

The West Bowling Youth Initiative: then, now and the future

Communities Bradford

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In 2004, JRF made a ten-year commitment to work in Bradford. We work in partnership with others to make a positive difference to the people in the city, and improve our understanding of issues in a diverse community.

This summary highlights a project that worked with young British Muslim Pakistani men in Bradford, to tackle social and economic problems and help strengthen the community.



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Key points at a glance

The West Bowling Youth Initiative (WBYI) is a project in Bradford working with young British Muslim Pakistani men. This paper looks at how the project tackles social and economic problems amongst these young men and helps strengthen the community in West Bowling. It found that:

- WBYI is seen as an important community resource. Its open door policy brings together young people, practitioners, project workers and other members of the community. It helps develop a sense of belonging, supports communication between different groups and encourages participation in community life.
- While it acknowledges the importance of faith, WBYI does not emphasise religion in its everyday project work or make assumptions about the relevance of faith in the lives of young Muslim men. It provides a space for people who choose to express their faith-based identity and for those who do not.
- While many policies now push for community organisations to work with a range of ethnic groups, WBYI shows that it is possible to work positively with young men of one ethnic background and encourage them to be more actively involved with their own community and other communities.
- WBYI makes the most of local knowledge and talent by employing project workers from West Bowling. A firm but fair approach means that the young men accessing WBYI look up to project workers as mentors and role models.
- Photography, media, sports, arts, volunteering, travel and other activities have helped young people at WBYI build skills and confidence. These activities help young people express different aspects of their identity – being an artist, sportsman, teenager, mentor or volunteer – as well as being Muslim, British and Asian.
- Visits and exchanges organised by WBYI give young men the chance to connect with people of a similar age, experiencing similar issues, from different countries and cultures.
- By investing in partnerships with other organisations, WBYI has increased its range of activities and encouraged young people from different backgrounds to mix.

Cover photo: Some of the young men involved with West Bowling Youth Initiative

Background

When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.

(Lao Tzu, Chinese Taoist philosopher, founder of Taoism, 600 BC–531 BC)

The West Bowling Youth Initiative (WBYI) is a local, voluntary-sector organisation working with young British Pakistani Muslim men in Bradford. It was established in 1991 to provide a space for young people to express themselves and encourage them to get involved in community life.

West Bowling is an area close to Bradford city centre, within the wards of Little Horton, Odsal and Bowling. It suffers from high levels of poverty and deprivation; Little Horton has been ranked the 42nd poorest ward in England and Wales (IMD, 2000).

This research project was carried out by WBYI in partnership with the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Culture at the University of Birmingham. It aimed to:

- find out how WBYI works and why it has been successful for the last 17 years;
- try out new activities to improve the skills and abilities of young people in West Bowling who are at risk of being isolated from society;
- encourage communication and cooperation between different groups of young people in the local area and beyond.

Neighbourhood

Dr Santokh Gill, who spent 18 months doing this research, describes it as ‘a project within a project’, looking at what WBYI has been about for the last 17 years and shaping what it will become in the future. The research drew on people’s first-hand experiences and involved the

whole organisation, including staff, volunteers and the young men using WBYI.

Methodology

The research took an ethnographic approach, which means the researcher got fully involved in day-to-day activities at the place being studied. Information was collected through observations, interviews, focus groups, discussions, audio recording, photography and film. The idea was to spend time talking to everyone at WBYI and create a truthful picture of the project. Building trust between the researcher and the young men taking part was important to help them tell their stories openly and contribute to the research process. The project was guided by the voices of these young people, the local community and staff at WBYI.

The research had four phases:

Phase 1: WBYI ‘then’

This phase involved research with past users of WBYI. In-depth interviews (both individual and focus groups) were conducted to find out about the impact of the project on their lives.

Phase 2: WBYI ‘now’

This involved research with young people currently involved in WBYI projects. This included observing day-to-day project work, in-depth interviews with current users and project workers, focus groups and video interviews. Young people took part by capturing their perceptions of Bradford, West Bowling and their everyday lives through photography. Interviews were also conducted with partner organisations and members of the local community.

Phase 3: WBYI ‘what works?’

This phase of the project was about identifying ‘what works’ to develop guidance for WBYI and similar projects. The images developed by the young people in phase two culminated in a photographic exhibition and a short film that was used to illustrate the work of WBYI.

Phase 4: WBYI 'the future'

This phase was ongoing throughout the research, with the researcher, project workers and young people at WBYI involved in developing new project work. Funding bids were also developed to support future work.

Project activities

The WBYI plays an important role in Bradford's voluntary sector. As well as regular ongoing activities, new projects have been tried out during this research. This work has followed an intuitive path, very much led by human values and the needs of users (in a similar way to a parallel project: 'Women Working Towards Excellence').

The Hub

The Hub, the small WBYI office, is within the West Bowling Youth Centre. It is a place where young people can easily access support and guidance in an informal environment, without being judged or criticised.

WBYI has been managed since 2001 by Haqueq Siddique, a qualified youth worker, seen as a role model by many young men. Haqueq has the ability to engage with young men in a friendly and informal manner, while understanding his role as a professional.



Haqueq Siddique, Project leader WBYI

Young men who visit the Hub can access a range of services, from help to find jobs to training opportunities and everyday project activities. It may just seem like a local drop-in point to them, but the Hub gives young men skills for life and the confidence and knowledge to become balanced and active citizens in their neighbourhood and wider society.

Film and photography

Film and photography have always been used at WBYI to record its history and achievements. The visual archive shows a rich variety of activities, from young men talking honestly about their religion, gender, identity and political views in the wake of 9/11, to groups of boys climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, surfing and canoeing. During this research, new film and photography projects were set up to give young people the opportunity to develop skills in this area.

Mobile Memories

The 'Mobile Memories' project supported young men to work with image and identity in a way that many of them had never experienced before. Using digital cameras and camera phones, participants captured how they viewed themselves and their local area. This was an opportunity for young men to gain new skills and talk about their neighbourhood, families, and identity.

Mobile Memories was so successful that it became an exhibition at a mainstream venue in the city – the Cartwright Hall Art Gallery. This was visited by almost 3,000 members of the public in one month. An education programme attached to the exhibition gave the young men a chance to speak about their experiences to an audience, the first time many of them had spoken publicly about themselves. This aspect of the

The exhibition tells everyone what we're about and what we do

(Mobile Memories participant)



Mobile Memories exhibition at Cartwright Hall

project not only helped the young men develop skills and confidence, it also challenged negative stereotypes about young British Pakistani Muslim men.

Two films were made as part of the research project:

Then, now and the future

This documentary film explored the history of WBYI, the current picture and what the future holds for the project. It includes footage of past

users who are now involved in the project as staff and volunteers and documents day-to-day activities such as sports, arts and training.

In my name

This film featured Muslim men from West Bowling and around the district talking honestly about what it means to be a Muslim man, covering issues from family to professional life. By capturing what it means to make a meaningful contribution to society, the film reflects the overall purpose of WBYI.

Sport, art and environmental activities

Sport has always played an important part in WBYI and will continue to do so. Sports activities take place at ‘The Sports Club’, next door to the Hub, and at the satellite base, Bowling Old Lane Cricket Club. This allows local men to pass on their skills to younger members of the project.

Alongside sports, ongoing arts activities provide opportunities for self-expression and personal development. A small allotment project has seen younger members of the group learn about caring for the environment by creating their own vegetable patch.

Events and festivals

Special events help celebrate community life in West Bowling and bring together people from different backgrounds, cultures and countries. Several successful events were organised by WBYI during this research.

Youth festival

West Bowling used to hold regular carnivals, bonfires and other events, but it was clear that these had not been taking place in recent years. The Youth Festival was organised to celebrate community life and variety in West Bowling. Held on a warm summer’s day, the festival was open to all and attracted around 600 people of different ages and ethnicities, including people from recent migrant groups.



The Youth Festival

Past users social event

A social event for past users of WBYI brought together young people, project workers, local residents and practitioners. Over 30 people came to share food, memories, conversation and new ideas. They talked about how WBYI had changed their lives and celebrated the achievements of the project.

American visit

A group of young people from the USA came to visit Bradford for a week and meet young men and women from the area. Together, 25 young people from different backgrounds and ethnicities took part in social activities and discussions about identity, nationality and belonging. While this project was limited in time, international events and exchanges are a regular part of WBYI's work.

I am a teacher now. I teach citizenship to the young men from this area. The WBYI are responsible for where I am today. I know that without them I wouldn't be working with these young men, giving something back to the local community. Without the project I wouldn't be the rounded person that I am.

(Amar Hussain, WBYI participant since 1992)



Amar Hussain, a teacher and a past user of WBYI

Key findings: what works?

The success of WBYI is evident in the stories of the young men taking part: from those who have become more self-aware as a result of the project to those who may have walked a very different path without it. There are a numerous examples showing how once misunderstood young men have grown into mature, competent adults who are now giving their time back to WBYI.

Research by Santokh Gill has helped develop a detailed understanding of WBYI and identified 'what works' in terms of supporting young British Muslim Pakistani men. These successful features of WBYI provide useful lessons for other similar work:

- ***Being a community resource.***

WBYI is seen as a vital and trusted resource in the local British Pakistani Muslim community. It helps people develop a sense of belonging and encourages participation in community life. This has taken time to develop and strikes a difficult balance between meeting the needs of parents and those of young people. The open door policy at the Hub brings together young people, practitioners, project workers and other members of the community.

- ***Taking a balanced approach to religion and culture.***

WBYI recognises that being Muslim is important for many of the young men who use their services, but does not over-emphasise the role of faith and culture. The project provides a space for young people who choose to express their faith-based identity (through religious practices such as dress and diet) and those who do not.

- ***Providing positive role models.***

WBYI makes the most of local knowledge and talent by employing project workers who are 'local lads' themselves. This helps build positive long-term relationships with the young men and the wider community. A 'tough love' approach means that project workers are respected and seen by young people using WBYI as mentors and positive role models.



A visit from a group of American young people

- ***Investing in partnerships.***

WBYI plays an important role in linking the community with external agencies, and is well-positioned to do this. It has worked hard to develop local networks and partnerships. Joining up with the cricket club, for example, encourages young people from different backgrounds to mix.

- ***Providing varied and challenging project activities.***

Photography, media, sport, arts, volunteering and travel have all helped young people at WBYI build skills, confidence and self-awareness. Through these activities, many are able to connect with new aspects of their identity – being an artist, sportsman, teenager, mentor or volunteer – as well as being Muslim, British and Asian.

- ***Promoting awareness and communication.***

Everyday project work and an informal drop-in space (the Hub) help develop skills and awareness amongst young people. Whilst the primary users of WBYI are British Pakistani Muslim men, the Hub is accessed by a range of people. Visits and exchanges organised by WBYI give young men the chance to connect with people of a similar age, experiencing similar issues, from different countries and cultures.

Lessons for policy

As well as providing a useful example for other projects, this study highlights an important message for government. A lot of policies now push for community organisations to work with a mix of ethnic groups, but WBYI shows that it is possible to work positively with young men of one ethnic background (in this case Pakistani) and encourage them to be more actively involved with other communities. Trying to introduce different ethnic backgrounds to the project could take away from the essence of WBYI and why it is successful.

Similarly, while there is a push to provide inclusive services for men and women, WBYI's approach allows them to do important work around gender issues experienced by young British Muslim Pakistani men, while retaining their trust.

The future

Building on achievements so far and findings from this research, future plans at WBYI include:

- making the most of media technology to do more creative projects using film, cameras and mobile phones to encourage communication and capture stories of everyday life in West Bowling;

- developing stronger links with other organisations by working with partners such as local schools and the cricket club;
- encouraging programmes that generate funding and income and therefore make WBVI more sustainable;
- building on the success of the Youth Festival to continue celebrating community life in West Bowling;
- doing more environmental projects and encouraging young people to respect their community at this level.

Funding and sustainability

Future programmes could develop the partnership between the University of Birmingham and WBVI. Other sources of funding may come from the arts and new media sectors, especially in terms of exhibiting voices and images from areas like West Bowling.

WBVI will continue to be led by the local community, rather than political agendas. By involving local people, WBVI has been able to respond to local issues and concerns. But these relationships take time to develop; something current funding for voluntary sector organisations does not always allow. Organisations like WBVI need long-term funding and support to gain the trust and respect of their local communities.

This project has been about experiencing something positive in communities. I have learnt a lot from it.

(Dr Santokh Gill, researcher)

About this project

This project aimed to tackle social and economic problems amongst young British Muslim Pakistani men in Bradford, and to strengthen their community. The author, Dr Santokh Singh Gill, is currently a Senior Lecturer at the University of Huddersfield. Santokh has conducted research relating to political participation amongst black and minority ethnic communities, social capital and faith, masculinity, with Sikh communities, and with refugee community groups.

A related report is also available as a free download from <http://www.jrf.org.uk/bradford>. Two films relating to this project can be viewed at www.jrf.org.uk/communities-bradford

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