

Engaging Diverse Communities in work on Recycling

A summary report on work done by Community Environment Associates
For the London Borough of Waltham Forest

May 2007

Introduction

Community Environment Associates (CEA) were asked by the London Borough of Waltham Forest (LBWF) to “undertake an outreach programme of engaging communities to increase involvement and participation in recycling in the south of the borough”.

CEA initiated contacts and met with or were invited to meetings of some 40 organisations in the target area. The principal focus of the work has been increasing the engagement of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community organisations and faith-based organisations. This report looks at the issues arising from the work.

Methodology

The challenge for this work was to seek to develop wider and deeper community engagement across 6 wards in the south of the Borough. Initial contacts came through lists of organisations provided by the council and by Waltham Forest Voluntary Action. In both cases the lists were only partially helpful. Many of those listed had moved or the group itself had changed. These lists were used as a starting point supplemented by extensive work to get pointers from one group to another (see recommendations below). This work was done at a time when LBWF was reviewing and tendering for its new contract for waste and recycling services. This has meant that there was a limited range of information materials to work with.

Recommendations and conclusions

The key findings and recommendations are:

Community Engagement

Engagement with BAME communities

- Improving engagement with BAME communities should be a priority and be adequately resourced. A first step should be to ensure that data about community organisations, especially BAME ones, is well managed, accessible and up-to-date. There is room for improvement here. This would benefit many activities and not just recycling.
- A ‘recycling conversation’ has been started with many BAME groups. This should be continued at whatever level can be sustained. Engagement on this issue (as with any

others) should be linked into existing events in order to maximise the number of people attending.

- BAME groups appear to rely more heavily on informal networking, conversations and peer support. These channels may be particularly important in relation to gender issues. Informal networks should be explored and be valued as a way of encouraging recycling.
- Accessing information via electronic or printed sources seems to be less of a priority. Translation issues are relevant but face-to-face discussions are more valued.
- Person-to-person links are important. The same groups should deal with the same officers where possible to ensure continuity.

Engagement with Faith-based organisations

- Faith groups have strong networks and a key role to play. It is important however to avoid undue 'categorising', labelling or stereotyping of faith groups.
- Many groups are willing to engage and help but feel that the council should not expect everything to be done for free.
- If there is to be collaboration between the council and faith groups then this will need to be partly on groups' own terms. Building better links with faith 'leaders' in all council work will be a valuable move.
- Many Faith groups have a wider 'ethical' agenda that links with issues such as Fair Trade and Climate Change. If recycling is promoted well it can fit in with this. This can help counter views that recycling is an 'old' issue.

'Hard to reach' groups?

- Some of the groups we worked with have been characterised as 'hard to reach'. Many groups actively dispute this definition. We would suggest that while individuals may be hard to reach the fact that the groups exist means that they are not intrinsically 'hard to reach', although this does take time and planning to build trust and good communication.
- It is the case that many BAME and other smaller community groups will only engage in a limited range of activities. Unless there is clear value in engagement they may well not take part in consultations or discussions. Demonstrating the value of engagement is a key success factor.

Council and community relations

- Many groups only have a very limited capacity to act on an issue which many perceive to be someone else's responsibility. Work on overall capacity-building within the Voluntary and Community Sector may offer benefits for services such as recycling.
- Work is needed to increase confidence in service delivery by the Council. There will always be criticism of local services, but dealing effectively with issues such as requests for boxes and tackling problems such as fly-tipping can help cut such criticism and build trust.
- Engagement in recycling should be seen and presented as a civic responsibility. Presenting it in this way may link to the ongoing dialogue about citizen and community rights and responsibilities, and may open links to those active in faith groups who may have a value-based and ethical approach.
- The council should develop a volunteer network of people (local 'champions') to help promote this work. Significant numbers of people have informally expressed interest in getting engaged in this work if confidence in current service provision is increased and this mirrors experience elsewhere. There are models operating in other London boroughs that could be developed for use locally. The role of informal awareness-raising amongst residents to neighbours, friends and peer groups should not be overlooked.

The recycling service

There is a real willingness to recycle; this is often made difficult by poor infrastructure and lack of capacity and confidence. The groups were ready to engage on this issue and had ideas and experiences to feed in, but a range of communications and infrastructure problems had put people off. The new recycling contract offers an opportunity to revitalise individual and community engagement in recycling.

Recycling infrastructure

- There is a need for ongoing work to increase public confidence in service provision. Waste management and recycling are council services of which most people have a week-to-week experience and many people want to see greater reliability. Recycling is still a new idea to many people and it is important that their initial experiences are positive. This is not meant to imply any criticism of current operations.
- There are differences in the services offered to different communities and this means that friends and colleagues can have different experiences in the same neighbourhood. Work to expand and develop collections to all communities should be moved forward as fast as possible as a way to helping normalise this activity.
- There is a perception of a two-tier service in some areas due to the difference between collections for flats and street-level homes.
- The ‘assisted collections’ service for older or less able people is welcomed. We found low awareness of this service amongst potential users and groups that might promote it. This should be supported and developed.

Communications and development

- Increasing participation depends upon having sustained communications work. Communication on recycling should be carefully planned to offer a consistent message, and should be integrated with other council communications. There is a need for representative images that show the target audiences becoming engaged, through (for instance) stories and photos of Muslim or African-Caribbean recyclers in relevant local media.
- There should be a regular supply of leaflets and small posters to libraries and non-Council buildings such as community centres, multi-cultural centres, community buildings, places of worship.
- A short and simple ‘one-stop’ guide to waste and recycling services would be welcome.
- Use photographs preferably for clarity about what can and can’t be recycled; graphics should be clear and direct.
- Translation of materials may be helpful but there is no guarantee that a translated leaflet will be used.
- Face-to-face communication at meetings and other events is most likely to be effective.
- Recycling work would benefit from links with work on other issues. This is not often seen as a high priority issue but might be taken more seriously if it is linked to wider citizenship issues, to the public health agenda and to the ‘bigger picture’ environmental issues such as Climate Change. There are a substantial number of issues on which the council engages with communities; many of these could link to waste minimisation.

Conclusion

This work has been relatively well-resourced and has opened up discussions and activity on recycling with many community groups for the first time. It is important that communication with these groups is continued and developed to support their engagement and to help those who have started to recycle to spread the message to their friends and neighbours. This can help build both recycling rates and trust in and engagement with the council.

We would recommend that the Council follows up on this work wherever possible using both community engagement and more strategic communication work, and recognises the value of the informal networks within the Borough as a way to get across environmental messages.