

Blog Post from Helen , Manager at Action For Refugees in Lewisham (AFRIL)

Volunteers from the AFRIL food bank had run a fortnightly face to face sewing and knitting group for members for 2 years. Together volunteers and beneficiaries shared, learnt and revisited sewing craft skills. They make felt badges, Christmas decorations, table runners, winter scarfs, and purses. Foodbank members learnt to mend and repair their own and children's clothes.

During COVID our foodbank art group transferred online to an art open house on a Saturday morning on zoom and an art@home project for beneficiaries and their families. Inspired by the learning, talent and reflection from the joys, surprises and sharing in this group, we decided to pilot an online sewing craft group. Inviting food bank members who had been previous members of our face to face group, alongside members who has highlighted this as an interest in our recent beneficiary consultation, we invited 10 people to join the group. Emma, one of our experienced volunteers and a professional creative and designer, was appointed as project facilitator.

We chose the title 'sewing crafts' to encompass skills and techniques in sewing, embroidery, making, pattern cutting, macrame, measuring and cutting. These would build up confidence to move on to larger projects. Each class consolidated previous learning, built on skills and introduced a new skill or technique. Workshops were timetabled for an hour on a Thursday afternoon in that time before school pick up and when we thought babies might be napping. That was the plan. 7 women took part in the project.

Can you imagine the joy of a small parcel of sewing threads, a needle, scissors and an embroidery hoop or pastel coloured wools and some lollipop sticks being delivered to your door ready for your class? Could you juggle your 1 year old on your knee and thread a needle whilst watching a zoom demo? Our mums could, oh and chat, giggle and ask questions at the same time. Laugh? We each modelled our face masks proudly on zoom. But that's the point- a slice of joy, easy learning and connection once a week to shut out the COVID world.

As a co-facilitator, working at home for over 5 months, I really valued this little piece of sanctuary and connection. How much more important for these 7 single mums? all so much more isolated at home, as services and support networks reduced due to COVID. All missing friendships of food bank friends, and starved of adult company and conversation. All determinedly learning new skills as mums, determinedly budgeting, caring for children and babies in small spaces (often 1 room); dealing with food poverty due to status on low incomes and reliant on food bank support, and like the rest of us, experiencing days of low mood, fear, frustration and worry for the future of themselves and their children.

A credit to Emma, her skills and talents came to the fore. She chose projects carefully that were cheap (none of our packs cost more than £5 and several less) all gave brilliant first time results but which could, at home in quiet time off camera could be perfected, developed and worked into more complex versions. Her live demos ("See my hands?, watch this, I'll do it again") and activity sheets allowed everyone to follow at their own pace and continue at home.

Projects were chosen with families on low incomes in mind: we made simple but beautiful mobiles for our baby's cot, fun sock puppets for older children, practical face masks for ourselves or children, and beautiful macrame mobiles as presents.

We've chosen the face masks demo as our case study because it seems so pertinent to families in poverty as London faces greater lockdown restrictions, continued social

distancing requirements and face coverings are mandatory in more settings. This is a lovely, practical project. the material we chose is double skinned and does not fray: the pattern can be modified for children, women and men and using running stitch and over sewing (2 of our learnt embroidery stitches] we have a COVID safe face mask ready to wear! We want to share this with all families in London to keep us all safe.



AND OUR SEWING CRAFT GROUP? We were proud and really pleased to be funded by 4in10 children in poverty network for sessions. We've just run our last session. Members and facilitators are sad to stop meeting as we feel we've just got started and we can do so much more. We've also lost a little joy in our week to keep us well. We miss our time together and have so many more ideas for sewing (and knitting) as winter months approach and our foodbank building remains closed. Next steps? If we could replicate this project with Emma, these women would like to progress to tuition online for individual @home projects And of course we could repeat the first 6 sessions for a new group including video demos and activity sheets.

And finally? Beautiful reflection from participants

"I'm so proud, I can do this now with my eyes closed!"

"I have really enjoyed the classes. I now have confidence in myself. Before I thought that I couldn't do any of the artistic things, but now I know that I can do it. "

"Thank you so much, I really appreciate it"

"The classes are so educational and nice. I have enjoyed every bit of it"

"I show everything that I have made to my friends and family and they are always surprised at what I have been able to do"

"I am very grateful for the classes"

"At first I didn't want to show anyone what I had made but now I show all of my pieces and I feel good about them"