



The Basis Project
Building and sustaining success

African French Speaking Community Support- Collaborative Working

African French Speaking Community Support (AFSCS) was founded on 31 November 2005 with the aim of promoting projects for disadvantaged French African Refugees and Asylum seekers living in Birmingham. It was formerly known as Macho: Eye for Help Community Association and changed its name in December 2010. AFSCS's main office was based in Birmingham until September 2007, when we moved the headquarters from Birmingham to Smethwick.



The organisation is run by an elected Management Committee comprising eight people, and currently has no paid staff. Twelve volunteers are very committed to supporting our service users with interpretation, translation, information, signposting, advocacy, children's and leisure activities and organising community events.

Two members of AFSCS are awarded certificates after attending a Bilingualism in the Community Training delivered by a trainer from Sandwell Council.

Introduction to AFSCS's collaborative working

AFSCS has built a strong collaborative relationship with Brushstrokes Community Project in Smethwick. As a well established organisation, Brushstrokes is working hand with hand with AFSCS to deliver services to refugees, asylum seekers and new comers in the area. Our organisation is currently using office space within the Brushstrokes building- an 'in kind' contribution. Our strong links and connections with the French Speaking African community have helped Brushstrokes to reach vulnerable clients who it would have been difficult for Brushstrokes to reach on their own.

In this paper we will look at how we developed the relationship with Brushstrokes, and how we work together to help our community members, whilst avoiding duplicating services and activities.

How we developed our collaborative work and what has come out of this

Starting the collaborative relationship

Our relationship with Brushstrokes started quite informally. I met with Teresa Clements (Brushstrokes' Project Manager) in December 2009. She invited me to come down to her office and collect some Christmas presents to be offered to local children from Africa backgrounds. The following day I reported to her office and got a pile of presents which I put in my car. I distributed them to 44 children.

In 2010, I was accepted to volunteer at Brushstrokes in connection with one of my university's modules (volunteering in the community). Thanks to a befriending course organised by Brushstrokes, I became involved in visiting local families and vulnerable people in their homes within our neighbourhood.

The Project Manager of Brushstrokes introduced AFSCS to the priest of St. Philips Catholic Church (where Brushstrokes is based). Fortunately, he accepted that our organisation could use the Parish Centre as headquarters from April 2011. Our organisation benefits from using facilities at Brushstrokes such as meeting space telephone, fax, internet, photocopier etc.

Joint work on community events and training

We have worked together with Brushstrokes on a number of events and training courses. Brushstrokes started involving AFSCS in some community activities such as health events, Refugee Week, summer events and events targeting children at school. Our involvement consisted of cooking some African foods, volunteering or performing some African dance and music. For examples Brushstrokes was doing a joint project with Smethwick Heritage Centre in August 2011. They involved us in providing African arts and music live music – a

good opportunity for us to promote African arts and music to the wider community.



Members of AFSCS at the Health and Safety training delivered by West Midlands Fire Service

We have also organised numerous community events in partnership with Brushstrokes, such as Health and Safety training (delivered by the West Midlands Fire Service in July 2011), demonstration of African cooking in August 2011.

Developing further collaborative working relationships and building recognition

Since being based in St. Philips with Brushstrokes, we have been able to hold meetings with other organisations using St. Philip's centre facilities. Recently, we have welcomed guests from Age Concern Birmingham, Sported and Sound It Out. Having a base to meet with other organisations, and linking to other organisations through Brushstrokes' contacts, has been very useful for building relationships and links.

I was particularly delighted that Brushstrokes nominated me to receive a "Volunteering in the Community Award" from Sandwell Council.

Supporting the implementation of our strategic plan and accessing funding

Our strategic plan is the main document guiding our activities on the ground. After the assessment of needs carried out among our members, we identified the biggest priorities to be supplementary education for children and befriending and support for adults over 50 and supporting parents. Working with Brushstrokes has been very helpful in enabling us to develop projects to meet the needs identified, whilst complimenting their activities.

On supplementary education, a Saturday Homework club has already started, and we are planning to kick off with sport activities for children and youth (boys and girls). Brushstrokes didn't have any similar activities to meet these needs and supported us with developing and seeking funding for the projects- for example Sport Albion is funding football and Zumba classes.

We are working on a project of supporting parents with family learning, pre-ESOL and sport activities. We identified that many parents, especially single mothers, are on a waiting list to attend English classes or face barriers to attending. We decided to run family learning activities with basis ESOL alongside the Saturday children's activities as well as sport activities for the whole family. This aims to equip parents with skills to support children at home, and to give basic English skills as a stepping stone to ESOL classes.

Brushstrokes' current befriending programme largely reaches white people so we are working in partnership with them to look at ways of reaching hard to reach people. We have developed a Befriending Project for over 50s adults from African communities with the participation of steering group (of beneficiaries) and we are waiting the outcome from the funder.

Following work with Age Concern Birmingham, they released some funding which was used to advise and support people from French speaking backgrounds to be ready for the Digital Switchover.



Digital Switchover training in August 2011, with Age Concern Birmingham

Enabling our community members to access Brushstrokes' services

My involvement in the Brushstrokes befriending project helped to develop the collaboration with Brushstrokes as many people from our community (French African) started to find out more about Brushstrokes' activities and started accessing a range of services delivered there, for instance immigration surgery, advocacy, collecting foods or clothes, using computers, making phone calls. Befriending has increased our involvement in assisting members of the local community from any ethnic background and in promoting social cohesion.

Nowadays, many members of our community have started ESOL class at Brushstrokes and come regularly to get their issues sorted out. For example, one day a French African lady, because of her poor English, was obliged to spend £12 to buy some ink in order to get help with printing out an application form for immigration purpose. By chance, she met one of our volunteers in the street. Then she was taken to Brushstrokes where she got support to print out the application form and get it filled in by an immigration advisor. In December 2010, our organisation distributed Christmas presents once more, from Brushstrokes, to 66 children within our community.

Reducing duplication

The positive impact of this partnership relates to the fact that there is no duplication or competition over delivering services between Brushstrokes and AFSCS. Both organisations are keen to deliver high standard services to meet the needs of our service users.

What problems and barriers did your RCO face in doing this, and how did you overcome or try to overcome these?

In the first few years, AFSCS's headquarters was based at the Chair's address. Getting funding was very difficult as many funders would state that they can't provide financial support to organisations whose premises are based at a domestic property. Apart from joint working with Sandwell Homes in organising some housing and health and safety events with local residents, our organisation had never secured funds. This issue was overcome thanks to a solid relationship with Brushstrokes.

Our commitment to other daily activities such as paid work, studies and family life is a real barrier preventing us from investing more time for volunteering within the community and developing our activities. Working collaboratively with organisations such as Brushstrokes to enable our members to access their services helps us to ensure that they do not depend only on us, but are also able to access other useful services.

Support for the work

Our organisation has benefited from a range of support provided by many organisations. Firstly, we have learned a lot from Brushstrokes staff and volunteers, particularly the befriending service. The Befriending training has helped us to deal with some difficult situations experienced by vulnerable members within our community.

Secondly, we have benefited from professional trainings delivered by Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO), for instance: Effective Management, Collaborative working, Bid writing and Strategic Planning. Thanks to this relationship, we continue to receive

information about funding through a newsletter published by SCVO and other opportunities for networking and trainings.

Thirdly, the Basis Project has supported us to develop our strategic plan (including the needs assessment) and a range of policies, and helped some members of our organisation to be trained in Safeguarding children which is important as we are now developing and running projects for children.

Our organisation is a member of the Migrant Group supported by Sandwell Community Information & Participation Service (SCIPS). AFSCS works closely with the Cape Hill / Windmill Neighbourhood Management Team in organising and planning some community events. We are participating in setting up a Community Interest Company to deliver social care services to vulnerable people in Soho and Victoria area. We are part of many initiatives designed to further improve services that benefit the local community.

We have also benefited from the support of the Discovery of the Talents, Care Link and SCIPS.

What are your key learning points from the work?

One major learning point is that “nothing is impossible if you have the will to achieve outcomes related to your organisation’s goals”. **It is very important to focus on achieving these goals, rather than getting funds for your organisation for its own sake.** For example, we haven’t received any core funding, and our organisation is proud of escaping overhead charges inherent to hiring an office.

Building good relationships involves ‘give’ as well as ‘take’.

Sharing skills

Thanks to the partnership with Brushstrokes, we are using its facilities and offices to carry out our activities and meet our users’ needs. In return, while our volunteers are at Brushstrokes’ premises, they give support to all clients coming for help and we help to publicise their activities to hard to reach groups. This has been the case during the period when people were filling in the census application forms. It is also the same when supporting people with filling benefit application forms, reading letters, making enquiries or making phone calls on behalf of clients. This way of working in partnership avoids duplicating work and builds good working relationships and trust between our two organisations.

Sharing information

It is also important to share information rather than just expecting others to share with you. For example, when our organisation got in touch with Age concern Birmingham for funding opportunity regarding the Digital Switchover, we passed the information on to Brushstrokes, Care Link and an African Christian Church, and introduced our contact from Age Concern to them. All their bids were successful.

Another key learning point is to be realistic in your approach to delivering services and to signpost to other organisations where relevant. We often refer or signpost clients to

Brushstrokes, Discovery of the Talents (an RCO based in Ladywood / Birmingham) and the Central Africa Refugee Link (Care Link) which is based in another neighbourhood of Smethwick.

All these points relate to the need to build trust, which we have found to be very important in making a collaborative relationship work. It is very important that you deliver on the things you say you will do in order to build this trust- you can't just expect things from the other side.

What are your tips for other RCOs considering doing something similar?

Effective planning

First of all, RCOs need to develop a realistic plan for their future and to try to develop sustainable activities to meet their clients' needs. They have to plan carefully what they can afford to deliver and how they will deliver it, including looking at ways to deliver work collaboratively with other organisations. They have to involve service users in shaping the activities and build the trust with the wider community. For example, we are about to set up a Saturday homework scheme, youth music scheme and family sport activities.

Winning funding takes time

Secondly, RCOs leaders have to be patient in what they plan to do as well as in the process of obtaining funding for their activities, and to start with small projects. It is important to understand that we don't set up RCOs in order to attract funding- we set up them as a means to meet certain needs arising within our local community and from a particular group of users.

As for us, we have been proactive since we started but it was only in July 2011 that we received our first funding, meaning that it took us more than five years before securing any funding. This was a small project and we spent almost everything within one month according to our project's plan. From next month we are going to start a new project that will run over 11 months.

Get involved with your local voluntary and community sector

Thirdly, RCOs need to work closely with Voluntary and Community Service organisations (SCVO for our borough) and other support services in order to benefit from free training, support with making bids and being updated about funding and other opportunities, especially funding accessible locally. We suggest that RCOs should identify local funders they can easily contact in order to apply for funding especially during this very difficult period of spending cuts.

RCOs need to network with other organisations operating locally and build good relationships. RCOs can approach some well established organisations working towards the same goals to work together or seek support. Today our organisation is known thanks also to our partnership with Brushstrokes and other organisations operating locally.

RCO experience paper, commissioned by the Basis Project www.thebasisproject.org.uk

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