

**Final Action Research Report
to
Devon & Cornwall Business Link**

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Introduction

Within the South West Region as a whole, over ½ of the population live in rural areas or towns of less than 20,000 population. Rural disadvantage throughout the region is widespread. Part-time low-paid employment, poor service provision, limited accessibility are just a few of the widespread problems. Increasingly, young people are migrating out of the region, contributing to increasing problems of social exclusion and rural deprivation.

However, low income is just 1 of the dimensions of poverty. Other equally relevant aspects must also be taken into consideration:

- access to employment
- housing
- healthcare
- satisfaction of basic needs

The UK NAPincl acknowledges “...women constitute a higher proportion of adults at risk of poverty and are more likely to be persistently poor.” Women out of work are often affected by lack of incentive to work, caused by the relationship between low wages and loss of benefits. (Source: European Commission Employment & Social Affairs: Joint Report on Social Exclusion 2002)

Worklessness is concentrated in particular social groups, geographical areas and households. For example the following wards all rank within the most 10 and 25% of deprived wards nationally. (Source: Government Office South West, Index of Employment Deprivation)

<u>Ward</u>	<u>District</u>
Ilfracombe Central	North Devon
Penzance East & West	Penwith
Torwood	Torbay
Liskeard South	Caradon (Rame Peninsula)
Exmouth Littleham Urban	East Devon
Bodmin St Petroc	North Cornwall

This has a backlash effect – many are unable to build-up decent second pensions, and progression into older age goes hand-in hand with further deprivation and exclusion.

One of the major challenges facing the UK is a concentration of poverty risk within geographical locations, such as social housing estates, some rural areas (as indicated in the areas listed above).

The wards indicated above, also suffer from multiple, interlinked problems of high unemployment and mortality rates, high levels of crime and poor access to quality services (housing, education and health care).

Strategic Approach

Employment is a primary route out of social exclusion. The Women's Empowerment Programme (WEP) will be targeted at socially excluded women within the areas earlier indicated, addressing specific issues.

Delivery of localised WEP workshops aim to create a more inclusive society for women, providing local hands-on support and opportunities for women to set-up in business, ensuring the most excluded and vulnerable can participate fully in society.

Focusing on local delivery, we recognise that alone, we cannot achieve success without the active involvement of all relevant local agencies and organisations.

We will develop properly coordinated arrangements, involving all local contacts to ensure socially excluded women are able to access good quality support services.

Wherever possible, we will work closely with the New Deal and Job Centre Plus regimes, who offer intensive support and training to a wide client group (ie over 25's long-term unemployed, lone parents, over 50's + partners).

We will introduce women within our signposting sessions, to a range of local resources and services, facilitating access. For example, introducing women to local community education/learn direct resources – encouraging women traditionally unable or unwilling to take-up learning, to develop ICT skills, tackling the risk of exclusion by being on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The primary focus of the project is to help socially excluded women of working age into self-employment. For those suffering from problems with basic/key skills, drug abuse, homelessness or mental health issues; referrals will be made to the appropriate agencies & partners (public, private, voluntary and community groups) identified in the Action Research.

Links have also been made whilst conducting the Action Research with Local Authorities – many of which have been set local Public Service Agreements (PSA's), whereby they must meet targets agreed with local people and partners; focusing on employment/self-employment initiatives.

Conducting the Action Research has helped us to target individuals or areas of deprivation suffering from multiple disadvantage across Devon & Cornwall.

Local Needs

Women remain severely under-represented in businesses in the South West Region. A significant amount of government funding goes to mainstream Business Support Agencies such as Business Link to support men and women.

Many of the women we chatted to confirmed they were not aware of this service within their own area and would not necessarily access the provision provided. Many cited the perception of it being a “...*very male-dominated environment. unable to empathise or understand any of the issues faced by women.*” Some women also were fearful of not being taken seriously, and are unable to *‘pluck up the courage’* to make an initial enquiry.

Informal research was also conducted with women that were already running their own businesses to gain a wider perspective. Of those spoken to, the overall message from each was that the support provided *‘...could have been better’*, one woman in particular was put off from returning as she was apparently not taken seriously enough and received negative feedback from Business Advisors who suggested her fashion retail business would not be very successful – despite the fact she is now trading effectively 2 years on, within a prime high street position.

Time and time again, all women confirmed issues surrounding self-esteem and confidence would be a major barrier in preventing them from considering entrepreneurship. Other barriers mentioned were as follows:

“ ... I won’t be taken seriously by the Bank / other people in Business / Family...”

“How will I juggle setting up and running a business with my childcare and other family responsibilities?”

“I haven’t got the sort of money you need to set-up a business & I don’t think I’d be able to get it anywhere else would I?”

“I’ve not really got the sort of qualifications you need to set up your own business.”

“I’ve tried to set up my own business but the paperwork involved scared me off. I used my husband’s money to set up a crafts shop & now I want to expand, but where can I get funding from?”

“Women in Devon are in a traditional ‘male dominated’ society. Many women we see feel they’re not ‘worthy citizens’ to contribute towards business.”

Gaps in Provision

As far as we are aware, with the exception of Enterprise Tamar there is no specific business start-up support catering for the needs of women interested in becoming entrepreneurs within the South West.

In discussions with local Enterprise Support Providers, it appears many of our target audience (socially excluded women) establish initial contact, but are somehow lost in the scheme of things.

One particular example, North Devon Enterprise Agency explained that female clients had approached them for business start-up advice, and they had received a 2 hour consultation, but then were never to return. The contact confirmed follow-up calls were made, and women either did not return the calls, or confirmed they were no longer interested in setting-up a business.

This project seeks to develop a relationship between Devon & Cornwall Business Link, local Enterprise Support Providers and women entrepreneurs to start and develop businesses, and thus contribute effectively to the local, regional and national economy. Observations were that...

- a) women were sent to Devon College for training and it is too much/too difficult an environment for them
- b) transport from villages is a problem
- c) lack of accessible child-care facilities in the area
- d) the process of getting funds/grants scares them off

The aim of this project is to encourage and refer socially excluded women within pockets of the South West, to mainstream business support.

We are confident that Business Link and local Enterprise Support Providers will have reduced churn rates as explained above, of pre-start female clients, as the women that have attended the Women's Empowerment Programme will have increased levels of confidence, a greater understanding of processes involved and terminology used in developing their business plan, and be more focused etc.

Recommendations

The original brief was to select 3 districts out of the 6 to concentrate delivery of the project.

In order to build a sustainable economy and society it is important that everyone in the region has an opportunity to contribute and share in the wealth of the region.

Therefore, as there are significant needs and great levels of deprivation in many wards within each of the 6 districts, it has been decided to prioritise each of the 6 districts and deliver the project within each one, as there is considerable opportunity to address the needs of socially excluded women across the SW, promoting entrepreneur opportunities .

Each area will be concentrated upon in order of priority with regards to finalising local contacts, conducting awareness raising and recruitment activities, delivery of the workshops.

We will work closely with each local Enterprise Support Provider, encouraging all to be involved in elements of the WEP workshops themselves, ensuring that when women are signposted and referred to the local Business Advisors, a relationship and rapport has already been established.

Project delivery in each district selected by Devon & Cornwall Business Link will be prioritised as follows:

1. Penwith
2. Torbay
3. Rame Peninsula
4. East Devon
5. North Devon
6. North Cornwall (Bodmin & Bodmin Moor)

We will work alongside local contacts identified in the Action Research, to bring forward community economic development; encouraging, training and supporting socially excluded women in these areas into business start-up, building and adding value to local activities.

Local contacts will also play a part in raising awareness/targeting of local socially excluded women – for example links have already been made with the SW Connexions Service and Careers Service who publish a directory of opportunities, providing careers information and guidance, ensuring that women have the opportunity to consider self-employment as an option within the careers mix. Such networks will be used to promote the project and workshops etc across the SW.

Delivery of the Women's Empowerment Programme (WEP) Workshops will commence January 2003 until November 2004. Awareness will be raised amongst total 200 women, with 40 women fully trained on the WEP workshops – spread across the 6 districts. A final project schedule will be drawn up with training delivery dates booked for specific wards within each district.

References & Sources of Information

European Commission Employment & Social Affairs : Joint Report on Social Exclusion 2002

Government Office South West, Index of Employment Deprivation

Rural Disadvantage in the South West – Rosemary Johnson Report 14.5.02

South West Public Health Observatory

Patterns of Deprivation in the South West of England: Mapping the Department of Environment, Transport & the Regions Indices of Deprivation (DETR ID200) – September 2001

Neighbourhood Renewal Fund Report: www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/2001/action-plan.pdf