

Highway to Opportunity The Asian Women's Project

Funding: European Social Fund (CFO Job Centre Plus and LSC)

Good Practice themes demonstrated: Equal Opportunities

What does the project do?

The Asian Women's Project, run by Highway to Opportunities, delivers training and advice on a converted double decker bus. The bus is driven to nine different sites in Oldham each week, delivering childcare, training and support in the heart of the community.

The bus, the ultimate in outreach, was one of the first in the country and was originally developed because Asian women were not accessing the mainstream information, advice and training service provided in the centre of town.

Highway to Opportunities, established in 1991, is committed to helping women recognise their potential, increase their expectations and help them remove barriers to their ambition, real and perceived.

How does the project encourage the participation of women?

The project aims to overcome the specific barriers that Asian women in Oldham face, as project manager Sarah Bell explains:

"In addition to the barriers of confidence, perceived lack of skills and childcare that many women face, some Asian women in Oldham also needed to overcome language difficulties, there was also a certain reluctance to engage with services outside of their communities.

A lot of women did not regularly come outside of the area they lived in, it was uncommon for them to come to the town centre and they did not perceive places like the job centre as for them".



How does the project encourage the participation of women?

Sarah identifies the trust that the organisation has built up in the community as the key to the success of the project. Sarah explains, *“When we started there was a lot of knocking on doors, but now we are well known in the community and it is easy for women to access the project”*. It is clear that bus has become an easily identified and trusted symbol of the project.

The trust of the community has also been central to recruiting women to the project. Sarah explains; *“Although we do hand out flyers, we find that it’s word of mouth - women who have accessed the project who tell family, friends and neighbours - that has helped a lot”*. However, Sarah warns that building trust can take some time and effort, *“when the organisation started there were a few guarded faces and suspicion as to what we wanted. People often under estimate the amount of time it can take to establish a positive reputation with local people.”*

The onsite crèche has also proved important in enabling women to access the service, as a lot of women wouldn’t be able to find childcare or wouldn’t be happy leaving children with someone they didn’t know.

Flexibility is built into the program of training, which enables women to take time out if needed, to look after children or family.

“I was given lots of guidance and support during the opportunities for women training, and valuable help with childcare. I became more confident and independent. It also provided me with opportunities to choose a career where I could work as well as gain future qualification.”

Jasu Patel
Beneficiary

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The project works around each individual woman’s needs, tailoring provision as much as possible. For example, the project provides extra flexibility around the month of Ramadan when many of their clients are fasting. The project also makes clear to women that feel they have to leave, that they can come back when they are ready. This kind of consideration not only reduces drop-out rate, it is also part of the project’s commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of the women it supports.

The training that the project delivers is progressive, and women can follow a programme at their own pace, from English lessons to formal qualifications. The project also enables isolated women to make connections and increases their confidence. These are foundations that the women will build on when they finish the program and go on to a job or further training.

Finally, partnership with other organisation is also important to the project. Ultimately, the aim of the project is to lead clients on to mainstream provision. Partnership with colleges and other providers is central to this, Sarah explains; *“we work closely with the colleges and as we are not in competition with them we see ourselves predominately as a bridge to mainstream services.”*



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