

North Lozells Green Up Project

Peer led community action raises awareness of environmental solutions

This project began from the recognition by Birmingham City Council that in order to successfully attend to derelict plots of land within the locality, a real structure for consultation with the community was needed. An advisory board concluded that a group able to work through local languages and with an understanding of the environmental issues, would be a platform for this. Monthly meetings with interested representative groups had been exploring what could be accomplished and how, to empower local communities to engage with the local decision making process. Their idea was that through training a small group of committed volunteers in environmental knowledge and understanding, these key people could reach out further into their communities, and encourage other residents to play a more active role. Two units on personal presentation skills from a degree course, offered by Birmingham University, could also link into this programme.



Making it happen

When the BEN Development worker in Birmingham learned about this activity, he realised that he was ideally placed to 'get the ball rolling' working between the statutory, voluntary and environmental groups to enable activity to happen. With his contacts, skills and experience, many of the ideas came to fruition. With support from Black Environment Network (BEN) and the Bangladeshi Multi-purpose Centre (BMC) the team of volunteers compiled a questionnaire to gather local people's views about issues on their doorstep. Suggestions were gathered on a range of solutions for derelict land in the area. The volunteer team also ran a focus group with residents, to get a more detailed picture of people's views. A six-month secondment was set up subsequently for a worker to be supported by the Council for a number of hours specifically to co-ordinate the project.

Reflecting diversity

The volunteers included people originating from Algeria, Bangladesh and Montserrat, people with disabilities, one teenager and those from a range of occupations both low paid and home-based. They were all keen to learn to express their views on their local environment. The 4 local mosques were committed to highlighting and discussing the local themes during Friday prayers for the 5 months of the project. The information was included on the prayer timetable posters.





Stacking benefits

The selected volunteers have improved their skills and knowledge in ways which may assist them to gain qualifications and find work. It has also empowered the wider community to take action to improve their local environment and their own health.

The Future

It is early days for the groups involved, but the experience has made them optimistic and more confident in getting to grips with developments that directly affect them in their environment. Two new groups are emerging from the Green Up Project: a residents' association, and a complementary health group. The residents' association will be able to address the built environment issues identified in the research. A monthly clean-up has been identified as popular, with immediate local response. The health group is planning to run sessions on topics such as nutritional aspects of ethnic cuisine and relaxation for stress relief. Both are currently seeking support in the form of premises, capacity building and funding.



FACTFILE

- **Funders:**
Handsworth Neighbourhood Renewal Fund
- **Partners:**
Black Environment Network, Bangladeshi Multipurpose Centre, Birmingham City Council, St. Paul and St. Silas Church, HRG. Handsworth's Practical Care Project, West Midlands Police, Age Concern, Mayfield School
- **Target group:**
Member of deprived communities in North Lozells district of Birmingham
- **Numbers:** 12 volunteers
- **Resources:**
Evaluation report will be available from www.ben-network.org.uk
- **Key points:**
 - Peer led outreach and community learning can be empowering for local communities. Beginnings are important, but developing confidence and community directed action is long term.
 - Linking health and environment is a powerful incentive for action for communities.
 - The programme was accessible to disadvantaged groups because realistic volunteer expenses were provided.
 - The involvement of a large number of partners can sometimes take an extended time to reach decisions and take action, thereby threatening a piece of work by losing sight of the aim. An independent co-ordinator, coming in at the right time, (in this case BEN) can be instrumental in enabling action.



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