



**Women's  
Environmental  
Network**

***Getting to the Roots – Volunteer Training Programme***

External Evaluation of a Community Development Initiative

**For Women's Environmental Network**

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September 2008

## **Introduction**

This evaluation reflects on the experience, performance and impact of the '***Getting to the Roots – Volunteer Training Programme***'.

It considers the:

- achievements and experience of the project;
- extent that the project has met the objectives of its original proposals;
- factors that contributed to achievements and an exploration of the challenges;
- context of the project including relevant changes; and
- contribution to the local themes and issues outlined in the LBTH Community plan.

The project ran for 12 weeks during the summer of 2008, and this evaluation will identify emerging issues which can be incorporated into future similar projects.

The report begins with an executive summary providing a general overview of the key findings. It continues with some brief background and the methodology used for the evaluation. This is followed by further details that illustrate the key findings and is arranged under the following themes: -

- Achieving targets with wider benefits
- Exploring the success factors
- Partnership and project management
- Contributing to programme and wider objectives

## Key findings and recommendations

- Getting to the Roots has met its aims in terms of identifying interest from the target community, recruitment of people onto the project, participants moving into paid employment and engaging with community groups to promote the programme.
  - The women who have been fully engaged have identified considerable benefits including improving the employability increases in participants' confidence and sense of empowerment.
  - All of the women who have completed the training and placements have stated they will continue to be involved in volunteering , one will be working and not able to continue but is keen to volunteer in the future
  - The project has delivered activities that clearly fit with the requirements of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in terms of improving integration through volunteering and uptake of services and improving health.
  - The project is well placed to meet the local challenges of breaking isolation and bringing together disparate communities through a common interest in gardening.
  - Activities delivered neatly bring together different areas of expertise; the love of growing with understanding of environmental issues, re-cycling and re-use of resources.
  - There was a range of factors that contributed to the successful achievement of the project including the quality of teaching, commitment of staff and the flexible approach.
- *It would be beneficial in future projects to have stronger and more evidenced links with work placements including having placement feedback forms.*
- *Aspects to review for the future include clear communication of the requirements of the course to ensure a good fit between initial interest and completion of the programme..*

## Background

The Getting to the Roots programme was developed by Women Environmental Network (WEN), the only organisation in the UK working consistently for women and the environment.

WEN's vision is of

- A world where women are aware of their ability to change the environment for the better and actively come together to do so.

WEN's strategic aims are:

- Empowering women to make positive environmental change.
- Increasing awareness of women's perspectives on environmental issues.
- Influencing decision-making to achieve environmental justice for women

Formed in 1988, it is a registered charity whose central belief is that women have the right to information to enable them to make fair choices.

WEN is based in Tower Hamlets and works in partnership with community organisations to bring a new expertise in a range of environmental and health issues to local people.

**Getting to the roots** is a volunteer training programme targeting unemployed women and supporting them to develop new skills in supporting and empowering community garden groups in Tower Hamlets. The project planned to provide a structured training programme to support the learning alongside a volunteer work placement programme within a range of community groups. The work placements would give the trainees an opportunity to undertake on the job training, testing out and re-enforcing the learning gained in the training course. Ongoing support is provided to facilitate ongoing volunteering after the end of the programme.

The project meets the strategic aims of WEN and contributes to improving opportunities for unemployed or economically inactive women to move towards employment. The aim of the Getting to the Roots – Volunteer Training Programme was to identify 7 women, unlikely to participate in learning and engage them in a project which brought together formal but supportive opportunities for learning and volunteering using gardening and the idea of growing food as the magnet.

The planned beneficiaries included women returning to the labour market with care responsibilities and or health issues, over 70% of whom were to be from BME communities. There were 2 main strands to the project –

- Group training to improve knowledge and understanding
- Weekly volunteering in placements with *one of* a number of community groups and premises to enhance skills and put the knowledge into practise.

## Methodology

The fieldwork for the evaluation was carried out in August 2008. It involved using a standard framework of questions, adapted to suit the different respondents with the aim of drawing out the experience and perspectives of a range of people who have played a part in the project:

- interviews with key management and delivery staff;
- one to one face to face interviews with project beneficiaries;
- telephone discussions with the LBTH officer and one of the work placements; and
- examination and analysis of project documentation application for funding, website and WEN promotional materials and beneficiary feedback forms.

Direct quotes from those who participated in discussions are included in the report in italics. The quotes are not attributed, as participants were assured of the confidentiality of their contributions to discussions.

## Aim and objectives

The aim of the programme was to train and support women to enable them to support local women's food growing groups and increase awareness of the environment through the provision of a gardening project targeting local women.

## Delivery plans

The delivery plans were developed by the staff and volunteer team and aimed to provide a complementary mix of classroom based training and practical gardening work experience placements.

### Training Plan

Date	Venue	Topics
12 <sup>th</sup> June	WEN	Induction to WEN, introduction to course, getting to know each other, visit to WWC
19 <sup>th</sup> June	WEN	Team building, urban food growing, CRB checks
26 <sup>th</sup> June	WEN	Team building, preparing for placements (including health and safety), organic growing and pest control
3 <sup>rd</sup> July	Visits	Visits to placement projects
10 <sup>th</sup> July	WEN	Growing techniques, planning
17 <sup>th</sup> July	Wapping Women's Centre	Soil and composting
24 <sup>th</sup> July	WEN	Events, crop rotation and companion planting
31 <sup>st</sup> July	John Scurr Comm Centre	Sustainable food event
7 <sup>th</sup> August	WEN	Seed saving, community development
14 <sup>th</sup> August	WEN	To be decided based on trainees interests/needs
21 <sup>st</sup> August	WEN	To be decided based on trainees interests/needs
28 <sup>th</sup> August	WEN	Any last questions, evaluation, certificate presentation, celebration

## Achievements targets with wider benefits

Outputs	Total achieved	Total planned	% achieved against target
Total number of community groups engaged	16	8	200%
Total number of participants expressing an interest	21	12	175%
Total number of participants involved in training	8	12	75%
Total number of people participating in volunteer placements	5	7	71%
Total number of gardening sessions undertaken	23	32	72%

Outcomes based on interviews			
% of learners with improved confidence	7	7	100%
% of learners with improved knowledge/skills	7	7	100%
% of learners with improved fitness	0	100%	n/a
% Continuing in volunteering after the end of the project	4	2	200%
% Progress into jobs for those unemployed/economically inactive	2	1	200%

**Getting to the roots** has met and in some instances exceeded some targets but has notable areas of under achievement which may be improved in future similar project.

## **Verbal feedback from participants during final session**

### **Positive**

Meeting new people  
Good food  
Lots of topics covered  
Placements enjoyable

### **Negative**

Placement too short  
Timing (clashed with summer holidays)  
Small and changing group – inconsistent  
Not enough handouts  
All day training would be better (12 weeks too spread out)

### **Interesting**

Language/translation

## Excerpts from Project co-ordinator's Report

**Recruitment and retention of trainees:** Recruitment was a time-intensive activity, involving visiting a number of groups, arranging initial interviews & assessments in addition to completing the paperwork. Participants seemed uncomfortable with signing the learning agreement, wanting to take it home to check before committing. This may have been a factor in some people deciding not to join the programme. In future we might consider whether such an agreement is necessary or if it could be simplified and made more user friendly.

Retention and inconsistency of attendance, impacting on planning, was exacerbated by holidays and Ramadan. It may be preferable not to hold future programmes in late July or August as this may have contributed to lower take-up and attendance of the training.

### Format of training

The training was delivered in two-hour sessions once a week for 12 weeks. While the length and frequency of the sessions seemed fine, a 12-week programme without a break was quite long. If the programme is run again using this format, it would be useful to include a "half term" week break, based on a school term, avoiding additional childcare need for school-aged children.

The same amount of training may be provided in a smaller number of longer sessions, 9.30am – 2.30pm being the most viable. Five such sessions would give roughly the same teaching time as the original format and would better meet participants needs offering a more effective use of time, and reduced costs in terms of volunteer expenses.

WEN commits to reimburse the travel and lunch costs for all its volunteers. Providing lunch is a good way of attracting participants and getting the group to gel. Lunch was provided at £3.50pp and was appreciated by the participants. It would be good to continue this arrangement in future programmes if funding allows.

### Content and delivery of training

The content of the training was broad, and participants were given several opportunities to suggest topics they would like to cover. Topics were only limited by the trainer's knowledge and skills. With the exception of practical planting and transplanting exercises, training was almost entirely theoretical. In future we should consider whether it would be viable to deliver the training run at premises where a more practical approach could be taken.

## Translation

It was made clear to prospective participants that, while little or no written work would be involved, the training would be delivered in English, and they were therefore expected to have at least a basic level of English sufficient to follow what was being discussed, in order to facilitate holistic learning and development. Comments from project staff and others suggest that in future we need to be clearer that there will almost certainly be other people in the group who are able to summarise in Bengali (and possibly other community languages).

## CRB checks

CRB checking was offered but the process is potentially off-putting, and may have contributed to drop out. New guidance from the Home Office states when it is necessary to carry out CRB checks on volunteers. Since a CRB check was not necessary for all the placements, for future programmes it may be simpler and better practice for placement projects to arrange a CRB check when the volunteer starts, if this is necessary.

## Placements

On joining, participants were informed that they were expected to attend a weekly practical placement at a local community garden project. This provided hands-on experience for the trainees and allowed the volunteers projects to gain from the assistance of the volunteers. However, those projects that were most in need of volunteer assistance were unable to take volunteers on as they were not able to offer regular supervision. Ultimately all volunteers (with the exception of one who continued in an existing placement) chose to be placed at Spitalfields Farm. There was a tension between which placements are best for the volunteers, and which are best from the point of view of support being given to the projects that most need it. In the end, the placement chosen by the participants had skilled supervision, allowing them to develop their food growing skills. However, because of this supervision, there was less opportunity for them to develop community development and leadership-type skills. For future programmes we might consider one of two alternatives that overcome these issues:

1. Training could be run on a similar basis, but at the end of the training and supervised placement sessions, participants would be encouraged to volunteer at another project that was in need of support on a more long-term basis.
2. More practical training would be run, based at one of the community groups, so that initially participants had closely supervised practical training. Following this, they could be encouraged to volunteer at this or another project that was in need of support on a more long-term basis.

- **Promotion of the project**

The project was promoted through a combination of leaflets, engaging with 16 community groups. For full list of groups see appendix 1. The effort of the groups participating in the promotion was fruitful in that the number of people, sufficiently interested in the project to provide contact details was 21. Unfortunately the follow through from this initial interest was less than expected, however the staff made time to identify the barriers which will provide a better foundation for the planning of future similar projects.

- **Recruitment and beneficiaries starting on courses**

Eight people (38% of those expressing and interest) started the training programme. The project has done particularly well in engaging beneficiaries who would have been unlikely to take up mainstream learning opportunities. This includes older women from the Bengali community, a group traditionally least likely to be engaged in learning activity with additional high levels of exercise related health issues. Staff follow up records showed that there were a variety of reasons for interested people not starting the project

- a) Time commitment was more than originally anticipated (5 people – 23%)
- b) Lack of childcare care provision (2 people – 10%)
- c) Lack of other care provision ( 1 person – 5%)
- d) Wrong phone number (2 people – 10%)
- e) Unknown (3 people – 14%)

- **Delivery of activity**

In the main the project's activity was delivered as planned, the training sessions were held weekly as were the work placements. The feedback from participants and others have suggested alternative approaches to delivery.

- **Progression into further learning and employment**

All of the project's beneficiaries were unemployed or economically inactive at the start. A key aim of the programme was to support their progression into further learning and employment. All of the participants said they would continue to do volunteering and that they would continue in their current placement. The planned number of unemployed/economically inactive beneficiaries moving into employment at the end of their course was doubled. This is a significant achievement given the barriers faced by many of the beneficiaries and the considerable support required to gain employment. Both people moving into employment stated that being involved in the project has been an important factor behind this achievement and one was give day release by her new employer to complete the project as *'they felt it would bring additional useful skills'* to the new job.

## Exploring the success factors

Participants of the project were overall very positive particularly the friendly support and help they were given

Exploring the factors behind the project's achievement reveals a number of important aspects. High up is the **quality of staff and teaching** offered by the project, and there were many very positive comments on this. *"The teacher was very good – I enjoyed the sessions"; "Tutor was very experienced"*.

Another important aspect was **the feeling of being a part of a group and friendship** *"I made many friends", "I like the people", I met different people"*.

Finally the **flexibility and personalised learning** provided by the project was appreciated, the work placements were individual placements arranged around the needs of the participant. *"It could do this and do my other classes"*

## Overcoming wider barriers

Staff and participants commented on the high levels of motivation of some participants, and that their confidence and levels of engagement improved over time. Notwithstanding this, many still faced barriers to established engagement in the labour market and opportunities to progress which the project aimed to address.

- 'on the ground' recruitment methods using established community links and networks and lots of word of mouth recommendations;
- the course being free to beneficiaries - *"was a factor in me deciding to do it."*
- That the project was local, *'It helped that I was able to walk to the training'*
- *'Friendly staff'* who provided *'lots of support'* to participants.

## Partnership and project management

As noted the 'Getting to the Roots' project was a partnership project led by WEN, the promotion and the work placements were provided by other community organisations.

There are tangible impacts for participating organisations that already are evident, some of which are noted below.

- The project has allowed WEN to deliver some of its aims and encourage women to be more involved in environmental issues.
- **Spitalfields Farm** has had an opportunity to develop its capacity to work with volunteers and expanded its volunteer base.
- **St Pauls Way Community School** has had an opportunity to develop volunteers to work in the schools gardens and build on the 'green' aspects of the garden for example composting.

- **London Community Recycling Network** has had the opportunity to employ a new member of staff who has *'developed a better understanding of working with the community and community empowerment'*
- **Other community groups** involved in the project benefited in 2 main ways, they were able to signpost their clients to an exciting learning opportunity leading to synergy rather than a duplication of services and /or benefited from the additional human resources in terms of volunteers' time and skills

Interviews with some of the community groups revealed enthusiasm at involvement in the project both from their clients and staff.

"There was a high level of interest in this project"

"The staff were hands on and very flexible"

*"Staff were really approachable and happy to incorporate comments to make the project better for our clients"*

## **Project management**

Women's Environmental Network has been responsible for overseeing the delivery of the project and liaising with local community groups to facilitate participation. Good systems were put in place for monitoring and reporting activity and achieved the outcomes within the budget.

While there are considerable benefits to working in partnership, it does bring about additional responsibilities. WEN has been able to engage effectively with sufficient groups to engage with people interested in the project but perhaps more time should have been spent in ensuring that those who signed up for the project fully understood the requirements. This would require better information, perhaps through a workshop, for staff involved in publicity.

## **Contributing to wider objectives**

Getting to the roots has made a considerable contribution to the LBTH community plans and its key theme of addressing worklessness, with the aim of helping those most in need within the London labour market, including those from ethnic minorities, and supporting progress towards ensuring that London has a competitive workforce. This is evident in a range of ways including:-

- the success of the project in assisting people who were unemployed or workless into employment and improving the employability and prospects for progression for those in work;
- providing opportunities for participants to feel more confident
- the fact that 100% of people supported were from BME groups who would have been less likely to be engaged in volunteering ; and
- contributing to the understanding of environmental issues, improving re-cycling and re-use of resources and

- strengthening the Third sector by increasing capacity in particular available human resource through volunteering

Although the project was not funded by the London Development Agency (LDA) it has contributed to their specified cross cutting themes for employment initiatives as follows:

### **Equal Opportunities**

100% of the participants were women; 100% were from BME groups; % for disabilities were not collected. The design and delivery of the provision e.g. fitting in with school hours; local provision and linkages to the local community infra structure were important aspects contributing to the successful engagement of these people. Insufficient funds to provide childcare had a negative impact on the range of women who could participant and impacted in the numbers completing the project.

### **Sustainable Development**

The project has addressed the social and economic elements of sustainable development by providing pathways to improved economic opportunities for people who faced disadvantage, with the consequent positive impact on family and community life. During the project volunteers have developed skills in growing, composting and working with the community. All skills which contribute to sustainable development, through improved employment opportunities, increased volunteering, increased community participation and improved community cohesion. Additional development which is more employment focused included community development, such as outreach (marketing) and team work, both offer transferable skills which are valuable in any paid job.

### **Recommendations**

It is clear that significant numbers of potential participants were put off between the expressing an interest and the project start. The staff involved in the project, however were proactive in reviewing this and tried very hard to follow up each individual, to find out why they did not participate.

There is always a percentage of people who say they want to do something but don't. In terms of full recruitment it would be useful if WEN were able to identify the average conversion rate ie total numbers of people who expressed an interest compared with the actual take up. This would give the staff tools to better manage the marketing process and enable them to recruit sufficient numbers of people onto the programmes.

Several people attended the first session but did not return, unfortunately these people were unavailable to question why they made that decision. It would be useful in the future to request feedback as part of the induction.

Five people (23%) cited a lack of time as reason for not participating although interested. It may be worth considering offering different approaches eg block training over a shorter period of time as suggested by the main staff member.

### **Aspects for development**

It would be useful to collect additional equalities data in particular information on health issues and disabilities. Funders are usually interested in which equalities groups are involved in the project and careful data collection may show improvements in health or fitness as significant.

Inevitably on a project such as this there were aspects that went less well, from which partners are keen to learn lessons and receive suggestions for improvement, and the key ones are noted below.

- In some instances the demands and relatively high level of commitment expected was possibly not communicated sufficiently well at recruitment.
- A view expressed by teaching staff on the project was that there was a need for more ESOL to be built into the programme in the future. The participants who faced language barriers all noted that their English had improved as a result of involvement in the project however there may be a need to have this more embedded and given a higher priority.

### **Widening participation**

Of the women who expressed an interest in the project 10% were unable to participate due to lack of childcare. There are various ways the project could overcome the issues of childcare:

- Payments for childcare or crèche provision – there were insufficient funds available to pay for registered childcare either in the form of an on site crèche or direct payments. For future projects WEN should investigate the availability of childcare support through alternative means, for example linking in to the LDA affordability scheme which pays women directly for the childcare required to enable parents to take up employment related initiatives and training.
- Timing of provision – some of the project delivery was during the school summer holiday, although this is probably the most exciting, and comfortable, time to undertake growing related activities, it is also the time when families have to take the full burden of childcare as schools are closed. Planning around the school holidays would have given women with school age children the ability to complete the project
- Range of provision - according to the feedback from those who did not complete the project lack of time was a significant factor. If this is consistent feedback then it would be as well to plan the projects to fit the needs of the potential participants, for example a parents and children project might be more suitable over the school holidays and contribute to the 'reduction of childhood obesity' as identified in the current PCT priorities hence attract an additional source of funding for this innovative and exciting project.

## Appendix 1 Community Groups involved in the project

Wapping Women's Centre	Grove Greening Group
Spitalfields Farm	U Turn
St Hilda's East Community Centre	Toynbee Hall
St Pauls Way Community School	Limehouse Project
John Scurr Community Centre	New Avenues Youth and Community Project
Asumjwe	Spitalfields Estate Gardening Club
The Arbour	Spitalfields Housing Association
Somali Integration Team	Ocean Women's Association