



PEOPLE'S HEALTH TRUST - ACTIVE COMMUNITIES CASE STUDY



Amina - Building Bridges

Introduction

This case study focuses on how the Building Bridges project in Dundee was conceived, and what it aims to do and achieve, as part of the evaluation of the Active Communities Programme managed by People's Health Trust. The report draws on interviews with the project team, volunteers and participants, and the monitoring information submitted as part of the programme's six monthly review cycle.

About the project

The project secured funding in November 2015 and recruited the project director and development officer before Christmas. The project funding is for two years. This project provides a social group for Muslim

and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women living in Dundee who experience high levels of isolation due to cultural and linguistic barriers. The project offers participants the opportunity to mix with other women, make friends and take time out for themselves, by participating in activities ranging from art to health and beauty. The group collectively control the focus of activities.

The project is based in Dundee, which has a high proportion of Muslim and BME women, many of whom have only been in the UK for several months or years, and therefore experience both social and emotional isolation. Most of the participants are highly educated in their home country (for example, one is a qualified dentist and one is doing a PhD in Medicine at Dundee

University). The participants are unable to work in the UK for legal reasons and most have young children, so culturally they are expected to stay in the home and only mix with extended family.

"There is a lot of social and emotional isolation. Some feel they cannot meet with other people because of the language, some because of their colour, financially, because they have children at home...It is a very wide category but they are a silent group...it is a very important group." (Project staff)

The project is therefore designed to help reduce the social isolation of Muslim and BME women, but particularly highly educated women who may be more isolated in the UK, as they are used to working in their home country.

"Most of the women were highly educated and working in their home countries. But coming here they are suddenly trapped in their own home." (Project staff)

The project is managed by Amina, the Muslim Women's Resource

Centre, which was established in 1997 to work across Scotland to empower Muslim women and tackle discrimination so the target group can access all aspects of society and fully participate in community life. The project activity was designed by Muslim women, for Muslim women. It is based on local need, informed by feedback from women who attended other sessions at the Muslim Women's Resource Centre.



Main findings

- ➔ The project is run by Muslim and BME women, for Muslim and BME women. It provides a range of ways for them to contribute to project design and delivery that are proportionate and appropriate. Participants decide the focus of each session and are satisfied with the amount of 'collective control' they have.
- ➔ The project has plugged a gap in local service provision, providing a free course delivered in a format and at a pace that suits its client group.
- ➔ The project is very inclusive, working with a number of refugees and asylum seekers.
- ➔ Through their engagement with the project, Muslim and BME women have improved social links and ties. The social aspect of the group is highly valued, as much as the workshop content. The group engenders a sense of

community belonging and reduces social and emotional isolation.

Who is involved?

The project officer and project director are paid members of staff. The project director is Amina's North of Scotland Co-ordinator. Her role is to oversee the project, ensure implementation, manage staff and costs, and monitor activities for People's Health Trust, reporting on a six monthly basis.

The grant also pays for freelancer workers to deliver sessions where necessary, such as a recent jewellery making class.

Participants are already taking an active role in designing the sessions. The project is in the very early stages, but the intention is for volunteers who are also BME/Muslim women and project participants to lead some of the sessions, or co-deliver these with visiting speakers. The project generated a high level of interest and commitment from the group during the first month to make this happen. Volunteers will play a key role in providing the capacity to run the project.

The project staff held a consultation event at the local mosque and it is hoped that some of those participants will become the steering group for the project.

What opportunities does the project offer?

The Building Bridges project is supporting Muslim and BME women from a wide age range. Participants are drawn from a diverse group of countries including Pakistan, Indian, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. The project has only been running for a month, but is already helping participants to

reduce their social and emotional isolation by providing opportunities for Muslim and BME women to meet women from other backgrounds, faiths and cultures.

"It aims to reduce social and emotional isolation...a lot of Muslim women are not accessing activities or opportunities. They don't know what's out there, or what their rights or entitlements are. We are looking specifically at emotional isolation and have talked about delivering crafts, arts and drama sessions so women come together and start building their confidence, getting to know other people and trying a diverse range of activities that reduces their social isolation." (Project staff)

It is intended that sessions will use drama and story-telling approaches to help participants build their confidence. Women felt the story-telling approach would help them to learn from each other.

The project empowers local people to help design the sessions. An initial volunteer meeting was held, with 12 attendees. These volunteers were recruited through established channels such as the Muslim Society, Dundee Voluntary Action website, and Amina's website. This was followed by a consultation at the local mosque which generated a long list of proposed activities, mainly focused on women's wellbeing and relaxation activities.

"It's about checking in with women and seeing what they think would be useful." (Project staff)

It is hoped that the women involved in the recent consultation at the mosque will develop a longer-term commitment to the project and become the steering group. The steering group will meet every six months, bringing together women from different backgrounds. The

initial consultation highlighted the lack of opportunities for women to come together.

"She [Development officer] talked about the project... The steering group were very excited about it, they said 'we have never been approached about such a type of project'... It was like a brainstorming exercise. The [Development officer] had a set of questions... everyone gave their ideas, what they prefer, what activities would be interesting for them. The meeting was in the mosque."

(Participant)



The women who participated in the initial consultation have decided on activities so far. For example, they suggested that the first session should be run as a lunch club, providing an opportunity for the project lead to introduce the project and encourage people to come forward with ideas. The lunch club provided very popular, recording 30 participants. The lunch club might be run monthly going forwards to encourage networking and update people about up-coming activities.

Collective control is already evident through participants volunteering to lead specific sessions. This is empowering for participants. For example one volunteer came to the UK from Iraq in September 2014, accompanying her husband who came to the UK to study.

"I was one of them, I didn't used to go out as I didn't know anyone, but this

broke my isolation and increased my confidence to talk to people... I came here and I really like it... I volunteer for Building Bridges... I don't have anyone to meet or go out with, so this is a good opportunity for me to meet and communicate with other people... This is my place, for me." (Volunteer)

One project volunteer will be delivering a session on health and diabetes, and another participant volunteered to run a henna painting session which was very successful.

Volunteering to help deliver the sessions provides opportunities for highly educated participants to utilise their professional knowledge and skills.

"One of the ladies is a law student and said she would give a session on civil law, one of the ladies is a dentist and said 'I can give a session on oral health'. It was amazing, everyone was happy to volunteer for these activities." (Participant)

It is hoped that collective control will become evident through peer support and befriending as the project evolves. The project provides costs for childcare and this enables some women to participate who would not be able to do so otherwise.

The project also has an inter-generational aspect. This helps to develop a common sense of community, as access and isolation issues can be experienced differently by women of different ages.

"The target group is not only Asian, we are trying to get everybody together... Arab, African, Asian, and the local community. It is not for a specific age group, it is for any lady over the age of 16 in Dundee. It is very interesting when we have in the same activity for 19 year olds and 60 year olds... In Muslim culture socialising is

normally within the family, here we are getting together ladies from different countries and sharing ideas." (Project staff)

"It was lovely having people in their 50s mix with people in their 20s, 30s, 40s... So its not like you are living here alone, your circle is increasing and increasing. It is enriching my experience here." (Participant)

What has the project achieved?

The project is on target so far, having already engaged 55 women. Although in the early stages, the Building Bridges project is already demonstrating some collective control, through the formation of a steering group and participants already volunteering to lead sessions/ workshops.

"It is really interesting that already we are seeing not only that women want to take part but they want to lead, it gives them empowerment and helps them feel less isolated... Service users who start to take more ownership; that is quite key for this project. So they will have a dual identity... that is the outcome we want, that they get involved in co-production, not just accessing the services, but being actively involved in the design and delivery of the project." (Project staff)

Around 20 people attended the consultation group at Dundee central mosque, which generated a comprehensive list of suggested activities including cooking, first aid, sewing, henna painting, drawing, beauty classes, civil law, swimming classes, presentations skills, self-employment, photography, cake decoration, food preparation, and visiting Scottish tourist attractions. Two members of the new steering group volunteered to lead sessions in 'Arabic for Fun' and 'English for Fun'.

"We discussed 12 questions I had prepared to explore what they wanted to do through the project. They all showed initiative...one of the steering group led the henna session." (Project staff)

The project also achieves collective control, with some volunteers/ participants volunteering to deliver one-off sessions. The project has recruited eight volunteers already, four of these being particularly active. The volunteers are from diverse backgrounds; most are Muslim but from Arab, Asian and African backgrounds.

The project is already demonstrating a good level of engagement, both in terms of participants and volunteers. Muslim women have primarily been engaged through the Muslim Women's Resource centre (who are leading the project), the local mosque and Dundee University. The project is reducing the social and emotional isolation of participants and volunteers and provides a forum for local women to develop new friendships outside the wider family, which is not common in some of their home countries. The project is therefore helping to break down cultural barriers, as some husbands tell their wives their role is to stay at home and take care of the house and any children. It is important the project is women-only as many participants come from segregated cultures, so this enables some men to feel more comfortable with their wives attending the sessions.

"So they come for themselves; it breaks the routine of their life, they really enjoy it. One participant told me it's the first time in her life she has really felt creative [making earrings]... The feedback I got from the ladies is that it's the only opportunity they get to do anything independently, even if its very simple

things, the fact that they chose to do it and they are doing it for themselves alone, that's really empowering...it is a very unique opportunity." (Project staff)

"It's strange, in our culture we don't take time to meet others, always we are working. At the Chaplaincy I see the women are more relaxed, they can see their children playing and can take time to talk and relax. They are not just always working in the house and taking care of the child... We don't have this, just to go somewhere and have a fun time with strangers...it's very useful to have time for yourself." (Participant)

Participants were very positive about the project broadening their horizons, reducing isolation and enabling them to make friends and feel part of the wider community. For example, the lunch club provided an opportunity for women of different faiths to socialise.

"At the lunch club I met a lady who is Christian and not Muslim. There were Muslim and non-Muslim women. For me it's good, knowing the community I live in. I have been here three years, everything here is new to me, the traditions, how things work...It's breaking the barriers...it's not that frequent to meet non-Muslims socially." (Participant)

"It's good to learn, to talk to them, to learn about their culture. People here are very lovely...In Iraq I was afraid to come here, because I am Muslim and wear the scarf, I thought maybe they would not accept me, but when I came I was surprised; they treated me normally...Its very easy and useful to learn from people here." (Participant)

In the longer term it is hoped the project will support the employability of Muslim and BME women living in Dundee, many of whom experience legal, language

and cultural barriers to accessing work, such as migrants who struggle to get their qualifications recognised in the UK.

The project is empowering Muslim and BME women to invest time in themselves. This concept is not common in some of the participants' home countries.



"They don't know anyone here, they are afraid to go out, so this is their opportunity to make friends and go out, think about themselves only." (Volunteer)

The project is also improving participants' quality of life and sense of belonging to the community. For example, the project ran a joint session with the international families group at Dundee University, which enabled participants to meet women from other cultures, faiths and backgrounds.

"She [the Development officer] took them because she wanted them to meet women from all over the world, not only the Muslim community. She wanted them to communicate and socialise with other women... They could have a coffee, this was nice." (Volunteer)

"The aim was for them to mingle with the white community...lots of different nationalities, African, Spanish etc...They talked and had a lovely time." (Project staff)

The project also aims to build social ties, encouraging participants to spread the word locally.

"They each have a local community around them, they tell them about the project. Everyone in the mosque is happy to attend activities that are for Muslims and non-Muslims." (Participant)

The group activities help participants to increase their confidence.

"It is giving them confidence to do things for themselves and do things by themselves I think... Without this thing she would stay at home all the time and be bored... She will go home and feel happy, she did something today." (Volunteer)

"They keep asking what they can do for the project. This change in their tone shows how the project is impacting positively... they are more confident, more aware of what is going on in the City, more aware of what she likes and doesn't like. She will develop skills... It is improving their quality of life." (Project staff)

Participants agreed that the project is enhancing their quality of life.

"I never tried something like this, I never had time for myself, here there is time for myself. So I feel happy because I can do something for me, just for me....if it's always just pressure it's not good... Always in Iraq a women is working for her husband, her child, helping her family... I feel better, it releases the pressure of life." (Participant)

"It's good to have this, an alternative... during the henna painting we were laughing, laughing, it's nice... to have time for yourself that isn't working and you can have fun. Fun in our country is like a family gathering... To have time for yourself, this is a new concept for

us...It changes your mind and we feel we are developing... To meet people socially, it makes you more confident." (Participant)

The project is also broadening participants' horizons. Meeting people from other cultures also encourages them to try new activities, for example some participants took their children ice-skating which they really enjoyed.

"Here they have given me the courage to try new things... we are shown there is nothing bad in a change... If you don't like it you can try other stuff... this is a lesson we learnt here, the concept that change is acceptable." (Participant)

"They always encourage us to walk in our own way... It's a chance to learn." (Participant)



What has worked well?

➔ **Recruitment:** The project is well promoted within Amina and word of mouth has been the most successful recruitment mechanism to date.

"Most came from the mosque... We say 'come along, you will have fun and break your isolation' and they listen... If I hear it from you I may not go because I don't know you, but if I hear it from someone I know I believe that person will do something better for me." (Volunteer)

"The women will bring other women. So far the word of mouth is working really well." (Project staff)

➔ Social media has also been found to be a useful recruitment mechanism, particularly amongst younger participants who use WhatsApp³, Amina's Facebook page and the Amina website.

➔ **Establishing collective control:** The project activity schedule is being designed by local people, ensuring the activities provided will be of interest to the target group.

"It is better to talk to the people so they can suggest what they need, I think this is better... If I need something I can tell her [the project officer] what project activities I need, that is better than [the project officer assuming] they know what I need." (Participant)

➔ **Inclusive practices:** The partnership with the mosque has helped promote the project and made it more accessible to some women. Holding the first meeting in the mosque was important as it is a very comfortable place for the women, which is private and where they feel their children are safe. Some participants are refugees and asylum seekers who do not speak any English, or write Arabic. The sessions help to engage this isolated group, who had to leave family in their home country.

"When you see her finish it [henna painting] and you see her smile you know how important such an activity is for her... So she, the refugee, can come here and not feel alone leaving her home country... the project is very empowering." (Participant)

What are the challenges and how have these been overcome?

- ⇒ Childcare: The majority of participants have childcare commitments so the project has found it necessary to vary the timing of the sessions and offer sessions across the week, to maximise accessibility. This has not had implications for project resources.

"They all had preferences which is why I am varying the times of the activities." (Project staff)

The future

This project has only been running for a month and plans to evolve in line with the plans outlined above; supported by the steering group and delivered in conjunction with the wider group of volunteers.

Endnote

¹ WhatsApp Messenger is a cross-platform mobile messaging app which allows you to exchange messages without having to pay for SMS. WhatsApp Messenger uses the same internet data plan that you use for email and web browsing, so there is no cost to message. In addition to basic messaging WhatsApp users can create groups, send each other unlimited images, video and audio media messages.

<https://www.whatsapp.com/>

