

The Shpresa Programme's Children's Congress

An Evaluation

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About the Shpresa Programme

The Shpresa Programme is a registered charity based in London. Shpresa's mission is to enable the Albanian speaking community in the UK to settle, fully participate in society and to realise their potential. Shpresa aims to promote a positive identity and recognition of the Albanian community's cultural and linguistic heritage, both amongst Albanian speakers and the wider society in order to contribute to community cohesion in the UK.

The Shpresa Programme provides a wide range of services, including:

- A Children's Project – running activities for more than 220 children aged 5-14 years.
- A Youth Project – providing traditional dance, drama and sports activities to more than 130 young people aged 11 and over.
- Women's support groups – providing more than 200 women with advice, advocacy and support services.
- A Volunteering Project – giving around 40 volunteers training and support to provide interpreting and befriending services to Albanian families and individuals in need.
- Cultural events and celebrations – for members of the Albanian community and for local residents, to encourage pride in the Albanian cultural heritage and to support greater understanding of Albanian culture among the wider community.
- Albanian language classes in nine London schools – reaching 296 children.
- Travel and education in English, ICT, parenting skills and other classes to support integration and to develop an understanding of the host culture.

The Shpresa Programme was set up by an Albanian speaker and it continues to be overwhelming grass roots in terms of leadership, staff (many of whom are refugees) and the involvement of service users.

The Shpresa Programme's Children's Congress: An Evaluation

On the 2nd November 2008 the Shpresa Programme held a Children's Congress at Mayfield School, Dagenham. The purpose of this event was to consult with the children and young people who use Shpresa Programme services. At this event the organisation also consulted with two focus groups of women – parents of the children, and with the adults (16-25) football club.

Over 180 children, young people, parents and carers attended this event. The day started with an introduction and welcome from a Trustee, followed by a review of Shpresa's activities from 2003-2008 from the Project Manager.

The groups were divided into classes of children, young people and adults.

- Newham
- Barking
- Redbridge
- Islington and Haringey
- Edmonton
- Greenwich
- Youth (14-25)
- Adults from Newham, Edmonton, Tottenham, Haringey and Islington
- Adults from Redbridge and Ilford

Each session was lead by at least one volunteer with Shpresa.

What the Children's Congress aimed to find out

The Children's Congress was held to access the views of the children, young people and their parents/carers. Facilitators were given materials – such as flip charts, post-it notes and other materials to produce a sheet at the end of the session reflecting what had been discussed. At the end of the day the resulting feedback was displayed on the wall as the disco and other activities took place. Some of the sheets by the children were very creative!

Facilitators, mostly using group work, got the participants to think about:

- 1) How has Shpresa helped you over the past five years?
- 2) What would you like Shpresa to concentrate on for the next five years?

The Sessions

The sessions went well. Attendance was high, though the Greenwich group unfortunately were unable to attend.

The feedback produced within the groups varied in style and amount of details – but even so a great deal of information was collected about what children, young

people their parents and carers have valued about Shpresa and what they would like to see in the future.

Children aged 5-13

How service users have been helped by the Shpresa Programme

Overwhelmingly, children, young people and their parents and carers valued the provision of classes in traditional Albanian dancing, and in the Albanian language. The Albanian language classes enabled the young people to communicate more effectively at home, to access their traditional culture, and to have a sense of pride in their identity. Learning poems and songs were mentioned by the young people as particularly enjoyable. As will be shown below, the consultation with parents showed that parents also felt the provision of Albanian language classes greatly improved communication between them and their children.

Children said about the class in Albanian language and culture:

‘Shpresa has helped us by reading poems and learning songs and performing ’

‘[It has helped us to be happy and proud about our community and who we are]’

There was a great sense of pride amongst the children who learned Albanian dancing – they had very much enjoyed the chance to perform in their schools. Young people also mentioned that they liked opportunities to take part in art, drama, games, trips and holidays.

‘I was proud when we performed at my school – all of my friends wanted to be part of it, definitely we going to have the project back next year’

It was clear that the children and young people also appreciated the chance to make friends. Comments included:

‘With Albanian friends we learn lots of new things’

‘Feeling happy with Albanian friends’

The children and young people also valued the sports provided by the Shpresa Programme. Football and kickboxing were particularly popular.

What service users would like the Shpresa Programme to concentrate on for the next five years

All of the school-based groups receive Albanian language tuition. However, the other services received vary – most (around 80%) also have sessions in traditional dancing. Others have different sessions – for example at the Little Ilford Youth Centre art and drama sessions are held. For this reason, some of the things that the children request may already been provided elsewhere, or they want focus to continue on their favourite projects – so there is a degree of crossover.

As to be expected given the popularity of the classes in traditional dancing and the Albanian language many children and young people expressed preferences for the continuity of these and, often, an expansion of them – for example larger or longer language classes, more dance classes, more dances taught in them and increased opportunities to perform in concerts. The idea of more games, English and Albanian in origin was also frequently raised. The opportunity to learn musical instruments was also a popular idea for an activity.

After these cultural and arts activities, the second most popular category that children wanted the Shpresa Programme to focus on was outings and trips. A number of ideas for trips were raised, the following being the most popular:

- Trips to other places – including other towns, cities and countries (including Scotland, Wales and Ireland)
- Trips to the beach
- Cinema outings
- Visits to historic castles
- Camping excursions
- Going to the countryside
- Going to a football match
- Various other venues – including the London Eye, the Discovery Centre and Chessington World of Adventures

Sport, again, was important to the children and young people. Interest was expressed in more football sessions (for boy and girls – currently only boys participate in this activity), basketball, swimming, tennis and other outdoors sports.

Young people aged 14-25

The young people also highly valued the Albanian dancing and language classes. They also liked the chance to meet people and make new friends, and to build their confidence. They appreciated a range of activities – including sports and learning about fashion and beauty. The role of Shpresa in their future

prospects was also clear – one group valued what it called ‘opportunities to help in life’ – giving as an example visits to universities.

Life chances were also central to their requests from Shpresa for the future. The young adult participants felt that access to training, to work experience and to information about employment and university would be useful. A specific need for assistance with selecting GCSE qualifications to study and also with GCSE homework was also clear.

There were also concerns raised about gangs and street violence and the need to know how to cope with such problems and learn self-defence.

As with the younger participants more trips and activities were requested, including;

- More dancing classes – including traditional but also modern styles
- Cooking
- More sports – including tennis and basketball

One group of young male service user’s focused on the football team of which they are all members. They valued this activity for providing something for young players to do and they made it very clear that they appreciate their coach, who makes a great difference to the team. For the future, they expressed requests for more equipment for training and said that they would like a better training ground, or even a home ground. The need for expenses – for players travel, for the football ground and for a referee was also raised.

When the young people were asked why they did not tend to access similar or new services (like the new ideas requested) via other mainstream youth services, they cited a range of reasons. Primarily there was the issue of trust – parents often felt that they would prefer their children to attend services run by people sharing a cultural background who they can trust. Issues of cost, and also of the way that parents had an opportunity to socialise at Shpresa events, and not at mainstream events, were also mentioned as reasons. Young people felt that their parents would be happy for Shpresa to take them to projects or events hosted by other agencies. This may be one way that Shpresa can help young people access new activities without taking on more project provision.

Adults

The adults groups were divided into two areas for the consultation and asked the same questions as the children’s groups. The adult service users consulted here were all parents of the children present. All the service users consulted were female. Though some fathers of children were present, they did not take part in the evaluation.

The adults groups were divided into two areas for the consultation and asked the same questions as the children's groups.

Amongst the adults, again, the value of children learning the Albanian language and about their traditional culture, was the main way in which adults felt that they, and their children, had benefited from the work of Shpresa. Parents felt that communication between themselves and their children was much improved.

Also much appreciated was the chance for people to contact other Albanian people – to meet, socialise and celebrate their cultural identity together – including the Albanian traditional dance classes for young people.

The services that helped people to cope with life in a new country were also valued. Hence the Shpresa Programme's provision of advice work, translating and interpreting, volunteering opportunities, chance to learn about the host community, and help into work experience or training was seen as vital in helping people to adjust and be able to support themselves.

Generally, the mothers were grateful for the opportunities provided to their children – ranging from language classes, homework support to recreational pursuits like football and dancing.

For the future, the adults consulted were keen that existing services and activities for children and women would continue. There were also a range of suggestions for new services.

For parents/women:

- Women's support groups to expand their focus to include:
 - o More training courses and classes, including on the English language, ICT and driving theory test.
 - o Advice about problems in the family – especially around the empowerment of women
- The chance to take part in healthy activities – such as the gym, dance classes, aerobics and advice about nutrition.
- More training and support around working – including more volunteering opportunities.
- More cultural events and celebrations.

For their children the mothers would like to see:

- Greater provision of support with GCSE maths and English.
- A Gifted and Talented Club – specialising in music, sports and the arts.
- A Half-term club for when parents are working.

The parents seemed to value the work of Shpresa so far in helping them and their children. As well as highlighting the need to continue with this work, the

women also made it clear that they would like services to focus more on their own opportunities for development.

Conclusion and evaluation

Overwhelming the service users of all ages consulted at the Children's Congress valued the provision of Albanian language classes, and traditional dance and history sessions. Children clearly took pride in their joint traditional and English identity, whilst their parents appreciated the fact that their children were able to maintain traditions and improve their communication skills.

The activities for children, and advice and support sessions for women were also mentioned frequently as things that people had liked and found useful.

For the future, both parents and children prioritised a continuation and expansion of the Shpresa Programme's existing services. In many instances the feedback expressed desire for 'more dancing', 'more poems' or 'continuing advice for family problems'. This shows the extent to which these services have been used and appreciated by the Albanian community, and also the extent to which they are still relevant and necessary.

Beyond this, children wanted increased numbers of trips and outings to newer places and attractions, and a greater range of sports offered.

For the youth (14-25) and the parents, there was an interest in services that could help with personal development. For the young people this meant access to training, work experience and information about GCSEs and higher/further education. The parents had similar needs – but also had specific needs to improve their English and ICT skills.

For the mothers present there was an implied need for advice about domestic problems and the need for the women to feel more empowered in the home.

An important additional concern of the young people (aged 14-25) was about gang and street violence and it was clear that they would appreciate some input on coping strategies and self defence.

Evaluation

An evaluation of the Children's Congress was carried out informally during the disco at the end of the day. Children and young people were given pens and asked to write what they thought of the day on a large canvas banner on the wall. Some areas for improvement were noted – including the need to involve older children to a greater extent, and a suggestion to mix children of different ages together. Another comment was positive about the disco and the consultation,

but said there should have been more food and more games and activities available.

Aside from these points, comments, along with drawings, were overwhelmingly positive. Children and young people liked the disco, seemed to enjoy the day and many said they had had fun.

Some examples of feedback:

'It was really fun and I liked the disco'

'A well organised event'

'I liked meeting my friends and putting my views across'

'This is the best day ever!'