

Community Development with Older People in St Pauls and Old Market

Evaluation of Livewest's Bristol Ageing Better projects

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Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) funded a series of 10 projects focused on Community Development for Older People (CDOP). **This document contains the executive summary for the evaluation of the CDOP projects in St Pauls and Old Market, delivered by Livewest**

This evaluation was conducted by UWE Bristol and a team of Community Researchers. The full evaluation report will be available in Spring 2021 on the BAB website.

Background to the projects

These projects took place over a two year period from April 2017 - March 2019 and were part of the wider Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, which aimed to **reduce social isolation and loneliness** among older people in Bristol. The CDOPs also aimed to **support older people to contribute to their community**, and to gain **greater influence over decisions** that affected their local area.

The evaluation was carried out by a member of the team of community researchers which worked on the BAB evaluation, supported by the University of the West of England (UWE). A broadly ethnographic approach was taken which included interviews and discussions, observation of community activities associated with the projects, a review of project documentation and monitoring data, the analysis of case studies, and a review of research literature. The BAB Common Measurement Framework (CMF) for the geographical areas was also used.

St Pauls and Old Market are both inner-city areas in Bristol with higher than average BAME populations and levels of deprivation. They were selected by BAB as CDOP project areas given the **significant change which was understood to be taking place due to gentrification**; a transition considered to put older residents at increased risk of isolation due to the disruption of their familiar community. The geographical areas included in the projects were larger than the specific St Pauls and Old Market neighbourhoods.

Executive Summary

The evidence collected for the evaluation indicates that the CDOPs were **successful in reaching a range of lonely older people**, enabling them to **broaden their social networks and increase their community engagement**. People involved in regular CDOP activities reported various psycho-social impacts from their increased social participation. These included **feeling happier, less isolated and more connected** to their communities, an **increase in confidence and associated feelings of acceptance and well-being**, and improvements in their **perceived state of health**. There were more difficulties engaging people and

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fewer people became involved in projects in the Old Market CDOP area which was more amorphous than St Pauls and where there was no central community venue. In contrast, St Pauls retained a stronger identity as a 'neighbourhood' with a sense of community.

Particular challenges were faced in enabling local people to have a greater influence on planning and development, and the project workers found that **although participants were willing to be active on issues which were of more personal and immediate interest, they had less interest in wider issues affecting the local community.** Local engagement was also hampered by changes in the channels for influencing community and city-level decision-making during the course of the BAB programme.

Although the CDOPs were **successful in terms of participant involvement and leadership at certain levels** of organisation of the activities and groups, the **level of autonomy achieved was variable.** There were **challenges in finding volunteers willing to take on regular responsibilities** and make a longer-term commitment to the organisation and running of project groups and activities, or participate in strategic planning.

Both CDOP projects had **unexpected numbers of participants from other geographical areas of the city** which was partly attributable to the ethnically diverse nature of St Pauls and Old Market and the associated sense of inclusivity which attracted BAME people from further afield. This highlighted the need to be aware of the **spatial cross-cutting nature of communities of interest as well as geographical communities and to take this complexity into account** in determining target populations for future community projects.

CDOP participants generally **preferred groups and events organised around particular activities or interests** to those which just provided an opportunity to talk and meet other people, although the social element often became very important to them.

Sensitivity was required in the terminology used to publicise the projects and their activities, given participants' stated **preference for a positive focus and rejection of negative associations between old age, loneliness and social isolation.** Numerous channels for publicity were used to ensure **inclusion of those without internet access,** and a local radio programme aimed at older people was found to be particularly popular at attracting participants.

The CDOPs took place in areas of relative poverty and deprivation, and one of the factors influencing the success of CDOP activities was their **low cost to participants.** Another major factor was **flexibility in the way that groups ran.** This meant that individuals did not feel under pressure to attend regularly, and could instead incorporate CDOP activities into their lives which were sometimes constrained by factors such as poor health and caring responsibilities, as well as occupied with social and religious commitments.

Not everyone who felt lonely was ready to immediately increase their social participation, and the community workers spent considerable time assisting people with other problems in their lives and **providing extra support to enable them to begin attending social activities.** The community workers were particularly surprised by the **high numbers of older**

people with poor mental health. Established links with social prescribing services and with mental health services would be helpful for future projects.

Wide variations were found in CDOP participants' engagement in social activities which were not necessarily linked to the availability of local social activities or people's awareness of them. Similarly, there was **some variability in participants' subjective experience of loneliness**, which could be considered independent of their levels of social interaction. The evaluation findings thereby appear to confirm the **importance of distinguishing between social isolation and loneliness.** Consideration of the detailed case studies and other qualitative data collected during the evaluation highlighted the **significance of self-identity and self-esteem in influencing feelings of loneliness**, and the role that supported and encouraged social participation can play in providing **incremental steps towards reducing loneliness and enhancing mental well-being.**

The two year project timeframe for the Old Market and St Pauls CDOPs limited their impact. Time was required to build up trust amongst diverse local communities, identify target populations, and support some of the most vulnerable in order for them to gradually begin participating in social activities. With greater time it is possible that more project participants would have developed the confidence and skills to take on wider responsibilities as volunteers or become involved in wider decision-making, with new impacts.

Further BAB learning resources including the full CDOP St Pauls and Old Market evaluation report (available Spring 2021) can be found at:

<http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/learning-and-evaluation-hub/>

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