

National CU Conference – Opening Speech

Thank you for that brief introduction, Ger, and a welcome from me – and all the CU Trustees – to you all. It is a great pleasure to be here with you at this third National Conference.

This is my first National Conference – although I did attend a national Regional CU Managers meeting in Manchester back in June this year – when Ger was predicting that Holland would be in the final of the World Cup – most of us thought he was crazy..... But he had the last laugh over us poor England supporters.

So at this, my first National Conference, I am taking the opportunity give each of you, and the CU movement as a whole, reasons to be optimistic and ambitious in these times of austerity, belt-tightening, and uncertainty.

In creating reasons for being bold, we must start with the essential purpose of the CU. To para-phrase well quoted observation from prospective several American Presidents when they have been trying to focus their campaigns – “It’s the Children, stupid”.

I became involved with the CU Trustees just over twelve months ago but the event that inspired me most in those early months was my attendance at the graduation Ceremony for the children at the Birmingham CU in March this year. It was convenient for me to attend this Graduation as I was still working in Birmingham at the time.

Well most of you have attended such events so I do not need to describe how uplifting they are; but for me – as my first taste of the outcomes of your work - I was enthralled. The sheer joy of the kids, the pride of their parents and the delight of their teachers at the impact that the CU had had on the children in their care was overwhelming.

The children too described what their involvement in the CU had meant to them. It was clear that the intent of the CU to enable children to discover new interests, to gain the discipline of self-directed learning, to raise their own aspirations about what they may do with their lives, and to build new companionships with other children – all these intents were fulfilled.

It is a well hackneyed phrase to state that “The Children are our future” – politicians and the media use it all too often. Nevertheless it is true.

The difference for us in the CU is that we put our energies into doing something practical and meaningful about this ambition, to build a better future for all our kids. There is a personal commitment from each person involved that generally goes “well beyond the call of duty”. The CU is a social movement – not primarily an organisation – although we do need some structure to help make it work.

As you know our CU slant is to help, particularly, those in the more deprived parts of our Society. So whilst we serve all children, we try to ensure that all have better chances to explore and to progress. We must sow the seeds of aspiration and ambition amongst children and their families, where it does not easily grow on its own, because the right ingredients are not readily available – for all sorts of reasons.

So whilst each of us can be moved by emotion, compassion or for the sheer love of helping kids develop – and all these are sufficient to make us work ever harder for the CU cause – there is a hard-headed approach too.

It is this hard-headed approach that we have to be able to demonstrate to our many funders and to our political leaders. So results and analysis are important. This is why the CU Trustees have invested in independent evaluations of the CU activity from Professor John MacBeath. You will hear more of these results later in this Conference.

So your success on the ground, translated into good measurements and good case stories, is essential for us to be able to persuade both Government and other funders to keep the show on the road. So when Ger or Andrea chases you for these numbers there is a long term purpose behind it.

So long term sustainability of the CU depends on us all working effectively together.

A clear structure for achieving this long term sustainability has evolved over the last four years.

The Foundation Stones are the collective set of local Childrens’ Universities. We have 62 (check) active as of today, and by next April our family should have grown to 75 (check). Each CU has its own distinctive character and structure. The core is the participating schools with their linked Higher Education Institution, these are supported in different ways by the Local Authorities and led by local CU Managers. Many CU managers have either no time allocated, or only a few hours per week, and

yet those CUs develop and flourish. This is an example of the commitment “beyond the call of duty” that I mentioned earlier.

The Schools provide the children for “out of Hours” learning. But what happens next? Well you all know about the importance of *Learning Destinations*, of *Passports to Learning* and the *Planning for Excellence* quality assurance structure. Together, these provide the opportunities for the children to explore, the means of easy recording of their learning and the guarantee to them and to others that the learning is meaningful and well constructed. These features provide a structure to the “franchise”, of which the CU Trustees are the guardians, the franchise under which each local CU operates. In this way our small central team enables the local CUs to be consistently effective and rewarding... for the children who participate. You can learn more about each of these elements of the “CU Franchise” at later sessions of this National Conference. Finally, the present economic climate means that those CUs heavily sponsored by Local Authorities are at risk, even though the Local Authorities wish the local CU activity to continue. So we have devised guidance, and some structures, that local CUs can consider adopting to enable themselves to be autonomous bodies whilst still having the involvement from all their partners, including Local Authorities. This takes the form of an organisational structure based in Charity Law. There is more information on this in the “Market Place” this afternoon.

So you can see that we are steering the evolvement of the CU and enabling it to find ways of adjusting to the new social and economic circumstances post 2010. We have “20 20 Vision”!!

We are able to support this continual process of development at the local level because we have a small, but very talented, team of four people, based in Manchester. At this point on behalf of you all, I welcome Peter Eavers to the CU movement – you can meet him over these next two days; I thank Andrea and Triinu for organising this Conference, and I thank Ger for his tireless energy, inspiration and leadership.

Very few of you will have met any CU Board members. You will be able to meet most of them over these two days and their photographs are in the first edition of “SeeYou” that you have in your pack. The position of the CU Trustees is very important even if it seems somewhat invisible to many of you. In organisational terms the Board of Trustees for the CU is the ultimate responsible body and Ger is accountable to us for all that he and his team get up to, and for stimulating all of you

to success in each of your CUs – both those in existence and those to come. So the Board is accountable for the effective expenditure of the funds it acquires in meeting our objectives for the children.

The Trustees all bring their own expertise and contacts to help fulfil the purposes of the CU, and they each give of their own time to further its development and to make it a sustainable movement. My responsibility is to keep the Board effective in what it does and to enhance the Trustee membership to meet our future requirements.

We have also created a new role of Patron. These people will not serve on the Board but will be invited because of their commitment to the CU cause and to Childrens' development, and who have skills, contacts and influence that should be able to assist the development of the CU movement.

Finally, it is my pleasure to announce formally today that we have a National Chancellor for the CU – Professor Michael Morpurgo.

So we have a matured structure to carry this movement forward. What of the future?

Well we have to survive and thrive in the world as it is today. So whatever your politics, we know that the Coalition Government is likely to be in charge for the next four years. The major part of our funding comes from Government. So we must align our presentation and our output with the ambitions of this Government.

I think we do that very well already and do not have to alter much. Our approach fits well with many of the policy directions of both the Department of Education, and of the Department of Universities, Business and Skills. Whatever “Big Society” is defined to be, I am certain that what we all do in the CU movement is precisely an expression of what “Big Society” is meant to achieve. That is communities helping themselves to develop, to help those most disadvantaged, and to build a better future for all. Those are my statements – so you will not find them in any manifesto or policy statements from Government. But I hope you take my point – we are doing the right thing, in the right way to the right people, And we are getting the right results!!

So together we are succeeding.

What I hope you will see over the next twelve months is a series of new initiatives to support the continued development of the CU movement.

Funding

We shall be bidding to the Coalition Government for the first time early in 2011 for further grants to keep our work going – to enable you and your colleagues and helpers to create part of the “Big Society”. The Evaluation by Professor John MacBeath and the results from your work all form part of our case to Government.

We shall be bidding to various major charities for funding for specific elements of the functioning of the CU in ways that benefit the local CUs and their children.

Finally, we recommend that each local CU seeks additional funds locally too, some private sector companies may wish to support what you are doing.

New Schemes

Clearly we shall seek to support the development of further CUs so that we can reach more children.

You have already contributed to the new award structure that recognises and rewards the longer commitment to the CU movement that many of our children are making.

We are also seeking opportunities to pilot some specialist CU centres that enable some children to obtain some accredited skills or knowledge.

More Support

We have already commenced exploring mentorship and the use of volunteers. I have mentioned already the establishment of CU Chancellors and national Patrons for the CU. In their various ways all these roles should enhance the effectiveness of what the CU movement can do to support children in their quest to explore the world and to discover new talents and interests for themselves.

More Positive Media Coverage

We now have a good story to tell. We have many children capable of telling the story themselves. We must find ways, both locally and nationally – it needs both – to promote what we do for children and to champion the benefits that they gain, the satisfaction that their parent and teachers feel, and the longer term benefit to society as a whole.

So be proud of what you do.

Be bold in how you convey to others, the importance of what you do for your local children,

And keep learning from each other how best to make your local CU even more successful.

Thank you for all that you do, and enjoy this conference.