

The Calthorpe Food Growing Group

The Calthorpe Project is a community organisation with extensive multi-use grounds in the King's Cross area of London. It is a facility with a programme of activities for the diverse communities in the local area. It has an ongoing working relationship with BTCV, developed through a series of partnership projects over many years. It is an example of a community project successfully owning and running their own socio-environmental projects while maintaining a relationship to the framework of support offered by BTCV. The project also sees BTCV as a resource in terms of expert guidance, the availability of BTCV volunteers that may be called upon to support its work, and funding that it has acquired through representation of social need, for example the People and Places funding scheme.

A group of older women, nearly all grandmothers, come to the Calthorpe Project regularly to tend their little plots within the grounds of the Calthorpe Project. The plots are around 4 feet by 6 feet. They grow various vegetables and herbs, with the odd flower now and then. They choose to call everything they do 'gardening' although it is mainly food growing. There are around 20 of them. 8 of them were with us for the workshop. They speak and understand some English, but felt they wanted the workshop to be conducted in their own language. They are all from Bangladesh. Rina, the project manager, speaks their language and was very kind to undertake the interpretation for us. Gavin, the other Calthore worker who supports the project was also present.

This group has been going informally for some years, anchored on the fact that the plots are there for their use. They also use the greenhouse that was built with funds from the BTCV People and Places funding scheme. The greenhouse was not bought. The identification of the need for the greenhouse was used as an opportunity to train members of the community to gain building skills, resulting in an appropriate facility for the community. The Bangladeshi women had taken part in the consultation about the need for the greenhouse.

The women have been coming and going as individuals, interacting with whoever happens to be present when they come in to water or tend to their plot. Rina told us that in the last two years, she had been working to enable them to feel more like a group, with simple suggestions like doing something else's watering if they see that their plots are dry and they have not come in. They now also sign in so that she can see the trend of their attendance. She has organised a range of group activities such as cooking sessions with recipe and skill sharing, and introduced them to non-Asian recipes such as a Spanish Omelette and other recipes that allow them to talk about a wide range of ingredients and ways of cooking, for example the consideration of using less fat, leading to awareness about food, ways of preparation, ingredients and better health. It is also stimulating to look at different recipes and to begin to create new versions all new ways of cooking. The cooking also encourages socialising and sharing, among the members of the group. It also brings them into contact with other members of the community, often learning to the pleasure of experiencing the compliments of visitors such as ourselves.

It is a confident group, settled into lives that may seem limited for some of us, especially the younger generation. They exercise cultural qualities of acceptance typical of their generation and background. These qualities contribute to their well-being.

“We have never been to the countryside, but we are not frustrated and unhappy not to have everything that life can offer. We come from a village. We never went anywhere then. It is OK that we do not go anywhere now. It would of course be great, but it is not something we worry about if we do not get these opportunities. We have our family. Our grandchildren fill our lives. They are important to us. It would be great to go to the countryside or do other things together with the children.”

“We have never been to the countryside, let alone a residential. We do not dwell on it. It is something we accept. It is like we used to live in a village and never went anywhere, so Living in London and not going anywhere is what we also accept. You have to be realistic and make the best of what is real and possible and give up what we cannot have. Concentrate on good things.”

They also position themselves very clearly about identity. “Of course we are British. How can we not be since we live here? That is it. What other people think we should be is their business.” When asked about the development of a sense of belonging. Again came the answer, “We belong here because we are here. We live here, so we are English. It is as simple as that.” Nods all round, “Yes, that is a good answer.”

They love being outside, and are very sensitive to the beauty of their plants. “Look at their leaves, the colour, the pattern. So beautiful plants are.” They have found the new greenhouse very useful, and enjoy meeting other groups using it, but wish that there could be heating to extend the season. They would also like raised beds to make their work easier, and a source of water that is closer to their beds. They look forward to using the outdoor classroom that is being built.

They really enjoy “gardening” (food growing in the main) and want to have better conditions and do more. They feel that the activity outside is good for their health, and say that the fresh produce also contributes to their health. The pleasure of fresh produce that is part of their cultural cuisine is significant to them. They were very interested to hear that BTCV is extending itself into providing a range of social activities besides environmental activities. They pointed to bits and pieces of artwork around the room and say that they really like any activities using art. They say that such activities enable them to use skills they had learnt a long time ago.

See **Calthorpe Matrix 1** for details of what activities the group has done and what else they would like to do.

See **Calthorpe Matrix 2** for details of what the activities mean and how they have made a difference to their lives.