

Women's Design Group Project Evaluation

The project

The Women's Design Service was funded to run a project by London Councils (2008-2011) to set up Women's Design Groups (WDG) across twelve London Boroughs. The aim of the Groups was "to increase community engagement and participation in local and regional planning and policy development". The remit of the Women's Design Groups was to comment on local and regional (London) major planning applications and policy proposals from a gender perspective, using women's experience of the built environment and to try to remove barriers to women that may be built into new developments. The Women's Design Service commissioned Dr Gemma Burgess at the University of Cambridge to conduct an evaluation of the Women's Design Groups project.

Activities

- Groups were established across different London Boroughs and local women took part in meetings, training events and local planning consultations.
- The Groups made inputs into local plans and WDG representatives met with planning officers and discussed major planning applications and policy proposals.
- Outreach activities were held across the Boroughs to try and ensure the group membership was diverse.
- Training was provided to women and to professionals on a range of issues.
- The WDG project developed informal partnership working with other organisations such as Planning Aid for London to develop training and to input into plans.

Successes

- The evaluation found that the project has been successful at delivering against the outcomes agreed with London Councils.
- Members of the Groups gained more knowledge and confidence about how the planning system works and about local planning issues. The project increased awareness of women's engagement and gender issues in planning across London amongst both group members and planning professionals.
- The Groups had a direct impact by using every opportunity to respond to Borough planning consultations, both in writing and by attending consultation events.
- Relationships were developed with local planning officers, building understanding and knowledge of the issues from both perspectives.
- Planners found the input of the WDG an invaluable alternative perspective.
- In some cases, architects' plans were changed directly as a result of the involvement of the Groups.
- There is evidence of how individual group members were personally empowered through their participation in the project.
- The Groups were most effective when there was a dedicated group of women keen to focus on planning issues and where there was a professional planning volunteer to help support the group.
- WDS hosted a 'closing event' attended by speakers from the London Access Forum, Inclusion London and Greater London Authority planning staff where project beneficiaries were invited to join the London Access Forum Planning Sub-group hosted at City Hall. Participants have also been invited to join a new WDS Women's Design London email forum. It is hoped that these measures will enable participants to continue to engage in planning issues and build relationships beyond the end of the Project.

Challenges

- Capacity within the Project to develop the engagement of the most under-represented groups within the funding and resources available.
- Limits to the capacity of some women to be involved as a result of juggling caring and work commitments.
- The focus on planning where more general issues such as access to public toilets were a local priority.
- The capacity to sustain involvement with Borough planning consultations without additional professional planning volunteer support. Joint arrangements with similar London Councils funded initiatives would have added value to the work.
- The capacity for existing groups to be self-sustaining without the support of the Project Manager, which was challenging as new Groups had to be simultaneously established.
- Political resistance from Boroughs in the early stages of the Project.
- Uncertainties over the future of funding of the Project due to the change in political and economic context.

Conclusions

The Project has been successful in supporting more than 100 women from diverse backgrounds to engage with planning issues in London. It has raised awareness amongst both planning professionals and local women of the opportunities presented in planning to remove barriers to women and enhance opportunity. However, there were significant challenges in delivering the Project including political resistance in the initial stages of the Project; resources available to engage with the most under-represented groups of women; resources for staff to sustain functioning groups without additional professional planning volunteer support built into the project and uncertainties over the funding of the Project in its third year.

For more information

For more information about the evaluation please contact Dr Gemma Burgess at glb36@cam.ac.uk or 01223 764547.

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