

Bristol Ageing Better Community Development for Older People (CDOP)

Initial findings and observations from UWE Bristol and Community Researchers: October 2019¹

Bristol Ageing Better has funded a series of 10 projects focused on Community Development for Older People (CDOP). Although starting at different times within the Bristol Ageing Better programme, each of these projects received funding for between 2 - 3 years.

UWE Bristol and a team of 8 Community Researchers are undertaking an in-depth evaluation of 7 of these 10 projects: Greater Brislington (delivered by Bristol Charities), Horfield & Lockleaze (delivered by Buzz Lockleaze), Greater Fishponds (delivered by The Care Forum), Old Market (delivered by Livewest), St Pauls (delivered by Livewest), Stockwood (delivered by St Monica Trust) and a city-wide 'strategic coordination' form of community development (delivered by LinkAge Network). The following initial findings and observations are based on these 7 projects.

Together, these 7 projects worked with an average of 2,800 people per year.

Learning and recommendations for future funders and providers



Scoping the area

Many of the CDOP projects found it valuable to spend time scoping the area at the beginning of the project. This included asset mapping, developing contacts with local groups and organisations, connecting with Council community development workers and finding out the historical context (for example previous workers or agencies operating in that area).

When scoping an area, time should be managed wisely. Whilst it is necessary work, in some cases it left little time for the more tangible community development outputs to be established. If project aims are to be realistic, the size and make-up of the area also need to be carefully considered in conjunction with the numbers and hours of proposed project staff.



Reaching and engaging people

After an initial phase of asset mapping and scoping the area, the CDOP projects used a variety of tools to reach and engage with local residents, exploring their interests and what they could offer.

These tools included door knocking and holding 'pop-ups' (for example on key walking routes through the area, near shops and schools, and outside blocks of flats). However door knocking can be time-consuming and in some cases was only used at particular points in time, such as before major events. It can work well for these activities to be informed by those who have a detailed knowledge of the local community, for example local postal workers, community police officers or local residents who have lived in the area for many years. People were found to be more receptive if the door knocking was undertaken by fellow residents themselves rather than community development workers who can be seen as 'external'.

Some projects also established steering/advisory groups and forums in order to involve local people from the beginning. These had mixed levels of success between the CDOP projects; some

¹ This should be considered a 'live document' of initial findings as of October 2019. The final evaluation will be published in 2020.

had little continuity of attendance and were not supported by project management, which limited their ability to carry out their intended function. Others were more successful, with one expanding the membership to be intergenerational. Having a steering group, with a significant number of local activists to represent the make-up of the project area, appears essential to provide practical knowledge, links, support and 'steering' to the worker. Without it, unless the worker is already established in the community, it may appear that they have been 'parachuted in'.



Raising awareness of groups and activities

A number of the CDOP projects produced paper 'what's on' booklets or newsletters to provide information about new and existing activities. As a printed resource, these booklets addressed digital exclusion as individuals did not need to access the internet. Projects often developed, printed and distributed these themselves, although in one case this was done by the provider organisation rather than the individual CDOP project.

It is important that these booklets are kept up-to-date, that information is accurate and that people have access to the latest edition. Whilst this led to duplicated information in the form of booklets and flyers distributed by different agencies, which might not be the best use of resources, this can also be beneficial as it increases the chance that messages will reach those who are more lonely or socially isolated. However it didn't appear to matter that a booklet covered a reasonably wide geographical area, as people tended to pick activities that were closest to them. For this reason, it may make sense to combine forces with other agencies in order to produce such booklets.

“ [The group] has really been a godsend taking me out of the house...getting out to [the group] keeps you sane. ”

Participant, CDOP St Pauls

There are however problems with the sustainability of these 'what's on' booklets after the funded period ends. One project made these sustainable by widening the booklet out to all ages in the community with a section specifically for people aged 50+. This meant it was more appealing for advertisers and therefore attracted more revenue to sustain it in the long-term.

Booklets are not the only ways workers disseminated information. For example two CDOP projects made use of the rolling information screens inside GP surgeries and at least one project arranged for a new notice board to be built in a locality further away from the existing sources of information.



Connecting groups and organisations

Rather than focusing on community development within a specific neighbourhood, one project had a strategic approach and focused on coordinating activities between agencies and groups operating across sections of the city. This illustrates the potential for community development work at a large population scale where, in many cases, local agencies appreciate support to build partnerships and act more strategically.

This approach enabled the project to act as facilitators, making introductions between organisations and building connections. Through this work, a gap in funding has been identified regarding support for community groups and small organisations with matters such as data protection, insurance, risk assessments and access to certain equipment.



Loneliness, isolation and mental health

It is difficult to say how many lonely and/or socially isolated people are now involved and attending activities as a result of the community development work. For example, it is unknown whether a 'what's on' booklet spurred someone into attending an activity or whether these individuals would have attended classes anyway because they are more proactive. These booklets can only be said to be effective for those who look at them and take action. Many projects felt they had only scraped the surface in finding lonely and isolated people.

A number of the CDOP projects found that those who are lonely or socially isolated often have complex issues affecting their lives (for example housing difficulties or poor mental health) and may need one-to-one support before they are able to participate in community activities. In some cases, this involved a referral to the BAB Community Navigators Service. Other individuals may only be comfortable attending an activity with a friend and would not come to activities on their own.

“ *When I first attended [an activity] I had to walk around the block a couple of times before I could walk through the door.* ”

*Participant and volunteer,
CDOP Greater Fishponds*



Consultation, participation and involvement for older people

One aim of the CDOP projects was to increase the influence that older people have over decisions that affect their local area. In some areas, this consultation was effectively achieved via a neighbourhood forum or over 50s forum. This seems to be a good way to get older people involved and for them to find out what is going on locally. However some people were not interested in getting involved, or stopped attending once they had the information they needed about local activities and clubs. New ways to keep people engaged for longer therefore need to be explored.



Sustainability

Sustainability needs to be embedded in activities from the start, for example by making contact with as many partners as possible and seeking out alternative revenue streams. Training opportunities for participants are also important, for example ‘grow your group’ courses or specific role-related training.

When activities were free or low cost for participants, it significantly helped to encourage participation. In some cases, BAB Kickstart funding was helpful in getting groups or classes off the ground. However these activities could not always continue after the initial series of classes if those attending were unable to pay the realistic costs of hiring a venue and a trainer/facilitator. One group was particularly reluctant to charge people to attend as some participants had already had to reduce their social activity for financial reasons. Others saw intergenerational activities as a possible way forward as it would enable groups to pool their resources with others.

One aspect of sustainability is ensuring activities have enough attendees. One project was honest with some activity groups about the possibility of closure. This then spurred people into being proactive in getting friends to attend in order to keep the group running. The same project is currently trying to foster connections with the new social prescribing service as a way to sustain participant numbers in activities beyond the funded period.

Some projects found it challenging to find volunteers willing to take on regular responsibilities with longer-term commitment or who were interested in more strategic planning. While some groups successfully supported a volunteer to take on more responsibility, being dependent on one key volunteer raises a question of sustainability for that group if the individual opts out in the future.



Transport

Mobility and transport are key factors in people’s ability to attend activities. It is important that groups and activities are accessible for those on foot who may not have access to a car or alternatively that transport is provided, particularly for those with mobility difficulties.

Within at least one CDOP project, most activities previously took place in only one part of the neighbourhood due to venues being unevenly dispersed. This meant that those who did not live nearby or have a car were required to take one or multiple buses in order to attend. One project began some positive work around transport and made arrangements with local taxi companies.

Despite this, there is some evidence that people were prepared to move to a new venue if they liked the activity. This emphasises the importance of getting an individual to attend the group in the first place so that they can see the benefits of participation and are therefore more inclined to stay.



Geographical boundaries and perceptions of community

Many of the CDOP projects found that, within their geographical area of work, residents often attended activities in other parts of the city. Similarly, activities within that area were attended by residents of other neighbourhoods. Some residents do not consider they have any connection, or want any connection, to their geographical neighbourhood, while others identify as being a resident of an adjoining neighbourhood regardless of the political ward boundary. Sometimes these identities were influenced by geographical layouts, economic wealth and community assets.

'Communities' and geography are not mutually exclusive; people may belong to several different communities of interest or geography at once, travelling to places where they feel comfortable. This affects how and where people look to find out about activities on offer. It also has implications for the future funding of specific areas, as not all individuals use services that are on their doorstep and care should be taken when imposing a definition of the 'community' for workers to focus on. There is a need for flexibility in this definition to allow some measure of self-identification and this needs reflecting in the indicators used to measure the success of a project.



Governance and staff turnover

Some of the CDOP projects had high levels of staff turnover, which caused problems in carrying out the project and continuing the momentum, relationships and practical arrangements established by previous workers.

Similarly, in some cases there was confusion surrounding the management and governance of the project, with management appearing disconnected from the project or absent altogether, and in one case using only a small percentage of the management hours allocated in the budget. Another project also experienced a lack of clarity at board level about who was holding the grant and deciding where the funding was being spent. This lack of governance in these two projects resulted in workers being left to 'go it alone' with very little support or management. This can lead to a lack of continuity in the project work, for example when one worker leaves and a new worker has to start again from scratch due to management's lack of information about the prior work.

These difficulties highlight the importance of ensuring that smaller providers have contingency plans in place to cover staff sickness and absence, that governance is clear and that management have buy-in and hands-on project involvement. An established steering group of local residents can also help to bolster practical support for the project staff to supplement management time.



Provider funding

Of equal importance is the issue of offering short-term funding contracts. This has implications for staffing, for example the workers that short-term contracts attract and the length of time they stay. However it also affects the community development work achieved. The 'test and learn' model at BAB has not allowed enough time for some projects to develop. Two or three years of funding is insufficient for the full potential of community development to be achieved; it takes time to find people within the target group, to build up trust in the local community and to enable vulnerable people to participate, particularly those who face multiple complex issues in their lives.

Similarly, covering a whole ward or neighbourhood partnership area rather than using prior research and asset-mapping to target funding on specific parts of an area meant that resources were spread thinly in two of the CDOP projects.