

Community Insight: Soft Touch Arts

Soft Touch is a Leicester-based participatory arts and community development organisation, which aims to use the arts to offer people with limited opportunities the chance to work together to effect positive changes for themselves and in the areas where they live.

Started in 1986, Soft Touch has grown from five unemployed people forming a workers' co-operative through the Enterprise Allowance Scheme, to a social enterprise employing 20 people and turning over half a million pounds during the 2010/11 financial year.

The organisation provides opportunities for individuals to get involved in enjoyable and challenging creative projects, making a positive difference to their lives and enables them to reach their full potential, through personal development and the gaining of new skills.

The empowerment of communities is also at the core of Soft Touch work, and during the last 25 years they have gained a reputation for their beneficial work with 'hard to reach' communities including young offenders, children in care, gypsies, travellers and other excluded groups.

In March 2011, Soft Touch completed their most ambitious project to date, the 18-month MASH-UP programme, which engaged over 800 young people on two of Leicester's most deprived estates in using creative activities. The project kept participants out of crime and anti-social behaviour and enabled those not in employment, education or training to progress.

The success of the MASH-UP has led to Soft Touch gaining five year project funding from the Big Lottery Fund's Reaching Communities programme to continue work on the New Parks Estate in Leicester.



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The organisation has also recently gained funding for their Streetvan Studio, a mobile arts and music studio equipped with state of the art iPads and Apple computers, which has working with young people in deprived neighbourhoods in the city and county, as well as going over to Rotterdam to deliver workshops as part of the International Community Arts Festival.

Other recent Soft Touch projects include:

- The production of four short films illustrating the key values of the Olympics and the Paralympics.
- The SheStylers project, working with teenage mums and mums-to-be, teaching fashion related skills to help them start their own businesses or move on to college.
- The Mash-Up Baseline, which following taster sessions, teaches music production in a mobile solar-powered studio.
- A creative partnership project transforming an outside space at the back of the school into six performance areas for years 3, 4 and 5 to make props, costumes, soundtracks, films and devise performances.
- The Fuzed band, combining samba and urban music.
- Filmed at Leicester Guildhall, the Lady Jane Gray DVD, distributed to schools, museums and libraries throughout the county.
- Animation Experimentation, run by a group of young people and producing

“Coming to Soft Touch gave me a reason to get out of bed. I’ve got to thank Soft Touch for doing a lot for me – I’ve got all these skills and a lot more confidence in myself.”

Jack Girling, 21, Soft Touch participant from New Parks Estate, Leicester

short films uploaded on to YouTube and Facebook.

- The Braid Women’s Group, which hosted informal sessions for asylum seekers, refugees and other newly arrived women to share and learn arts and crafts skills.
- Commissioned by the NHS East Midlands Pacesetters, production of a DVD bringing together health professionals and ambassadors from the gypsy and travellers community.

Soft Touch are signed up to the Skills Pledge and are a registered centre for delivery of the Arts Award, the Creative Craft Award and, accredited by the Focus Charity, the V Volunteering Award.

For further information on Soft Touch Arts visit www.soft-touch.org.uk. Soft Touch has published a book to mark their anniversary, entitled ‘25 years, 25 people, 25 stories’. To download visit www.soft-touch.org.uk/site/uploads/docs/25yearbook.pdf.