

WEA Rochdale Women's Training Initiative



The Women's Training Initiative began in 1997/8 in a predominantly Asian heritage community. The regeneration programme had identified a need to enable Asian women who were not coming out of their homes to access learning. The project had to overcome cultural and religious barriers and introduce subjects which would be acceptable to families.

Having started from a single class of twelve learners, there are now 200-300 women each year attending classes in eight community venues and ten primary schools. The current programme responds to demand from the women. It includes sewing skills classes accredited at levels one and two; digital embroidery accredited at level one; a sewing skills workshop; English language, literacy and numeracy; Spoken Urdu; Arabic; ICT accredited at levels one and two; an ICT workshop; cookery; arts and crafts; health and beauty; grow your own vegetables, and driving test theory. Open College Network accreditation is used. Craft courses usually last for ten weeks. Once families are satisfied that the programme is well run, women are able to continue and progress.

Women have progressed to:

- helping as volunteers, in recruiting other women and translating in classes
- being tutors, with training provided by the local college
- childcare training
- helping in school
- being family literacy workers
- working from home or employment outside - for example in childminding, garment-making or administrative work
- self-employment.
- Further education
- CITTECH Level 2 IT Practitioners Course.

"Attending a WEA course has changed my life for good. As well as gaining skills, I am a more confident and an assertive individual."

"My sister told me about the adult classes running at the school. So I came to see the home/school liaison worker and she referred me to the classes. I have developed my confidence just by coming to the classes. I have gone on to do higher courses to achieve more in life."

"I was a very shy individual and thought I could not attend courses due to young children but to my surprise, the course was welcoming and provided childcare."

"I went to drop my children off and saw the leaflets for adult courses. And I saw there was a computer course and they had a crèche worker. So I told my sisters about the course. They came to join it. I came for one year and developed confidence. Now I can go on the internet and help my children with the computer. I have gone to college for further study. I have got a job with the education department. I have enrolled in basic literacy and numeracy to become a part-time tutor."

"I learnt a lot on the course. I really enjoyed doing it. I hope to do a more advanced course in computers and hope to find a job in an office. I have offered to help in the office of the school where I go for my class, for experience."

All quotes from learners who have attended courses provided through the Initiative

"It's not easy. It's intensive, hands-on work, lots of partnerships, recognising the community."

"It's hard for the women at the start. Once they're in, it's OK."

Quotes from staff

The Public Value of Adult Education

Rochdale Women's Training Initiative

The curriculum is designed to enable participation by:

- using acceptable venues, provided by the community or primary schools, and timing, usually in the daytime mid-week, to fit family life
- using the community languages (Bangali, Sylheti, Kashmiri, Urdu, Punjabi) as well as English as the language of women born in UK; bilingual tutors are recruited, with additional support, and translation by volunteers if needed
- developing skills through a curriculum rooted in women's own culture: for example, making Asian rather than Western garments, using Asian embroidery styles, healthy cooking of Asian food.
- creating trust: agreeing ground rules about confidentiality and sharing feelings
- offering accreditation to enable women with low levels of formal educational achievement to move along as their confidence increases
- supporting women in moving on, for example organising additional training in health and safety, hygiene and first aid for women intending to work as childminders.

Transferable Tips

The key issue is to evaluate needs. For example, some women may have completed their formal education but need the Initiative because of family circumstances.

One must start with each learner as a person.

Always plan a whole curriculum, not just single courses, to enable learners to move on.

Adjust to local cultural and religious circumstances – this has enabled the women to feel at ease with the curriculum and in the venues used.

Leadership by an organiser from the community who understands the context, can deal with issues, and work with partners has been key to the Initiative's success.

Celebrating achievement publicly, with support from councillors, MPs and media coverage encourages recruitment.

Challenges and Pitfalls

Like other providers, the WEA may feel the policy pressure to use national qualifications, but these may not always be appropriate for such community-based work.

Prescribed time-scales and progression routes are inappropriate for many learners, who need time to develop confidence. Resources are needed to support learners in moving on.

Additional funding is needed to cover the community engagement and development stages of such work.

Language, literacy and numeracy, as well as IT skills, are embedded in all courses. For example, learners may follow instructions for sewing machines in English, or use the Internet to research embroidery designs with IT accreditation following on. Preparing a portfolio for accreditation develops English and maths skills. Initially learning English was a 'hidden agenda', as families did not wish women to attend English classes. This is still true of some families, but now language, literacy and numeracy classes are openly advertised and accreditation is being introduced for ESOL.

The community now values women's education much more, with a broader idea of how it benefits families and support from families for women joining classes, including English. Men attend celebration days to applaud female relatives' success.

The initiative mainly relies on Learning and Skills Council funding although other sources, in particular European Social Fund and Single Regeneration Budget, have helped build up the work. Courses are free to learners, with materials and childcare provided.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

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