sup> The Warwickshire-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWEBS)

The evaluation has highlighted positive behavioural and attitudinal change amongst participants engaged. The case studies in particular highlight the individual impacts of the initiative – **put simply it has been a key intervention in saving a number of the young people's lives.**

It has cost on average £1,835 per young person to deliver the GRIT Experience based on an overall cost of £270k to send 147 young people on the initiative. A relatively small amount when compared to estimates on:

- The cost of housing a prisoner (£95,000 per prisoner per year in NI<sup>4</sup>).
- The cost of a young person taking their own life (£1.4 million per suicide<sup>5</sup>).
- The cost of youth unemployment to the economy (estimated to be £90 million for Northern Ireland and likely to cost the UK exchequer almost £5 billion in 2012).
- The cost of youth crime (estimated to be £1.2 billion a year to the UK economy<sup>6</sup>).
- The cost of depression caused by underachievement in school (estimated to cost the NHS up to £28 million a year).

The social return on investment undertaken as part of the evaluation quantifies the economic and social value of the GRIT Experience. In total, across the initiative the social value has been calculated as approximately £1.2 million or £4.49 for every £1 invested. Whilst it is difficult to accurately predict the effect of an increased scale on the programme these figures would indicate significant returns on investment and would likely be increased by additional economies of scale as a result of scalability (e.g. average costs of elements reducing as numbers of participants increased).

**CASE STUDY 1 – Participant A attended a residential in June 2010 during GRIT Experience 2 She is 18, from Belfast, and has had a difficult start to life. She became involved with drugs and alcohol at a young age but with the help of the GRIT Experience she has started to turn her life around.**

Participant A left mainstream education at the age of 14 as she was engrossed in drinking alcohol and taking drugs. Eventually she was kicked out of home by her mother and having nowhere else to go she slept on a friend's sofa. Her life hit rock bottom when she was caught stealing and was given community service by the police. She was very distressed and with no education or career prospects thought she had no future. At this point, Participant A was at her lowest, was self-harming and started to experience suicidal thoughts.

She was referred onto the GRIT Experience in 2010 through a drug and alcohol awareness programme she was attending as a result of the community service. On the residential itself she developed personal skills, gained increased confidence and completing the week gave her a sense of achievement she had never experienced before. She then attended 10 mentoring sessions where she talked through what she wanted to do and got advice on training courses available for her. The mentor was also able to talk to her about her living situation.

The GRIT Experience has provided a platform for Participant A to go back into training. Since attending the GRIT Experience she has completed the Springboard directions course and is undertaking an Essential Skills course through a local youth organisation. Her home life has changed dramatically as well with her currently living in sheltered accommodation with Barnardos – an application she was supported through by her GRIT Experience mentor.

She said *“Without GRIT I would have had no reason to stop the drugs and self-harming and it's as simple as this - if it wasn't for GRIT I'd either be dead, in jail or in hospital”.*

<sup>4</sup> Review of the NI Prison Service – Interim Report February 2011

<sup>5</sup> Protect Life – A Shared Vision – The Northern Ireland Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan 2006 - 2011

<sup>6</sup> PTNI and RBS - Cost of Exclusion survey (December 2010)

**CASE STUDY 2 – Participant B attended a residential in 2009 during GRIT Experience 1. Participant B, from Belfast had been bullied at school which eventually led to her being expelled, leaving with no qualifications. After completing the GRIT Experience she has carried out a range of volunteering roles and continues to seek employment.**

As a result of being diagnosed with ADHD at 13, Participant B found school difficult and became a target for bullies. She would often react angrily and as her behaviour worsened, she was expelled from school at the age of 15. She attended an alternative education scheme in her local areas but the challenges continued after she lost her cousin and a friend to suicide. She didn't know where to turn. She was depressed and frustrated, didn't believe she had a future and attempted to take her own life.

Her referral to the GRIT Experience came through the alternative education provider – in her own words *“GRIT came at the right time – my behaviour was getting worse again and I was spiralling out of control”*.

Participant B was apprehensive about the GRIT Experience. Due to her difficult time at school and the isolation she suffered, she was used to being on her own and was intimidated at first by the thought of spending time away with strangers. As the week progressed however she learnt more about herself and talking to others learnt how to deal with things more easily. She talked about the satisfaction of helping others when they were struggling, describing the feeling as *“a buzz”*.

After attending GRIT Participant B met with her mentor on twelve occasions, discussing how she was feeling and what she needed to do to achieve her ambitions. She stated *“it felt good to know that my mentor was always there to talk to and support me”*.

It has now been more than two years since Participant B attended the GRIT experience. She is bubbly and polite and described herself as *“feeling great and really positive about life”*. Due to the medication she needs to take for her ADHD she is unable to maintain a full-time job but has carried out a range of volunteering work including in a care home and through a local youth organisation. She also commented that whilst she continues to drink alcohol *“GRIT continues to be at the back of my mind and I really try to not drink too much”*. She also states that alcohol intake is because she wants to rather than feeling she *“needs to too block out the pain”*.

On using the lessons she learnt on GRIT she said: *“I learned how to deal with things more easily, for example, if I get stressed out now I write it down and take time to think through it rather than fly off the handle. I also know there are people out there who want to help me and I'm not dealing with things by myself.”*

## **1.5. Conclusions**

Based on our analysis of findings, we have identified a number of strategic and operational recommendations for the GRIT Trustee Board and key stakeholders. These are presented below our conclusions.

- The rationale for providing assistance to disadvantaged young people through the GRIT Experience is valid and strengthened by the current challenges faced by the unprecedented levels of youth unemployment across the UK.
- The recent AVECO report on youth unemployment presents a vision to challenge the youth unemployment crisis across the UK. Findings within the evaluation would position the GRIT Experience within the preparation / development stage of this vision *“focussing more on (a) those most at risk of long-term unemployment and (b) giving them what they need to progress”*.



- The GRIT Experience has provided an opportunity to engage participants from across Northern Ireland and is proven to have focused, targeted and been successful in engaging hard to reach groups (e.g. engagement of young Protestants). It is a regional initiative, it has worked with marginalised young people from disadvantaged areas and it is a cross-community intervention.
- Given the evidence of impact of the intervention, the scale of the challenge of youth unemployment and NEETs and the potential costs to society of not dealing with the consequent issues, evidence indicates the GRIT Experience provides stakeholders with significant returns on investment.
- The GRIT Experience has proven to be a cost-effective intervention in supporting marginalised young people already out of the system or likely to fall out of the system. Collaborative working between the community and voluntary sector and the statutory sector remains desirable in helping vulnerable young people, particularly given the increased pressure on using resources in the most efficient and effective way. The initiative plays an important role in preparing young people for the next stage of their development, building confidence and self esteem. Positive collaboration with other strategic and operational partners working in this area is vital in sustaining support for the young people in the longer term.
- We recognise that mentoring has been an area of continued focus for the GRIT Experience over its lifetime. When it is taken up by participants it is effective in providing ongoing support to the young people as they return to their lives. Although they cannot be forced to avail of it, a structure has developed whereby uptake has increased. In addition, the Programme Delivery Handbook provides a clear process through which the impact of mentoring can be maximised in terms of promotion of its availability throughout the GRIT Experience, management of caseloads for mentors and an outline of the support that should be provided at different stages of the offering.

## 1.6. Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Strategic direction**

We recommend that the GRIT Experience be one of the options availed of by Government as it responds to the challenge of a growing NEETs population. As is highlighted across the evaluation the GRIT Experience engages with key strategies relating to children and young people, health, employment, training, education, crime prevention and good relations. While alone the GRIT Experience cannot solve the NEET problem it can play a key role in supplementing and complementing other efforts, in particular in targeting the most disadvantaged.

### **Recommendation 2: Influencing policy and practice**

Given the conclusion on the effectiveness of the GRIT Experience model there needs to be a strategic and urgent effort in engaging and informing policy makers and practitioners. It is anticipated that Trustees and ex-participants should participate in this effort. We recommend this is done at various levels:

- engagement with elected representatives from across all parties, raising awareness, encouraging debate and developing commitment to applying the intervention's approach within key fora (e.g. DEL Committee);
- engagement with officials in Departments and officers in relevant agencies should be targeted for sharing of views on policy and operational learning;
- it would be appropriate given certain relationships, skills and experiences for specific Trustees to be tasked with sharing the learning / engaging with key individuals within certain sectors;
- respond to consultations on relevant strategies (e.g. Pathways to Success)
- encouraging attendance at GRIT Experience celebration events;

- the young people should be encouraged and facilitated to share stories of the success of the initiative. This can provide powerful messages to policy makers and could act as an inspiration to other young people in addressing and seeking support;
- a key tool to support influence of policy and practice should be the GRIT Experience Programme Delivery Handbook. This handbook has been designed to prescribe the content and delivery of the model, including the certification processes and the quality standards (i.e. staffing, training, mentoring and administration etc) required for its successful widespread delivery; and
- consideration should be given to an online resource for referral organisations and programme delivery staff to engage and share knowledge relating to operational lessons. Finding effective ways to share knowledge, experience and practice and sustaining these relationships into the longer term could be valuable for any future phases of the initiative.

### **Recommendation 3: Operational Issues**

At an operational level the following recommendations are made:

- consideration should be given to the development of a multi-disciplinary plan for every participant in order to present a continuum of support between young people and collaborative partners. This could include, for example, Prince's Trust, Business in the Community and the Washington Ireland Fund.
- the GRIT Trustee Board should also continue to build and establish relationships with potential collaborative partners in order to support the development of multi-disciplinary plans for disadvantaged and marginalised young people. This should include understanding where key interface points occur with existing and developing mainstream programmes including DELs Learner Access and Engagement Programme and others developed through Pathways to Success.
- we recognise that positive developments have been made with regards mentoring. However, understanding good practice principles in mentoring and shaping how this could work in different settings (i.e. with different age groups, etc) will also continue to be important for the initiative. This should include clear guidelines to ensure consistency in delivery and quality of mentoring support for participants in the period post-residential.

### **Disclaimer**

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