

The Green Back Yard and the Cross Keys Hub Westwood Drop-in Groups

Group Evaluation Summer 2014

Background

Both groups are based in Peterborough and facilitated by CP Learning Trust's Development Worker. Established early 2013, as part of the Learning for Wellbeing Project, meetings are held weekly in the Green Back Yard located in the city centre and the Cross Keys Community Centre located on the outskirts of the city in Westwood.

Although each group was evaluated separately, because of the similarity of their makeup and operational characteristics, it was agreed to combine the findings and comments into just a single report.



Group Assessment

The evaluation report has been arranged to reflect the evidence in line with the four project outcomes of CP Learning Trust's Big Lottery Funded "Learning for Wellbeing" project.

Outcome One (*beneficiaries have improved confidence, aspiration and self-esteem and are more optimistic about their future*).

Recruiting participants onto the project appears to work best via personal referrals, including the 'bring a friend' technique. This seems to work as well if not better than any form of advertising especially once the group is operational.

Establishing the correct group size is very important, activities are more productive when it is less than 12 people, members explained that they feel comfortable and more at ease and interact better with this number. They are also less likely to divide up into smaller groups which would be counter productive to the sharing activity.

The groups explained that an important feature of the share and learn process is that it isn't just based on just sharing skills, the group described how comfortable they find it is for them to speak openly about themselves, discuss personal family and health issues and are able to benefit from the input and shared contributions of fellow members.



Outcome Two (*beneficiaries have a greater sense of belonging, are treated fairly and with respect and more support for those where they live*)

Whilst the facility and location of the two meeting venues are very different, when it comes to evaluating each groups performance both reflect very similar characteristics. This similarity is reflected in how they organise themselves, the background of the members attending and the frequency of individuals to attend both venues sometimes during the same week.

Both meetings are facilitated by CP Learning Trust's Development Worker and it is evident the respect and friendship that exists between this person and group

members. Some of those attending have been associated with previous projects led by the Development Worker and have been keen to maintain their contact.

The key emphasis of meetings is to instil an informal and friendly atmosphere in which they are held. Delegates strongly believe that meetings should be relaxed with a family feel this encourages them to easily interact with each other and more likely to share skills and experiences.

Reasons for attending the meetings were varied, some were seeking companionship and needed to socialise more, others experiencing health problems needed to be somewhere where they could forget their pain and suffering albeit for a brief time.

Outcome Three (*beneficiaries have increased basic and life skills and more informed regarding opportunities available to them, socially and economically*).

The project is very much client centred, this is clearly reflected in how members attending one meeting then set the agenda for the next. To encourage the desired levels of informality and friendly family atmosphere meetings tend to alternate between a 'learn and share' occasion and a simple come and 'chat' session. This is a formulae that has been worked out by those attending and appears to be providing a rewarding experience. There is no pressure to attend each week, it is not even expected that individuals share a skill or even take part in the learning activity if they choose not to, if someone just wants to sit and chat then that's what they do.

Communication channels between those involved proved to be an interesting topic. Regular contact with each other is essential but social media i.e. Facebook plays a key role. Group members use Facebook to keep in touch with one another and since joining many have established long term friendships and use it as an ongoing support network. The Development Worker also uses it to communicate with group members and to exchange ideas, opportunities and organising events with the support network of providers.

Outcome Four (*beneficiary volunteers are positively engaged in the community, there are more active citizens and an overall improved sense of community*).

The Cross Keys community hub offers information and assistance to the local residents at its centre in Westwood, the group utilises the centre's meeting facilities which adequately copes with 12 – 15 people in an open plan meeting area. The location of the centre is in a shopping complex on a residential housing estate and is ideal for inviting people to 'pop in' especially when a meeting is in progress, evidence of this actually happening took place whilst at the meeting.

Cross Keys Housing Association staff are keen to refer residents to the programme and the interaction between Cross Keys staff and group clearly reflects the respect and support that they have for the project.

Although the Green BackYard meeting facility is a large garden shed it is still well equipped and fit for purpose to be used as a meeting venue. The 'shed' is located on a two and half acre small holding boasting chickens, geese and rabbits and a very large vegetable garden all within walking distance of Peterborough city centre.

These facilities were established several years ago, on land donated by the city council, to enable a work place venue for unemployed and disadvantaged people to socialise and contribute their time for the benefit of themselves and others. The site has been so successful that it helped contribute to the city being awarded environmental city status.

As with the operation at Cross Keys, the staff here are enthusiastic about the Learning for Wellbeing project and regularly act as a conduit through which people are made aware of the 'drop-in' meetings.

The location of the Green BackYard being so close to the main bus routes makes it easy for people living in the outer city residential areas to travel to the weekly meetings.

Room for improvement

Both groups appear to be completely satisfied and couldn't offer any area for improvement. Responding to how appropriate the term 'drop in' is to describe themselves they offered alternatives such as 'pop in' and 'friendship meeting'.



Individual interviews

Jo

Jo joined the group in May 2013 and is an active member and regularly attends both group meetings. She has attended 18 workshops and skill shares and has passed on her own cross stitch and rug making skills. She is unemployed and felt quite isolated with little or no contact outside her immediate family before joining. Since joining the group her confidence and self-esteem have improved dramatically a new found feeling of wellbeing encouraged her to become a Learning for Wellbeing 'Learning Champion' and has enabled her to demonstrate various craft skills and to promote the project at Peterborough and Cambridgeshire events.

Discussing the group dynamics she highlighted the importance of involving different generations, not only does it add variety of views to discussions it also plays a key role in the development of members. She believes that a lack of structure works 'the group benefits from doing different things and doing things differently' – 'variety is an essential part of any get together'. Although keeping the group size manageable she feels that the group benefits from having people dropping in and out.

Cheryl

Cheryl is unemployed and since joining the group June 2013 has become a regular at both drop-ins. She has attended 16 workshops and skill shares and has passed on her own jewellery making and crochet skills. She has attended Learning Champion training and is active in planning Learning for Wellbeing activities and welcoming and encouraging new learners.

Cheryl needed to socialise and make new friends, she was keen to add purpose to her life. Since joining the group she has been able to meet new people gaining confidence in her self and realised a natural ability to interact with others. The project has given her a feel good factor and sharing her skills has proved to be extremely satisfying. By attending both venues she explained that apart from the enjoyment that she gets it also provides her with a 'routine' to the week. Her highlight so far is that whilst demonstrating her jewellery skills at a Learning for Wellbeing promotional event she actually sold some items to a local councillor!

Louisa

Louisa is an 81 year old widow living in sheltered accommodation and joined the group in October 2013. She often sees no one during the week except when she attends Learning for Wellbeing activities. Although she is Italian by birth she has lived in the UK for many years. Her tales of her up-bringing in Italy have group members enthralled especially when she recalls her mothers cooking habits. Her contribution to the cook and share occasion was extremely

well received and the receipts recounted during the session never seemed to stop, from making raspberry vinegar to preserving strawberries to brewing a liquor using sloes and polish vodka.

Talking to Louisa it is apparent that whilst she has enjoyed providing her contribution she has also benefitted from the contact she has had from being involved with the group. Before joining the group her week was depressing, she never ventured outside her flat and very rarely spoke with anyone. The project has given her the confidence to exchange regular conversations with others in the complex where she lives and she is sharing her cooking skills by feeding residents not able to cook for themselves.

