

**Advice Support Knowledge Information**

**A.S.K.I.**

Opportunity Knocks  
Reaching Communities  
Big Lottery Funding

**December 2014 – December 2017**

ASKI is a Registered Company No: 08324877 | Registered Charity No 1171343

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## **Introduction and Background.**

The *Opportunity Knocks* project aimed to improve the lives of people aged 50 years and above from BME communities in Croydon. This project was ASKI's response to extensive consultation and research exercises, which had identified 5% of the boroughs older residents as being severely economically and socially disadvantaged with people from BME communities also facing a wide range of health challenges and social barriers on a daily basis.

The initial idea was to provide a package of culturally supportive, inclusive, and affordable activities for BME men and women aged 50 and over who wished to access employment and training opportunities in particular JSA customers who have been registered unemployed for four years or more. A programme of accredited vocational training with a strong focus on learning activities that would increase individuals' self-esteem and motivate them to take up volunteering opportunities both as a means of gaining credible experience in the jobs market and also as a way of fostering better relationships between local people from different sections of the community was developed.

ASKI was aware that economic disadvantage could clearly (although not necessarily easily) be addressed by providing a pathway towards employment. However the organisation felt that addressing the health and social issues identified during the consultation was equally, possibly more, important. The underlying premise being that project beneficiaries, people from the hardest to reach sections of Croydon's BME communities, would be encouraged and enabled to engage with existing local service provision.

Therefore the intended outcomes of the project were

- 1) Isolation and related problems will be reduced as BME older people feel increasingly valued and respected in their wider local community

2) BMER older people will gain confidence and new skills that will increase their ability to take up new educational or employment opportunities

3) Local services will be more effective as local providers gain a better understanding of barriers faced by BMER older people

4) BMER older people will have a greater input on the issues and strategies that affect them



*Opportunity Knocks Health Watch Event 2017*

### **Project delivery.**

The project was delivered in the Thornton Heath area.

Workshops in for the accredited learning programme took place in the ASKI training room and social activities, designed to increase confidence and reduce social isolation took place at a range of venues for example an Awards Evenings was held at a local hotel conference suite and the Mayor of Croydon presented the certificates and awards.

The formation of a Project Advisory Group (PAG) with service users as members was seen as an important way of ensuring that the front line delivery was under continuous scrutiny at a level which would ensure that, if necessary, services

could be tailored to the needs of individuals e.g. if language was identified as a barrier a volunteer with specific language skills could be recruited to support the project delivery.

It was also anticipated that the PAG would play a key role in identifying any gaps in the services, or changes to delivery style that would both benefit this current project and also inform ASKI's strategic planning processes for the future.

All service users were invited to comment on the project service delivery. A number of people attended the PAG meetings intermittently with a core of six people attending on a regular basis. Once the initial start up phase was complete, and it was clear to the service users that they had ownership of the project the number of formal meetings was reduced. The PAG met three times in Year 1, once in Year 2 and once in Year 3. However appreciative feedback from participants confirms that informal meetings were held at every opportunity.



*End of year Opportunity Knocks presentation evening 2016*

Over 36 workshops were delivered over the life of the project from a range of providers and individuals which were related to reducing social isolation, and improving the volunteering and employment prospects of people taking part in the delivery. A range of learning events/IAG presentations from other service providers took place which included Beyond Borders, ACHA, Social Services, Croydon Neighbourhood Care, Community Police, and Croydon Credit Union during the lifetime of the project.

### **Opportunity Knocks Results**

People from a wide range of cultural backgrounds have individually benefited from accessing the training available via Opportunity Knocks. This programme has also delivered a collective benefit by resolutely supporting increased community cohesion amongst older people in the borough. Social isolation has become less stigmatised, addressing a problem that people are too ashamed of to admit to having is an almost impossible task. Opportunity Knocks has successfully increased people's confidence to levels where project participants have openly discussed issues related to social isolation and supported one another to address these problems.

137 people gained accredited training and qualifications, **over** 200 people attended events, and in excess of 75 people were signposted to other service providers, including Job Centre Plus, NHS, Social Services, Croydon Council, Croydon Neighbourhood Care as well as other Third Sector providers. The project has people who spoken between then 35 languages, and our external talks and discussions which took place throughout the year increase in numbers the average attendance been 45 people.

The project successfully brought diverse communities together, the average number of attendees for the external presentations and discussion sessions was forty-five people, however, the most important fact is that between them they spoke thirty- five different languages

As the Opportunity Knocks project progressed routine monitoring and evaluation data showed that a great deal more work needed to be done to address the negative impact that social isolation has on people's mental and physical health. As a result two new projects have been added to the A.S.K.I portfolio; funded by the City Bridge Trust and the Peoples Health Trust both deliver social activities such as Therapeutic Dance classes to support project outcomes relating to increased cognitive stimulation and increased mobility which in turn lead to a decrease in the likelihood of people suffering from dementia related illness. These new projects will be delivered between 2018-2020.

### **Learning from the Opportunity Knocks approach.**

Feedback from the project participants compliments A.S.K.I on their sensitive delivery style, and the organisational ethos that all activities should be user led is greatly appreciated. This undoubtedly gave rise to a very high number of word of mouth recommendations, which increased the reach of the project even further than was anticipated.



*Brit School collaboration with Opportunity Knocks 2016*

The importance of the delivery style was highlighted by CEO of the Ministry of Empowerment (MOE) who noted that project beneficiaries had told her they felt *valued in themselves*. This sense of being valued played a vital part in both their initial engagement and the enthusiasm and dedication with which individuals applied themselves to the tasks involved. For example the Open College Network London (OCNL) commented that it is unusual with the age group involved on this project to have such high attendance levels, and OCNL also noted that the quality of work people submitted for their accreditation was also unusually high for this age group. The learning from this is that when older people are engaged with the decision making, planning and in some instances delivery of projects they take on higher degree of ownership and as a result the sustainability of the project becomes stronger.

"Ownership" and "service user involvement" are terms frequently used in the Third Sector. Transforming them from mere phrases into a reality is challenging, ASKI aims to build upon the work done to tackle social isolation during the Opportunity Knocks project, with a particular focus on trying to explore and identify the barriers that currently deter men from BME communities from engaging with community service providers.

The organisation is rightly proud of its user- lead ethos and highly motivated volunteer team, but, as stated above, has recognised that expanding the capacity of the services to deal with the increasing number of people who wish to participate will require having paid staff to co-ordinate the delivery.

Thus the top priority for ASKI during 2018 is to review the organisational structure with a view to creating a new "co-ordinator" or volunteer manager post.

and it is Opportunity Knocks success in doing so that is, perhaps, the projects greatest achievement. The management committee style of the PAG was the mechanism used to do this. However A.S.K.I was aware that many older people are inhibited from joining a "committee' if they feel their health (or the health of a family member they care for) will not allow them to commit to regular attendance at meetings. Thus a fear of "letting people down ' due to inability to attend becomes a barrier to contributing ideas. Opportunity Knocks PAG minutes show that once the project participants realised that they had clear and practical ownership of the delivery, e.g. by PAG members being on the recruitment panel for course tutors, formal meetings were reduced, and informal meetings were actively encouraged. This enabled the PAG to identify and explore a number of small changes such as early evening and Saturday morning delivery to accommodate people who were required to look after grandchildren during the day, which then engendered the unusually high levels of motivation and enthusiasm, which so impressed the Ministry of Empowerment and OCNL.

Therefore it can be seen that the Opportunity Knocks project was hugely successful, meeting its outcomes and exceeding its targets in all areas.

However the ASKI project team recognised that the number of female participants greatly outnumbered the number of males. Comparison with a range of other community activities and services across the borough showed that this imbalance is usual. Older men from BME communities are known to be being at risk of social isolation but are also "known" to be extremely difficult to engage in project delivery. A.S.K.I. and the PAG were keen to explore further and 2016 minutes record how they secured funding from Health Watch Croydon to run an event promoting health amongst older people at which they could specifically target older men.





*Mayor of Croydon attends ASKI Opportunity Knocks certificate presentation 2016*

Analysis of individual participants "project journey" highlights the value of outreach work. The importance of this first step, supporting and encouraging people to engage with the project cannot be overstated because once they were part of the project people benefited from additional information advice and guidance in relating to other areas of their lives. For example, individuals from the job centre who were recruited onto training programme then benefitted from signposting to existing services and support they had previously either been unaware of, or, more worryingly, been vaguely aware of, but believed they were not entitled to the support.

### **Next Steps.**

Following the success of the Opportunity Knocks project A.S.K.I is keen to roll out the service across the whole borough by setting up a network of delivery

locations. Future projects will be designed to take account of the differing needs of the two age categories that emerged during the Opportunity Knocks project.

A.S.K.I is a well - known and respected training provider and will continue to provide opportunities for older people to gain new skills and OCNL accredited qualifications. A.S.K.I. was evaluated by the OCNL in January 2018 and was awarded Highly Recommended for the provision of training to disadvantaged individuals. A.S.K.I. is currently working on a number of partnership opportunities including one with Croydon Voluntary Action and one with a Faith based charity in Croydon.

A.S.K.I aims to develop a programme for people at the younger end of the Opportunity Knocks target age group and also their slightly younger peers, people aged 40+, for instance those who are looking to retrain after redundancy. These people see themselves as having another 10-15 years of 'working life' and therefore are keen on accessing A.S.K.I training courses as a pathway to back into employment, or as the first steps towards starting their own business. A key area of development will be supporting individuals with starting their own business including work in the area of Social Enterprise with support from Red Ochre following discussions in December 2017.

People at the older end of the Opportunity Knocks project target age group, people aged 60+ tend to recognise that they may only have a maximum of 5 -10 years of working life left and therefore it is more important to deliver activities which address the problems of social isolation, and other issues related to improving mental and physical health in older people.

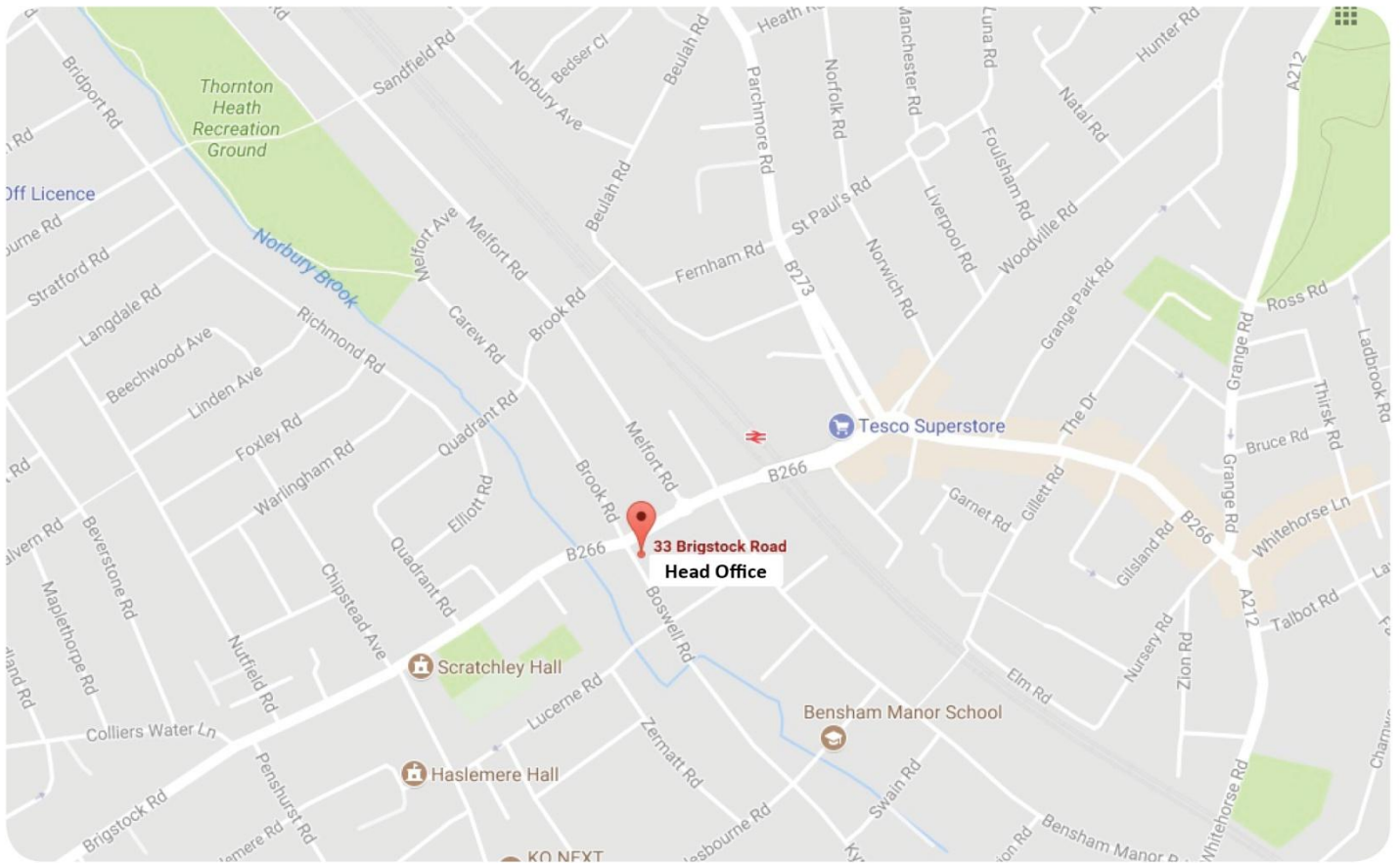
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Appendices:

- Opportunity Knocks Feedback Evaluation Document
- Opportunity Knocks Evaluation Document



Joseph Jeffers  
**Advice Support Knowledge Information (ASKI)**

**Head Office**  
 33 Brigstock Road Thornton Heath Croydon  
 CR7 7JJ

**Training Room**  
 2nd floor, Day Lewis House  
 324 – 340 Bensham Lane Thornton Heath Surrey CR7 7EQ

T: 020 8683 2191 | M: 07759194567 | E: info@aski.org.uk | W: www.aski.org.uk



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