



# Be Free! Evaluation

27 April 2021

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on behalf of Freedom Works UK

## Project overview

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The Be Free! Project is a 10 session personal leadership course designed to empower up to 12 unemployed or self-employed individuals whose personal and financial resilience was adversely affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The course was due to take place over 20 weeks in Islington, London.

The two course facilitators have several years' experience delivering similar course content. The materials used in the course have previously been used in longer-term personal development courses delivered by Freedom Works to help individuals to overcome their limitations and set a path to greater achievement as a leader.

The course was designed and delivered by Ken Hettiarachi and Chris Hayes from Freedom Works. The course content had been in development since 2010 and aimed to take account of the specific context affecting people at the time of implementation. To achieve this, Ken and Chris consulted widely with key stakeholders including Mind and Islington Council. They also received advice on securing fundraising to support their proposal development.

The project was funded by the National Lottery. Chris Hayes and Ken Hettiarachi from Freedom Works submitted a proposal for the project in June 2020. The course received approval in September 2020. Implementation began in September 2020. The project was advertised widely, with a particular emphasis on residents in Islington. Interviews were held for prospective candidates the same month.

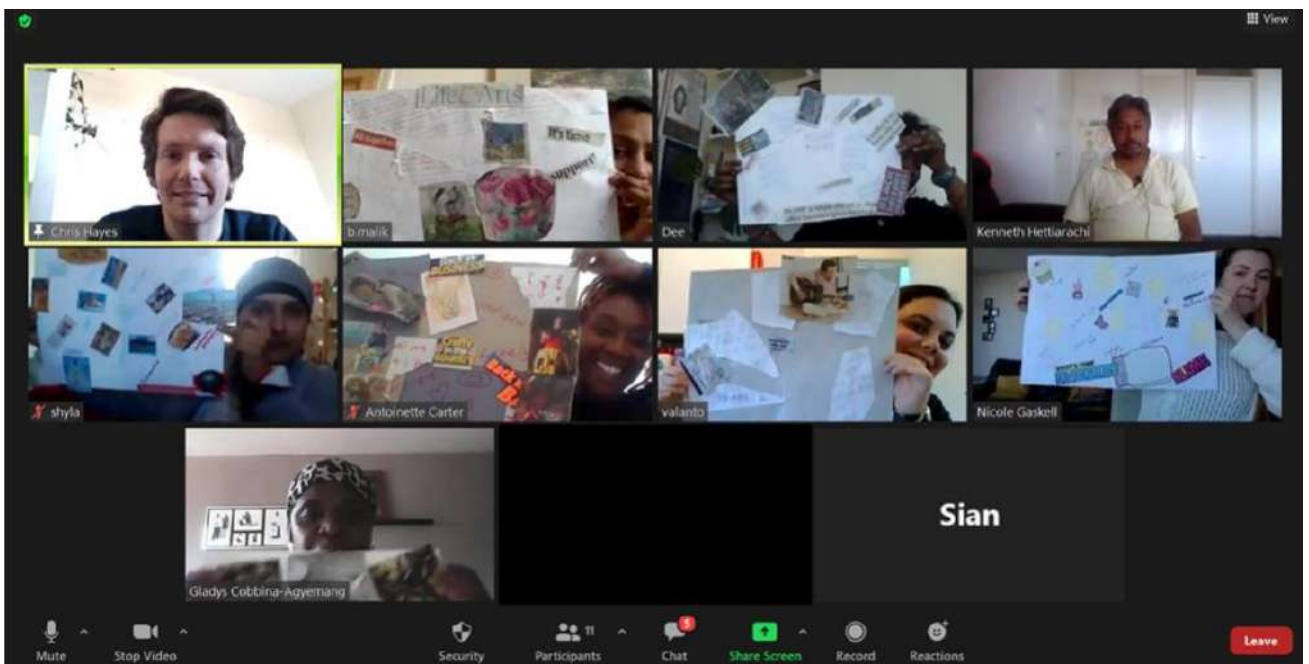
Initially, the course was due to be conducted in-person with a venue identified for the duration of the course. However, after the second session, a further national lockdown was announced to address the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. Freedom Works requested an extension to the course with the National Lottery, but this was not possible.

To overcome this issue and to ensure that students could still access the course contents the decision was made to conduct the remaining proportion of the sessions online. However, due to the loss of time, the decision was made to condense the remaining sessions to one per week to ensure completion by the end of April 2021.

Alongside the course, the facilitators also established a WhatsApp group to allow course participants to share progress and communicate with each other for the duration of the project. Ken was the lead facilitator, with Chris playing a co-facilitator role. Each course participant was asked to choose a facilitator to work with 1:1. These 1:1 sessions happened in conjunction with the group sessions and provided an opportunity for the facilitators to provide more tailored support, answer questions and provide bespoke advice and encouragement in line with each participant's individual goals.



Be Free Session 1 In-Person



Be Free Session 10 Online



*At the start of the Be Free Completion Event*

<b>Project Data</b>	<b>Number</b>
Project attendees	11
Gender	10 female, 1 male
Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds	9
Residents of Islington	10
Unemployed (not counting individuals with part-time, sporadic freelance or business activity)	2

## Methodology

To assess the course, the evaluator chose a multi-disciplinary method, relying on the results of a post-course survey, individual interviews and feedback with 8 of the 11 participants, a joint interview with the two course facilitators as well as a desk review of available course materials and documents. The evaluation focuses on three key elements:

- The difference the course has made to the beneficiaries.
- Key success factors and problems that arose.
- Recommendations for the future.

# Successes and Challenges

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## Course structure and content

There was an acknowledgement by all the participants who were interviewed that the course material was both interesting and wide-ranging. In the words of one of the participants:

*There was so much material to go through each week. But I did not mind that. I could pick out what was most relevant to me.* ~ Participant 1

This is reflected in the feedback from the course participants on which sections of the course they found most interesting or useful – each participant picked a different element.

*I found the At Stake element most useful, I was struggling with self-doubt and it helped me to consider possibilities and be more confident.* ~ Participant 7

*The strategies that Ken gave us were really helpful. At first, I didn't think they would work but I gave them a try. Saying every morning "I am the possibility of being free, fearless and committed". Now I am taking action by being that possibility.* ~ Participant 3

Participants entered the course with a wide-range of expectations. Most had been initially attracted by the course title – Be Free! – but had different ideas about what would be included before they signed up.

Some were looking for an opportunity to discover more about themselves and become more empowered. Others felt they were in a period of transition – either personally or professionally - and were looking for guidance and tools to support them during the next stage of their lives. Based on feedback from participants, there seemed to be an even split in attitudes on the amount of content provided. Those who had more experience with adult education seemed to appreciate the volume of content. Those who were not suggested that the course content could have been reduced without there being a reduction in the overall quality of the sessions.

*I wish we had more time to absorb some of the sessions. We would complete a session and have our homework to go through and the next week we would be on to something else.* ~ Participant 7

During the feedback session, the facilitators acknowledged that a reduction in the volume of content could have been helpful and that is planned for future projects of this type.

Two of the participants interviewed stated that they would have preferred to have a greater balance between practical and theoretical information and tasks. While this wasn't stated by every participant, the level of enthusiasm for the course seemed focussed on the most tangible elements including At Stake and Full Circle.

All the participants interviewed commented on the length of each session – usually 3 hours over Zoom. There was consensus that it was difficult to hold concentration and that more breaks might have helped to alleviate drops in concentration.

Course participants were also near-unanimous in stating they would have preferred that the course was equally co-led by Ken and Chris. This may be in response to the course being held primarily online and single facilitation during long sessions becoming monotonous. Hearing more than one perspective can help engagement.

### **Facilitation, individual and group relationships**

*The facilitators have been wonderful. The coaching has been valuable, so supportive. They take the time to check in. It took me by surprise, I have never met anyone like them before. They helped me not just [with career aspirations] but with emotional and personal issues. ~ Participant 5*

*Ken is very energetic and communicates very well the messages. Persistent and committed, but also polite. ~ Participant 3*

Feedback on the quality of the facilitation was very high. Despite the course being conducted primarily online, all the participants surveyed commented on their gratitude for Ken and Chris' efforts during the course. All participants stated they were happy they had taken part and found the experience valuable. Particular focus was on the facilitators 'going the extra mile' to support participants. For example, Ken sent course materials by post to ensure everyone could access key documents equally. Participants repeatedly mentioned the facilitators checking in on them by telephone, specifically if they had shared they were having a difficult time and may require additional support.

Many of the participants acknowledged the availability of support and the value they placed in the 1:1 sessions which allowed them to access personalised guidance to address their priorities and achieve their goals.

Both facilitators were appreciated for their efforts to support participants on a range of topics both personal and career-based. Participants referred to feeling motivated to launch new business ventures, establish community groups, address personal trauma or issues within the family and spoke of feeling like they were better able to address the issues they were facing thanks to their participation in the project.

The group dynamic was also appreciated. As the bulk of the sessions occurred during a national lockdown, the acknowledgement that all individuals – including the facilitators! – were at risk from loneliness and social isolation was widely shared. The opportunity to be part of a group and communicate with others was powerful and helpful.

*The community part was lovely, even over a short time getting to know people from different backgrounds, we shared a lot. ~ Participant 8*

Nevertheless, the extent to which the group was well managed was questioned at times by the participants. According to the facilitators and some participants, there were instances when they found it difficult to share and “be vulnerable” with the group. This primarily arose due to the sometimes disruptive behaviour from one or two individuals within the group.

[At certain points there was] *not enough follow through of rules. [!] Would have liked poor behaviour and breaching of group rules to be addressed head on, not ignored .~ Participant 2*

The facilitators were aware of this issue and did attempt to take action, but acknowledged that this had been done late and they could have tried more robust approaches earlier.

## Making a Difference

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The Be Free! course aims to help people to manage fear and uncertainty and develop strategies to address the barriers that face individuals as they try to manage their time, seek new opportunities and expand their horizons. The course has been designed to allow for personal reflection and provide opportunities for new positive behaviours to be modelled and developed. When asked during interviews about the experience of participating, course members used words like “transformational”, “re-energised” and “focussed” to describe how they felt they had grown. 90% of the participants said they had found the course useful and felt better able to respond to challenges in the future as a result.

*I have struggled with [my] motivation and self-belief. I learnt that I don't need to live in fear.* Participant 7  
*The course has allowed me to get some insight into myself and how to deal better with an issue I have.* Participant 4

Many of the course participants are currently not in work and keen to re-enter the workplace. While some had realigned their goals since the course began, all had made positive steps to achieve objects they had set for themselves. One participant spoke of the challenges of balancing raising a family with a career. Participation in the course had boosted her confidence and allowed her to take tangible steps to develop the projects that she had put off while simultaneously addressing personal challenges.

Several of the women spoke about financial, health and family issues that they face, often as primary caregivers. One participant described having to “put aside” her aspirations as she focussed on supporting her children. She now feels that she has the confidence to apply herself to a business opportunity she has been putting off for several years and is excited to no longer feel she is procrastinating out of fear of failure.

Boosting self-confidence and feeling empowered to handle setbacks appears to have had a powerful impact on all the participants. Participants spoke about feeling better able to handle criticism, experiencing a change of mindset and feeling confident to tackle future problems they may experience. However, they also described practical changes in their behaviour, such as feeling more organised and focussed, writing lists and seeking out advice and support which they would previously have put off or not completed.

*[One of my problems] Is that I put things off. Someone suggests something and I think, “yes, tomorrow”. But tomorrow comes and I don't do it. That has changed now. I hear a suggestion and I think “yes, I will do that” and I do it.* Participant 1. A powerful reflection of the success of the course and interest amongst the group in continuing personal development is that 6 are interested in pursuing further courses with Freedom Works.