

Educafe Podcast

Episode 1 – Origin Story

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Educafe podcast, community projects, Newbury library, language support, volunteer network, social connection, community spaces, ESOL provision, diverse ethnic support, funding challenges, volunteer hours, community cohesion, partnerships, National Lottery funding, togetherness program.

SPEAKERS

Sue Kavanagh, Clare Middleton, Jamie Adam, Mark Brown, Jules

Jamie Adam 00:15

Welcome to Creating Communities the Educafe podcast. In this five-part series, will be shining a light on the amazing work being done by Educafe, a non-profit organisation based in West Berkshire that delivers people centered projects that strengthen communities. Educafe started as an idea to bring back positive action to the local community of Newbury, they now service hundreds of people through a free weekly drop in Community Cafe at Newbury library. Here, residents can connect for language and employability support, baby friendly activities and direct access to local early years, maternity and parenting experts. My name is Jamie Adam, and in this series, I'll be speaking to the founders of Educafe, alongside the partners they work with, and the volunteers and service users, all of whom make Educafe possible and contribute to the thriving community. We'll be discussing the benefits that Educafe has on the individuals involved and the positive impact on the local community, before looking at how the Educafe recipe could be replicated in other parts of the country to help build more thriving community spaces. In this first episode, I'll be speaking with Educafe founder and co-director, Claire Middleton, and the Adult and Community Learning Lead for West Berkshire Council, Mark Brown. But before we dive into that conversation, I spoke with Jules, one of Educafe volunteers.

Jules 01:39

I'm Jules, and I run the cafe at Educafe. I have been running this now for nearly four years, and I became involved through working at a cafe and a friend had passed me on to this. And then I started with the cafe, with about 30 people coming in every week, and we have seen this grow over the years to now, we can see over 100 people come in as guests to the cafe and enjoy our tea, coffee, cakes and our friendly sort of conversation. Newbury itself has a very, very active community, very diverse, and it is a very welcoming, open, friendly space for us to make people feel valued, comfortable and to enjoy and make new friends. The other thing I

really enjoy is, since I retired, it's nice to give something back to the community that we have lived in for nearly 30 years. Newbury is a lovely place to live, and we've always been happy, and we've always been happy as a family to support the community that we live in. A few years ago, we had one of our guests come to the cafe who, let's say, wasn't in a very good place, and we were able to introduce them to a group of people here, and they have now become very great friends, and we've also been able to help this guest feel much more valued within the community that they're in, you never know what somebody's been through, and sometimes you feel very privileged to be a part of their life, or they feel comfortable telling you and sharing their life experiences. And I think for me, I have learned so much more about different nationalities, different cultures, and generally people.

Jamie Adam 03:48

Another one of the key aspects of Educafe is the physical space. The weekly event takes place in Newbury library, which offers a sanctuary for many. Here is Library Manager Sue Kavanagh. To tell us a bit more,

Sue Kavanagh 04:01

I'm Sue Kavanagh, Newbury Library Manager. I've been in this role now for two and a half years. Very much enjoy libraries in particular, and very much enjoy working with Educafe. Educafe just totally transforms Newbury library while they're here each Wednesday, and that's what libraries have become now. It's more than just a library, it's somewhere you come for information and books, we are community spaces. It's without doubt, Educafe has had an impact. It's really good that Educafe brings in people who wouldn't normally use a library, and so it's really good that people come into the library, they know that libraries are not frightening places, we are welcoming, we do want people to use the space, and Educafe does that. They know that they're going to get a welcome when they come along to Educafe sessions. For parent village, it's so important, it is the social aspect, it's not just for children, babies, it's for the mums and dads as well, who can be quite isolated at home. They're no longer going out to work, and Educafe provides that welcoming space, that interaction with other mums, other dads who are in exactly the same position, and gives some knowledge. And then, of course, there is Chatty Corner and all our people who are here, who are refugees, and it helps them with English as second language, but it also helps them integrate into the community. It's different on Educafe days, there's more of a buzz. You've got this crowd of people in, you've got a diverse range of people in, people who come along for the social aspect, people who come along to learn English as a second language, and the parents who come along for social to learn knowledge about parenting. And it's just a nice buzz.

Jamie Adam 06:15

A nice buzz, indeed. Thank you so much Sue and thank you to Jules as well. Now Clare, Mark, welcome to Creating Communities, The Educafe Podcast. Delighted to have you here and

really excited to chat to you today all about Educafe's origin story. But before that, could you just give us a quick introduction to yourself and your connection to Educafe.

Clare Middleton 06:38

I'm Clare Middleton. I'm the founder and co-director of Educafe CIC. Educafe has grown into a weekly community event with a cafe ESOL hub, family support space and a volunteer powered Network.

Mark Brown 06:52

Hi, I'm Mark Brown. I work for West Berkshire Council as their Post 16 School Improvement Advisor, and I'm also the lead for Adult and Community Learning across the district.

Jamie Adam 07:03

Thank you very much. And now, Clare, over the next five episodes, we're of course, going to be learning everything there is to know about Educafe, but could you please just give us a bit of an overview to get us started.

Clare Middleton 07:16

Educafe is a pop up space on a regular basis that brings different people from the community together, from all different walks of life, all different ages. So multi-generational, multicultural people that want to have that social connection, perhaps people that have mental health issues or are socially isolated. You know, they can come in, we've seen people come in that look absolutely terrified and leave with a big smile on their face and come back week after week. So it is a place of connection and building stronger communities. I need to say that Educafe didn't just appear four years ago. It was an idea that was bubbling away for a long time. And some of you may know, when I was running Berkshire School of English, we used to host a weekly drop in coffee morning for people to come along, practice their English, meet local services and general community navigation. And it was really very simple, warm, very human, and it showed how powerful those informal spaces could be. And then covid obviously came along and hit us all, and everything went online, so the need for social connection only grew stronger. I grew up in a small village, and I knew my grandparents, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, we're a big family. We've all departed there now; I miss that community. My children never had that growing up, because we didn't have that, so they couldn't pop up the road to see their granny or their aunties or their cousins. And I feel that with Educafe, certainly with Parents Village, and with that multi-generational, multicultural thing, you know, we are building that community, and that's what makes me really, really happy, and because I'd worked with West Berkshire Adult Community Learning for years on ESOL and resettlement programs, it was already a strong relationship. So, when the commission for a diverse ethnic community support agency came up, it felt like the right moment to bring back that idea. And we applied, we were successful, and that little weekly drop in coffee morning became Educafe.

The commission was for three years to serve around 30 people a week from diverse backgrounds, with support from a handful of absolutely brilliant volunteers. But from day one, we welcomed over 80 people, and today it's grown much bigger to a one-day event supporting 150 to 200 visitors a week, where people come, they're welcomed. English conversation is a big part of that family support, social connection and help to navigate life in West Berkshire. So, I'm really pleased to be here with Mark to share how that partnership and trust have shaped the projects we've built over the last four and a half years.

Mark Brown 10:02

Yeah, as you say, Clare, it's been, it's been bubbling away for a long, long time. Much, you know, way, way before that initial sort of grant funding. And we first got involved with Clare many, many years ago for the need for ESOL provision in West Berkshire, so providing language for English speakers of other languages. I mean, ESOL has always been a staple part of adult learning. There's always been a need for language development with adults. And we had a big gap in West Berkshire, which Clare came along and filled with Berkshire School of English, and things sort of grew from then. And the idea of having some kind of community hub, some sort of socially inclusive place, I think, really came to my eyes around about 2015 when we had the Syrian resettlers. And then things really spiralled from, as Clare said, sort of covid times onwards, even before that, when we knew that there were going to be further resettlement programs, And we first engaged with Educafe. It was a teeny tiny pilot back in, I think, February 21, such a very small pilot just to get things going. And this was ahead of the formal sort of centre that it was turned into, just to try and initially grow an idea, and it really has taken off.

Jamie Adam 11:23

Yeah, it really has taken off. You mentioned the commission there. What was that for and Mark, why did West Berkshire Council think that that was important?

Mark Brown 11:32

Well, if we, if we go back before the diverse ethnic community support centre, we were commissioning various activity across West Berkshire to cover all aspects of Adult Community Learning, trying to retain sort of really broad curriculum that meets the needs of adults. And the Berkshire School of English were, were our prime provider, as such, to provide that language speaking. And that's the way we tend to work with our grant. Rather than go out for one big tender, we like to put it out for local tenders so local community groups can respond to it, come up with ideas, enter the market, tell us what they think the need is. And Clare did that year on year and year. And that's where we follow through, commissioning what we believe people can deliver and what is needed within those local communities. And then Clare came to us in early 21 with this idea for a pilot to try something new, aside at the Berkshire School of English. So the idea of Educafe then sort of came to us. It sounded new, it sounded needed.

And yeah, we took a chance and said, yes, we'll go for that. And in turn, I think that informed other people, within the council, within those other groups, around housing, around community, what they might then follow up with further down the line. So I think once, once covid really kicked in, and people were sort of let back out again, this idea that we needed this hub for community cohesion. And it was then I was able to talk to colleagues to say this, this is up and running. Now I say that it's working. It's become very successful, and the feedback has been very, very, very positive. So let's run with it, and that's where that initial sort of larger three year program came from, and in turn, you know now that has come to an end, there are still opportunities to continue that commissioning as and when the need changes. Need rises and it has changed. It isn't the same thing. It was the needs. The needs are different. The needs have grown, and those various funding parts that come into us from Central Government have changed and responded to need. As I said, first of all, we started seeing the need for these things during the well, during the Syrian times, resettlement times. But since then, we've had Afghan, Hong Kong and then the big one of Ukraine as well. So, this continued need to commission, to meet and to meet the local need that presents itself to us has been ongoing. And I think Claire has been, you know, at the heart of that through whether it be the be Berkshire School of English or Educafe.

Clare Middleton 14:07

The beauty of what we do, my team, BSE and Educafe, is that we're really agile. And when a need presents itself, like the, you know, that the Afghans and the Ukraine and Hong Kong situations, we've been ready and able to jump in straight away and respond to those needs, and I think that's really important as well.

Jamie Adam 14:27

Yeah, I think we'll be hearing a lot about the agility and flexibility throughout this series, and the role that that plays in Educafe success. Clare, I'd just like to go back a little bit. Could you tell us a bit more about your background and the Berkshire School of English and how Educafe developed from perhaps what you were seeing a need for in the community.

Clare Middleton 14:46

So my background is in English language teaching, or ESOL, which is English for Speakers of Other Languages. I was a course leader at Newbury college, so very passionate about giving people the language to get work and jobs and support their families. And I think it was in 2014 I left the college and set up Berkshire School of English, which was, you know, designed to be the one stop English shop for West Berkshire. And I think it was because I am a very creative person, I like working in small groups. I like to give people the opportunity to explore language in a safe environment. And so that was my reason for setting up BSE. And then obviously, you know, at the time, it was a private language school. We saw a lot of au pairs and people coming through all the gap years and what have you. But of course, as soon as covid hit, well,

we did have our community learning element as well, which is free to local people, and then covid came along, we lost all of those people that we'd seen historically, and we realised that the need for community ESOL was greater. And as I said, before covid, we were having those little dropping coffee mornings, and it really served a purpose. The people that were coming along were so grateful to have the opportunity just to speak casually to local service providers or find out about what's going on in their community. So, it really, really just grew from there and just recognising that it's great in the classroom, but you don't get that opportunity to have those extended conversations that people really, really need, that informal stuff.

Jamie Adam 16:16

Yeah, I mean, we'll be hearing in later episodes in a lot more detail about Parents Village and Chatty Corner, but you touched on it there that I think what is so great about Educafe is that you have the opportunity and the resource to get practical support and help if you need it. But there is also the social aspect, which can have such a huge impact on people's lives and the wider community as well. And just on the wider community, Mark from yours and West Berkshire Council's perspective, why are community groups such as Educafe so important?

Mark Brown 16:51

Well, I think you've only got to look around now and see how important community is, more now so than ever at these very sorts of divisive times. I think you need these things to happen to ground people, to show that, you know, that we are a cohesive area. You know, just despite sort of what you see in the news, there is still this need for what is the identity to live in West Berkshire? What is the culture, you know? What is the social belonging? Where do you fit in? And there were a lot of people doing a lot of good things across West Berkshire. And I think the need to sort of bring it all together was why we were keen to sort of do this, this whole idea of having sort of a one front door approach for people to go through. And I think what this did was open up everybody's eyes to actually, we don't all need to do things individually. We can do them more jointly, and that's why it really, really worked. And you know, in terms of continuing, commissioning, adult learning, we always now specifically ask people to name the partnerships and groups they work with, because we want people to work together rather than compete against each other. You know, I'm not saying the competition was there, but you achieve so much more value for money and value for everything actually, if people are working together. And the whole idea of community, these are the same people, you know, we work with the same people, but just in different ways. And it's sometimes easy to forget that somebody that has a housing need, may also have a English language need, may also have a family learning need, may also have a health need. So these are all the same people. You bring them together in one place, deliver one kind of service in its broadest sense, and you can meet so many of those needs in a much more efficient way.

Clare Middleton 18:39

Yeah, I think. And I would say that, you know, to anybody else doing something like this is, you know, do choose your partners wisely, because the partnership should be reciprocal. We should support each other. It's not just a one-way street, but partnerships, as Mark was saying, they really do amplify any impact that we have, we're much stronger together. We love working with other organisations. And, you know, because as we've all got different skills, you know, and we we've all support learners in or the community in a different way. So those partnerships that are really important. And as Mark was saying, actually lots of funders now, you know, they won't just fund one organisation, they want to see those partnerships in action.

Jamie Adam 19:20

Clare, you just spoke to the listeners who might be in a similar position to where you were back in 2021, and I know that one of the key hopes of this series is to not only shed a light on the amazing work you are doing, but to also offer some advice and provide some insight into the process of running a non-profit community focused group. With that in mind, I mean, we've touched on the commission and funding, but could you just tell us a little bit more about Educafe's funding journey, and what that looked like and continues to look like.

Clare Middleton 19:48

Well, the first three years, we were commissioned as DCSA, the Diverse Community Support Agency for West Berkshire, and nobody really knew what that was going to look like, and our bid showed that we were going to create this community space, support non-native speakers, and do that community navigation and support. And as I said, that was for three years. And once we started, we realised that was just not going to be enough to sustain what we'd started, you know. And it shouldn't just fall, you know, we tried so hard to get top ups from all sorts of places, and I think it's fair to say that for those first three years, we really did hold on by the skin of our teeth. But in year one, we got a top up from the NHS CCG Commission, which supported Chatty Corner and the cafe. Year two, ACL beautifully supported us with an extra grant that was for Chatty Corner. And then in years three and four, we received a grant from the strategic migration team at West Berks, which has been an absolute godsend. And then, of course, in March last year, after six months of nail biting and you know, terrible process, we got notified that we'd got that five year commission from the National Lottery, which keeps the cafe open for five years, and our infrastructure, but also this two year add on project, which is for outreach to go out to other areas, to encourage other people to set up their own Educafe spaces in whatever they might look like. But yeah, the funding, I think, for anybody, is always going to be an issue, and sustainability. So Mark.

Mark Brown 21:22

Well, I think your agility with the funding and flexing to try and meet the different funding pots that were out there has been fantastic. And we have been lucky over the years with various pots of money coming in, usually ring fence, they have to go on certain things. And Claire was

very creative in turning around some of the things she was doing, to meet the funding that was coming down the line. And another way I think Clare was able to show us, as the funders, is what we call the pound plus, which is the return we're getting on our funding. So this is the contribution that she gets from volunteers. Contribution from, effectively, the library service, through giving up free space in the building, that would be a cost elsewhere, whereas if you can meet those costs by getting a free venue, by getting volunteers, by getting food, things like that, anything at all, then you're actually getting more for your funding than you actually, you know, that appears on a bit of paper. And I think that's very powerful in terms of, we can give you this small amount, this is what you will get in return. So, you know, certainly for any small groups thinking of going the same way, that is a very important message to get across to saying, volunteers aren't free. If we didn't have volunteers, that would be somebody that we would have to pay. But by getting them, it's a good way of demonstrating this is how much more you're getting for it.

Clare Middleton 22:51

Yeah, and I know, certainly we know that over the last year for Educafe, we've had over 7000 hours of volunteer hours, and if you costed that out at £15, or whatever the going rate is an hour. That's a lot of pound plus or value for money.

Jamie Adam 23:10

Wow, that really is, yeah, that's amazing, that's so many hours. And, I mean, we're speaking to lots of volunteers throughout this series, and the work they do each week and behind the scenes as well as it's absolutely incredible. And, you know, we've been talking about funding, but the amount of work that you and Janine and the rest of the team, and, of course, all the volunteers, is absolutely pivotal to the success of Educafe. Just a quick word, Claire, on the volunteers, and then your team.

Clare Middleton 23:36

So what's really lovely is that people come along to Educafe for all sorts of reasons. Let's take some that perhaps come because they're on maternity leave and they've had such a positive experience that they decided they want to give something back. And the volunteers sometimes it's difficult to see where the volunteer starts and the visitors end, because I actually believe that the volunteers get just as much from being there themselves as what they're giving to the people that come there. People that are perhaps retired, missing that connection with work, that networking. They've got that team of colleagues back again with their volunteer network at Educafe.

Mark Brown 24:17

Yeah, it's expertise that might otherwise be lost, particularly for those that are not working. And it's a really strong resource to tap into. And again, it's all part of our community, bringing it back

together and showing that people still do remain purposeful and can very much give something back if, even if they only have a few hours, or if they're not working, or if they finish working or retired. And again, I think West Berkshire has a very strong history of supporting volunteers and identifying those organisations that will benefit from them.

Jamie Adam 24:51

And a word that you hear a lot and is applicable to both the funding and the volunteer support and everything else within Educafe's consistency. How important is consistent support when you are running a nonprofit community group like Educafe?

Clare Middleton 25:07

It's really important. You know, the volunteers are the backbone of everything that we do, but we do need to pay people to do certain jobs to keep that consistency. And you know that infrastructure in place, So to have a sustainable income, or, you know, is really important. And in terms of consistency, for our visitors, it's really important that we are in the same place at the same time, every day, every week, because then you build trust within the community. They know we're always going to be there. And for some of them is the only time of the week that they actually leave their homes is to come along to Educafe with big smile on the face. And, you know. So consistency throughout for everything, through the volunteers, meeting the people that they're working with, consistency with funding, consistency with venue, yeah. So big, big word for all of that.

Jamie Adam 26:02

Yeah, and you mentioned the consistency of location there as well. And we heard from Sue at the top of this episode, how important is the library in terms of a physical space and what that offers to Educafe?

Clare Middleton 26:15

I would say that community spaces are really, really important. We don't have our own premises, so we always work out of community buildings. So, the library kindly lend us that space for free every week, which is incredible, because we couldn't sustain hiring a venue like that and other places, town halls, museums, you know, they're deemed to be safe places people feel safe going to them. So, there is all automatically, an element of trust there before somebody even comes through the door. Oh, you know, it's the library, it's going to be safe for me to go there. And our library, of course, has a library of sanctuary status, so it's very, very safe.

Jamie Adam 26:56

We'll be discussing this a bit more in a later episode, in more detail. But as you mentioned earlier, part of the National Lottery funding you received was to engage with other community

groups and and reach out to people to help set up Educafe spaces in other locations. What does this program look like?

Clare Middleton 27:15

So the Togetherness Program has given Janine and I the opportunity to go out and explore new Educafe spaces. We were at a meeting recently with a different local authority across the border, and, you know, we had 19 organisations that turned up for that workshop, and the energy that was in that room was incredible. Now, their ideas may not be exactly the same as ours, their outcomes slightly different for different reasons. But the idea of that connection, creating that one space where they can explore those things and bring different people together, was really, really strong. So, I'm hopeful for that. And you know, each community that you speak to, there's different people, they've got different needs because of the demographics that are there, and so an Educafe Newbury is going to look different from an Educafe space somewhere else. And it might just, it might not be all of it, it might be just one part of it. It might be a Chatty Corner or a Parent Village or something that's needed in those communities. And with all these new housing areas popping up all over the place, I think, you know, maybe the construction industry should fund a Educafe just putting out there and, but, yeah, it's grown because the community have shaped it. It's, you know, we're there to put the ideas out there, but it's not because we planned it all. And it just proves that when community does feel ownership, that everything changes, and people really do step up. They want to get involved, they want to help each other and build the place that they want to live in. And that's what we're trying to do with the togetherness project, is to spread that message. We just create the space where it can happen. And yeah, we hope that others will be inspired to do the same as what's happened in West Berkshire.

Jamie Adam 28:59

It's really amazing to see and hear about the growth from the drop-in sessions to where you are today and now also the plans for the future. And there'll be lots more information coming in episode five on how Educafe plans to grow sustainably moving forward. But that is, sadly, all we have time for today. But in tune with the aims of the togetherness program. I wanted to end this episode by asking what learnings you've had, or any advice you have for people listening who may be running a community group or wanting to start something similar in their area.

Clare Middleton 29:34

Well, I think there's a lot. I think we've all learned a lot through some very difficult years with covid, the different troubles around the world and the people that have come to West Berkshire, there's been a lot of learning. And my advice to anybody that wants to do this, really, is just start before you're fully ready, because you'll never be ready to open the door. It's really scary, and just do it. You know, even if you've got a small amount of money, it will pay for something. I think the most important thing is to have a person who really believes in this

kind of project, and then to have a space, so to find that space where you could hold an event, and then to look for the need and find some volunteers, and the rest will come together, because those people that come out of the woodwork will go and help you find that funding. We've learned that's one thing we've really learned, is to have a very strong governance team behind you, team that you can trust, so they bring in different skills underpinning our organisation, so that that's something that we've put in place over the last two and a half years, and we rely on them a lot. And to expect the unexpected as well. You know, you never know what's going to happen, what world events are going to happen. You never know who's going to walk through the door, whether it's going to be a volunteer or somebody coming along, because they need support. And you know, just meeting that one person, as we've seen through our volunteers. You know, it can change their lives, it can change your life, or it can just bring bigger and better things to your organisation. So, yeah, it's every week's different, and we meet such amazing people that really do care about their community and want to give back.

Mark Brown 31:17

Yeah, I mean, if there are opposite colleagues to me in other local authorities, where an Educafe might pop up, they probably wouldn't welcome me giving this advice, but whenever we do have any funding, we always put it out there, and we always joke that we know one of the first people that will respond is Clare. Claire doesn't ask once, she doesn't ask twice, three times, four, so she will ask all the time, and it becomes a bit infuriating for us, but that would be my advice. Be persistent, keep asking, you've got to be brave. Keep on asking, if you don't ask, you won't get, you don't get all the time, even though, if you ask all the time, but you've got to be fairly, fairly relentless. If you really believe in it and it is your passion to get these things going, you're going to have to convince people.

Jamie Adam 32:00

Fantastic. Thank you both so much. Really amazing insight and advice there. And it's been a great episode, a great way to kick off the series. It's been amazing to hear all about Educafe's origin story. And thank you for listening, join us next time on Creating Communities, The Educafe Podcast, where I'll be speaking to Chatty Corner manager Margaret Neville and Samera Abdas-Majid from reading refugees. We'll be discussing the English language learning and community engagement support that Educafe provides to non-native speakers, refugees and asylum seekers. If you would like to find out more about Educafe, you can visit their website or follow them on social media at Educafe UK. Contact information will be available in the show notes of this episode. If you've been listening to this and have been inspired to set up something similar in your local area, then please do reach out to Educafe. There's lots of information and toolkits available to help with this process. Educafe is a non-profit organisation, if you would like to support them, to continue to grow the thriving community that is helping so many people, you can donate by the link in the show notes. Please remember to

subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. This has been a Research Podcasts production, produced and hosted by Jamie Adam.