

## SOSTRIS STAGE TWO AGENCY STUDY

### **‘Only Connect’: Report on the Bromley-by-Bow Project**

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#### **The Origins of ‘Social Entrepreneurship’**

Hidden away in a neglected margin of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets<sup>2</sup> is a community project which, by pioneering the concept of ‘social entrepreneurship’, has acted as a bridgehead between New Conservatism and New Labour. In the Bromley-by-Bow project, ‘social entrepreneurship’ denotes both innovative action at the community level, and a newly creative relationship between the business and social sectors.

The term was launched through media coverage of the ‘Great Banquet’. This was a spectacular sponsorship event in 1995, in which 30,000 people, many from the City and business sectors, but including Tony Blair and Jesse Jackson, dined at a wide range of venues throughout the country, in order to raise funds for the project. Following an article in the *Independent*, the radical think-tank organisation Demos gained funding from the National Westminster Bank and Royal SunAlliance insurance company for research on ‘social entrepreneurs’. The ensuing report by Charles Leadbeater, *The Rise of the Social Entrepreneur* (1997), focussed on five innovative welfare projects, of which one was Bromley-by-Bow.

The intertwining of the two facets, local activities and business sponsorship, arose pragmatically from the history of the project and particular governmental contexts rather than from an a priori ideology. Starting from a near derelict church building in 1984, the newly appointed United Reform Church minister, Andrew Mawson, had by 1990 developed a thriving set of community activities which included: craft and art workshops in carpentry, wood stone, pottery, stained glass, knitting, life drawing, painting; modern, tap, ballet and jazz dancing; a nursery with a toy library and drop-in group; a cafe, run by three local women, which had become a self-sustaining enterprise offering dinners and catering for weddings; a disabled gardening project and a disability group; a senior citizen group. A language festival held in that year led to a book produced by local women. The centre had become part of the Adult Education Institute, and over 500 people used the facilities per week. These early years were infused with Andrew Mawson’s previous experience of the Kaleidoscope project for young drug users, which had been run by his mentor Eric Blakebrough, and by the ideas of Paolo Friere, brought by the exile craftsman Santiago Bell, many years prisoner in Central America, who worked at the centre for eight years.

The wider context for this expansion of activities was the Conservative government’s roll-back of state welfare, its continuing reduction of local authority autonomy and budgets, appeals to charity and self-reliance, and numerous unsuccessful attempts at urban regeneration. Tower Hamlet Council’s withdrawal in 1990 of £35,000 annual funding for the nursery may be seen in this light. However it was not just frustration with local health and social services funding which impelled the turn to the private market sector and then to a new ‘Third Way’ partnership with business. Andrew Mawson had long considered public services, including those run by churches, ‘a Sargasso sea’ of bureaucracy and self-serving professionalism which actively created poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork and interviews were carried out by Susanne Rupp and Zoe Fearnley. Susanne Rupp also wrote a first version of the report.

<sup>2</sup> According to Dept of the Environment statistics, and despite its juxtaposition with the City of London and the now flourishing Docklands area, Tower Hamlets is the most deprived local authority in the country.

‘The word was made flesh not minutes!’ he declares. Emblematic for this frustration was absence from the statutory services, in the case of the death by cancer of a parent in the community, of any adequate support, for her or her family. Project members and volunteers organised ongoing care, and became involved in the conflictual negotiations concerning which aunt should become the children’s guardian. The offer of help in caring by a deeply disturbed and childless woman who had been greatly abused by her husband and who was convinced she was called to be the children’s guardian, was met by rejection among the volunteers. Negotiating that conflict, leading the volunteers to understand the woman’s distress, find ways of accepting and using her desire for social engagement and break the pattern of ostracism and exclusion, (which was achieved through the gardening project) and much group discussion, is also emblematic of the centre’s work. As the current director puts it: ‘Whatever baggage there is has to be included and managed’. Such community development aspects of service delivery are rarely pursued by the statutory services, yet they are crucial to a more inclusive approach to citizenship and well-being. This is all the more so in the socially corrosive context of the twin processes of welfare rollback and long-term unemployment in an area which has been deprived for over 150 years.

The project’s response to the cut in nursery funding was to hold a Celebrity Midsummer Charity Ball, graced by a host of public figures, and accompanied by such festivities as a fire-eater, a comedy group, silent movies on the roof, a dance show, a disco. So successful was this that by the next year the nursery had become self-funding and was employing a Bengali outreach worker. This marked the beginning of the project’s serious turn to private funding sources.

From the collective caring for the woman dying of cancer sprang the idea of a locally-owned health centre. Starting off in prefabricated huts and led by a barrister-turned-GP, who is now a member of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s think-tank on health, this clinic moved into its beautifully designed new building in 1998. By that time it had attracted government attention as a model of an arts-based ‘healthy living centre’ and extolled in the government Green Paper on public health. Healthy living centres are receiving National Lottery special funding as a model for the C21st. Yet, from the local health authority, the health centre proposal received only obstruction. And when, after lobbying and an eventual instruction from the Tory Government Health Minister, funds were released, there followed protracted wrangles concerning leaseholds, salaries and ‘patient ownership’. Relations with the health authority remain somewhat sour, but, with its national profile, the Bromley-by-Bow Centre has to be respected. Thus it is now in a third phase of relationships with local services, having moved from frustrated attempts at partnership, to a stand-off position, to renewed cooperation. The project does not see its role as one of leading or coordinating at a national or regional level, however, but as ‘creating the melody’ with its own high quality facilities, which others will then want to emulate.

Following this introduction to the project, this report is structured in three sections:

- issues of method and the relevance of notions of ‘biography’ to the study
- ‘crossing boundaries’ as a central concept in the project’s work
- organisational structures and ways of working

The conclusion discusses some of the wider questions arising from the project’s work as a model of welfare.

### **Biographical approaches**

It is significant that the account given of the Bromley-by-Bow project so far, already includes a number of ‘stories’. Indeed stories are central to the identity and functioning of the project; they are the main means by which its development and approach are explained to others, both

outsiders and insiders. This in itself reflects the creative and pragmatic way the project has developed. The script has been written and is being written as the work develops, rather than deriving from established policies. Stories, which centre on actions and situations, also reflect the jig-saw nature of the project's history, the bringing together of a wide number of initiatives and ideas in which a great diversity of individuals have played a critical role. Of course the study's own research method of narrative interviewing<sup>3</sup> encouraged the telling of stories, but this does not contradict the fact that story-telling is central to the life of the project.

A biographical perspective highlights a number of characteristics of the project: stages and turning points in the life of the centre, the exceptional biographies of its leading figures, gender patterns in the leadership and activities of the organisation, and the role of the project itself as one 'player' in the evolving story of British and East London welfare. Briefly, these four aspects will be considered in turn.

The idea of the work and life of the project as a journey is already expressed in the church: in the central symbol of the canopy covering the central (flexible and moveable) space reserved for worship, around which the nursery takes place. For the current director the canopy represents the forty years in the desert, fluidity and travelling light, openness and preparedness as to how to proceed. In a workshop<sup>4</sup> which considered the history of the organisation, the researchers were also struck by the image of Noah's ark which they associated with the beginnings of the project, when the dilapidated church building was used by a local artist to build a boat, and when such a range of activities and participants were taken 'on board'. Beyond this, the initial account has already suggested three phases in the development of the project's relations with statutory services. It could be added that the year previous to the third phase, (in which the project decided to adopt a more prominent role in modelling welfare), was one of 'drawing breath', focussing and reflecting a great deal on internal structures and roles. This followed the change in directors, in which Allison Trimble took over from Andrew Mawson. Andrew remains closely involved, but he has also moved on to national and European-level activities.<sup>5</sup>

The notion of 'social entrepreneurship' places centre stage the 'restless, creative, lateral thinking rule breakers' who are 'social entrepreneurs' (Leadbeater and Goss (1998, 15). 'Social entrepreneurs are driven, ambitious leaders, with great skills in communicating a mission and inspiring staff, users and partners...(and) capable of creating impressive schemes with virtually no resources' (Leadbeater 1997, 9). It might be surmised that exceptional individuals tend to have outstanding histories, and certainly the leading figures at Bromley-by-Bow bring a wealth of experience which doubtless helps them in lateral thinking. Andrew Mawson, who also spent ten

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<sup>3</sup> The study was based on interviews with two staff members who had started in the project as volunteers from the community, three senior staff members, and a student on placement. In these narrative interviews individuals were asked to talk freely about how they became involved in the project and how their role developed within it. Subsequent questions kept within the frame of what had initially been said by the interviewee and led to rich and expansive narrative accounts. The study included observation and shadowing of a range of activities and meetings (a dance and movement class, brainstorming meetings on the community care and health work, and shadowing of an outreach worker), and examination of a range of documents relating to the project.

<sup>4</sup> The workshop (of four participants) analysed a chronology of all the known events from the 'life' of the project, hypothesising at each step what the next development would be. Fairly knowledgeable about community work, we met surprise at every turn! In a second workshop we undertook a detailed textual analysis of a paragraph of publicity material - again we were constantly surprised.

<sup>5</sup> One of Andrew Mawson's main fields of activity is the Community Action Network, which used computer networking to promote links and support between social entrepreneurs.

years campaigning on Latin American politics, Santiago Bell and the leading GP have already been mentioned. Allison Trimble's formative experiences came from working with lepers in India; others have travelled widely and worked abroad. The project workers who come from the locality have also 'moved a great distance', and their lives embody the history of the centre. One of the day centre workers, who started off as a bored housewife whose playgroup had collapsed, moved through a women's DIY group, to a mosaics and pottery class, to NVQ training in welfare rights and business. 'I've done a lot with me life in ten years', she says. Her daughters meanwhile joined art, woodwork, drama, music and gardening activities, both performing live on stage 'with all the stars', and her husband became a community transport driver. *'Once you're in it's like a family, once you're in you're in. You'd come back every day and every day there's something new ... I call this place the web, you get in and you don't wanna get out.'*

A focus on gender patterns is also an intriguing way of using biographical thinking to gain insight into the centre's development. The technique of drawing vulnerable people into activities by inviting them to give help to those who are even more vulnerable, a community work method which builds, for example, on people's personal understandings of what it is to be 'down' or skills in survival, is mainly work by and with women. Sports and fitness are the main ways of accessing men, and the centre is making great efforts to find new ways drawing in the young men who are conspicuously absent from its activities. Male leaders have been the 'visionaries' and Machiavellis of the project, 'seeing the moon' and achieving the spectacular financial sponsorships of the centre. The decision to allow heavy outside machinery to destroy a participatory community garden around which fragile community relationships had been nurtured, in order to establish a high quality garden space, was expressive of gender differences between Allison Trimble and Andrew Mawson: the slow tending of particular social relationships or high speed action to raise the wider communal feel-good factor. Later on, it was quite a turning point for the organisation when the charismatic Andrew Mawson, who had run the organisation with a group of about four outstanding figures, handed over the directorship to Allison Trimble, who then had to carry all four roles herself, in an organisation which had become a great deal bigger. Allison solved the problem by enlarging the division of labour, creating seven areas of operation - in the year of 'taking breath', which has been mentioned.

It is also interesting to think not just of the life and workings of the project in terms of biography, but also its part as a player in the wider history of welfare, and its lineage, the sources of its inspiration. Asked about the antecedents of the project and its parallels with the arts and crafts movement, which had struck the research team, Andrew Mawson spoke of St Paul's practice of establishing groups around key figures and moving on, of being the first to build on community entrepreneurs. For him the task is to restore much that has been destroyed by the welfare state, the friendly society tradition of the late C19th and early C20th, the famous 1930s Peckham health centre now 'reinventing itself'. It is also to cut across the stale counterposing of 'woolly-headed idealists' and 'greedy capitalist pigs', to establish instead a productive dynamic of exchange in the 'Third Way'. For Allison Trimble the goal is to generate ownership and mutuality, the latter having been terribly undermined by Thatcherism.

### **Crossing Boundaries**

The idea of creatively cutting across boundaries both to counteract bureaucracy and to mobilise resources is central to the notion of social entrepreneurship. It has also become a prominent theme in New Labour's advocacy of 'joined-up government'. In Bromley-by-Bow the finding on new connections underlies all thinking and practice, as is clear from the account so far - concerning legal frameworks, business connections, art and welfare, social divisions in the

community. This section focuses on two means of crossing boundaries, religion and outreach work.

As has been said, the project began in and around the church building, and Christian symbolism permeates much of the physical design and decoration of the project. Yet with forty-five languages spoken in the area, a multitude of religions are represented among the participants. At the same time there is no 'religion' pressing on the visitor - nor on the project workers. Religion certainly is central for many of the workers. One, who now attends the Sunday service as well as prayers during the week greatly appreciates the integration of work and religion which were previously separated: *'I was a social worker, you know, five days a week, and then you know on a Sunday I would go to church and it would be a different world, not something I could relate to'*. For some, the emphasis on food in the daily life of the centre as well as at numerous festivities and occasions, not to mention the Great Banquet, symbolises the eucharist and the sacrificing of life for a community goal. Religion also represents openness and a way of accessing different levels of reality. Andrew Mawson sees this in the children's games and dressing up in nursery within the church, constantly changing their identities and on the edge of danger, shifting between benign and frightening situations.

Santiago Bell had come to be known as a Catholic in his years in prison, and to celebrate the eucharist there, learning also to remain sane in the midst of insanity. There is a great deal of mental illness in Tower Hamlets, and breaking down the persecutory barriers of exclusion which surround it has been an important theme in the project's work. Gardening has been one way of building in the contribution of mentally ill people, as has been described in the work surrounding the women who died of cancer. As Allison Trimble puts it:

*We never have policies here, but we had a view...that anyone, anyone could be involved as a volunteer, it didn't matter what they'd done, who they were, because everybody had something to contribute to community life, the only thing was to find out what it was...What people had to offer was what they had to offer and we had to build the community with what people had to offer.*

She then describes how the children of one woman 'quite far down the mental illness continuum' began to swap videos with the neighbours who used to shout at them in a hostile fashion, and how she got other volunteers involved.

One of the project workers relates her surprise in realising she was being helped by rather than helping a disabled person, and her fearful initial expectations of the project:

*I thought how do you do pottery...I was dreading it...and this guy in a wheelchair amazed me...he just said to me sit there I'll demonstrate and he just talked me through it as if he was my teacher...and I was amazed, I thought I've come here to help somebody with his disability who is sitting there teaching me what to do, and that's when I thought I really like this place...you know I was expecting these strange people to chase me round the room...I thought there was mad people, I said oh God, maybe...but it was so different as you'll see yourself when you go and sit there... they're just pretty down to earth people, just got their own problems, but they're ok in their own way.*

If the work of breaking down exclusionary barriers is difficult enough within the centre, it is even more so in the outreach work. The hope is that friendly behaviour within the project would have some impact on the community, since *'you couldn't be friendly with Joyce (the name is*

*changed) here and five minutes later go back on your estate and suddenly not be friendly with her.' One story is of a group of white mothers who lynched a black young man who had had a mental breakdown and had grabbed one of them, with the result that he was hospitalised for several months. A similar incident some months later, when a black young man placed a tranquilliser in front of a child, was forestalled when one of the centre volunteers, whose child was involved, intervened and said 'no, hang on, I know about these people and he's a community care person, he should be looked after, there's no point beating him up, it's not his fault'.*

The outreach worker walks a tightrope in a minefield of hostility, as a local person who has sold out to do-gooders, as a youth worker who is associated with the 'correction people' like police and teachers, for his crossing of racial barriers, in his drugs work. He describes his way of crossing barriers:

*I've got a lot of different hats... I'm a court jester that's why it's working for me, I'm the comedian when it's time to be funny, I'm the headmaster when it's time to be strict, I'm the boy when I'm on the street, I'm the grown up when it's time to give them a bit of fun. There's a load of different caps going on, that's how I work, I haven't got all the answers and I talk to people and I'm learning every day.*

The boundaries in the drugs world are dangerous:

*I can't spread the gospel no drugs in case I put myself in the firing line .....but in this drugs scene culture I take myself out of it but I don't leave the group, and I get a better understanding of what's going on. But there's not a lot of people that can actually stay with the group, cos not many groups want to keep you in there, keeping the relationship.*

Racial boundaries are also violent, as this worker has found in building a mixed football team, which he achieved over a year and a half:

*we got to the final ... and I felt really positive felt really good... so I sat there as pleased as punch and I thought I'd go for a drink, popped in the local pub, 'What you up to, what's happening mate?' I said 'Tell you what, I've got this local team' and explained it now from a local community point of view... What I got, How many Paki you got in your team?' Killed it stone dead. He was happy if there was five white guys in that five a side team, but the moment there was Bengali boys playing it's stick your football up your arse let's change the subject.*

The skills of local artists have been a critical ingredient in resourcing the centre. Many of them were middle class squatters, or at any rate living in a segregated community, as one of them describes. This artist later won some outstanding commissions. The extract shows how the crossing of boundaries can generate new reciprocities, which have been a key element in developing the project:

*I sort of introduced myself to Andrew, saying you know, 'I know you had a stained glass teacher, do you need a new one?' To which his response was 'Yes. Great. Wonderful. But we've got no money for wages. We do have this lean-to shed at the back...you can have this space if you teach a class'. So I started doing that, and I was also helping Sue in the cafe. That was my first proper workshop. And so everything just sort of developed from there. I mean I'd been living here already for about five or six years round the corner, cos where I live is a housing co-op, but I didn't know the rest of the area at all. We were like a little sort of ghetto of young, mainly single... mostly had some experience of further education, and we had found somewhere cheap to*

*live in London. I mean we were our own community. And of course that changed completely from working in the cafe. I just knew everybody.*

The centre's openness and willingness to cross boundaries can be controversial, as in the case of inviting the page-three girl<sup>6</sup>, Donna Hughes, to be a sponsoring celebrity for the Great Banquet. This caused extreme anger among feminist-minded women in the area. So did the collaboration of engineers from the nuclear base at Aldermaston<sup>7</sup> with children and artists in designing an (award-winning) adventure playground. It can also be very difficult for the project workers themselves to maintain such openness, as this account illustrates:

*One of the people who was probably one of the most racist women I've met here would lead her children out of school when Bengalis songs were being sung. She used to come with me on the bus to pick people up from the community, welcome the person, bring them out of the house, and bring them onto the bus. She wouldn't do it with this one Bengali man and the question for me was well what do I do. .... and I remember one day we were in the hall and this man had had a stroke and he could only communicate by stamping his hands and his feet, and he wasn't feeling very well, and I just said to this woman, the first person that I saw, just sit for a minute while I find someone to take him home, just sit with him till I sort something out, and I rushed off, hadn't realised, well I realised when I said it that it was this woman who wouldn't even go to his house...and came back half an hour later and saw her sitting there stroking one of his hands and talking to him quietly...and after that she would get out of the bus and go and pick him up every morning, and so that pattern was broken. Now if we'd said you're being racist, either do it or don't take part, we would have lost the opportunity. It's a bit like allowing space for somebody to grow really.*

Crossing boundaries is the way the day centre manager describes the way the artists work with service users. The very emphasis on garden and architectural design, fountains, sculpture, and paintings, which one encounters at every turn in the centre, already breaks the boundaries of an ordinary community centre in a deprived area. The activities which bring national and international artists together with local residents do likewise, as do the trips to the Sinai Desert involving City executives, homeless young people and community residents, and the secondments, such as the Treasury official who is placed at the centre.

The day centre manager contrasted the emphasis at the centre on communication, much of it generated through arts work, which 'gets the creative juices going', with the personal isolation characteristic of a residential home. He recalls visiting one where 'the surroundings were lovely...but there wasn't a lot of one-to-one contact'. In his words:

*we work very hard on quality, and that's where the arts focus comes in, I think, getting people motivated... the majority of arts tutors come to perform...and they get this kind of buzz that goes round the room...get them doing what they don't want to do sometimes, things they have reservations about, put it that way. She crosses over certain boundaries in a very nice way and gets people feeling confident, volunteers and members alike.*

He remarks on the excitement of seeing people in the day care sessions 'visibly change. That's quality, that's touching people at the core of their being really, and people are feeling good...and

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<sup>6</sup> Page-three of the popular press mainly consists of a photo of a nude and large-breasted model.

<sup>7</sup> Aldermaston nuclear research facility was the target of annual peace marches in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s.

*they've had a good time'. He came to the project from a local authority social services department, where 'my work environment was pretty miserable. And I was struck by how happy people were here...they seemed to enjoy their work', including those who had worked at the project for many years.*

The Bromley-by-Bow day centre for disabled people involves one-to-one care by volunteers who are paid a token sum, and a great deal of input by artists. Its expense cause constant arguments with social services, although its large size makes it an important service in the locality. Arguments also arise from Bromley-by-Bow's determination to develop volunteer skills, through NVQ training, but also through volunteer involvement in care planning and care conferences, which clashes with professional codes of confidentiality.

An example of how volunteers are drawn in, also by each other, and encouraged to develop further is given by the Bengali outreach worker's account of how she developed a sewing class. Her narrative also shows the creative use of existing resources:

*We got no money to open the sewing class...so then I've been to the local, to find out from people mouth to mouth the factory there, then I asked for the cotton, I asked for the material, and then one day I found out about a machine, from an old class. So with one machine or two machines I started my first class. I am not a qualified teacher you know, I only know basic sewing, so I myself was both a sewing teacher with two or three ladies and an outreach worker. So then after a few months one lady, said that she would like to come to my women's group, and her sewing is better than me, so I said do you mind if you help me as a voluntary worker in the same class, so she is a voluntary worker without money for two or three weeks, and then I find out from the project about five pound for voluntary work so I give her five pound and then she helping.*

### **Organisational structures**

In the face of obstacles such as 'professional confidentiality', which also arise around the health centre work, the project's response is to have brain-storming sessions, which often lead to creative solutions. Such brain-storming sessions or 'cluster meetings' are typical of the organisational structures, which develop around particular projects and avoid formal hierarchies, while designating responsibility.

'Giving space' is a key theme in the approach to personal and leadership development. Allison Trimble describes how she arrived to take up her post armed with a sheaf of ideas. Her designated role was to '*help mothers in the nursery to connect with other parts of the project...enable the women to become involved*'.

*On my first day Andrew, he's the chief executive, said to me, well your job is a blank sheet of paper, and you call it how you want, we've got funding for it, for you, to set up some projects, and there's lots of needs. ..When I came for my interview I had a book about that thick, full of ideas and things that I'd try to do, and I got the job, and he says, put that book on a shelf for a moment, in a drawer, and after three months of hanging around, have another look at it, and then decide what you want to do, so I never looked at it again.*

The day care manager had been appointed following a longish period when the work had been largely organised by the volunteers. He both needed their experience and knowledge, and wanted to give them space and encouragement to go on developing their own leadership capacities. His account suggests, that, although things had slid, by maintaining a sense of continuity, validating



past the good work in the past, and giving individuals space', he managed to enhance ownership, responsibility and initiative:

*I knew I had to come in and solidify things really, so I started pulling things out of Fiona's (changed name) head and saying to her what we've got to do is get all this intuitive stuff that you have and put it on paper, formalise it. So I started to put together guidelines for the volunteers...not being the new broom that sweeps clean, but you know reasserting the old values that have made it a success over the years, and which had slid away slowly.*

The volunteers in the day centre are organised within groups, and the manager has been pleased to 'see the group leaders assert themselves more, asking a lot less for assistance, but taking initiative'. Of one group leader, he says: 'She's not running the groups as I would tell her to run it, but she's running it how she wants to run it...as long as she sticks within certain boundaries which are basically about quality..I think we've managed to set that standard and now people are working within it individually'.

Basing the work on 'principles' rather than on 'policies' allows personal space. Currently six key principles are: flexibility, creativity, quality, pragmatism, backing people, and rhythms. Principles are agreed through discussion, but allow a certain fluidity in their translation, a 'dancing either side of the line', as Allison Trimble puts it.

The complexity of allowing people space, at all levels of the organisation, is a strong theme in Allison Trimble's account of her group work and management technique. It is at the heart of the crucial process through which the local 'rip off' culture of survival becomes broken by experience of the rewards of giving. It is a messy and very personal transition, which has to be worked through and managed by people themselves, although leaders can open up the possibilities for such experiences. Understanding such working through, and the space needed for it, is an essential part of leadership. This approach involves understanding how power operates, particularly the circles of oppression within which those with power are often blocking the pathways for others to change. The rejection of offers of engagement from those with mental illness would be a case in point, though Allison herself first became aware of such processes in Hindu society. Allowing space involves taking risks, but by no means involves a relinquishing of responsibility. Allison's experience of allowing volunteers control the cashbox and the payment of their own experiences while she was on maternity leave illustrate this well.

Allison started the community group as a forum in which she could get a mixed set of people to support each other. Getting people to make a space in the chaos of their lives was the first task, and offering a £5 payment a means to that end. Her aim was to break the family-based 'rip-off' culture in which people 'know a lot about surviving themselves but ...not much about needing other people to survive'. Eventually 'people started coming not for the five pounds but for the reason of coming'. Allison herself 'worked quite hard at creating a culture ...which was about where anybody has to come in, anybody has to be welcomed...a reliance about respecting people', and then 'what happened was that the volunteers themselves took on that culture and when the new volunteers came in they would teach them the new culture.' In fact the volunteers were very reluctant to handle the cash box, perhaps because they would feel less able to 'borrow' from it in the way they did when Allison controlled it. On her return, however, Allison was furious to discover that the volunteers had now allocated a new 'double-bubble rate of two expense payments for a full day's activity. Horrified at her reaction, and fearing that she might stop the project, 'the core went off and sorted it out themselves with everybody else'. As she points out, such a development was only possible because of the 'really strong personal

*relationship*' she had built up with them over the years; continuity of staffing is essential to such work..

The organisation structures have developed considerably in recent years. In 1995 five areas of activity or 'pillars' were identified: art, health, education, enterprise and environment. In the 1998 re-structuring, seven pillars were created, and the staff leading each area of work were made senior partners, although their levels of development were quite uneven. The seven pillars were now:

1. health, research and PR - including the community care work
2. multicultural work - including the Bengali project
3. families - outreach team with vulnerable families
4. arts, enterprise and environment - including the gardening projects
5. operations - administration and events
6. finance
7. education and training.

Until 1992 the project was run by the Church Meeting. As a registered charity and development trust it acquired a thirty-strong Council of Management, elected by the project members with at least six months' involvement, and an executive of six to eight members, elected by the Council of Management. The proposal that members have shares in the project was not legally allowable. But despite such democratic structures and a constant striving to extend forms of co-ownership, the project is often accused of contravening democratic norms and procedures, and notions of accountability. For the project, consultation procedures evoke images of sparsely attended community halls, and the exercise which the local authority obliged them to conduct over the development of the adjoining garden, where the only two responses came from dog owners who through children should be excluded from the park. In the project's definition, democracy comes from the insight and knowledge arising from cooperative participation, and from striving for ownership and mutuality. Close knowledge of incidents on the estates is a more democratic way of working out what people need than holding formal discussions, since people *'don't want to talk like that'*, as Allison puts it. It was through advocating for individual people for proper services which they could not get that projections for both the community care project and the health centre took shape.

The project is perhaps quite difficult to understand from the outside, and difficult to present to other public bodies. In its new phase the centre receives many requests for training; the difficulty is that the methods of work at Bromley-by-Bow have to be learned through experience rather than by observation. The very notion of 'work' is different. Full-time work at Bromley-by-Bow is more of a vocation than an employment contract. Salaries are modest<sup>8</sup> and there are no annual increments. On the other hand the involvement of staff's wider family members in many of the activities in the project blurs definitions of 'work'. Over 50% of the thirty full time staff live locally. Recently a more standardised system of 'family-friendly' employment was decided against in favour of a more individualised and flexible approach. On the other hand, everyone received seven extra days' holiday at Christmas. The emphasis on drawing volunteers into ever greater involvement and eventual employment can require considerable flexibility and negotiation in a community which operates with quite different time frames from those of industrialised work patterns. This may be a result of several generations of unemployment, a quite different life world based on the informal economy, or non-industrialised rural origins.

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<sup>8</sup> Full-time salaries are about £16,000, more senior posts £24,000.

Allison thinks that people's health does suffer at times from overwork, but commitment and morale are high.

Interest in management techniques and the encouragement of lateral thinking is one of the sources of the private business sector's interest in the project - it seems there is strikingly less interest in such aspects from the public sector. In the argument of one project worker, big business has also become highly constrained and bureaucratised, so that tackling big problems such as urban poverty revives a sense of adventure and challenge<sup>9</sup>. As in the case of the Aldermaston design engineers, working across new interfaces can lead to exciting results. Community involvement has other motivations, however. The employees of the business sector live in communities, and products are also sold in communities. Coke, Texaco and Boots have an interest in understanding community dynamics, Boots is buying in to the concept of healthy living centres as a model for the new millennium.

### **Conclusions**

Following fifteen years of development, there is a sense in which the Bromley-by-Bow project has 'come of age'. It has weathered a major transition in leadership, which is inevitably challenging in the case of a charismatically-led project. It has also adapted its organisational forms and working culture to a larger-scale operation. Moreover these transitions seem to have enhanced rather than detracted from its innovative qualities. For by creating seven leadership positions, maintaining the culture of working groups at all levels which 'allow space' for personal initiative in interpreting the agreed principles, and continuing to seek out and create 'eddies of energy' around which to develop new activities, the scope for creative leadership is greatly enhanced. Its 'grounded' approach is if anything strengthened under the directorship of Allison Trimble - as she puts it, the greater difficulty lies in applying the method at higher levels in the organisation. It was perhaps a critical feature of the Bromley-by-Bow project that from the beginning Andrew Mawson drew around him a group of outstanding personalities; he was not operating as a single charismatic figure. On the other hand he is still closely involved in the project, although not at the level of day-to-day operations.

The question remains as to how replicable is it, and how relevant to mainstream health and social services, given its exceptional sources of funding. Partnership with adult education services have long been fruitful, as with social services in the community care project. Yet interfaces with many other public services remain tricky, as in the project's participation in a borough-wide scheme to generate community involvement in housing regeneration and neighbourhood centres. Bromley-by-Bow's suggestion that every household be encouraged to design its own stained-glass panel for its front door, was met with doubts about excessive costs, and scepticism concerning the scope for other social benefits around such individual and communal involvement with craftsmen and artists. Moreover it is a contradiction in terms for the project to set itself up as a model: the bottom up approach, working with existing resources, finding of 'eddies of energy', allowing 'space', can only be creatively applied, not 'copied'. It is for this reason that the project restricts its more public influence to 'playing the melody', which others will hopefully take up. It may also be much more difficult for an existing bureaucratic organisation to adopt such methods - Bromley-by-Bow was able to discover new approaches in the course of its development.

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps inner city community involvement, which has a long tradition through the settlement and arts and crafts movements, is an alternative to Outward Bound-style management training!

The research emphasis within Bromley-by-Bow demonstrates the project's commitment to wider developments in welfare, to evaluating the impact of its work on personal and community development, and to developing new research instruments which are able to evaluate holistic and person-centred approaches. The development of a new type of medical record, which tracks other aspects of personal growth such as hobbies and interests, is one example. Evaluation is critical if healthy living centres are to become a key model for the C21st, and if government policy is to appreciate and address the very 'long journey' which is often involved in shifting from a position of demoralisation to one of active social engagement.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the power of the narratives quoted in this report testify to the contribution which biographical methods might make to the exploration of the intricacies of social problems and processes, and to the training of professionals.

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## Appendix: Detailed list of the 'biographical' data of the Bromley by Bow Centre

**1984**                      **Andrew Mawson** became the United Reformed Church minister in the Bromley-by-Bow area after the former minister has dropped dead during a service

### Description of the area:

BbB is part of Tower Hamlets, the most deprived local authority in the country (Department of the Environment's statistics). The Bromley ward is wedged between the flyover and acres of high-rise housing estates, it is rated the second most deprived ward in the borough. Some 17,000 people inhabit an area enclosed by the Blackwall Tunnel Motorway to the East, the A 11 Bow Flyover to the north, the Docklands Light Railway on the west and the Limehouse cut to the south. There is no support through public money, 'largely forgotten', though it is located 3 miles from the City, 2000 yards north of Canary wharf and the same distance from the designated Stratford Euro terminal.

Fifty languages are spoken in the area.

The church premises are adjacent to a semi-derelict public parc, mostly used by dogwalkers and for criminal activities (drug selling and using) during the nights.

The situation of the church: the church has a leaking roof, the central heating system worked barely, piano keys stuck together. There were only few and very old congregation members

**1984**                      The buildings are offered to the community: local artists establish workshops, they get

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<sup>10</sup> New Labour's New Deal and Welfare to Work policies place more emphasis on personal trajectories and involve counselling advice. Work at Bromley-by-Bow would not lead one to expect dramatic results from three or four counselling sessions, even by highly skilled staff

the place rent free, they provide classes for local people in return. A local woman, a squatter, builds a boat in the church hall.

The church is redesigned: could be used as a religious and a social space.

- 1985** A range of activities start: dance school, nursery, cafe, disability group started. The disability group works on the garden outside the church.
- 1987** Lord Ennals becomes patron of the Centre.
- 1988** Pie in the Sky Cafe opens as a self-sustaining enterprise, run by 3 local women. It offers dinners, also starts catering (3 - 4 weddings during the first two years)
- Andrew Mawson becomes Chair of a new £1 million centre for Mind in Tower Hamlets
- 1990** The buildings are open daily, often till 10pm. Over 500 people use the facilities each week, over 120 of these use the workshops. The centre has become part of the Adult Education Institute.
- The centre offers workshops in carpentry, wood and stone sculpture, pottery, stained glass, design machine knitting, life drawing, Art for beginners and children. Dance classes are run by Janet Viola (modern, tap, ballet, jazz). The centre offers a Senior citizens meeting. Multipurpose Art Workshops are run by Santiago Bell who is Chilean in exile. The workshops are based upon the thinking of Paulo Friere. The Disabled Gardening Project in front of the church building starts. The Drop-in Group and Toy Library provide facilities for parents to come with their young children. Classes for parents are run by the Adult Education Institute.
- The Pie in the Sky Cafe runs under new management.
- Local authorities withdraw £35,000 of annual funding (for the nursery).
- June 1990 A Language Festival takes place.
- 22 June 1990 Midsummer celebrity Charity Ball to keep the nursery open (stars among others from Eastenders and the Bill, boxer Sylvester Miti, Lord Ennals...), fire-eater, comedy group, auction, dance show, silent movies on the roof, disco, buffet
- December 1990 The book 'A world of Schools' published, growing out of the language festival. It is produced by a group of local women.
- 1991 About 600 people are involved with the Centre each week. The Centre has 30 workers and a turnover of £400,000. The Church, an ecumenical group supported by the Methodist and United Reformed Churches, is the legal entity for the Centre.
- The nursery is self financing. A Bengali outreach worker employed by the nursery
- The workshops are developed and extended. There are plans to develop an ancient and derelict churchyard 100 yards from the Centre into a landscaped Adventure playground, nature reserve and Environmental Study Centre
- The dance school runs for 30 hours a week with over 100 young dancers. The dance school is self financing, classes cost £2 -£3.
- Community Education Outreach Worker works in the production of educational multi-

cultural events, gives support for adults wishing to return to education, does literacy and language development work and links the centre to the local education 'scene'.

A parent from the local community has died after a long illness, the statutory services had failed to organise themselves to provide any adequate care for the individual or her family. Workers and volunteers provided much of the missing care themselves

Sheenagh (arts tutor) has won a major commission to design and make a commemorative stained glass window for the Cripplegate Foundation at St Giles in the Barbican. A young man living round the corner from the Centre, wins a place and a grant to study fine art at a top college. He was tutored by Santiago Bell. Paula Haughney, stone carving tutor, has won a competition for a commission for the Foyer of the new BP Building in Brussels. Santiago Bell is nominated for British Gas/Arts Council Community Arts and Regeneration Award.

- July 1991 School of Dance produces the Tales of Beatrix Potter, an audience of 400 watched a cast 93 aged from 2-20 years. One of the cast has been offered a place by the Royal Ballet.
- A group of 15 from the Centre (staff, volunteers etc) spend a week in the Laura Ashley Manor House in Wales following an invitation by David Ashley.
- August 1991 Price Waterhouse provides two weeks free consultancy.
- September 1991 A culturally diverse group of 10 from the Centre travels to the Sinai (Project Sinai by McCabe Educational Trust, takes groups of young people, mainly from inner cities to the Sinai Desert to experience first hand some of the complexities of the Middle East)
- Mrs Carey, wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury, opens formally the community garden.
- Two integrated groups for people with disabilities and local volunteers meet twice a week. Their first project was to design, build and maintain the accessible community garden. The classes are trained by local artists.
- 1992 St Leonards Churchyard has been converted into a children's play area and wildlife garden. The Dance School floats off as a separate business, changes location. Estate Balcony Projects starts (pottery workshops, gardening, mosaic).
- A consultation process including surveys, competitions, public meetings and exhibitions has taken place with a view to redesigning the park next to the Centre.
- Planning for a Health Centre adjacent to the park/centre have started.
- HRH The Princess of Wales visits the garden project; it has also won awards.
- Andrew Mawson is a member of the Lefevre Walk HAT and has responsibility for working with local people to redesign their Estates.
- 1993 London Borough of Tower Hamlets asks the BBB Centre to carry out a feasibility study and public consultation for the site.
- 1994 The centre focuses its work around four pillars: Arts, Education, Health, Environment. There are 45 volunteers working with the centre. Over 20 arts classes are taking place per week.

January 1994	A range of service level agreements is established with the local authority.
May 1994	Councillor Arthur Downes, Mayor of Tower Hamlets, launches the Health Centre and Park project.
1994	<p>Another four trips to the Sinai desert (including a mixed women's group in September) are taking place. A group of members visit Australia including meetings with Aborigine people and Vietnamese Refugees</p> <p>The centre incorporates as a company with charitable status. This status allows clear democratic control to both users and representatives drawn from local people.</p> <p>Preparation for building a £1.2m health centre begins.</p> <p>Key decision makers visit the centre (London Implementation Group, Ministers of Health).</p> <p>Santiago Bell, one of the founder members, retires (returns to Chile).</p>
September 1994	Health Centre and Park project is presented at the DEMOS seminar at the Guildhall.
December 1994	<p>Cultural events include an accapella evening with the Umfolosi Group from Zimbabwe as part of the World Circuit Arts London Programme, and a Community Carol Concert performed by the Academy of St Martin in the Fields.</p> <p>Live documentary of the centre's work is presented as part of BBC 1's Advent series.</p>
January 1995	Ethel Wheatley, the oldest member of the centre, dies.
1995	<p>New arts and education classes include classes which bring children and parents together. Week-end courses start in arts, attracting students from across London, scholarships are on offer for local young people.</p> <p>Members of the centre visit Australia. Members of the community care project participate a pilot trip to the Sinai Desert for people of mixed abilities.</p> <p>The renovation of the 3 acre public park adjacent to the centre starts (BBB Community Regeneration Initiative).</p>
3 June 1995	30,000 people from across London taking part in the Great Banquet. Andrew Mawson takes a lead in the project, it is run from an office at the Centre.
1995	<p>Royal SunAlliance (insurance group) is funding a £300,000 project over three years: innovative ways to reduce youth crime in the area. A core of 50 users are participating the programme, up to 300 yong people have been involved in special events. The scheme runs poetry and sculpture classes as well as foreign trips. Young people gain access to national programmes run by organisations such as the English National Opera. The programme runs the only football team in the area to include White, bengali and West Indian boys</p> <p>One of the Patrons, Lord Ennals, dies suddenly. Lord Young of Dartington becomes the new Patron together with Lord Peyton.</p> <p>Lord Young of Dartington has inspired many social institutions such as Open University.</p>

	<p>The centre plays a key role in first year Tower Hamlets' Summer University (running the Visual Arts Programme Arts 2000), hosting ENO's music workshops.</p> <p>Paula Haughney carves two unique stone seats for the parc. Sheenagh McKinley makes 1000 ceramic cobbles for the path.</p>
September 1995	A bid for £4m from the Single Regeneration Bid is not successful but the centre is strongly encouraged to bid again in September 1996.
October 1995	The centre wins the BITC Dragon Award for Partnership, presented by the Lord Mayor of London at the City Banquet.
December 1995	HRH The Prince of Wales visits the centre.
1995/96	<p>90 projects a week are taking place in five pillars (art, health, education, enterprise, environment). Five interactive Arts Programmes run in conjunction with local schools including a project to redesign Bromley Recreation Ground and a pilot Arts NVQ (level 4). An ongoing exhibition of work from the arts classes takes place at the Texaco Headquarters on Canary Wharf.</p> <p>The Pie in the Sky cafe employs 6 people and offers extensive outside catering.</p> <p>Health Project is housed in portacabins in the park.</p>
1996	<p>20 groups comprising young homeless people, city executives and local people trekked together through the Sinai Desert, living with a bedouin tribe and sleeping under the stars (in partnership with NatWest Markets, McCabe educational Trust, Big Issue<sup>11</sup>).</p> <p>The community care project combines day-care with a community development approach: local volunteers work on a one to one basis with people with special needs. The volunteers are offered training opportunities, social support in life, and NVQ qualification in Developmental Care.</p> <p>A ten week induction programme for the Tower Hamlets Housing Action Trust community development team takes place.</p> <p>Training courses for local people are taking place.</p>
April 1996	Building work on Primary Care Centre (= Health Centre?) begins, the first community health facility in the UK to be designed and built by a community organisation and owned by local people.
May 1996	A building programme next to the park - supported housing units for single elderly people - is scheduled to start.
1996	<p>BBB Community Regeneration Initiative is presented at the 'London in the 21st Century debate', sponsored by the Evening Standard and the Corporation of London.</p> <p>Reports on the centre are presented in national newspapers and BBC programmes.</p> <p>The centre cooperates with with DEMOS (independent Thinktank).</p>

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<sup>11</sup> The homeless magazine from London.



- 1996 A donation £220,000 from NatWest bank supports local young entrepreneurs.
- 1997 The nursery provides care for 30 children.
- The launch of the health centre (£1.4 million) takes place. It is built by a development trust, executive committee made up of centre users, local councillors, other interested parties. Profits will go to the development trust.
- 1998 30 paid staff at the centre.
- The organisation of the centre is restructured into seven areas:
1. health, research and PR - community care is part of this area
  2. multicultural - Bengali project is part of this area
  3. families - outreach team, vulnerable families in Bow
  4. arts, enterprise and environment - garden, enterprise
  5. operations - organisation, events (eat-parties, Chinese New Year)
  6. finance
  7. education and training