

Young People, GIS Mapping, and Zebras:

A Story of Collaborative Working in the South Wales Valleys



A group of young people from Merthyr Tydfil recently won a campaign to make an important difference in their community. Working with Cardiff University and Citizens Cymru Wales, young people from the Forsythia Youth Project (hereafter called Forsythia) and Bishop Hedley High School (hereafter called Bishop Hedley) came together to identify problems affecting their sense of safety and wellbeing. This led to them organising a campaign around three issues: 1) installing street lighting on a path by a hospital; 2) closing an underpass which they felt was dangerous for the community; 3) installing a zebra crossing by a hospital and the Forsythia Youth Project.

In this post, we outline the entire process of what has become known as the 'Gurnos Zebras' project, from its formation to its current status, as an example of co-production.

The Very Beginning

This project began in February 2014 when Gareth Thomas was employed as a Research Associate on a programme called 'Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement'. The

4M's (Mapping, Making, and Mobilising in Merthyr) project – part of the Productive Margins programme – involved working with young people, academics, community members and organisers, and creative artists in North Merthyr Tydfil to map young peoples' experiences, perceptions, and concerns around issues of safety, health and wellbeing, regulation, and place.

The intention was to enable young people to define the spaces where they feel secure and unsafe in their neighbourhoods, articulate needs to public officials and third sector agencies, and help co-produce new modes of provision which will empower them to speak out about the barriers they face in participating as full public citizens.

The full team was Eva Elliott, Gabrielle Ivinson, Martin Innes, Gareth Williams (who later had to drop out), Emma Renold (who joined the project around May 2014), and Gareth Thomas.

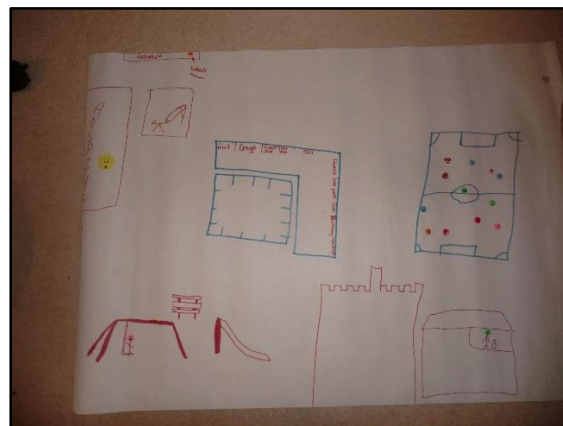
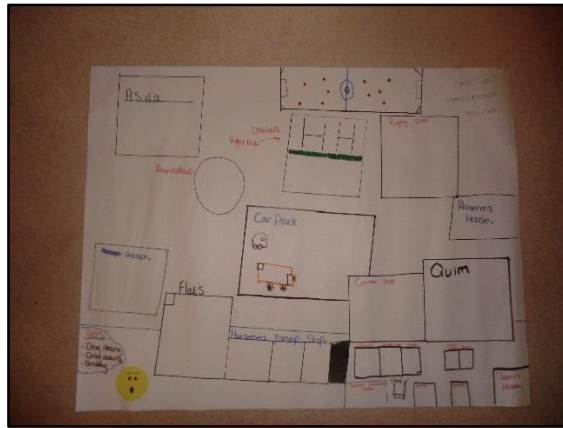
After an initial settling in period and whilst getting to know people in the community (especially at the Forsythia Youth Project), Gareth was put in contact with some staff at a school in the local area called Pen-Y-Dre High School (hereafter referred to as Pen-Y-Dre). These contacts were provided by someone who was already familiar to the research team prior to the project.

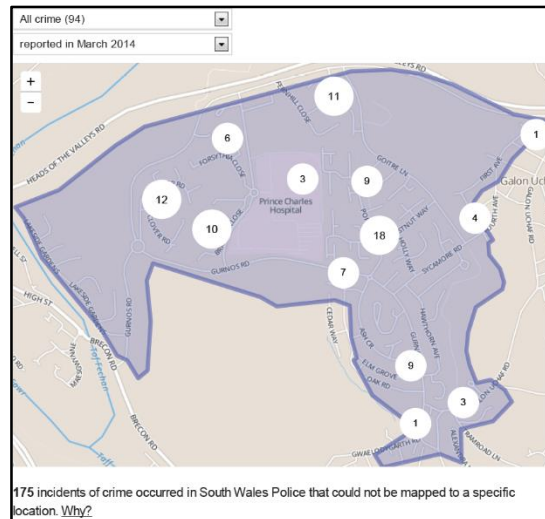
School Sessions

Gareth visited the school for the first time in April 2014 after some initially promising emails with staff at the school. A few productive meetings later, Gareth was able to work with 12 students – 6 boys and 6 girls from across years 7-9 – once a week for a period of 7 weeks in May and June 2014. The intention was to get young people to discuss their neighbourhood, how this affects their health/wellbeing, and ask what (if anything) would they change about their community.

During these sessions, Gareth asked young people to participate in lots of different activities. This was informed by what he wanted to discuss and also what young people asked to do.

The young people drew maps of their area, participated in focus groups and informal conversations about their community, engaged with photo-elicitation techniques using images of Merthyr taken from online resources, produced their own photos of Merthyr, and talked about maps created by police about neighbourhoods in Merthyr (specifically the Crime and Policing Maps available [here](#)).





Much of this exercise was not just hearing about the perspectives and experiences of young people, but also rapport building with the staff at Pen-Y-Dre school to ensure that future work could be possible.

The seven sessions were followed by a long summer’s holiday, other related work (Light Moves – please see [here](#) for further details on this project), and frequent visits to Forsythia by Gareth to discuss these issues and become increasingly familiar with the young people and the environment around them.

As the summer’s holiday ended, Gareth contacted Pen-Y-Dre and Bishop Hedley to organise a meeting and ask if they would consider allowing us to carry out some interviews with young people (this idea had already been mooted with Pen-Y-Dre). We also asked if we could do follow-up work with a smaller number of young people (around 10-15) after the interviews.

Once again, after a few productive meetings with staff members in which we outlined our intentions, we were granted access to the schools to carry out this work.

We were in! But a lot of hard work was to follow...

Pre-GIS Interviews

As part of the project, the research team had decided to carry out interviews with young people using GIS technology, a system designed to capture, visualise, analyse, and present geographical data to characterize spatial patterns/trends. Interviews would be carried out using a GIS ‘app’ on an iPad.

We had decided as a research team that we would try to recruit young people from year 10 in each school to take part in the interviews. This was following advice from Pen-Y-Dre and Bishop Hedley that year 9s and 11s would be undertaking exams, and that year 10 pupils could – at this stage – afford to take part in an interview and any other future sessions.

We met with the schools to discuss our sampling strategy. At Pen-Y-Dre, we were told to run a session during a school assembly. We did so and asked the small number of young people attending if they would be interested in taking part.

This was mostly successful. After some young people volunteered, the school said that they would help identify more pupils who would possibly be interviewed (with their consent, of course).

Bishop Hedley staff, on the other hand, said that they would personally identify pupils to participate (a weight off the research team's shoulders!).

Both schools told us that the young people they asked to consider taking part in interviews were representative of the year group and school as a whole (i.e. a mix of people of different gender, ethnicity, and educational status).

Organising this became a logistical headache. The team spent many hours in conversation with the schools and each other to ensure that there were enough people to carry out interviews and that young people had a chance to attend an interview. This was because the team were told that the participating young people could not miss STEM lessons (both schools) or religious education lessons (Bishop Hedley).

After the timing schedules were created, it was clear that we needed another researcher to help with the interviews. We asked Eve Exley to take on this role.

Pre-GIS Interviews: The Pilot

Before undertaking the interviews, we decided to pilot the app with two pupils at Bishop Hedley. We carried out an interview with both pupils at the same time and asked for their advice about what worked and what did not work, if language should be changed, and other queries about the process.

The two young people were immensely helpful in highlighting both the benefits and flaws of using the GIS app for an interview.

Taking their considerations on board, the wider research team met to discuss the technology and adapt the app.

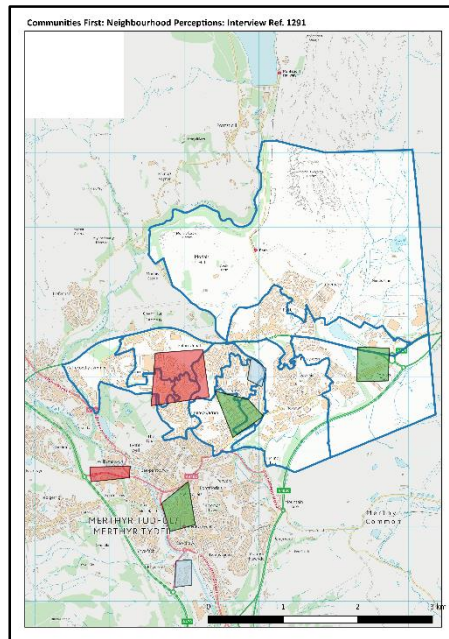
Since it was too late to alter the app significantly, Gareth and the team produced a new interview guide that would be used alongside the app. Many of the questions remained the same so this guide was only used to *direct* the interview rather than change it completely.

A few days later, the team were leaving for their first day of interviewing (day 1 of 6, all day each time). Eve, Gabrielle, Emma, Eva, and Gareth completed the interviews over a period of two weeks. A very busy time for us!

GIS Interviews

In late October 2014, we had completed a total of 56 interviews with young people aged 14-15 at two schools around issues of safety, health/wellbeing, and place in their community.

For more information on how the GIS interview was carried out and the findings from these, please contact Gareth Thomas and/or see future publications. But you can see an example GIS map from the interview below. In this particular interview, the young person felt positively about three locations (green), dislikes two areas (red), and has no positive or negative emotions of two locations (blue).



Interestingly, another project stemmed from these GIS interviews, namely, that carried out by Emma Renold on relationships and sexual harassment. For the full story of this project, [click here](#)).

Thankfully, the interviews were hugely successful and young people seemed to enjoy taking part! But where did we go from here? What did we need to do?

Post-GIS Interviews

After the GIS interviews were completed and transcribed, the research team spent many weeks analysing the transcripts and discussing our future work in both schools.

We planned to return to both schools to discuss our plans. This would involve Citizens Cymru Wales, a branch of Citizens UK which 'organises communities to act together for power, social justice, and the common good'.

As collaborative partners, they would work with us and young people to help identify issues, informed by the GIS interviews, that young people wanted to see changed in their community.

Some of the research team had a pre-existing relationship with Jonathan Cox, a Lead Organiser for Citizens UK, and he became our primary contact for the organisation.

Sadly, due to various external pressures, Pen-Y-Dre notified us that they were unable to continue in the project. This was an awful shame, but it also allowed us to narrow our focus by working with one group of young people.

We met with Bishop Hedley staff to discuss our plan for future work with the young people.

They said that they and some young people were still keen to continue their involvement and that we could run 8-10 sessions (each lasting about 50 minutes i.e. one lesson) with around 10-15 young people who participated in the GIS interviews.

We identified a few young people who we definitely wanted to include (i.e. they were excellent participants) and we left the remaining invitations for young people to become involved up to the school's staff.

After some more negotiations with the school and on hearing that a group of 11 young people were interested in participating in our future sessions with Citizens Cymru Wales, we set some dates and organised our first event in mid-November 2014.

Sessions 1 and 2: An Introduction to Community Organising

In the first session, Jonathan gave an introduction to 11 young people about community organising (naturally, numbers differed across different weeks). We also discussed preliminary findings following an analysis of some interview transcripts.

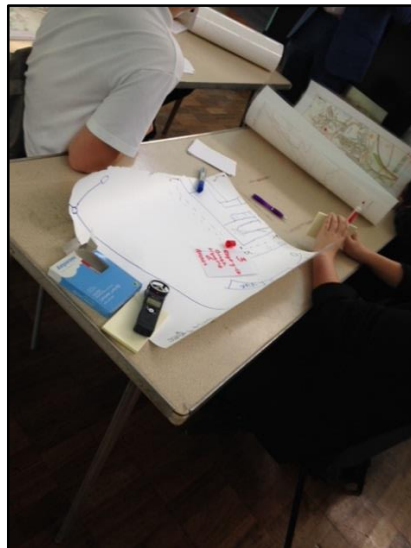
It was a creative and useful session which the young people seemed to enjoy.

Eva, Jonathan, and Gareth had a debrief in a coffee shop after the event (the team did this after every session) and discussed how the next event, organised in December, should be run.

In the second session, Gabrielle, Emma, and Jonathan encouraged the young people to draw maps of their community, replicating a successful tactic employed by Gareth at Pen-Y-Dre in May and June 2014.

The young people were told to identify things that they dislike and would like to change in their community. Issues identified included drug use and paraphernalia, litter, and inadequate street lighting.

In the debrief, it was decided that it would be productive if the team carried out a tour of the area with young people so that they could identify these issues *in person*.



Session 3: Tour

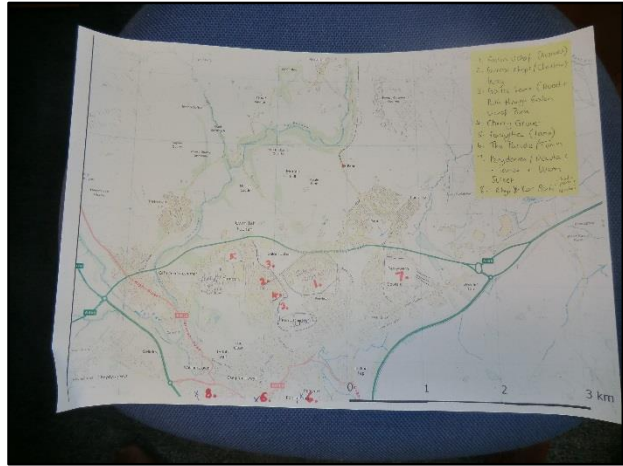
After a Christmas break, a tour was carried out with young people in February 2016. Eva and Jonathan accompanied a member of staff from Bishop Hedley and the young people.

A route was planned in session two, although this was changed during the tour.

The tour highlighted many of the same issues that were discussed in both the GIS interviews and in sessions 1 and 2 with young people (street lighting, drug paraphernalia, litter, etc.).

Interestingly, the tour focused around the shops, a skate park, and, mostly, an area near Forsythia and a hospital. This is where they talked about inadequate street lighting, busy roads, and a subway that was dark, narrow, cold, and full of debris (and also a hangout for drug users).

Finally, the tour ended with a trip to Nando's that was appreciated by all after a long tour!





Session 4: Negotiation Skills

In session 4 after the tour (which was reorganised after the initial meeting had to be cancelled - this happened a lot, which is not uncommon in work of this nature!), Jonathan - with Eva and Gareth observing - began training young people in negotiation skills.

This culminated in a scenario in which Gareth and Eva pretended to be council leaders and the young people had to argue their case for changing three things in Merthyr: bad lighting in the community; installing crossings on a dangerous road, and; closing a subway.

The session worked very well and allowed young people to think about how they may negotiate with local government if they were to organise a campaign around these, or any other, issues.

Session 5: Identifying the Issue

In session 5, the team were fortunate enough to have an entire morning (about 3 hours) with the young people. During this time, Jonathan, Gareth, and Eva asked the young people what three things they would like to change in their community.

Once again, the same issues came up about street lighting and dangerous routes.

After some brainstorming/mind-mapping and debates within the group, the young people identified three community changes that they wanted to see: i) adequate lighting on a path beside a hospital; ii) a zebra crossing on a road opposite the hospital; iii) the closure of a subway under the same road.

All of these recommendations concerned a location that the young people spent a lot of time at during the tour (i.e. by Forsythia and the local hospital).

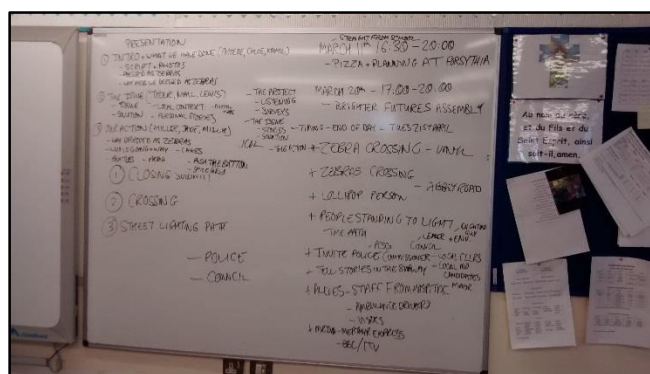
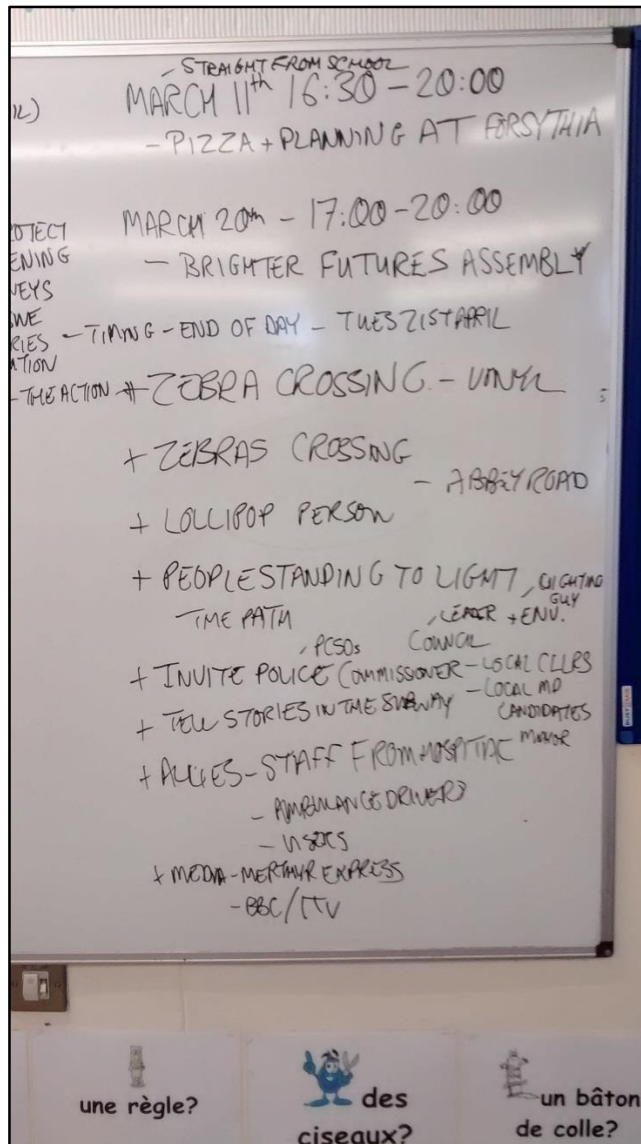
Most of the session, after this, was spent coming up with ideas about what a public action around these 3 issues might look like – and what date would be appropriate for this (we decided on April 21st after some discussions).

The young people also produced a script for the 'Brighter Futures Youth Assembly' organised by Citizens Cymru Wales. Here, young people from across South Wales would gather in Cardiff to present their Young Citizens' Agenda and do deals with senior politicians from across the political spectrum.

It was planned that the young people would present their 3-point plan (outlined above) at the Assembly and then invite other young people to join their public action.

Regarding the public action, ideas for what it would look like ranged from dressing up as zebras (to highlight the need for a zebra crossing) to having people line a path with torches to emphasise the need for lighting. The young people opted for the first idea – that is, the one where everyone gets to dress up as zebras!

At the end of the session, it was decided that the young people needed some more people involved. They wanted to hold the meeting in Forsythia to encourage young people there to take part. Organised for a few weeks later, this would become the 'Pizza and Planning' session.



Session 6: Pizza and Planning

This session at Forsythia was designed to allow young people (although only 3 of the group attended) to present the 3-point plan to young people at Forsythia and ask if they want to become involved.

After all young people from Forsythia indicated that they are interested in becoming involved, everyone toured the area and the team collected personal stories from young people that could be used for the Brighter Futures Youth Assembly and the public action on April 21st.

The session was a success and everyone ate pizza to celebrate the occasion.

Session 7: Brighter Futures Youth Assembly

The Brighter Futures Youth Assembly was well-attended by many young people across South Wales. However, due to practical constraints (i.e. no staff could attend as chaperones for the young people), no-one from Bishop Hedley was able to attend.

Thankfully, young people from Forsythia were able to talk about the 3-point plan with other young people at the Assembly. This session, frankly, could have been much better. The young people from Forsythia were new to the project and were thrown in at the deep end.

It was disappointing but the young people did brilliantly in highlighting some key concerns that were heard by some local politicians and distinguished guests, including Alun Michael (South Wales Police and Crime Commissioner).

After the event, Alun Michael talked with some of the young people about the project and indicated that he was looking forward to the public action in a few weeks' time.

Now the young people and the rest of the team just had to plan it!

Public Action: The Gurnos Zebras Are Born

After some intricate and careful planning, the young people were ready to go.

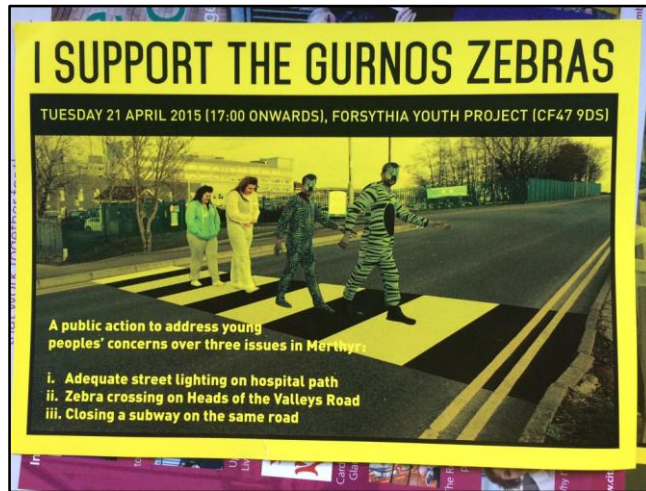
With help from Citizens Cymru Wales and the research team, they had arranged for senior police and local politicians, such as Gerald Jones (Labour MP for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) and Alun Michael, to attend the public action.

The young people (many of them dressed as zebras!) began by introducing their 3-point plan in the Forsythia centre. Afterwards, the guests were taken on a tour and shown an underpass littered with glass and drug paraphernalia, a poorly-lit path, and a dangerously busy road.

The young people explained how they sometimes felt unsafe in their community and why their three-point action plan would help.

The guests were suitably impressed and they all committed to supporting the campaign by signing a giant sheet with the words 'I Support the Gurnos Zebras'.

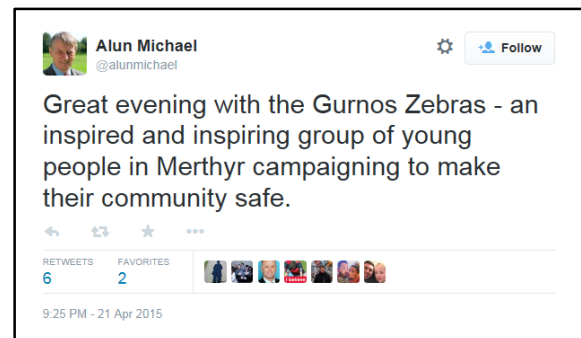
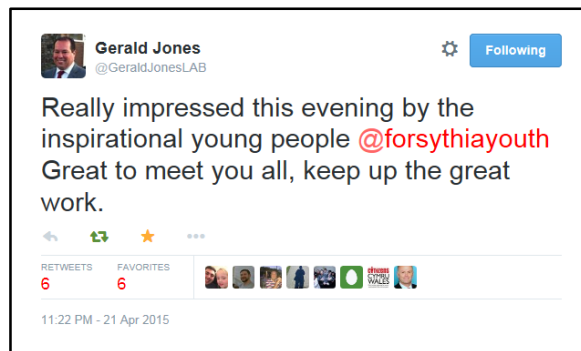
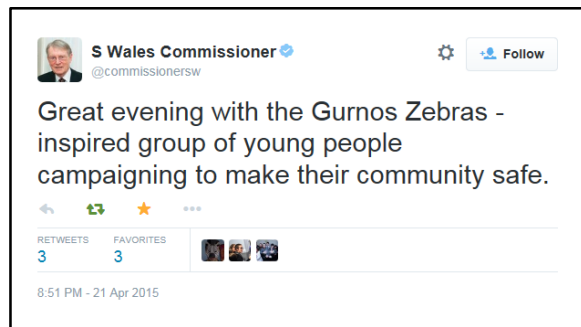
The tour, carried out over a period of about two hours, was a huge success. The young people seemed very pleased that they were listened to by the guests. They felt that they may be getting somewhere...

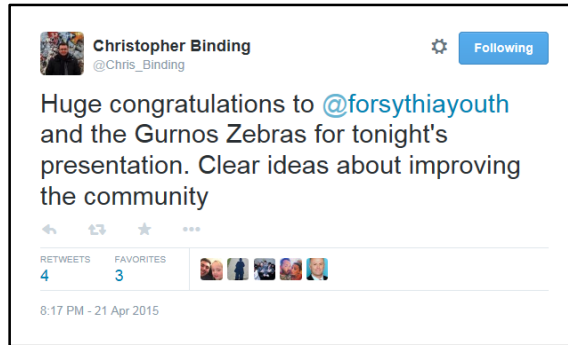




Post-Public Action and Follow-Up Sessions

Reactions from the senior police and local politicians following the public action was incredibly supportive and encouraging. This was made clear on Twitter, with Tweets from Alun Michael, Gerald Jones, and Chris Binding immediately after the event.





This caught the attention of Brendan Toomey (Merthyr Tydfil Council Leader), as did a letter written by the participating young people. Huw Lewis (Assembly Member, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) also contacted the young people, following praise from his office manager Christopher Binding who attended the public action. He indicated his support by writing, in response to the action, a letter to the council regarding the condition of the path by the hospital.

There was also positive media coverage of the public action, including a report in a local newspaper.



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'Using culture to tackle poverty'

From page 1 culture to tackle poverty and about giving communities the resources to improve the lives of people in Merthyr.

It's broad-ranging research, working with Community First - the Welsh Assembly's flagship anti-poverty programme. This will be a real partnership, in which we will listen to what those communities want and work with them."

In his academic field, Dr Eilnon has specialised in research about "social determinants" - the factors in society that affect people's wellbeing and their life chances.

She added: "Part of our aim is to ensure cultural industries, such as museums, libraries and arts, are available for everyone. We are also looking to find ways that cultural industries can contribute to communities such as Merthyr."

"We've already done a lot of research in Merthyr, Tydfil and run engagement projects that address poverty in a number of ways, and have been involved in training young people from community groups."

"Engaging with communities is about improving life chances, and that is why I've been so keen to support young people's leadership and raised safety issues with local politicians and police."

The launch of the scheme runs from 2-8pm and includes a community choir, exhibitions and films from young people, a pop-up museum and a community leadership training session with Citizens Wales Cymru.

There will also be a showcase of some of the projects that have already taken place, including last month's art exhibition at the Red House in Merthyr.

Young people from Forsythia Youth and Bishop Hedley School will talk about how they have learned about community leadership and raised safety issues with local politicians and police.



communities in Merthyr Tydfil

Community First and Cardiff University project launch in Merthyr, Cymru Toomey said: "I am gaining a better understanding of the work happening and finding out about the really good, positive engagement taking place."

The group previously engaged an action night in which participants from Bishop Hedley School and Forsythia Youth Project met senior police and local politicians.

The dignitaries were taken on a tour of the area and shows a subway littered with broken glass and drug paraphernalia, a poorly lit path used by young people and the dangers of a busy local road.

Jonathan Cox, lead organiser at Citizens Cymru Wales, spoke about the Gwynn, Zebra and the impact of partnerships, such as that with Cardiff University.

He said: "Cardiff University have sponsored the community organisation to develop their community leadership."

"People have looked at issues, especially those around safety, listened to the community and found constructive ways to make that change happen."

Caitlin Matthews, 12, of Forsythia Youth Project, is one of the campaign leaders.

She said: "This is the first time I have spoken up to public. I took this step because we are trying to improve safety on a path that my friends and I use every day."

South Wales Police and Citizens Cymru Wales Commissioner Alan Michael was one of those who took part.

He said: "At a time when we hear so many negative things about young people, it is good to see young people from Forsythia Youth Project and Bishop Hedley School taking responsibility for identifying problems and coming up with solutions. They are an inspiration."

Young people from the Gwynn in their zebra outfit

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Throughout the summer of 2015, the young people had a number of meetings with Brendan Toomey and others.

After the young people impressed with their clarity and thoroughness, the local government told the young people that if they could obtain matched-funding, they would be able to implement their 3-point plan.

Fortunately, in September 2015, the young people were awarded a £4,612 grant by the Ffos-Y-Fran Community Benefit Fund. They received confirmation shortly afterwards that their 3-point plan will be implemented in 2016.

These inspiring young people have made a significant contribution to benefit their entire community. More specifically, they will ensure that they and others can walk safely to school, access local amenities, and socialise with friends.

Citizens Cymru Wales Pre-Founding Assembly for Valleys Citizens

At the beginning of December 2015, the young people from Forsythia and Bishop Hedley attended the Citizens Cymru Wales Pre-Founding Assembly for Valleys Citizens.

After a short introduction from Eva Elliott and in a room full of important figures and allies (including Brendan Toomey), the young people outlined the entire process (as described above) and told attendees how changes were already underway.

Since this Assembly, we have had contact from a number of people and organisations who want to commend the zebras and ask for more information about their campaign.







The High Sheriff of Mid Glamorgan Youth Community Awards

In March 2016, the young people were awarded the group prize (and £500!) by [The High Sheriff of Mid Glamorgan Youth Community Awards](#) for their work on this project.

The young people impressed the panel with their focus on benefiting their entire community by ensuring that they and others can walk safely to school, access local amenities, and socialise safely with friends.





The Future

Since the local government have committed to implementing these changes, one may think that this chapter is closed. However, our work continues.

We want to continue this collaborative work in the community.

We want to produce a legacy of community organising in Merthyr and the Valleys more widely.

We want to establish a long-term relationship between Merthyr and Citizens Cymru Wales, partly helped by enrolling local youth leaders (Geraldine Maddison/Ashley Evans) and an emerging youth activist (Daniel Walsh) on the Citizen UK 'Community Organising' training programme.

We want to continue a rolling programme of Cardiff University/Merthyr Tydfil work such as linking student placements to school citizen based/creative activities.

Finally, we want to continue telling such positive stories.

This is not the end!