

# Witness Seminar Toolkit

## Introduction

In 2010 the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens was awarded a grant to research and document the development of the movement over the last fifty years. This one-year Heritage Lottery funded project focused on the physical, social and cultural heritage of city farms and community gardens since their inception in the 1960s.

As part of the project witness seminars were held and the learning from that process has been gathered into this useful resource for community growing groups wanting to record their own histories.

## What is a witness seminar?

Witness seminars are group interviews pioneered by the Centre for Contemporary British History and used widely in recording developments in medical science. Their use has now been extended to other fields and we consider them an ideal forum in which to discuss developments in the city farm and community garden movement. We are aiming for an open, sharing environment where all participants feel included and heard, and their opinions and experiences are valued.

## Why do we think they are a good idea?

- You have the opportunity to record the history of your group to preserve memories of developments and progress. It will record your views and be your record in a way that you would like to be perceived.
- It will be a vital permanent record for future generations. With the inevitable passing of time people will join and leave the project at different times and for a variety of reasons. This is a good way of reminding people how valuable they are, and have been, to the project.
- Others can learn the lessons from your experiences, for example how you found solutions to problems.

## **What happens at a witness seminar?**

- Members of your group are invited to a seminar event.
- The event is hosted by a Chair to ensure that everyone is invited to participate fully and fairly. The Chair does not participate in the session but acts as a facilitator to ensure that the session flows and that everyone has an opportunity to be heard.
- Participants agree on terms for the session, a 'goodwill agreement'. This may include agreeing on how people should indicate they have something to contribute, agreeing not to talk while someone else is speaking and so on.
- The session is recorded.
- All participants sign a consent form for the content of the session to be deposited in an archive.

## **Setting up a witness seminar – the process**

- Identify the key people involved in your project today and those with memories of the project during its development – those people without whom the project wouldn't be what and where it is today. Four to six people is an ideal number. If you have more than six people you could consider running multiple sessions.
- Approach those people to see if they would take part. You may need to use persuasion! There will probably be people without whose input the session either will not work, or will be less valid. It is worth stressing to those people the importance of their participation in the witness seminar. If they have any issues, such as mobility difficulties you could organise transport to ensure they can attend the session.
- Set a date following consultation with participants – what are the best times?
- Confirm by phone / email / letter to all participants. Ask them to bring along photos / documents about the project to the session.
- Find a suitable room – lighting, heating, noise, size considerations, table. The room should be well lit, not too warm, with preferably a table to sit around so that the participants are able to see each other's faces. The most important aspect is to have no external noises because they will be picked up on the recorder.
- Organise refreshments / publicise event within project.

- Consider and circulate questions – the participants should have sight of the questions beforehand because they may wish to think about what they want to say in advance, and perhaps make notes.

### **What questions to ask?**

- Short / clear questions.
- One question at a time.
- Open questions – who, what, why, how, where, when?
- Do not anticipate the response i.e. So you struggled with getting start-up funding. Is that right?
- Allow time for a developed answer, but not for one person to dominate the session.

There are possible themes and questions included in the toolkit which can be adapted for your own purposes.

### **Sample Questions**

Every project will be individual in terms of start-up, different activities on site, development and growth, any setbacks and how they have been managed, and when and where various people have become involved. Here are some suggested 'starter' questions for discussions which can be changed to suit your own requirements.

#### Personal questions:

- What drew you to becoming involved in this project i.e. influence of relatives, a love of being outdoors, recognition of a need, wanting to be involved in the community etc.
- What have you gained personally from being involved?
- What changes have you seen in the project since you've been involved?  
Which changes are you most proud of?

#### Project / Movement questions:

- Who are the people who started your project? Please would you describe how it all began, even before work started on site.
- What were the project's original aims? How have these changed, if at all?

- How many paid staff do you have and how many volunteers? How have these numbers changed over time?
- Please would you describe some of the activities / programmes you have run. Who has been involved in running them and who has attended? How were they funded?
- What has been the benefit of your project to your community? What effects have you seen within the local community as a result of the project?
- What have been the main hurdles you and your project have had to overcome? What challenges do you face today and what strengths do you have?
- What is the realistic future of the project in your opinion? Where do you see yourselves in 5 years / 10 years time?
- If money wasn't an issue what individual aspirations would you have for the project? If money wasn't an issue what aspirations would you have as a group?
- What do you feel is the future of the community gardening and farming movement?

## **The Seminar Itself**

- Length of the session – you should set aside two hours. It is not likely that the session will last less than 90 minutes, although it may be much longer than two hours. If necessary you could all take a break part way through and re-convene after refreshments. However participants should not continue their discussions during the break as this would not be recorded and you could miss some really important anecdotes and opinions.
- Things to bring: audio recorder (eg laptop or tablet), boundary microphones, mains cable for recorder, spare batteries, spare memory cards, extension cable.
- Have water on the table.
- Remember to turn on recorder, check microphones, have spare batteries, check for extraneous noises. The recorder should preferably be connected to the mains as well as have battery power to ensure you capture the recording in the event of power failure. Bring some tape to secure wires to the floor to prevent trip hazard

- Bring name cards and markers. Ask participants to fill in name cards if there are people taking part who are not known to each other.
- Discuss procedure for the session – decide on a ‘goodwill agreement’.
- Participants to introduce themselves.
- Adopt a chronological approach. This may not work if the project is very new, in which case a thematic approach may be more suitable. A chronological approach ensures that major developments are not missed.
- Watch for less vocal participants and include them.
- If you have invited a (small) audience, towards the end open the floor for questions.

### **At the end of the session**

Ask all participants to sign a clearance form – the interview cannot be used afterwards without it. A sample clearance form is available at the end of this PDF file. You can use it as a guide to create your own.

It is vital to secure the interviewees’ informed consent. The interviewees will want to know: how the interview will be used, how it could be used in the future, whether they can review the interview and where the interview will be held. In the future, will the interviewees and their families have access to the interview? These are all areas for discussion, particularly relating to whether you wish to place a copy of the recording in a local archive.

During the session it is important to guard against defamation, which is a false statement of fact which injures that person’s interests. Defamation only applies to statements made about the living.

Also remember to:

- Take photographs of the attendees as a group and individually.
- Scan any photos and documents at high resolution. High resolution, good quality scans mean you can use your photos at a larger size for exhibition purposes in the future.
- Return any equipment on loan.
- Send a copy of the interview and clearance form to each participant with a thank you letter.

### **What are you looking for from the session?**

- Rich, colourful detail.
- Where you have the information you need.
- Where the audio quality is good.
- Where the interviewees are pleased with the process and the result.

It is important that everyone feels they have been heard and have had an opportunity to have their views and memories included.

### **What can you do with the interview?**

- Archive it.
- Transcribe it.
- Put extracts on a website. Extracts can be taken from the interview using free software called Audacity [audacity.sourceforge.net/](http://audacity.sourceforge.net/)
- Use in promotional literature - books, leaflets.
- Education programmes.
- Audio trails.
- Digital story telling – for examples of what digital stories are, have a look at the BBC website at [www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives/) or the My Yorkshire website: <http://www.myyorkshire.org/overview.asp?journeyid=113> (How to shoe a horse).