Community Empowerment: working together to achieve!

A case study on the Women Organising in Wolverhampton Network

LTB Consultancy
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The third sector and the voluntary and community sector

The third sector is a diverse, active and passionate sector. Organisations in the sector share common characteristics. They are non-governmental; value-driven; principally reinvest any financial surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives. The term encompasses voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals both large and small. (Office of the Third Sector)

This report is based on research with the voluntary and community sector. Where appropriate, reference has been made to the voluntary and community sector, as distinct from the wider third sector.
1. Introduction

This case study of the Women Organising in Wolverhampton Network (WOW) discusses the building blocks to its development, its achievements, the challenges it has faced and the key lessons learnt.

It is hoped that information on lessons learnt will prove useful to other networks in planning their future development and to organisations and funding bodies who are commissioning services from community engagement networks.

The methodology for this study included:

- A review of minutes of WOW meetings, WOW reports, monitoring returns, annual reviews and other documentary information;
- Semi-structured interviews with the chair of WOW and representatives from:
  - WOW’s management committee;
  - the organisations commissioned to deliver the six strands of WOW’s work programme;
  - Wolverhampton City Council;
  - Wolverhampton Strategic Partnership.

2. The WOW Network

WOW’s vision is:

“To improve the quality of life for women in Wolverhampton and to make sure our voices are heard, listened to and taken seriously.”

It is the only Wolverhampton-based project with this remit.

It aims to:

- Encourage better communication between women’s groups and organisations;
- Promote sharing of information, ideas, experiences and good practice;
- Provide a mechanism for ensuring that members’ views reach policy makers, decision makers, service providers and funding bodies within the local area;
- Provide the information and skills necessary to improve the quality of women’s lives.

It is a constituted, unincorporated body (adopted in 2005) with a management committee (made up of representatives from different women’s organisations and has an agreed terms of reference). Membership is open to all organisations and individual women in Wolverhampton that support WOW’s vision, aims and objectives. It was felt important that the membership extended beyond women’s organisations because other organisations need to take into account gender equality and challenge themselves in relation to gender equality issues. As at January 2008 WOW had 50 members from 32 organisations.
3. The building blocks to community partnerships and empowerment

WOW was established in March 2002. The driver behind its establishment was the formation of the Wolverhampton Community Empowerment Network (Wolverhampton CEN). The Wolverhampton CEN was structured around a core group and a ‘network of networks’. WOW was established as one of the new thematic networks which formed part of this ‘network of networks’.

One of the first actions for WOW was to determine how to ensure it was an effective partnership and was able to represent the issues and concerns of women in the city. This involved developing a longer-term action plan and agreeing guidelines and protocols. Initial support was provided by:

- Working for Change, a group of trainers and consultants who had received funding from the Barrow Cadbury Trust to develop women’s groups and support their involvement in political and decision-making forums. Working for Change allocated some of this funding (£2,500) to support the development of WOW up until December 2003;
- Sue Priest, the Wolverhampton CEN’s Community Development and Participation Officer who helped WOW identify hard to reach women’s groups and individual women to link them into WOW;
- The Community Empowerment Fund which provided grant funding for the first three years. The initial grant enabled WOW to appoint a part-time co-ordinator (two days a week) and five sessional outreach workers who talked to women about what they wanted from WOW.

The Network’s action plan, agreed in 2004, focussed on:

- Consolidating the development of the Network;
- Developing an appropriate infrastructure which encouraged and supported representation of women’s interests in local decision-making processes;
- Supporting the growth of a vibrant and effective women’s voluntary and community sector in the city initiating and supporting projects around areas of concern to WOW members.

In April 2005 a European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) grant was secured to appoint a full-time co-ordinator; this enabled WOW to develop and build on its partnership base. A re-launch was held in July 2005 which brought in 36 new members. Funding for the co-ordinator’s post finished at the end of December 2006.

In 2007 Wolverhampton Network Consortium and Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council jointly decided to commission bids, based on a specification and a fixed price contract, for seven different communities of interest. WOW submitted a tender bid against the appropriate specification and was successful in its bid. However, the budget for this work was only £25,000. The size of the budget meant it was not feasible to employ either a full-time or part-time co-ordinator. One of the main aims was to communicate the developing and emerging changes around the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the impact these would have on women and families. WOW therefore decided to break the activities down into six strands:

- Website development;
- Newsletters;
- Communication and information technology;
- International Women’s Week 2008;
- A review of the recommendations of the All Saints safety project;
- Policy and strategy development in relation to the Gender Equality Scheme.

WOW invited members to express an interest in carrying out individual strands of work, and it was allocated to four organisations: The Haven, The Arena Theatre and Parvinder Chana (independent consultant), Tara Consultancy and Teleresources.
4. How has empowerment really worked? Successes and the challenges faced

This section looks at empowerment in practice and focuses on developing a quality network, giving women a voice, supporting and promoting the sector, and demonstrating impact.

Developing a quality network

WOW has agreed its legal structure. A local women’s group (The Haven) has been appointed as WOW’s accountable body and guidelines have been developed for the working relationship between WOW and the accountable body. WOW has adopted the CEN’s Partnership Protocol and the Wolverhampton Partnership General Protocol. The first annual general meeting was held in 2006.

WOW now has an up-to-date database of contacts, and along with the 50 members there are a further 157 organisations or individuals on the contact database.

WOW achieved the Practical Award in Community Excellence (PACE) Quality Mark in December 2006 following a review of its organisational structure (2005), and the holding of a PACE away day (2006). The away day focused on perceptions; strengths and weaknesses; opportunities and threats; and identifying all stakeholders who had an interest in the work of the Network. An action plan was produced and implemented to ensure WOW offered a high standard of service provision.

Giving Women a Voice: informing women and finding out women’s views

Over the past two years WOW has recognised that although engagement has been positive, it could be more constructive and valuable if more women were involved. WOW recognises that a variety of communication methods are required; it is unrealistic to expect that all women will be able to attend meetings and events. Women need to be offered the opportunity to contribute in a way that best suits them.

One of WOW’s objectives was to develop a new website which was launched in November 2007 (www.wowonline.org.uk). This encompasses news updates, details of events, and progress on individual projects. It also offers the opportunity for members to include information about their organisation and advertise on the site. It enables WOW to carry out and present the results of its own opinion poll surveys, including surveys to find out views in relation to government consultation documents, for example changes in recent legislation on Every Child Matters and Contact Point which means every child’s details will be placed on a national database. The website will include a communication point and discussion forum accessible to all members. This forum will allow women to start discussions and contribute to debates. The information collected will be fed back to the WOW Management Committee and then taken forward to the relevant decision-making forum.

In addition to the website WOW has produced quarterly newsletters, which individual members contribute to, and which are disseminated to all contacts on WOW’s database and placed on the website. Positive feedback about the newsletter has been received from women. Regular email updates are also provided to all contacts on the database.

Giving Women a Voice: influencing decision-making

One of the key structures that WOW targeted, as part of its influencing strategy, was the LSP. The Local Government White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities (Communities and Local Government, 2006) emphasises the importance of community involvement in local decision-making, and places greater importance on LSPs and LAAs to deliver services. LSPs are responsible for producing the local Sustainable Community Strategy. This sets out the priorities for an area, and how services can be improved and delivered in a way that increases the environmental, social and economic well-being of a community. LAAs are effectively the three year delivery plans for this strategy.

A study by the Women’s Resource Centre (2007) found women’s organisations to be insufficiently represented on LSPs in relation to their size and their expertise. The report

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recommends that LSPs should ensure the full involvement of women’s organisations in LSPs at all levels. WOW’s priorities include ensuring that the voices of women are heard at all levels of the LSP process and influencing strategy development in order to ensure the needs of women are understood leading to better service delivery and improved communities.

WOW engages with the LSP through the following routes:

- WOW was represented on the LSP Board up to the end of 2006. However, due to changes in nomination arrangements to the LSP board, which are made via the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategic Forum, WOW is now represented on the LSP Board through the voluntary and community sector representatives who have a wider remit;
- WOW is one of the community of interest networks that form part of the new Community Forum which feeds into the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategic Forum which feeds into the LSP and other decision-making forums;
- Members of the WOW management committee are members of the 15 Local Neighbourhood Partnerships (LNPs), which are key vehicles for the delivery of the Community Plan. Information on LNPs is communicated to women via the newsletter and the website. LNPs will also be sent recommendations from the research and consultations as part of the process of ensuring these are implemented in local action plans.

A key objective is to influence the development of the LAA. Five resident outcomes have been identified for the next three years. These are:

- We have more job opportunities;
- We like where we live;
- We have access to the skills we need;
- We will live longer and healthier lives;
- We feel safer and more involved.

A key priority will be to ensure that the targets and indicators selected in relation to these five outcomes take into account the views of women.

Giving Women a Voice: working with other voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations and fora

WOW recognised that one way of ensuring women’s voices are heard was to work with other infrastructure agencies to influence collectively. WOW was represented on Wolverhampton CEN core group. WOW is well represented in the new engagement structures introduced in late 2006; it is represented on the Community Forum, the Voluntary Sector Forum, the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategic Forum.

Giving Women a Voice: capacity building

Another key influencing strand involves working in partnership with the City Council to deliver the Gender Equality Duty Scheme. The Gender Equality Duty places a positive duty on public authorities to have due regard for the promotion of equality of opportunity for men and women. Public bodies must now consider service delivery, policy making, decision-making and commissioning, as well as employment in the context of gender equality. WOW and Wolverhampton City Council worked together to set up consultation events in October 2005 and December 2006 which focussed on what women considered to be the main gender equality issues which needed to be incorporated into the scheme. The City Council’s Gender Equality Scheme was launched in May 2007; however WOW was disappointed with the lack of recognition of its contribution to the finished document. WOW was also contacted to support the Gender Equality Information Day, co-ordinated by Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council; unfortunately this was cancelled due to low take-up.

WOW is also represented on the gender working group which is overseeing and monitoring progress against Wolverhampton Council’s gender action plan which is a key element of the Gender Equality Scheme.

WOW has commissioned Teleresources to consult with women’s organisations on the Gender Equality Scheme to assess levels of understanding in relation to the Duty and the Scheme and to look at how it is being implemented. A report will be produced later this year (2008) which will be presented to WOW and the Gender Equality Group.
WOW has also been involved in influencing a number of other strategies through consultation events, responding to consultation documents and disseminating information on consultation drafts. For example, in partnership with the Maternity Services Liaison Committee, WOW held a consultation event in November 2005 to give the opportunity for service users to voice their opinions and share experiences.

Delivering its work programme through commissioning members to deliver one or more of the key strands has helped build the capacity, skills and knowledge of some of these organisations.

"It has helped me build up my knowledge of the Gender Equality Scheme and informed the work I do with other organisations and individuals I provide services to. It has also helped my organisation become more sustainable through the funding, and through the additional skills I have picked up."

WOW member

It has also meant that WOW has been able to maximise the expertise and skills of its members and has encouraged wider engagement with WOW.

Supporting and promoting the women’s voluntary and community sector

WOW has played a lead role in planning and implementing International Women’s Week events in Wolverhampton for a number of years. The events aim to raise the profile of women’s groups and the work they do, foster networking between the groups, celebrate the achievements of women who have accessed these groups and give women the chance to try out a range of skills and opportunities. WOW carried out an evaluation of the 2006 event, Real Women, Real Lives: a celebration which highlighted a number of areas for improvement – including placing a greater emphasis on lobbying for change, influencing and raising awareness of women’s issues – to ensure future events had the maximum impact in the city. This means involving and working more closely with the council, other strategic groups and forums. The 2008 International Women’s Event is being organised by Arena Theatre and Parvinder Chana, on behalf of WOW in conjunction with the local authority.

Demonstrating the impact of engagement

WOW commissioned the Women’s Design Service to carry out a safety audit for the All Saints area of Wolverhampton. This project aimed to improve the quality of women’s lives by looking at safety within the community and establishing and improving the relationship between women and built environment agencies and professionals. Women from the local area worked with the Women’s Design Service on the audit; this enabled the women to develop skills in auditing, developing recommendations, and presenting information to key stakeholders. Feedback from the women demonstrated an increase in their level of confidence along with a feeling that they could help to make a difference through their involvement. The ‘Making Safer Places’ report, along with a story board put together by participants was launched in 2006 to key stakeholders from the area, community members and WOW members.

Tara Consultancy has recently been commissioned by WOW to assess how far the report’s key recommendations have been implemented and what the impact has been. This report will be produced later this year in line with the funding criteria.
5. Lessons learned

Resource requirements: Sustainable, longer-term funding

A key barrier to building an effective community partnership has been the inability to secure a long-term commitment to resourcing the network (sustainable funding). Funding has been approved on an annual basis which has made it difficult to commit to and plan longer-term initiatives. This has led to loss of expertise and knowledge with the departure of paid staff. It also means that, if future funding is not available, it will be difficult to maintain infrastructure developments such as the new website. This uncertainty has already impacted on the development of the website, for example, WOW would have liked to include a website discussion forum open to all women but were concerned about their ability to monitor use of the site which may lead to the forum being abused.

Overall, uncertainty over funding has meant WOW has been in ‘stop-start’ mode and during periods where there has been no or little funding has struggled to keep going and maintain its profile.

Two further issues were the need for longer-lead in periods for funding and for funding payments to be made in advance as it is unrealistic to expect the accountable body or other organisation to ‘bank roll’ the network.

Need for leadership and co-ordination

One of the key lessons learnt, given the capacity constraints faced by individual members, was the importance of having a paid co-ordinator to work with the chair or management committee to promote the network and act as a single point of contact, consult with members, help provide leadership, and co-ordinate activities. For example, the network is finding it difficult to pull together the work of the six strands of their work programme, and members are concerned that, by using this approach, WOW may have failed to adequately develop its strategic links with local decision-makers and/or may be perceived to have had its agenda set by just one or two of its members.

In addition, there is a need to ensure a strong and representative management committee. This means resources are required for capacity building for committee members, including training.

Management of staff

A further lesson learnt is the need for the management committee, rather a specific member organisation or the accountable body, to oversee and agree the work programme of staff employed. There is a danger if only one organisation is responsible for this role that the Network is perceived by others as delivering on that particular organisation’s agenda rather than working in the interests of members as a whole. This in turn could discourage women’s organisations and individual women engaging with the network.

Representing the network and ensuring two-way feedback

When attending committee meetings members of the management committee are acting on behalf of all women’s groups and organisations from across Wolverhampton. This means they need to be seen to be representing the views of members as a whole and providing feedback to WOW. There were issues around organisations effectively ‘wearing two hats’, or turning up at meetings of the same forum on one occasion representing their own organisation and at the next meeting representing WOW; this led to confusion both for strategic partners but also amongst WOW’s wider membership. In part this is a capacity issue, but it is also an area where the network needs to agree protocols outlining what is expected and communication strategies and methods. It is also an area where strategic partners need to provide funding to build the capacity of representatives to engage with their constituents and consider how they can assist, for example by disseminating meeting papers and agendas earlier, producing reports etc., in electronic as well as hard-copy format.

Keeping women’s organisations and women informed

Due to the time constraints faced by individual women and women’s organisations the network has focussed on disseminating information and securing feedback from its wider membership and contacts via electronic means (website,
email updates), a newsletter and one–off events. However, this has meant that some groups and individual women are less likely to engage with the network (for example women who do not have IT skills or do not have access to IT) and therefore their views may not be represented. There was support for holding regular wider network meetings to keep members informed and to facilitate networking. Whilst the majority of women may not want regular involvement there will be some who do and if this opportunity is not provided they may disengage with WOW. This means that resources need to be secured to hold both management committee and general meetings of the Network.

**Raising awareness and encouraging women’s organisations and women to become involved**

Where the agenda has been set by government, local council or external agencies it is important to carry out preliminary awareness-raising in relation to the issues and the impact on women in order to encourage women’s organisations and individual women to participate in discussions and provide their views.

The Network also needs to be able to evidence that it is comprehensively engaged with its constituents and therefore is a credible network in terms of acting as a consultation conduit and representing the views of its constituents. It needs to be able to demonstrate this to organisations it is trying to influence.

**Demonstrating that women’s voices have been heard and have had an impact**

It is important to be able to show women that they have contributed to something that has made a difference. This means the Network needs to develop planned dissemination programmes, determine which people to target, promote success, and evaluate their impact and the difference they have made. This inevitably has resource implications. However, it is also important to recognise that it takes time for strategies, research, etc. to which women have contributed to have an impact on the ground and this may mean the Network needs to look for some early wins to establish its credibility and encourage engagement.

**A strategic approach to influence**

The network needs to determine its priorities and how these fit in with and can contribute to helping inform and meet the agendas, objectives, strategies and plans of strategic partners. At the same time when applying for resources or submitting tenders WOW needs to ensure that the requirements of commissioning bodies or funders do not divert the focus from its main aims and objectives.

**Be realistic**

It is important that the Network sets out what it can deliver with the resources, competence and capacity it has. If it tries to deliver everything it will fail and consequently will not be seen as a credible and influential network by its community of interest or strategic partners.
Appendix

Wolverhampton: Key statistics

Wolverhampton is amongst the most densely populated local authority areas in England. At the 2001 census there were 236,582 residents living in its 26.8 square miles (6,944 hectares), equating to a population density of 34 people per hectare. According to the 2006 Mid-Year Estimates (MYE) the population stands at 236,600 showing a negligible change in the number of people living in Wolverhampton between 2001 and 2006. There is a strong possibility that these figures mask the significant levels of inward and outward migration that have taken place over this period (especially with changes to the EU).

Wolverhampton is an ethnically diverse city, with just under a quarter of the population (24.6%) being of Black and Minority Ethnic origin. This is higher than the regional average of 23.5% and much higher than the England average of 13.0% (2001 Census).

A large proportion of the BME population in Wolverhampton is of Asian-Indian origin comprising 12.3% of the total population. This shows a much higher proportion of the population of this origin than regionally and nationally (6.1% and 2.1% respectively). The Sikh community is the fourth largest in Britain and contributes 7.6% (17,944) to the total Wolverhampton population (2001 Census).

With respect to gender MYE show gender balance to be roughly equal in overall numbers; however data does show that women are living longer and form a larger part of the population aged 60 and above.

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