

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

tackling truancy

The Lattice Group has developed an innovative way of encouraging school-age teenagers who play truant or are excluded from lessons back into education. Its Lattice Cred project shows how companies can work in partnership with the public sector to raise educational standards

The Lattice Group, through its corporate social responsibility arm, the Lattice Foundation, has long taken a keen interest in trying to tackle some of the UK's most pressing social problems, particularly those connected to the improvement of educational and employment opportunities.

So it was with relish that in the late 1990s it began to look at ways of helping to reduce the amount of truancy and school exclusions in the Reading area, where Lattice now has offices.

RELATING EDUCATION MORE CLOSELY TO WORK

One of the major outcomes of the Foundation's deliberations was the creation, in 1999, of what is now known as Lattice Cred (short for Creative Education), an innovative scheme that aims to help disaffected 14-16 year-olds who have become bored with education to rediscover their enthusiasm for learning through a work-related curriculum more suited to their interests.

The three-year-old Cred project has grown to become one of the most important elements of Lattice's work in the field of corporate social responsibility.

Lattice Cred operates from a learning centre within The Leasing Group, part of the Lattice Group. Lattice is one of three successor companies to the former British Gas plc. Tom Melvin, the chief executive of the Leasing Group, has been the driving force behind the scheme. Each year, around 50 teenagers are referred to the centre from six local feeder schools. From then on, they spend three days a week at the centre developing literacy and numeracy skills to gain vocational qualifications in business studies, and the other two days in work-experience placements of their own choice at local businesses such as building firms, car mechanics, hotels and shops. This work-related curriculum enables them to apply the skills they are learning.

The venture is a partnership between Lattice, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Reading borough council. It is the first such partnership involving a company, the DfES and a local authority.

Lattice, through the Lattice Foundation, spent over £125,000 setting up the centre in the first year, but considerably less thereafter because of lower capital costs. The local authority provides the three teachers.

The attendance figure for the second intake of pupils was 85 per cent. This compares with an

the company

Lattice is one of three successor companies to the former British Gas plc. It provides, manages and services infrastructure for the utilities market.

Through the Lattice Foundation it:

- supports a women's training organization in the East End of London to help lone parents find jobs
- seconds Lattice staff to help tenants of the Braunstone estate in Leicester, central England, to manage the regeneration of their area
- has provided £1m to work with the Groundwork charity to create jobs around the country as part of the New Deal for young people
- has helped to train 50 young offenders as fork-lift truck drivers, with three-quarters of them finding jobs as a result and only three reoffending
- funds Transco Heat in Scotland to carry out energy surveys of social housing stock using New Deal trainees.

the background Each year, one million children in the UK play truant and more than 100,000 are excluded – 13,000 of them permanently.

estimated 40 per cent in their previous schools. Nearly two-thirds have so far gone on to get jobs, while another 16 per cent have entered traineeships and 11 per cent decided to pursue further education. An evaluation report from the National Foundation for Education Research

nearly two-thirds of pupils have gone on to get jobs and a further 27 per cent to further training or education

said the scheme had produced 'outstanding work' from the first cohort of students.

Given the rising social costs of truancy, interest from educationalists in Lattice Cred has been nationwide. Children taken out of school are referred to a pupil referral unit or have home tuition. Either option costs four times as much as mainstream schooling and results are usually poor.

For Lattice, and particularly The Leasing Group, the scheme has been deeply rewarding. Being intangible, the benefits cannot be quantified precisely, but Mary Harris, Lattice Foundation director stresses that this is not a charitable exercise. 'There are good business reasons for us to be involved. We believe sustained commercial success is only possible if the communities we serve



are also thriving, and Lattice Cred helps us improve the economic activity in the area where The Leasing Group operates. "We have a vested interest in raising educational achievement because we employ thousands of people around the country. We and our supply network need a well-educated workforce", Harris says.

The scheme has also improved links with local businesses that provide work placements and often gain good employees as a result. 'As potential suppliers or partners of The Leasing Group, it's useful to have their goodwill and support,' she says.

BUILDING BONDS BETWEEN PUPILS AND STAFF

Lattice did not set up the scheme for public relations reasons. Harris says the company has 'a deliberate policy of letting the news come out, rather than shouting about it at every stage'.

Even so, there have been PR benefits, including positive coverage in national newspapers, visits from ministers and mentions in speeches by David Blunkett, the former education secretary, now at the Home Office. Lattice Cred also won Business in the Community's Investors in Young People Award for 2001.

The effect on the 400 employees at The Leasing Group has also been marked. They are regularly updated about the progress of the scheme via the intranet and many have voluntarily given their time to support other out-of-hours activities linked to the centre, including mentoring.

One unlooked-for benefit was day-to-day contact between employees and pupils in the same building. 'Staff mix with the children in the canteen and sometimes this is where the mentoring starts', says

Tom Melvin. 'Talking to Leasing Group staff gives the pupils an understanding of the work environment and improves their confidence and social skills. Staff will tell you the first time pupils came in they wouldn't lift their eyes, but now they'll chat to people and are part of the whole establishment'. Lattice is now working with DfES and the city council to set up a similar venture in Peterborough – this time with £200,000 of government support and using Transco premises as a base. Lattice hopes that its trailblazing work in this field will be used as a model by other companies.

Further information: Mary Harris, Lattice Foundation director at mary.harris@lattice-group.com, or visit www.lattice-group.com

Lattice Cred produced 'outstanding work' from its first year's intake of students. The picture shows Nicola Gregson, the head of Lattice Cred, with a pupil at the learning centre within the headquarters of Lattice subsidiary The Leasing Group

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It is sometimes said that businesses are not in business to solve social problems, and that this is the job of government. However, when a social problem, in this case truancy and exclusion from school, affects the life of the community, it is in everyone's interests to try to solve it. The Lattice Group's response was to use its staff and some money to set up an effective school-based scheme for 50 teenagers, who are referred to it. The Group is now working with the DfES and the city council on a similar venture in Peterborough.

Some outstanding features are:

- Leadership from senior management, including the CEO
- Partnership between company, local authority, schools and government
- Practical involvement in the community
- Changes in pupils' attitudes and behaviour
- 'Portability' of the scheme, which could be adopted by other companies, including those within the Lattice Group.

SIMON WEBLEY, INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS