Karmabank – WhatsApp Communities

With the motto 'Together we design the world we want to live in' - Karmabank's arts-based social impact projects deliver tailored support to rebuild & transform the lives of residents & refugees.

Karmabank delivers a range of physical activity sessions and classes. For example, our Karmabank Racquets Club is a Women's Beginner Tennis Training session held weekly, rain or shine (in collaboration with Courtfit, idverde & Sport England). We also deliver or collaborate on short term projects, such as the 'Dive In' 6 week female swim session pilot with London Sport. We also support para athletes to train for the Paralympics, triathlons, and other sports.

How is WhatsApp used to communicate with members/participants?

Karmabank started as a simple WhatsApp group to help local organisations connect with one another better; to limit duplication in efforts and essential resources, and to help organisations co-ordinate their efforts around identifying Londoners left to fall through the gaps, especially during the pandemic.

Karmabank now uses WhatsApp to create self-sustaining 'micro-communities' around the projects we design or co-design. We set up different WhatsApp groups and communities for different projects, and on average a project has around 25 members. We also use WhatsApp to circulate flyers and updates to members, and to partners, volunteers and colleagues. Some of our WhatsApp groups are announcements only (to reduce chat and ensure our messaging is loud and clear), whereas others members and users to exchange freely.

What are the benefits of a WhatsApp community?

WhatsApp is used universally by every organisation in our non-profit space. For project work, we find it extends the project's ability to communicate rapidly and effectively with it's audiences.

We use WhatsApp mainly because there is no other similar free alternative, and everyone has it. This is partly due to the needs of Asylum seekers or local residents, who are typically on low or no income, so WhatsApp and free Wifi spots enable us to communicate with them. Also, due to its tech versatility, WhatsApp enables the easy sharing of flyers, video clips (larger than emails), documents, contacts, locations etc.

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How have you successfully built and maintained WhatsApp communities?

We grow our 'micro-communities' on WhatsApp through adding new members who register for activities, or adding new volunteers assigned to the project. We safeguard the community through screening at the registration and induction stage.

The key features we use are private messages, group chats, and regular updates to members.

Newer features take time to incorporate as many people are used to the older features – which still provide everything we need for the time being. We also use group video chats and group calls.

WhatsApp is an essential communication tool for any organisation working with asylum seekers and residents on low or no budget. It's one of the only free communication methods people use regularly and enables quick and easy two-way conversations.

The micro-communities we build through WhatsApp help members/participants to connect, share updates, and build friendships that are not only essential to positive mental and physical health, but also provide a source of motivation to ensure individuals continuously turn up, take part and sustain their physical activity habits.

Would you recommend other community sport & physical activity organisations use WhatsApp?

Yes! There are clear safeguarding and data privacy issues with using WhatsApp, but, like Zoom, it is a universally used communication tool that helps organisations connect with each other, and with members, partners, funders, media etc.

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What are your three top tips for successfully building a WhatsApp community?

1. Make the aims of the WhatsApp group or community clear in the description.

2. Pre-screen members/access to WhatsApp with a registration form, and make sure to include acceptance of your organisations data privacy and safeguarding policies.

3. Set clear rules for reducing spamming, off-topic chats, and encourage members to switch to private messaging for more in-depth discussions.