

A decorative graphic on the right side of the page. It features three blue circles of varying sizes, each composed of concentric circles in different shades of blue. Two thin blue lines intersect at a point, forming a V-shape that frames the circles. The circles are positioned in the top right, middle right, and bottom right areas of the page.

First Steps, New Opportunities

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Organisation: Go-Woman! Ltd

Project: First Steps, New Opportunities

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Project Outline

'First Steps, New Opportunities' project was developed to introduce informal learning for women predominately from the South Asian community, via short, fun and interactive taster sessions. The project was delivered via the local children's centre based in the heart of the community.

The taster sessions had a two-fold purpose; to provide women with an exciting opportunity to engage with learning through informal sessions and an opportunity for them to find out more about selected subjects in order that they could make informed choices if they wished to continue with either formal or informal accreditations.

The aim of the project was to create an environment for informal learning by creating a mechanism that will allow individuals to access further opportunities in learning via colleges, local centres or support agencies.

Go-Woman! and Adderley Children's Centre utilised their strong partnership to sign post individuals to further studies; Adderley Children's Centre, through its multi-agency steering group and Go-Woman! through its work with a large number of business support agencies and networks which support women wishing to start or grow their business. Combined together, this enabled the partnership to have access to a large pool of resources and linkages.

As a by product, the project created a vibrant network of individuals accessing informal learning, acting as a catalyst for other women wishing to access informal learning.

'First Steps, New Opportunities' helped to improve the adult learning infrastructure by providing the informal learning provisions via local establishments that are utilised by the community, and are ideal for particularly women who, due to cultural and social reasons are unable to travel far to access any learning provisions and in many cases are unaware of what is on offer closer to home.

Each taster session was 3 hours long, ensuring that women could access learning around their childcare responsibilities for those that had young children at the nursery.

For those that childcare was an issue, a crèche facility was offered to ensure that it did not present a barrier to learning.

The target group for this project were women who are classed as 'hard to reach', coming from communities that rarely access local provisions due to cultural reasons, and newcomers to the area, from other countries.

The participants of the project came from a number of backgrounds. These are summarised in the following table.

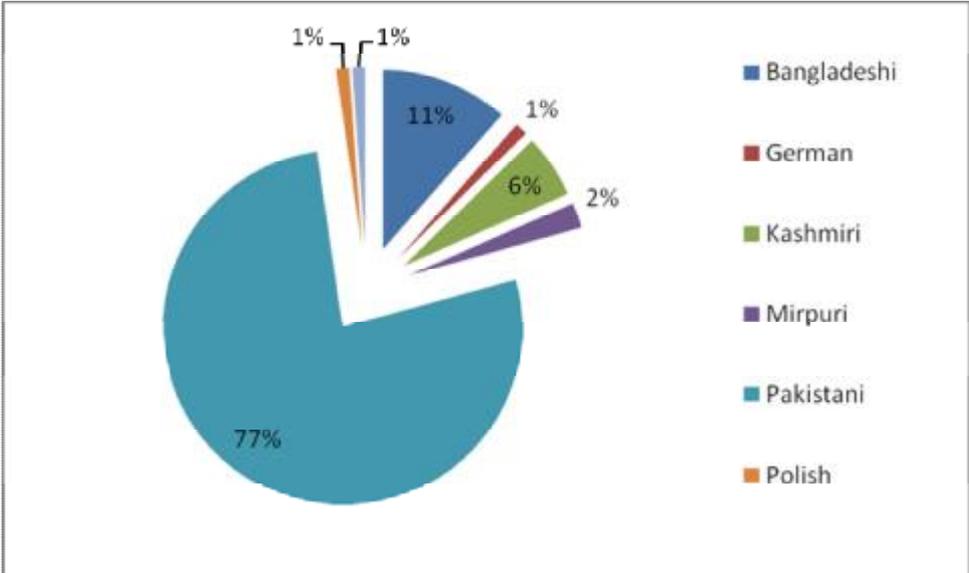


Figure 1: Ethnicity of Participants

The above pie chart is a fair representation of the make-up of the local area, where the majority of the community comes from the Pakistani background.

Figure 2 below shows the breakdown of the employment status of participants attending the taster sessions. Washwood Heath ward has one of the highest rates of unemployment (*Birmingham City Council February 2010 – Unemployment Briefing*).

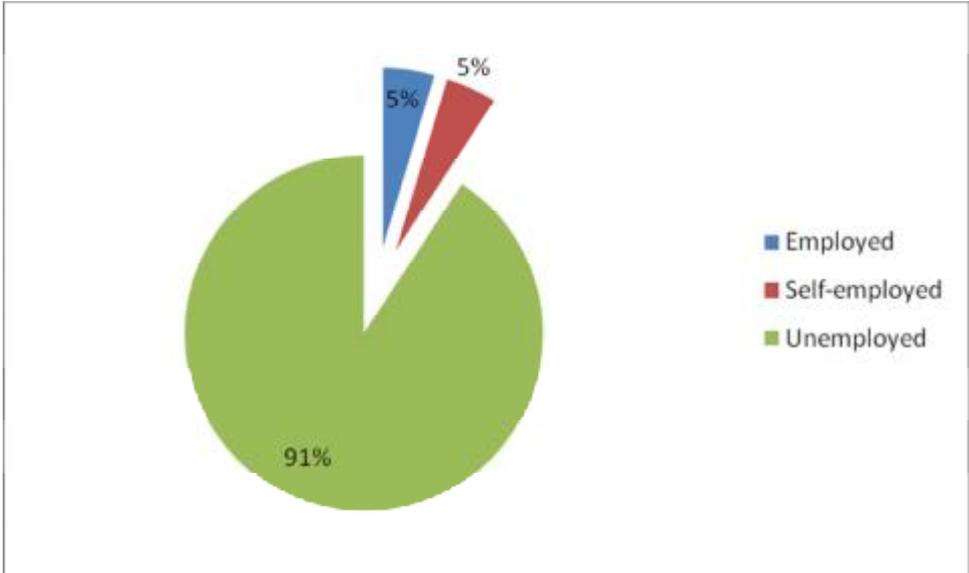


Figure 2: Unemployment status

The majority of the women accessing the taster sessions were looking for information and support. The project developed a hub of local resources to sign post these individuals to further studies whether they be accredited courses or informal learning.

Through the project an active network of women was developed. Through need identification 'Reading Ladies' group was setup which allowed women lacking in confidence to Read, Enjoy, Apply and Discuss books.

In order to develop the central hub, a number of networks and partnerships were developed. These included local service providers including the local community centre, colleges and community organisations running accredited and informal learning provisions. Some of these organisations are listed in Section 3.

The largest group of learners were from aged 26 - 35 as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

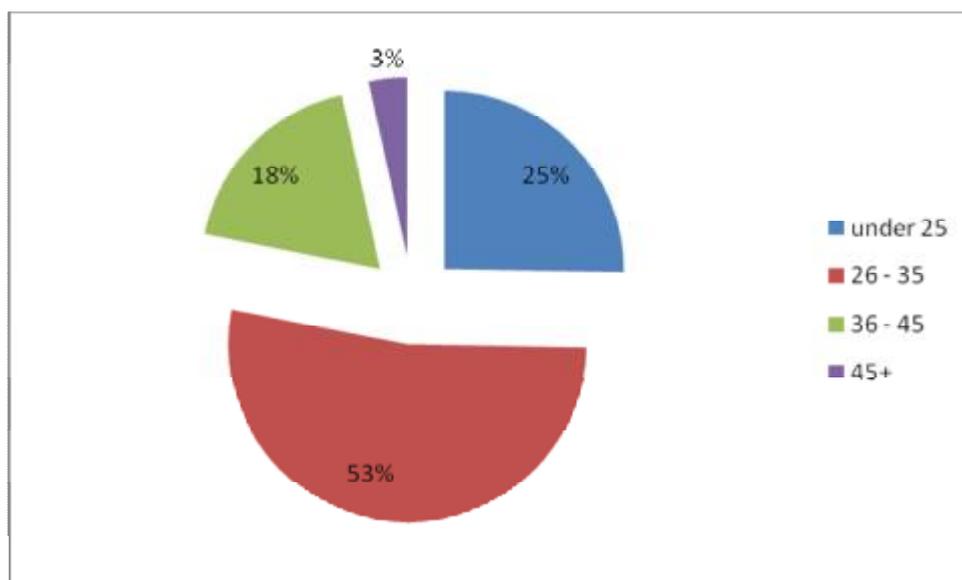


Figure 3: Age of Participants

The project engaged with its intended target audience, - women from the community predominately from the south Asian community.

Ø What went well

- 28 sessions were planned, 32 were delivered. Demand for the taster sessions exceeded expectations.
- Participants sign posted to further studies took up this opportunity to take full advantage of developing their skills.

- Positive feedback was received from all participants.
- Through the engagement process an active group of women's network was developed that acted as a catalyst in engaging more women onto informal learning.
- Celebration events were a great success in recruitment and providing networking opportunities for learners and practitioners alike.
- 69% attendance rate in a community where 30% attendance is perceived as a success.

Ø What didn't go well

- The bad weather spell in December and January didn't help with the planned sessions but due to the flexibility of the overall project plan, the project was able to deliver the original planned sessions as well as additional taster sessions.
- First delivery period (October to December) due to only 5 weeks available between signing of the contract and Christmas break. This did not allow sufficient time to build momentum and hence therefore marketing had to re-commence in January for the second period of delivery from January to March 2010.

Ø What would you do differently next time

- Paper marketing alone does not work with this client group. A combination of outreach and an interim celebration event helped to engage more individuals onto the taster sessions.
- In order to maximise the long term benefits from projects such as these, any initiative must span over a much wider time period to allow individuals to engage; tutors and facilitators to build a rapport allowing maximum outputs.

Ø Lessons learned

- Any initiative requires time to develop and build momentum. For 'First Steps, New Opportunities' this happened during the second delivery period thus raising expectations when funding was no longer available.
- Although initially the attendance was scattered, once the process was developed, the attendance improved and the demand grew. Projects must introduce procedures for learners that are clear and once the understanding of what they can expect from the project, the process is much smoother in terms of engagement.
- The needs of this group are wide and varied – one size does not fit all.

Ø Hints and tips for other organisations

- In order to reap true benefits when engaging with this client group it is imperative that the engagement utilises some sort of outreach work using members from the community that can adequately empathise.
- Language support is crucial to engage with this client group. Many of the target group had already attended ESOL classes but lacked the confidence to engage in a conversation, hence an automatic barrier to further development.
- Childcare is also a crucial requirement for many women and lack of availability excludes these women from participating.
- The attendance is also very sporadic with this group of learners. In order to ensure that value for money can be obtained, it is important that there is a mechanism in place that ensures that maximum participation can be assured. This may include a refundable contribution to book a place on any training. This will eliminate high non-attendance and ensure that those actually wishing to further their knowledge engage and have the opportunity to do so.

Evaluation of your project.

The aim of the evaluation carried out throughout the project was to ensure that it met the needs of the participants it intended to support. The evaluation was in two parts.

- Ø Continuous evaluation carried out at the end of each taster session together with a mid-point evaluation which took place in December 2009 and January 2010. This was used to update the taster sessions for the second delivery period from January 2010 to March 2010.
- Ø Combination of taster session evaluation and small group feedback at the celebration event helped to prepare the overall project and production of the final report which highlighted concerns and achievements of the project. This will help to mould the project when seeking future funding and analysis of outcomes.

The objective of the evaluation was to improve and update the content and the delivery process ensuring that it provided value for money and allowed continuous upgrades to the programme to meet the needs of the participants.

Taster sessions were designed to engage more women into informal learning. It was therefore pivotal to the success of the overall project to evaluate and have the necessary mechanisms in place to update the programme to meet the needs of the participants.

Feedback was sought in the form of questionnaires after every taster session to help in evaluation of the programme.

Each learner was contacted after completion of each taster session to ensure post support was offered, allowing the programme to sign post them to further learning whether that be to a college course, employment or self-employment.

Non-attendees were contacted to ascertain the reason and action taken to support where appropriate.

The creation of the learner network allowed a two way feedback to ensure that we were constantly evaluating the programme and building in provisions to ensure that learners were post supported.

It was the aim of the project to look at the barriers that were inhibiting women particularly from the South Asian community from accessing learning. Some of these have already been discussed in detail in the adult learning environment, including access to childcare facilities, access to learning provision locally and language issues.

'First Steps, New Opportunities' also wanted to look at the need for a flexible programme that would fit around learners commitments. The project also wanted to explore issues around language support.

The above two issues although well documented in various arenas, including research undertaken by Go-Woman!, remain a barrier for many women. The cost implication to funders does not allow many programmes to implement solutions to remove these barriers.

'First Steps, New Opportunities' found the following in the four key areas:-

Ø Childcare

This still remains a crucial requirement for many women from the community who have childcare and or responsibility of care for the elderly. More work needs to be done with local provision providers in this area including nurseries and childcare centres, to develop strong partnerships that can offer childcare support. 34% of women on 'First Steps, New Opportunities' needed childcare provisions in order to participate in any learning programme.

Ø Local access

One of the key elements of the 'First Steps, New Opportunities' initiative was the development of a central repository containing information of local provision providers. Many of the participants were unable to utilise this resource as many women were unable to access provisions that were not linked to the nursery. The nursery is a trusted environment accepted by the community.

Due to cultural issues in many south Asian communities it is still not acceptable for women to access learning. These individuals use the trusted environment to overcome this barrier by accessing opportunities offered under the umbrella of the nursery particularly within this programme.

Ø Flexibility of the programme

Many women particularly those that had additional care responsibilities, including young children and elderly, sought provisions that were accessible around their children's nursery times.

Any project wishing to access these groups must be sensitive to this and allow the flexibility. 'First Steps, New Opportunities' taster sessions ran between 9 and 11.30 (12 for those that wanted to stay and access the tutor) allowing women to drop off their children and walk into a session and collect them at 11.30.

Ø Language barrier

Language is a major issue particularly for women from South Asian community and newcomers to the country. Many of them came from abroad and had already attended ESOL classes. Others have studied abroad and are not new to the English language. What they all had in common was the confidence to speak English. As they do not get sufficient opportunities to practice in the home environment, they lack the confidence to pursue further self-development.

Each taster session on the 'First Steps, New Opportunities' had a tutor and a facilitator who doubled up to provide language support.

Taster sessions were kept small in numbers to allow each individual to gain maximum support from tutor and the facilitator.

The aim of the 'First Steps, New Opportunities' was to engage women particularly from South Asian community and new comers addressing four key areas above.

'First Steps, New Opportunities' attracted its target audience and this was largely due to the attempts to remove the four key barriers above, prohibiting women from accessing learning provisions. Embedding these elements were crucial and a key reason for the success of the project.

Due to the short time span of the overall project, it was not possible to fully follow up learners from the second delivery period (January 2010 to March 2010).

It was anticipated that as part of the project the following outputs be achieved:-

- Ø Central repository - a central database of local provisions
- Ø Participants sign posted to local provisions - after support to ensure that any queries raised during taster sessions were addressed and participants were signposted accordingly
- Ø Provide sufficient information on each of the taster session to allow women to make informed choices in regards to accessing further accredited or informal learning in their chosen subject

Due to the continuous evaluation and particularly the interim evaluation, it emerged that one of the most pressing barriers for the participant in continuing further learning, was the lack of confidence in speaking English. The project was unable to sign post these individuals to ESOL classes as many of these women had already accessed these.

What these women required was an environment where they could practice the spoken English without the fear of failure or embarrassment.

From this Reading Ladies (R.E.A.D) initiative was launched. A small group of women from the taster sessions met every fortnight for 2 hours where they would Read, Enjoy, Apply and Discuss (R.E.A.D) books.

Each group is made up of 8 women allowing each one the sufficient opportunity to read in the session, thus increasing their confidence as well as allowing them to have an opportunity to discuss with confidence amongst a small group of women without the fear of being judged and being supported by each other.

The group is facilitated, providing structure and support. This has proven successful beyond expectations. Women feel more confident in a small group to practice their speaking skills. Through 'First Steps, New Opportunities' two Reading Ladies groups are currently running.

This was the first time Go-Woman! had worked with Adderley Children's Centre. The partnership utilised skills and knowledge from both organisations to recruit participants and to provide a comprehensive support providing access to a much wider resource pool.

Opportunities for learners:

Working alongside and in close partnership with Adderley Children's Centre, community champions were identified and promoted. Throughout the project they were key in the recruitment process. This has also provided them with an opportunity to develop their skills and personal development.

There are a number of groups in the South Asian community that are much harder to reach. Using these positive role models helped to raise their profile but also provide a community champion that is local and visible.

Utilising effective outreach, the project engaged different people who would not normally participate in learning. These included older learners.

Strong partnership development as part of the project with local service providers including the libraries have also opened up wider learning spaces for participants.

The positive mindset of not trying to 'Re-invent the wheel' approach and utilising existing provisions to open up current learning spaces to the community, has also ensured that certain elements of the project especially 'Reading Ladies' initiative, can utilise some elements from the nursery, local library and current infrastructure utilised in the 'First Steps, New Opportunities' project to continue to function.

'Reading Ladies' initiative was developed as a result of a need identified through taster sessions. It encourages learners to develop their skills; to organise their own learning, developing their own path to self-development.

The central repository developed with local service providers can continue to be used by the children's centre to sign post learners.

The project has and is developing online resources from the project to go on the Go-Woman! website allowing women to work through the taster sessions in their own time or to re-enforce learning from the classroom.

Skills development:

- Health and wellbeing – First Aid sessions enforced key issues women needed to be concerned about when dealing with issues affecting their children.
- Digital Literacy – Internet Cafe allowing women access to technology to develop their skills in a safe environment.
- Skills for Life – ‘Reading Ladies’ group helping women to improve their language and literacy skill.

Wider Achievements:

Through the social interaction via the celebration event and reading ladies initiative, participants showed greater confidence to engage and pursue new opportunities. The celebration event also provided a great opportunity for learners to network and learn from each other as well as local service providers.

Through Ready for Employment taster sessions participants took the opportunity to develop their cv's, moving them one step closer to employment.

The increased confidence through increased knowledge means that these individuals are able to contribute more in their community through feedback on issues affecting their community and their children's well being. The networking has been imperative to develop a positive community cohesion bringing together groups that were previously unable to work together due to tensions in the community.

The celebration event also brought together local service providers and acted as a forum to ensure dialogue and cross working can take place.

The Internet Cafe provided learners with an opportunity to access the Internet, again in a trusted environment. Learners used the Internet Cafe for many reasons including, re-enforce learning from taster sessions, practice driving theory tests, revision for citizenship and to look for job opportunities. The learners also utilised educational websites to practice their numeracy and literacy skills using sites such as BiteSize.

Future Funding:

Due to the nature and the flexibility of the 'First Steps, New Opportunities' project, it has been possible to take out certain elements of the project and develop those. 'Reading Ladies' has been one such element. It has been possible to secure future funding to continue this group building health and social issues as part of developing English speaking skills.

A strong commitment from the Adderley Children's Centre has been crucial in developing and continuing Reading Ladies initiative.

Lessons learned, particularly issues with language and childcare will be used to ensure that the programme will meet the needs of learners that can provide positive long term outcomes.

Case studies

Community Champion

From leaving school, Ashya did not continue her education. Many years went by and Ashya married and had four children. When her two youngest started Nursery, with the support of Donna Barton (Deputy Head) Ashya volunteered at the centre working in Parent and Toddler groups and within Family Support. Through Ashya's experiences and increased confidence she enrolled on an NVQ level two in childcare, completed the level three the following year, and increased the amount of hours volunteered. From these successes, Aysha is now completing a Foundation degree in Family Support.

Ashya became involved in the taster sessions in the capacity of a tutor and delivered training on both the Pre NVQ Childcare and the sewing sessions. Ashya has been able to impart her real life experiences and knowledge with learners enabling them to make an informed choice regarding their learning. This has given Ashya the confidence to write a sewing programme for families who wish to learn more, has become a Learning Champion at the centre, and is now inspiring others.

As a result of Ashya's experiences and knowledge we will be able to provide an increased number of informal learning sessions including the childcare taster session and sewing. As a result of the funding and opportunities these sessions will be delivered throughout the area at various centres as part of a sustainability strategy.

'Adderley Children's Centre has supported me and enabled me to put my experiences into practice whilst improving my future employability and overall outcomes'.

Reading Ladies

Azra joined the 'Reading Ladies' group when she heard about the project in her ESOL class which she attends at the Adderley Children Centre. Not having had much of an education before she came to this country from Pakistan, she decided to improve her English now that her children are in school and nursery. She has been attending the 'Reading Ladies' group on a regular basis and is very enthusiastic about improving her reading and speaking skills. You can see she is improving every time she attends and hopefully will go a long way.

Azra was the winner of our 'Reading Ladies' award.

First Steps, New Opportunities Achievers

Binash attended the Pre-NVQ Childcare taster session, Hair & Beauty, First Aid and Reading Ladies. She realised that if she wanted to do any course with a long-term plan to gain qualifications for employment, she would need to improve in her reading, writing and speaking. She wants to continue to attend the Reading Ladies group and has also enrolled onto a Pre-NVQ Childcare course at a local centre.

Shazia had a good level of education in Pakistan before she got married and came to England. She is not confident about speaking in English in front of other people. She attended taster sessions in First Aid, Sewing, Pre-NVQ Childcare and Reading Ladies. She is also looking to find employment and has enrolled onto a Childcare course at a local centre. She is very keen to learn and has set herself certain goals, becoming more and more confident as she goes along.

Comprehensive case studies on the above individuals will be available to download from http://www.go-woman.com/?page_id=3237 website.

Exit strategy/legacy

The lasting legacy from 'First Steps, New Opportunities' will be the 'Reading Ladies' group.

We have been successful in securing funding for 'Reading Ladies' which will allow the project to continue to March 2011.

Go-Woman! and Adderley Children's Centre will continue to work together to develop and deliver the 'Reading Ladies' initiatives. We will continue to work with other partnerships developed through 'First Steps, New Opportunities' project.

To ensure continuous development of staff especially those working with this client group, NIACE training has been accessed to continuously develop personnel.

What this project has shown is that if we truly wish to move women on, any initiative needs to address barriers highlighted above.

Outcomes and outputs are long term and therefore must be factored into any initiative. This group of learners require specific support and one size, does not fit all.