



Social Science

Something to Offer: LETS Schemes

V/o:

Something to offer. You will hear about LETS schemes in South East London. LETS stands for Local Exchange & Trading Schemes. These give people the opportunity to trade skills or goods without cash changing hands. Liz Shepherd, one of the founders of LETS in the UK, explains what attracted her to the idea.

Liz:

I come from a very large family and I know the value of families in terms of support of all different kinds and, of course, many, many people don't have access to anything like that. Increasingly we're an atomised society, life becomes increasingly difficult and expensive and it's no wonder that we get this sort of polarisation with people ending up on the street, 'cos there isn't that kind of informal safety net. My initial attraction to LETS I suppose was to try to develop something that was independent of the general economic situation; I was looking at things like the debt problem, not just the Third World debt but the debt problem for people in this country, interest owed to the banks and how the poverty trap works, and seeing that so many people were caught in this trap, looking for a way, a self-help way, a co-operative way where people could assist one another without having to go to the banks, and trying to build on the notion of almost creating an extended family.

Jan:

I hadn't quite grasped that LETS had evolved more from grass communities, from communities that are interested mostly in green politics and perhaps were interested in cashless societies.

V/o:

Jan Hirst is a LETS development officer in an anti-poverty team in Greenwich. She hopes to broaden the application of the scheme.

Jan:

LETS to me is a very useful tool for community development. The issue for me is around where people are participating, and where they're doing that they're actually excluding other people, especially if it's people who are involved in something with shared interests. Greenwich Council has adopted a community development approach to LETS which is really to raise the profile about the scheme, expose the scheme to the widest community so people, all people have the opportunity to join if that's what they want to do.

V/o:

For Peter Jones LETS enables him to trade his skills for things his family needs. He's been taking part in a scheme based on an estate in Greenwich.

Peter:

Well I joined LETS because I've got certain skills. I'm a qualified mechanical engineer as well as a qualified electronics engineer. After I had my accident I couldn't go back into mechanical because I've got a bad back now and I can't lift very heavy things. Then I saw this notice in the window in this council office and it was called the Ferrian Neighbourhood Project at that time and then from there they said well we're thinking about starting up something called LETS, and I thought what's that? And she said well basically it's like a bartering system, that you use your skills to do jobs for other people. So I said oh well, that's interesting, you know, we'll get the kitchen decorated and I can do things for other people without it actually costing me an arm and a leg to do it and it basically went on from there.

V/o:

Peter has been passing on computer skills to Roger Bunker, a member of another Greenwich LETS groups.

Roger:

Peter's been very good because we've both got interests in Amiga computers, and Peter's actually got rid of his Amiga and gone on to PC but he still enjoys playing with an Amiga because the Amiga is a lot of fun, and he's teaching me at the same time because even though I've had an Amiga for a long time there's a lot of it I still don't understand. It's not really a trade, it's developed much more than that, it's become a real friendship, I think.

Hopefully some time I'll be able to help him with something, and repay him that way.

V/o:

To pay for his computer classes Roger hasn't parted with any cash, instead scheme members exchange LETS units.

Roger:

Our group uses keys, Peter's group uses squares, and it doesn't really matter because I give him so many keys, he can use them with our LETS group and I believe there is a sort of banking system where we can exchange keys for squares, and triangles, or whatever else the other groups use.

Rather like being in the Euro.

V/o:

Roger is partially sighted. He joined a LETS group with a specific need in mind. He and his fiancée Rachel were planning their marriage.

Roger:

We was hoping to find some help for the wedding, like the wedding cars, help with catering, that kind of thing, and we decided that we would try to earn some keys and see if we could get people to do our flowers, and pay for our flowers that way. I've got an old lady I go to, Vera, and I do her garden for her; I went to her to earn keys to pay for what I needed because I didn't want to work on a deficit.

V/o:

LETS often suits people who aren't always in the mainstream of society. Liz Shepherd.

Liz:

LETS is very much designed for people who are outside of the mainstream jobs economy, if you like. It's something that because it uses people time can appeal very readily to people who are either unemployed, or perhaps have young children, or retired, or disabled. There are a lot of people in LETS with disabilities and because LETS is very much a supportive community, it's not something that's imposing the stringency of the marketplace on people; it's very good for everyone who's outside of that. People who don't fit into neat categories can find LETS a very, very empowering sort of ladder, and because it doesn't impose demands on that individual, it allows that individual to offer what they can, and to be self-motivating in terms of what they're offering.

V/o:

Jenny Hurst, Roger Bunker's wife Rachel, and Vera Usha Mueller are all part of a Greenwich LETS scheme called LETS Get Together, set up by disabled and non-disabled people. They explain how it's been useful to them.

Jenny:

LETS Get Together is for disabled people, their friends and family, but apart from that it's just the same as any other LETS scheme. We do have people with all different impairments, or no impairments at all, it's just the same as anywhere else, it works the same. There are quite a few things that I wanted, some practical things as I'm disabled so it's difficult doing practical

things like painting and decorating, gardening, that type of thing, and the person at the LETS desk said that she needed someone to do the administration, and I'm good with computers so I thought yeah, I can do that. Disabled people I feel find it difficult to offer skills and goods on the same level as non-disabled people so it's good because you can offer skills which you might not think you have. There are some people on the LETS Get Together scheme that offer counselling, they are disabled people themselves, so if a disabled person is looking for counselling it's often a good role model to be counselled by disabled people.

Rachel:

Obviously interested in like disability issues and being registered partially sighted myself same as Roger is as well, well we thought we'd offer things, Roger wanted things like gardening, he's willing to offer and he's got a few things that he could hire out like a typewriter and the lawn mower and things like. I wasn't really sure, I just wanted to help people so I'd be like willing to do like shopping and companionship, and pet-sitting 'cos I like animals, and just mainly to help people out if they wanted it really. I've come more out of myself to be honest 'cos I go out once a week or maybe twice a week to help in the office with the LETS, and meet the people I think has helped me a great deal.

Vera:

It's been very interesting 'cos I did meet a lot of people that way in the meetings that they've had, and it's been very nice. This lady had she had a friend who was going to have a baby and she didn't know how to knit, and so I showed her on the knitting, how to knit, and then I knitted as much as I could. That was a great help because she couldn't understand the pattern and so I could show her that and so at that time I was going to visit my daughter and so they came, both husband and wife and helped me with the luggage. You know when you are alone there are little things you never realise how much, like for carpet, taking somebody to help you roll a carpet down, or someone to paint the rooms, or the garden, or even to put up a picture, and LETS comes in very handy. It becomes more of a, you become more friendlier and you know people can depend on you for little things that they can't come up and talk to someone who's completely a stranger.

Rachel:

OK so now we're actually connected to the internet.

Vera:

I'm emailing my son, he's in Australia.

Rachel:

Well the good thing with email is it doesn't cost a lot of money 'cos if you're trying to 'phone Australia it does cost quite a lot.

RACHEL SHOWING VERA HOW TO SEND AN EMAIL

V/o:

LETS originated without any funding from Government.

JAN:

LETS in, certainly in this country started very much with the perspective of self-help, independence, not needing injections of money, and very many people in LETS have held to that consistently. Now that side of it, that development of the co-operative people-centred approach has been very important in that, that when people have stood back and looked at what is the overall objective of LETS, if you're looking at something that is independent then the purpose really is to build independence, to build capacity, and as a tool the potential for helping with impoverished communities is very vast, but I think as we know impoverished communities have a history of certainly disillusionment with the latest schemes that have come in and there is a sense that they, you know, perhaps most people, all that most people want to do is get off the estate, get out of that community, and a perception that whatever resources the community has are either beaten up or available perhaps for black money so, you know, you're dealing with a lot of problems and barriers to be overcome.

V/o:

Jenny Hurst also thinks that the ease or otherwise of setting up a LETS scheme depends to a large extent on the community involved.

Jenny:

In an area like Greenwich there are a lot of estates where people have difficulty trusting neighbours and trusting people around them, so you do need to build up trust. We use markets and social events to bring people together so they can see who they're going to be trading with. I think in middle class areas that people are more inclined to trust each other, they have the same background, they have the same hopes and wishes. In an area like this there's a lot of poverty, people like to keep to themselves, they don't want to trust other people, so in areas like this you do need to build more confidence to allow people to trade with each other.

V/o:

Jenny Hurst recognises that when promoting a new idea it's important to work with local people.

Jan:

If you don't listen and respond to community needs the initiative will not be supported. This I think requires creative problem-solving and a willingness to work in messy situations at times. For example, when I first approached a low income area to see whether the people were interested in setting up a LETS, they thought LETS was a good idea but there were a whole load of things as why they didn't think it could happen without addressing issues, for example around safety. People weren't happy about having their names and telephone numbers in directories, as most other LETS in the UK do, and so we had to stop and think how we might resolve that so that we can help people to save money and create a community network, and they came up with the idea of using ID cards, so that's where the council has been really useful, providing the resources necessary.

V/o:

Liz believes that LETS has achieved much since its inception and her hopes are that it will provide radical solutions for local economies in the future.

Liz:

What LETS could achieve in the future is I think pretty immense, I mean what I would like to see personally would be for LETS to be something that is woven into life, which really acts as a new sector in sort of people's lives, I mean I've sort of alluded to the market, the workplace, and then there's the home and the family, and the home, family and community element is something that there's a great sense of wanting to get back to. When you look at how many people are involved in voluntary work, for example, in their local community it's actually the number of hours that people put in on a voluntary basis it's bigger than the number of hours that's put in into the market economy. So people's values are certainly with what we are aiming for. And it's a question of can we co-ordinate that to an even greater extent, can we see the formation of a community economy where the volunteer effort that's going in is co-ordinated so that people are not reinventing the wheel, people are not working in isolation, and we're building something in a co-operative way that actually amounts to a new form of local economy.