

Keys to developing the Cub Scout section

This document contains a summary of the report '*Overcoming the barriers to the growth of Cub Scouting*' produced by nfpSynergy in June 2012, on their research and findings about the Cub Scout section.

It also suggests some quick wins and local actions, based on nfpSynergy's findings and recommendations, for how we can continue to grow and improve the section so that more young people can enjoy Cub Scouting.

Introduction

Background

Over the past ten years The Scout Association has been monitoring growth rates in membership across the organisation. A large volume of both statistical and anecdotal evidence highlights difficulty with retention amongst the Cub Scouting demographic. Various concerns have been raised including:

- Loss of older Cub Scouts, at around age 9
- Loss of young people who leave Cub Scouts at 10½ but do not start Scouts
- Growth in numbers in the Cub Scout section not keeping pace with growth in other sections (i.e. the section is growing, but at a slower rate than other sections)
- Growth in numbers in the Cub Scout section slowing over time (i.e. the section is growing, but at a lesser rate each year)
- Absolute numbers of Cub Scouts continue to be lower now than they were at the peak of the section's popularity

This concern about the health of the Cub section sits within the context of a number of strong and positive years for the Scouting movement in the UK, with impressive growth in numbers following a major review of the Scouting programme completed in 2002. Research commissioned by The Scout Association has also highlighted the positive impact the movement has on its members, volunteers, and the broader community.

The Association therefore wants to understand the source of these growth challenges for Cubs, in particular since the Cub section is the largest in the movement and any decline in its membership could have a knock-on effect on broader membership.

Project structure and research methodology

nfpSynergy completed a 3-stage research process:

1. Clarification of the problem; interrogation of Scouts census data
2. Capitalising on previous work and identifying knowledge gaps; re-analysis and review of previous work
3. Generating new insight; original qualitative research with young people, parents and leaders – focus groups and interviews conducted around the UK.

Findings

Overview

Firstly, it is important to note that our research has highlighted what a positive and valuable experience being a member of Cubs (and any part of Scouting) is for young people in the UK. When the right combination of factors comes together, the result can be not only a fun evening, but the broadening of horizons for members and the chance to develop skills, interests, a new friendship group and a life-long hobby. A good evening at Cubs can be as diverse as: sitting around a campfire cooking; trying out rock-climbing (or any other pursuit) for the first time; playing games outside after a long day stuck inside at school; learning how to cook; working as a team to win a prize...The list goes on.

However, our analysis of the Scout Association data does confirm concerns that the Cub section is growing more slowly than other parts of Scouting, and more specifically that a challenge with 9 year old members has emerged, most notably in 2011. Our research shows that there are a wide range of issues which may be influencing this.

- National population statistics indicate that declining birth rates may be at the root of this problem: fewer children were born nine years ago than in previous years and therefore there are fewer potential and actual cubs.
- Desk research into child development and how young people spend their free time shows how vulnerable this age group is at this key developmental stage – despite how much more grown up than previous generations we may view them.
- We learned from our respondents that there are some key factors that need to be in place for the experience at Cubs to be a positive one. When those factors are in place you will have a happy Cub who stays involved and goes on to become a Scout; when those factors are missing then there is a strong chance that a Cub will leave. In short: most of the factors that motivate a Cub to stay are the flipside of those that lead a Cub to leave the organisation.

What this means is that to halt the decline in Cub membership and ensure future growth, the Association needs to ensure it is delivering on certain key factors:

- Good leaders, who are fun, engaged and have the leadership skills to manage a large group of 8-10.5 year olds
- A fun and challenging programme of activities. This needs to include plenty of time spent outdoors, both at weekly meetings and at camps.
- Programme delivery needs to ensure variation, be practical and leaders need to be open to feedback from young members
- Well-managed communications between leaders, Cubs and parents. The Scout Association also has a role to play here as a safety net if other communication channels break down.

There are some other factors that the Scout Association needs to be aware of that can have an impact on membership:

- Family involvement: this can both encourage membership and ensure continued involvement
- Other hobbies: there is a lot of competition from other hobbies, but flexibility and good communication on the part of leaders can prevent this becoming critical
- Friends and socialising are central to a positive Cubs experience. Unfortunately, if a friend/s leave a group, this can lead to a departure
- Scouting still retains a traditional image. For some this can be a barrier, especially as Cubs grow older.

Census analysis

Through examining Scouts Census data, we note in particular that:

- Numbers of Cub Scouts have been growing since 2006 following a decline since 2002
- In 2011, there was a 2% drop in the number of 9 year old Cub Scouts
- Rates of retention are increasing for both 9 and 10 year olds
- Since 2002, the percentage of members who are female has been rising in every section except Network

Having looked at 10 years of census data, the overall picture for Cub Scouting can be seen as positive: overall membership continues to grow and the drop-off in membership from Cub Scouts to Scouts is also decreasing. Other sections of Scouting are also experiencing growth. It is also worth noting that membership is increasingly more representative in terms of gender: for the whole period covered by these data, the number and percentage of female members has grown in every section from Beavers to Explorers. Interestingly, the transition from Cub Scouts to Scouts actually results in an increase in numbers of female members and has done in every year since 2002.

However, our analysis of the Scout Association's census data does show that the Cubs section is growing more slowly than other sections. Furthermore, there was also a decrease in the number of 9 year old members of Cubs in 2011. While this was a small decrease, of 2%, given that it is coupled with the lower growth rates of the Cub section generally, we argue that this is worthy of concern and attention by the Scout Association.

Demographic trends

Our analysis of demographic trends over the last 10 years indicates that The Scout Association has actually done a good job of increasing membership of Cub Scouts amongst 9 year olds in the years 2007-2010 as this age group was decreasing in numbers during the same period. 2011 was the year when the 9 year old population reached its lowest point, perhaps explaining why the Scout Association saw its 9 year old members decline in that year specifically.

The number of 9 year olds in the UK will be growing from 2012 onwards. It will therefore be important for the Scout Association to continue to map its membership numbers against ONS population data so as to understand whether increases and decreases in membership

can be explained in part by changes in the UK's population. In addition, the Association will need to increase the number of leaders so that the opportunity to join is available.

Re-analysis of previous work

Parents of lapsed 8-10 year olds do not appear to have any grievances that are different to any other parents of lapsed members – factors such as impact on family life, meeting times, costs, and distances travelled do not appear to be more of an issue for this group than for any other parents. Indeed, their level of dissatisfaction is slightly lower than the average. Therefore, there is no indication that the lives of parents of Cub Scouts are specifically prohibitive to their child's involvement in Scouting (e.g. because of being a younger family, having additional childcare responsibilities).

Generating new insight through qualitative research

This section of the report takes you through the findings from the qualitative fieldwork we conducted throughout the UK in March and April 2012. During the earlier stages of the project we identified a variety of factors that are likely to have an impact on a young person's continued involvement in Cubs. In this third stage we aimed to test out these factors and generate new insight into why some young people continue as members of Scouting, while others leave. We spoke to both current members of Scouting and past members, and wanted to compare and contrast their responses to understand better the difference in experience. We also conducted focus groups with parents of both past and current members to add a further layer of investigation and analysis.

Leader (major influence factor)

Our analysis indicates that leaders are one of the most critical factors in a young person having a positive experience in Scouting. During our research we spoke to some parents and young people who had stopped enjoying their time in Cubs and Scouts because of a poor leader or because of a clash with a leader. Many of the young respondents expressed their negative impression of their leader by describing them as "shouty". This is connected to the challenge of maintaining the right level of discipline.

Enjoyment – Something we discovered as really important – leaders need to be enjoying themselves too: former Cubs were all too aware that their leaders were not enjoying themselves. It is important that Cubs doesn't become like school for children, and also important that being a leader doesn't become like work for volunteers.

Support – It is also important that Cubs feel supported and encouraged – rather than judged and criticised. Our discussions with parents and children painted a picture of Cubs as an opportunity for young people to develop, push boundaries and try out activities for the first time. Current members talked about Scouting as a place where you were not judged, in stark contrast to some former Cubs we spoke with who had not felt supported by their leaders.

Leadership teams – It's important that the Cub Leader is supported by a good Leadership team and Group Scout Leader. It is also vitally important that there are sufficient leaders

for each group and a solid infrastructure of support. This enables the leaders to give individual attention when necessary, relieves some of the pressure, and also means that discipline issues can be tackled without the whole group being delayed. Leaders we interviewed highlighted the importance of engaging with parents in order that there is sufficient adult support for the effective running of the pack.

Discipline – it is clear from our research that poor discipline can have a major negative impact on a young person’s enjoyment of Cubs. But it is also vital that Cubs doesn’t become too strict either. A number of leaders acknowledged that Cubs should be different from school, and so while poor discipline can spoil the experience for others, meetings shouldn’t become too strict. Parents we spoke to often highlighted how constricted children were at school, and that Cubs needs to provide an opportunity to let off steam.

Characteristics of a good leader – So what are the absolutes of good leadership we learned from our research? Here is the list of the most important attributes of a Cub leader:

- They need to be kind and understanding
- Reasonable attitude to discipline – they should not blow their top when a child does something wrong
- They need to be good at communicating both with Cubs and with their parents
- They need to be enthusiastic about Scouting and offer a varied programme
- Organised, in particular about badges, record-keeping and transitions
- Full of energy
- Sensitive to the needs of different members (older/younger, shy/confident)
- They need to have the skills and/or training to be able to manage a large group of energetic youngsters.
- They need to be fun!

Programme delivery (major influence factor)

It is important not to forget that good content alone is not enough to engage children – the material also needs to be delivered in an engaging manner. It is vital that leaders deliver the programme in an engaging and practical way rather than as a lecture. As well as being able to deliver the Cub Scouting programme in a practical manner, leaders also need to be flexible in how they approach programme delivery. They need to be both willing and able to make changes to the programme or even go “off programme” to deal with the reality of the situation in their Cub Pack.

The importance of being responsive to the needs of their Cub group is connected to another important aspect of good programme delivery that we heard about from all our different respondent types – openness to feedback and child participation in programme design. The leaders we spoke to who were running successful groups regularly consulted the kids on what they did and didn’t enjoy. Parents we met also noted the fact that their child’s leader sought out their views as one of their positive attributes. There is a balance to be struck here – Cubs should neither be setting the entire programme for the evening nor have their interests and ideas ignored.

Cubs spend two and a half years as members of their Pack, and it is important that there is sufficient diversity to the activities they do during this time. If Cubs turn up each week to play the same games, or if leaders do the same badges and activities each year, Cubs become bored. We heard from a number of respondents that doing the same things each week, such as playing one game all the time was a contributing factor to their disaffection with Cubs. On the other hand, some parents of current cubs explained to us that their children wanted to keep going each week because they knew they would play different games and try out new activities each time.

Programme content (major influence factor)

Our research indicates that there is a range of vital ingredient needed to provide Cubs with the kind of engaging programme that will make them want to keep coming back week after week.

Challenge and achievement – The young people we met were delighted to tell us about the badges they had earned, the awards they had won, and the challenging activities they had managed to do while members of Scouting. Some of the Cubs we met explained that they did enjoy the fun aspect of Beavers and Cubs, but at a certain point they became bored because they were not doing enough badges and did not have goals to work towards.

Badges – Our respondents explained how they were inspired by other Cubs they saw with lots of badges, and got a real sense of achievement from completing the necessary tasks to be awarded a badge. However, it was important for young people that they understand why they are doing a task or a badge. What is vital is that leaders are organised about the badge process, otherwise Cubs will become frustrated and even lose interest in working towards badges. Some former Cubs were disappointed because they had done the requested homework for their badges, but their leader had forgotten about it by the following week.

Fun – A vitally important aspect of Cubs is the fact that it is not like school. After a day of schoolwork, rules and constrictions, children are ready for something different, and specifically something more fun. Parents were keen that Cubs allowed the children to have fun and participate in gregarious activities. Cubs should be about playing in the snow in winter, while at school this is sometimes against the rules; Cub uniforms should be in sore need of a wash after a meeting, while getting school uniforms dirty is frowned upon; the Cub hut should be abuzz with the sound of noisy kids having fun while school is a place where being noisy leads to a reprimand.

Trying out new things – While it is true that many of the children we met participated in a wide range of extracurricular activities (from kickboxing to amateur dramatics), Scouting does have a strong advantage because of the variety it offers to its members. Indeed, for many young people it is during Cubs that they try out certain activities for the first time which then develop into lifetime hobbies.

Outdoors and camping – We heard from many of our respondents just how popular spending time outside was for Cubs. As one youngster explained, being outside is intrinsic to Cubs. However, it is important for us to note that a positive outdoors experience at Cubs

does not need to be as complex as a Grylls-style survival evening. Many respondents highlighted the pleasure they got from a wide-range of outdoor activities: playing games outside, cooking food on a bonfire, learning how to light a fire, going into the woods, playing cricket. Camping is a particularly important part of the outdoors experience, and for many youngsters is the best bit about Scouting.

Communication (medium influence factor)

Communication emerged as an important issue during our discussions with respondents, and we identified challenges at various levels. Communication becomes all the more important if the prospect of leaving Scouting emerges on the horizon, as good communication between children, parents and leaders can enable the ironing out of any problems. It is particularly important that good communications channels exist between parents and leaders.

Transitions between sections (medium influence factor)

Strong communication is particularly important when young people are transitioning between different sections of Scouting. However, there are also a range of other issues connected to transitions between sections that can have both a positive and negative impact upon a young person's experience in Scouting. Unfortunately, we spoke to some former Cubs who had left the organisation because of a poorly managed transition.

As well as adequate information being provided, it is also important that the transition takes place at the appropriate time. Broadly, there were two approaches: either to send Cubs together as a group to Scouts, or to let individual Cubs move up when they are ready. This latter approach may be more appropriate given feedback from some leaders and our findings from our research into child development.

The Hut (minor influence factor)

Some leaders mentioned their great building as a factor in the success of their group, while other leaders underlined the challenges they face due to not having control of their own hut. One of the findings from our research, is that many of the children who join Cubs are expecting and in search of outdoor fun and adventure. Unfortunately, some Cub huts do not have outside space and this makes fulfilling children's expectations difficult. Unfortunately, not all groups are fulfilling the outdoors promise.

What we learned is that, while the hut did not in itself emerge as a critical factor in a child's decision to leave Cubs, if the hut prevents children spending time outdoors and engaging in adventurous activities it can lead to a diminishing interest and enjoyment.

Friends (major influence factor)

Friends emerged as an even more important factor than family. Children are often inspired to join Scouting by one of their friends, and friend swere mentioned by many of our young respondents as one of their favourite parts of going to Cubs. Parents see the real value in this chance to socialise and establish friendships, in particular if their children have difficulties making friends at school or face bullying.

Some former Cubs we spoke with explained that they would have stayed as members if their friends had not decided to leave. This risk of this is particularly high as Cubs become older – other friends may leave because they are too old and leave them with a group of much younger Cubs who they are not interested in befriending.

Family (medium influence factor)

Family involvement is a protective factor for a young person's involvement in Scouting – a child is more likely to join and more likely to stay involved in Scouting if a parent or sibling is also connected in some way to the movement.

Parents are also key to the decision for a child to stop participating in Scouting and any other free-time activity. We identified a difference between the parents of Cubs and Scouts during our research, with parents of Scouts leaving the decision about continued involvement very much in the hands of their children. However, the parents of Cubs were more likely to encourage their children to continue their involvement in a wide range of activities, seeing the value of trying out a range of hobbies and sports at a young age.

Other hobbies (medium influence factor)

When we talked with our young respondents about how they enjoy spending their free time the sheer variety of responses we heard was impressive. A number of respondents did explain that the decision to give up Cubs was linked to a clash with another hobby. A positive finding from our research is that for many parents Cubs compares strongly to the other activities on offer. Specifically: Cubs is more structured, it's planned and well-organised, the leadership is strong, the element of competition is seen as important, and the fact that Cubs contributes to the community is regarded as positive.

The image of Scouting (minor influence factor)

Research conducted by nfpSynergy into how The Scout Association's brand is perceived by the general public indicates that the organisation still has a traditional reputation. This also came through during this research project, in particular when talking with parents. Parents acknowledged that this old-fashioned and geeky image did act as a barrier to continued involvement for some children, with this becoming a particular threat as children near secondary school.

A number of the Cubs and former Cubs we met expressed their discomfort with the image of Scouting by explaining that they did not like the uniform. However, it is important to note that opinion was divided on the topic of uniform – many respondents enjoyed wearing the uniform, in particular since it meant that they felt part of a community. In general, feedback from parents indicates that there is a need for flexibility and understanding on the part of leaders when it comes to uniforms, especially as Cubs grow older.

Conclusions

It is important that we start the final section of this report by underlining the real warmth of feeling that exists towards the Scouting movement. Conducting this research project was a real pleasure for our team as we had the opportunity to speak to young people (Cubs,

Scouts & Explorers), their parents and leaders, and hear about the important contribution Scouting made to their lives. This contribution ranged from the opportunity to make friends away from the stresses of school, through to trying out a new activity that became a life-long hobby.

What we found through our research is that when it is done right, Cub Scouting is unlike anything else available to young people. In terms of the ongoing opportunity to try out new activities, stretch yourself, make friends and develop personally, as with the rest of Scouting, Cubs is truly unique.

However, we did also meet some young people and parents who had decided to leave Cubs because they were unhappy with some aspects of their experience. We found through our research that the root of this dissatisfaction was in the main caused by Cubs not delivering on its promise (or not meeting the expectations that the young person had). The most critical factors that Scouting needs to get right are (starting with the factor of greatest importance):

- The Leader
- Programme delivery
- Programme content
- Communication
- Good management of transitions
- The Hut

We also found that there are some additional factors that can contribute to a child either staying or leaving. Over these factors the Scout Association has less control, but it is important to be aware that they do play an important role in whether or not a Cub remains involved in the organisation. It is also useful to note that they were, in general, of less importance than the factors mentioned above:

- Friends
- Family
- Other hobbies
- The image of Scouting

Local action

nfpSynergy say that "Our research does not indicate that the Scout Association needs to revolutionise what it offers to Cub Scouts to meet a changing generation. We recommend instead that the Scout Association focuses on ensuring that groups around the country are better at delivering the existing programme."

There are a number of areas where you can make a real difference by providing active communication, support, and incorporating work into local development plans.

Leaders

A focus on ensuring the right people are in the right roles is particularly important in the Cub Scout section. Please encourage and support line managers to carry out appointment reviews, and look at moving on Cub leaders who are more suited to other roles.

Look out for updated materials to support the review process, specifically the support for carrying out difficult reviews, which will be available in September.

Flexible leadership teams are key to making sure that all of the important positive characteristics of a Cub Leader are present – one leader does not have to be the expert at everything. You can help by promoting the flexible volunteering such as role sharing, sharing tasks amongst a team of leaders and assistant leaders, and the use of roles including Section Assistant, Scout Active Support, and engagement with parents as occasional helpers.

Look out for the training and accompanying videos that are being released in the coming months to promote and encourage flexible approaches to volunteering. Training Managers will be provided with more information about this in September.

More information about the differences between the roles of Section Assistant, Occasional Helper, and Scout Active Support member can be found [here](#).

The support and training given to new leaders is an area where we have a real opportunity to influence the future direction of Cub Scouting in a positive way. Make sure that new leaders are able to access quality training in a relevant timeframe. In particular, focussing on really good delivery of *module 15: Challenging Behaviour* and *module 12: Providing a Balanced Programme*, delivered by inspiring trainers who have recent practical experience of delivering a successful programme.

Programme

Leaders need to provide a fun, exciting and challenging programme in order to retain young people, particularly older Cubs.

Programmes need to be varied to stay interesting, both for the Cub and the leader. In the Cub section many leaders continue to plan a 2 year rotating programme, which can in some cases become stale over time. Make sure programme planning support is available, and encourage leaders to try new things.

Cubs should be spending approximately 50% of their time outside. This could involve simple things such as playing games, going for a walk, or having a campfire. It is especially important to promote outdoor activities during the winter months, and encourage people to share ideas.

Cubs need to be challenged, and want to be earning badges. All Cubs should be encouraged to achieve activity badges, and their Chief Scout Silver award – it is a myth that restricting the number of young people achieving the award increases its value. The award will be valuable to each young person because it is their personal achievement.

Communications

Encourage, and if possible help to facilitate, frequent and effective communications between leaders and parents. This is especially important leading up to and during transition to Scouts, and to help find flexible solutions to allow young people to continue to take part in Scouting if they also choose to do other extra curricular activities.

For ideas on how to engage parents, particularly through camps, see

www.scouts.org.uk/recruitingparents

Make sure that arrangements for transition between sections are well managed. Leaders should know who to contact in other sections with their Group, and neighbouring groups. Young people should move sections at the point in time most appropriate for them, rather than the time which is simply most convenient for the leader. Parents and young people should be able to choose between sections that meet on different days and times, and receive information about different Groups where it would be helpful.