

Centre *for* Social Justice and Change

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Beckton Sustainable Living Initiative

Michelle Gibb: School of Social Sciences, UEL.

Pamela Boyd: School of Social Sciences, UEL.

Gregory Sarpong: School of Architecture, Computing, and Engineering, UEL.

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Working Paper Series

This working paper has been developed from the authors' involvement in a UEL civic engagement project managed by Alice Sampson, co-director, Centre for Social Justice and Change, School of Social Sciences, University of East London in conjunction with Professor Darryl Newport, Director, Sustainability Research Institute, University of East London.

The Centre for Social Justice and Change Working Paper Series is intended to aid the distribution of research findings, special lectures and work in progress by researchers and associates of the Centre. Papers aim to generate discussion among scholars, policymakers and practitioners. The views expressed in the papers are solely those of the authors.

The Centre for Social Justice and Change is dedicated to undertaking high quality research which contributes to the development of theory and knowledge, and to the improvement of public policies both nationally and internationally.

The Sustainability Research Institute (SRI) is UEL's centre of excellence for environmental research and development. We collaborate with industry, government, public agencies and charities to enable changes in physical infrastructure and social capital that benefits the environment, promotes sustainable living and creates a carbon neutral society.

About the Authors

BSc Sociology (Professional Development) student **Michelle Gibb** became involved in the Beckton Sustainable Living project initially through UEL's London Scholar programme (summer 2015), conducting a sustainable living residents' survey on Winsor Park Estate, Beckton - the findings of which contributed to informing this Civic Engagement project research (2016).

Michelle was featured in UEL's Civic Engagement News website, London Live TV and other national and local media about the solar project she is developing in The Gambia, West Africa. <https://www.uel.ac.uk/News/2016/01/No-job-and-no-home-leads-University-of-East-London-student-to-bring-ray-of-sunshine-to-The-Gambia>. Michelle's passion and evolving specialism is clearly in sustainability, completing her dissertation on the subject of 'sustainability advocacy in urban communities' in 2016.

Email: u1127211@uel.ac.uk

Pamela Boyd is a BSc Sociology student. She has a keen interest in social policy and social justice and hopes to pursue this in her future endeavours.

Email: Pamyboyd@icloud.com

Gregory Sarpong is a School of Architecture, Computing and Engineering (ACE) student studying Civil Engineering and Construction Management at the Docklands campus of UEL. He was part of the Young Black and Ethnic Professionals (YBEP) scheme in 2014/15 academic year through which he got to be part of the Beckton Sustainable Living project as an intern for the Sustainable Research Institute (SRI). He has also been able to set up his own business, SARPONG LANDSCAPES LTD which has a shared office space in the Knowledge Dock Business Centre.

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1. Introduction

This working paper reflects the authors' involvement with a civic engagement project funded by the University of East London's (UEL) Institute for Civic Engagement. It was a collaborative initiative between the Centre for Social Justice and Change, School of Social Sciences, and UEL's Sustainability Research Institute. The initiative commenced in November 2015 and was completed in July 2016.

The civic engagement project is part of an ongoing sustainable living project in Beckton. Situated in the hinterland of UEL's Docklands campus in the London Borough of Newham this initiative provided an opportunity to work with communities local to UEL.

Our involvement in a civic engagement initiative raised issues about what our role as students representing a University might involve, how we may contribute rather than replicate or duplicate ongoing local activities, and what additional skills we could bring to make a positive contribution.

Our project was about taking practical actions; by completing a communal garden in a local park and distributing water-saving devices to enable households to reduce their expenditure and contribute towards sustainable living. Research findings informed these practical actions and we were able to use our knowledge concerning environmental sustainability and research in discussions with residents and local agencies. Our experience also raised issues about how best to do research that can be used to inform and facilitate social action. This is particularly challenging in local communities which are ethnically diverse and culturally fragmented.

This working paper describes our experiences and reflections.

2. What we did

The purpose of the project was to gain a better understanding of how to design a social-ecological initiative in the local area. For example, local food production is key to a more sustainable lifestyle, it helps to reduce food miles and carbon emissions. Household bills can be reduced using devices which are also conducive to using fewer resources such as potable water, and, such schemes can create opportunities for residents to come together with a common purpose.

Thus, we liaised with local agencies already active in the area and who have responsibilities for delivering services including the local authority, housing association, community groups and utility organisations such as Thames Water.

We encouraged residents to help maintain a communal garden. The garden was designed and constructed by UEL with the assistance of a number of community members. The project enabled the installation of two rainwater harvesting systems, some additional planting and replanting, and for weeding to be undertaken.

We distributed over 500 water saving devices to households and raised awareness of the types of environmentally friendly actions they could take that could also reduce their household costs. We devised an information leaflet for residents to assist those who may be in debt or families struggling to 'make ends meet' by accessing professional support to improve their financial situation. We distributed 450 information leaflets (see appendix 1).

We regularly met as a team to reflect on our progress and to learn about each other's disciplines and skills, we discussed findings from our research which included notes taken at meetings with agencies, problems-solved, discussed alternative actions and reflected on the relevance of theories learnt on our academic courses.

3. Reflections on Civic Engagement in Beckton

Our research was informed by the theoretical concept of Action Research with an emphasis on community participation. Conventional academic consensus says that community action research should be organic grass roots led, whereby individuals and groups within the community take leadership of devising strategies to identify and improve issues within the community (O'Fallon & Deary 2002, p.155) and as such, our goal was to make the research collaborative and participatory.

Findings from a residents' survey conducted last summer by UEL London Scholar Michelle Gibb (Gibb 2015) identified that there was no resident involvement in any community groups within the Winsor Park Estate community and further engagement by researchers as part of the Civic Engagement project echoed those findings. In response, attempts were made to consult with and set up a community organisation which would aim to support the residents'

to maintain the community garden as well as outline the collective concerns affecting residents in order to devise a plan of action and obtain funding resources to address the issues identified. Some key residents got involved in the planning stages of trying to set up a community organisation. Pamela Boyd instigated this effort as part of her work placement.

The survey also found that gaps existed between what residents say they are interested in doing, i.e. being involved in the community garden, and actually becoming involved and doing some gardening.

Generally, we found engaging residents difficult and on reflection, felt that the conventional mode of community action research would be more conducive in a community that shows some active and existing signs of mobilisation, the fact that there was not, made our intended collaborative approach challenging particularly, as we were conscious of being what could be perceived as outsiders of the community and also as researchers it is argued (see Somekh 1995), that we hold knowledge and expertise which may already bias the power dynamic in our favour in action research. We concluded from this experience that whilst community-led action research of and by the community is preferable, a leadership approach is at times necessary.

4. Challenges

We faced many challenges and three are described in this section.

4.1 Delivering environmentally friendly materials

One of the key aims set out in the project application was to 'work with partners to reduce household expenditure and raise awareness of environmentally friendly actions they can take by the distribution of water saving devices'. Thames Water kindly provided Sava-flush toilet water saving devices and tap inserts to reduce water flow. We found the idea of the toilet water saving devices provided by Thames Water to be a well-meaning resource in reducing water use overall. However, questions were raised about the environmental impact of the devices as we found that they were produced with carbon neutral solution and in fact, found it difficult to source any commercial devices that were not produced from non-environmentally friendly materials. This led us to question whether the dominance of the market in applying economic solutions to environmental problems did not at times create a significant conflict of interest.

We considered the development of a carbon neutral water saving device which would meet both the social and ecological aims of the project and attempts were made to collaborate with UEL Civil Engineering students and staff in the process of developing such a device. (See 'possible future directions').

4.2 Engaging local people in communal gardening

Although the household survey conducted the previous summer found that the majority of respondents were willing to be involved in a communal garden initiative (Gibb 2015), at the beginning of the civic engagement project local people were reluctant to commit to being actively involved, with only a few attending our consultation meetings. As the project progressed, some residents and school children who used the park started asking questions on their way to or from work and school about what was happening on their community park. Time was taken to explain the construction of the raised beds and poly-tunnel, and as the project developed they felt comfortable chatting to the engineering student (Gregory Sarpong) who was constructing the garden to check on the progress. This enabled residents to interact with each other.

However, handing over the garden to the community was challenging and there was a reluctance to take on the necessary responsibilities to maintain the garden. In order to sustain the community garden, two water reservoirs have been wall mounted to the adjacent building to collect rain water which will help irrigate the raised beds on the park and the sown seeds in the poly tunnel. Furthermore, there has been additional planting with local people and recently residents from the Cygnet Hospital opposite the park are now involved and are tending the garden every Thursday as part of their therapeutic activities, to help facilitate their recovery from complex health issues. (See Appendix 2 for summary of information on the construction of the communal garden).

4.3. Working with other organisations

We found that attempting to involve well-established frontline organisations who were in the position to engage potential beneficiaries more challenging than we had expected. Many were either hesitant or too busy to work cooperatively, particularly where they perceived themselves as **the** experts or had to negotiate permission to liaise within their agency. Despite the fact that some of the prime organisations did not appear to be actively addressing issues that were identified around household debt and expenditure in the community (Gibb 2015), they seemed reluctant to participate in an initiative to raise awareness about accessing help that is available to residents. Partner involvement we felt, was vital to the legitimisation of any service delivery and gaining access to beneficiaries, as found by *Learnings from the DECC Community Energy Efficiency Outreach Programme* (Databuild Research & Solutions Ltd 2014, p.44).

5. Partner Involvement

Thames Water provided both water saving devices for distribution and were equally willing to give talks about water usage and sewage treatment; Community Links liaised and shared information pertaining to their own scheme which provides debt assistance and help with purchasing white goods (see Appendix 2); Aston Mansfield provided expert advice and support in relation to setting up a community organisation; Newham Council played a supportive role at various stages of the project; East Thames Housing provided the land upon which the community garden was constructed and played an active role in the promotion and launch of the community garden.

6. Case Studies

When distributing the water saving devices we were struck by the lack of knowledge about the availability of cost-saving schemes that are available free-of-charge. We also reflected on the inadequacies of schemes that rely on participants accessing the internet and noted how low the take up is in these situations. We were heartened by the warm reception from residents when we approached them directly and how grateful they were for the water saving devices and information about advice agencies. Our civic engagement project demonstrates how small practical actions that involve face-to-face conversations can make a tangible difference to the everyday lives of local people, some of whom are living in poverty. The following case studies illustrate these findings as follows:

6.1. Case 1

A Winsor Estate resident who had been a respondent to the survey and also attended the garden launch, expressed her appreciation for the consistency of the follow-up in which we provided water saving devices, information on accessing additional freebies from Thames Water website, water debt information and feedback on the survey findings.

6.2. Case 2

Another resident who had participated in the survey was extremely grateful when revisited with the water saving devices and debt information pack, particularly because she had significant water debt to the extent that legal action had been taken against her.

7. Lessons Learnt

- 7.1. We found that there is a structural barrier to information transference between frontline organisations and service users, for example, the website only based information is beyond the reach of some residents and community members who may not have access to the internet, and also with the knowledge of its existence being as equally elusive.
- 7.2. As researchers we found the process of applying theoretical concepts in a real life context highly advantageous.
- 7.3. The value of doing empirical evidence based research to inform social action.

- 7.4.** An action research method enables researchers to identify problems relating to individuals and their communities, such as Beckton, in ways that are sensitive to how residents perceive and experience issues. It is also an effective approach for research that aims to contribute to changes and assess if an intervention has made a difference to the every lives of those living in an area, such as, in community development and empowerment, due to its cyclical approach of ‘planning, acting, observing, reflecting’ (McNiff 2013, p.57). Some scholars have dismissed action research as being too ambiguous because it lacks scientific rigor (Gill et al. 2010). From our experience we question the validity of this objection. In this civic engagement initiative we gained a better understanding of the complexities of how social problems are constructed. Using an action research approach we: drew attention to how agencies can themselves contribute to residents’ problems as well as provide solutions; we developed an improved understanding of how the formulation of social problems includes ideologies and prejudices; and, we identified strategies to take practical actions to reach those most in need. We found that the rigor of this approach is in researching and analysing the characteristics of social problems from different perspectives that enables alternative, and sometimes preferable, solutions to be considered.
- 7.5.** As sociology students we believe that Action Research really challenges conventional modes of learning about social problems and subsequent solutions and feel that it should be a more significant aspect of our subject discipline.

8. Possible Future Directions

- 8.1.** A Civil Engineering student with a keen interest in our project expressed an interest in collaborating with us to develop an environmentally sustainable water saving device. There could be potential here to fill a gap in the market as no bio-degradable devices could be found. However, limited time scale, work-loads and lack of sufficient resources created a barrier to this endeavor. We recommend this approach for future consideration.
- 8.2.** In order to gain a strong foothold in the community, earn trust and legitimisation and build relationships with frontline organisations – all the things necessary to make a lasting impact - continued and long term engagement would be necessary.

9. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Water debt advice Leaflet (see page 7)

Appendix 2 – Civic Engagement Poster (see page 8)

10. References

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WANT TO SAVE MONEY ON WATER BILLS?

If you are a Thames Water Customer and have access to the internet, you can apply for water saving devices for FREE by going to:

<http://freebies.thameswater.co.uk/>

Available freebie devices include:

- ◆ **Save-a-flush**
(saving up to 8,760 litres of water)
- ◆ **Showerhead**
(saving up to £97 per year)
- ◆ **Shower-timer**
(Potential annual saving of 11,648 litres)

For information about grants and benefits to help you pay your energy bills

Log on to:

Citizens Advice Bureau

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/energy/energy-supply/get-help-paying-your-bills/grants-and-benefits-to-help-you-pay-your-energy-bills/>



For money and debt advice

Email:
info@moneyaande.co.uk

Web:
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"Changing lives through money advice and education".



Centre for Social Justice and Change, School of Social Sciences, University of East London, Docklands Campus, University Way, London E16 2RD
<http://www.uel.ac.uk/CSJC/>



STRUGGLING WITH A THAMES WATER DEBT?

(would you like help in having this cleared?)

NEED HELP PURCHASING WHITEGOODS*?

(fridge/freezer, cooker or washing machine)

*Please note: The Trust can only assist towards one item.

Call us on 0207 473 9640

(we may be able to help)

BECKTON — SUSTAINABLE LIVING

Sustainability Research Institute
Centre for Social Justice and Change,
School of Social Sciences

Reasons for project:

Climate change is recognised as a serious social problem that will result in, amongst other things, food insecurity, poor health, strained social relations and large scale migration.

Purpose of project:

To find out about local people's perceptions of these threats, raise awareness of how to live sustainably, and provide practical support to reduce household expenditure.

What we did

Used findings from a residents' survey conducted last summer by London Scholar Michelle Gibb to develop an action plan:



Completed communal garden

Last summer Gregory Sapong, on a UEL young black entrepreneur scheme, led the construction of a communal garden on Winsor Park, supported by Brazilian students on a Scientists without Borders initiative. For this civic engagement project:

- Water butts were installed close to the gardens.

To save water and reduce household expenditure

Thames Water supplied hundreds of 'Save a flush' bags that were distributed by Pamela Boyd and Michelle Gibb, Social Sciences students. They:

- Distributed the water saving devices to those who had completed the survey and liaised with care agencies, community organisations, and attended community events to reach those living in low income places

To provide information on how to get support to live sustainably

Pamela Boyd and Michelle Gibb also:

- Produced and distributed leaflets giving information about where to obtain help with water bills/debts

Supportive Partners included:

- Key residents
- Thames Water
- Newham Local Authority Community Neighbourhoods Team (Beckton)
- East Thames Housing (Winsor Park)
- Community Links
- Aston Mansfield
- Community Police



Photos from top to bottom:

- The park before the creation of the communal garden
- The construction crew
- Bio-diversity beds for wild flowers
- Raised beds and poly tunnel
- Broad beans

BECKTON — SUSTAINABLE LIVING

Sustainability Research Institute
Centre for Social Justice and Change,
School of Social Sciences

What we learnt

We learnt about:

- The value of doing empirical evidence based research to inform social action
- Residents were grateful and appreciative of the water saving devices and information leaflets
- Gaps exist between what residents say they are interested in doing – being involved in the communal garden – and actually becoming involved; doing some gardening
- Challenges implementing an initiative in a neighbourhood with few vibrant community centres and virtually no community-based organisations
- Engaging with well-established frontline organisations was more challenging than we had anticipated:
 - Staff were often too busy to engage potential beneficiaries on our behalf
 - Some organisations were hesitant to work cooperatively if they perceived them as experts or had not had permission to work with their agency
- The use of commercial products for sustainable purposes that were made from non- biodegradable materials

Considerations for the future

Much more could be done:

- Resident's feel they could benefit from more information about help that is available for other household costs such as Gas and Electric bills
- A lot more information could be given to residents to support them to live more sustainably – many are willing to learn
- Simple changes in policies and procedures could create greater incentives to live sustainably. For example, water saving devices were most useful for residents who have water bills which are not included in their rent

Our skills

We improved:

- our research skills
- our negotiation skills
- our understandings of how to work cooperatively with a range of organisations in a highly political setting
- our understandings of how to work in a multi-disciplinary research and delivery team

Photos from top to bottom:

1. Lavender plants
- 2-3. Bio-diversity flower beds
4. Residents growing strawberries and tomatoes

