**Draft Press Release – Learning Ship**

AMBITIOUS plans are being launched to take hundreds of Bristol schoolchildren on a voyage of discovery.

But the pupils will not be sailing off to distant oceans - this ‘Learning-Ship’ will open the eyes of young people to opportunities closer to home, in the River Avon and the Severn Estuary.

The idea is to use a vessel, such as the Waverley or the Balmoral, to take groups of children and adult volunteers on a 12-hour coastal trip.

The programme, which will involve preparatory and follow-up activities in schools, will support studies of the natural environment, science, engineering, design and technology.

But its broader purpose is to help young people, especially those from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, to make more use of the experiences and facilities available to them.

The involvement of business volunteers from relevant industry sectors such as engineering, power, water, finance, tourism and environment, as well as wildlife experts and historians, is also seen as crucial, providing role models and encouraging youngsters to have higher aspirations.

The Learning Ship is being developed by the Bristol Initiative Trust, which is looking at ways to make the city fit for the future in 2050 and beyond.

Hugh Thomas, education director for the trust, said surveys revealed that a high proportion of young people in a deprived area of north Bristol had never visited the city’s redeveloped Harbourside. They had told researchers that not knowing how to access opportunity was their biggest barrier to happiness or success.

Other studies show that children’s interest in school science declines from the age of ten.

“There is a need to create a new vision for studying science, engineering and the natural world in the wider context of society - and there is a critical age at which we have to engage students,” he said. “On the Learning Ship, young people and industry volunteers will interact in an environment beyond the traditional classroom.“This is a unique project that will generate a cohort of young people with a deeper understanding of their region who are fitter to support its future.”

About 60 students are likely to be involved in the inaugural trial voyage of the Learning Ship, and the programme aims to build to five trips a year with up to 250 young people on each by 2015.

Similar projects may be developed in other parts of the region later.

Mr Thomas said until now schools had tended to travel out of the West Country to give children different experiences. But while students enjoyed these trips, they reported that they felt disconnected from the experiences and are unlikely to follow up opportunities independently.

“Our research shows that children are inspired by passionate people, hobbyists and enthusiasts. This project will be advocating lifestyle choices rather than career options,” he said.

To learn more contact

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