

MARSH FARM ORGANISATION WORKSHOP

EVALUATION REPORT



*"What gets things moving is not money. What gets things done is not technology.
What makes things happen is not project planning and management.
But things do get done by men and women who are adequately organised.
Once organised, they will find the money, they will find the technology,
they will find the projects."*

Clodomir Santos de Morais

*"We were thrown in at the deep end.....but even though it sometimes
felt like none of us knew what we were doing, it still worked.
I was dumbstruck, seeing all these people working together
to achieve the same thing."*

Marsh Farm Organisation Workshop participant (60yrs)

*"The farm project was interesting – I felt physically better
– I had a feeling of freedom and my spirits lifted
– I didn't realise I had so much stamina!"*

Marsh Farm Outreach participant (40yrs)

*"The Organisation Workshop has made a huge difference to me
– without it, I think I would probably be in jail by now.
The OW has been a lifeline."*

Marsh Farm Organisation Workshop participant (25yrs)

'Imagine' was commissioned by the Office for Civil Society in Cabinet Office to evaluate the Marsh Farm Organisation Workshop. Tricia Zipfel led the research with support from Marilyn Taylor and Mandy Wilson.

Thanks are due to Marsh Farm Outreach for their help with data collection and interviews.

We would also like to thank Dave Smith, Business Development Director at the Social Enterprise Support Centre, Leeds, for his help with the cost benefit and social values analysis in Section Three.

SUMMARY

In March 2015, residents on Marsh Farm estate, Luton, set up an innovative project to engage with some of the most marginalized, long-term unemployed people in their community. They piloted an 'Organisation Workshop' (OW), based on a Brazilian method that has been adopted across South America and in many parts of Africa over the past 40 years, but never before used in the UK. It was also the first OW ever to be initiated and led by local residents. Marsh Farm Outreach (MFO)¹ had worked for many years to strengthen community involvement in the improvement of their estate and they had been trying to pilot the OW approach, without success, for more than fifteen years. In November 2014, Cabinet Office, Office for Civil Society, (OCS) funding finally made it possible.

An OW brings together large groups of people to develop the 'organisational awareness and skills' necessary to change the participants' lives, their livelihoods and their communities. It is based on 'large-group psychology' and principles of self-organising, self-discovery and learning by doing. Participants form what is known as the 'Participants Enterprise' (PE)² and are tasked with delivering a project that is of benefit to the community. They are supported in a non-directive manner by a small team, the 'Facilitators Enterprise' (FE)³. The PE is provided with the tools and materials needed to undertake the project, which they must deliver on time (usually within 4-6 weeks) and within budget. The OW creates a sort-of 'pressure cooker' in which participants must determine how to go about the task and organise themselves to deliver it. At its core, an OW aims to trigger a profound change in the participants, in terms of their confidence, their relationships, their organisational and other skills, and their capacity to change their lives for the better.

The MFOW was structured in three phases:

- the core Workshop during which 45 participants transformed a derelict field into a community farm/educational /recreational resource – 3 months;
- a transition phase when a smaller group of 13 participants developed business plans for enterprises they hoped to establish – 1 month (though in reality it has been much longer);
- an implementation phase when they established these enterprises and began trading prior to launching them – 6 months (ongoing).

Initially all three phases were expected to be complete by November 2015. But this was never realistic. At the time of writing this report, seven new enterprises were in the process of development.

¹ Marsh Farm Outreach was formed in 2001 in order to ensure the community had a strong voice in the development of the estate and in particular the New Deal for Communities programme which ran from 2000-2010.

² The 'Participants Enterprise' refers to the people brought together by the OW, who form the work-team that self-organises to form a mini-enterprise in order to deliver the OW project.

³ The Facilitators Enterprise is the core team of 6/8 people who lead the project

The aims of the Marsh Farm project were to:

- transform the lives of the participants in terms of their ability to access jobs and their overall wellbeing;
- improve the local environment and strengthen the community;
- impact on the local economy by developing community-based enterprises and services as a direct outcome of the OW.

The OW has been a major learning experience for everyone involved – participants, facilitators (MFO), and other agencies.

Key features of the project include:

- The OW recruited 45 people, most of whom felt ‘excluded’ from society and had been unemployed for long periods. Many were struggling with complex problems relating to physical and mental health, housing and other family crises. The fact that they were motivated to join the OW and to stay the course was in itself an important achievement. Sixteen participants left early – most of them, because they found work.
- The OW method required this large group of people, who did not already know one another, to deliver the core task - transforming a derelict field into a community resource - within twelve weeks. They were provided with the tools and materials but had to self-organise in relation to every aspect of the project – including support services like catering and health & safety. It proved to be a ‘roller-coaster’ experience but, incrementally, leaders emerged, people divided into work teams, decisions were made, conflicts were resolved and ultimately the OW task was delivered on time.
- After about ten weeks, most of the participants transferred from the farm site to Marsh House, a previously derelict building which MFO had partly restored, where they worked on renovating the building and developed their plans to establish community enterprises through the New Enterprise Allowances (NEA) programme.

Outcomes:

- By summer 2015, 44% of participants had been able to find mainstream jobs and (*as far as we know*) all were still in employment eight months later. This compares well with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) national figures, where around 30% of unemployed ‘clients’ find work after spending two years on the Work Programme⁴.
- The cost per job outcome was £7,000. This is higher than for other programmes that focus solely on employment outcomes, but the OW was a much broader and more ambitious undertaking. Also, if the participants currently working towards employment via new community enterprises are included, the cost per job outcome reduces to £4,000.

⁴ The Work Programme was launched in June 2011, as part of the Government’s programme of welfare reform. It aims to help more people into lasting employment and replaces previous programmes such as the New Deals, Employment Zones etc

- At the start of the OW, 44% struggled with depression, lack of confidence, low self-esteem. Even though many still face significant barriers, feedback from participants shows that the OW gave most participants a new lease of life – more confidence, new friendships, more skills, better life-style, greater capacity to cope, greater resilience.
- Some formal training was provided within the OW and 13 people, who had few if any prior qualifications, undertook and passed a total of 42 courses on topics like health and safety, hygiene, employment rights, customer services, finance and administration.
- By September 2015, 13 people (28%) had opted to set up new enterprises based on their skills and interests including: bee-keeping, a community farm, a building co-operative, a catering business, music related and IT services. It is too early to say what the outcomes of these will be, but all these businesses are currently either in development or starting to trade.
- MFO has plans to establish a Community Interest Organisation (CIO) by May 2016 that will act as an umbrella organisation to support and nurture these new businesses over a longer period of time.
- Through the OW, a 5 acre abandoned field has been transformed into a community resource complete with paths, orchard, flower-beds, vegetable garden, bee-hives and 'iron-age replica round house'. Also Marsh House has new outside decking, toilets and music workshops, and, with a bit more work, it will have a new kitchen and café area.
- Although a Social Return on Investment (SROI) assessment was not undertaken, it is possible to make a reasonable estimate as to the added social value of the OW, by applying proxy wellbeing values used by housing providers in relation to non-housing benefits. This suggests a total social value from the OW of around £1,300,000.

Lessons:

The MFOW represented a steep learning curve for everyone involved in the project. Even though MFO had dreamt of running an OW for many years, when the funding became available, they had to move very quickly with only three months to plan and prepare for what was a very ambitious undertaking. They had to find additional resources, negotiate the involvement of partner agencies, recruit the right mix of participants, establish a project structure, navigate a complex regulatory system, find expert advisors and plan the development of new enterprises, while dealing with the day-to-day management of the Workshop itself. Although they had the support and guidance of Ivan Labra⁵ from Chile, this was the first time an OW had been tried in the UK, so it was difficult to predict what would be required. Despite the difficulties, the outcomes of the MFOW are significant and encouraging. But the insights gained from this project are also important and should inform the implementation of any future OW project in the UK.

⁵ Ivan Labra is the lead international expert on OWs having managed and evaluated them in S America and Africa for more than 30 years.

Recommendations:

It is difficult to make specific recommendations on the basis of a single pilot project. One recommendation from this research, therefore, is that more pilots are needed, ideally in different settings, including rural as well as urban communities.

But future pilots are more likely to succeed if:

- more time is allowed for planning and preparation, and if budgets are set at more realistic levels than was the case for the MFOW;
- a local, trusted community organisation 'hosts' the OW, with a management structure that combines community leadership with a clear role for key stakeholders such as the Local Authority and the Job Centre;
- financial incentives are built into the way the OW operates, in a way that does not jeopardise participants' core income;
- fledgling enterprises have intensive business development support and, as they begin to find their feet, are given access to local public and private sector contract opportunities;
- sustainable local investment is identified to support future OWs, e.g. through local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, local businesses and social enterprises that prioritise social value;
- Government departments encourage local services to exercise greater flexibility in the funding and regulatory systems that affect an OW.

A national 'incubator organisation', bringing together people with relevant expertise, could help to share learning and provide support for future OWs – setting standards, providing training, protecting the integrity of the OW method. It could be linked to an existing national NGO or function as a 'virtual organisation'. It could also gather together the data needed to deepen our understanding of the OW model and enable further comparative analysis of the impact of the OW on employment, community enterprise and well-being.