

Community Development with Older People: Strategy, Organisation and Coordination

Evaluation of LinkAge Network's Bristol Ageing Better project

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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 Strategy, Organisation and Coordination, delivered by LinkAge Network.**

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 project

In 2017, LinkAge Network (LinkAge) was commissioned through Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) to deliver a three year project called Community Development for Older People (CDOP) Strategy, Organisation and Coordination. The project included **coordinating and supporting community development activities** across three areas of the city, a **training programme**, a **'share and learn'** exchange initiative, and work to help **bring funding to groups and organisations** across the city. All of this work was founded on a principle of **championing asset-based approaches**. The LinkAge team consisted of three community development coordinators, a team manager, and additional office support.

This evaluation has been produced at the end of the project funding period. The research is a collaboration between staff at UWE's Centre for Public Health and Wellbeing and Bristol Ageing Better Community Researchers. We undertook a range of interviews, activity observations and project records analysis over the course of the project. **Relatively little previous research reports on best practice in community development 'coordination' specifically, and wider practitioner capacity building work.** The majority of existing research focuses on grassroots community development.

Executive Summary

The evaluation found that LinkAge was able to **build upon a track record of community development** work with older people's organisations and groups. The Community Development Coordinator (CDC) team also brought **considerable experience in the use of asset-based approaches**.

The first stage of the project involved a **strategic scoping of the organisational assets** in each area of the city. In each area – North, South, Central and East - the team then **brought together practitioners and other interested people** in a series of 'Gatherings' with the aim of **creating new dialogue around good practice, priorities for action and collaborations**. The team also focused

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support on **existing forums and networks – particularly those less visible in the Bristol community and voluntary sector**, such as faith networks. Over the course of this project, staff were well placed to connect several hundred individuals in the city: for example, in a nine-month period one CDC recorded 118 meetings, of which at least 86 involved external parties.

LinkAge was able to **advise and inspire groups to scale up their work and open out to new partners**. The team helped create **neighbourhood What's On Guides** for activities for the over 50s, worked on **filling gaps in local provision** and provided 66 **small grants** to help develop and support community activities for older people.

The **city-wide training played a role in building skills** for the BAB programme as a whole and practitioners in community development work more generally. LinkAge adopted a **strategic approach to skills training in which local groups with niche expertise were supported** by LinkAge to develop training events. This contrasts with standard training packages that are led by specialist consultants. The training sessions covered 11 subject areas, each of which were delivered on two occasions. In total there were 299 attendances for the programme, with an average of 13 people attending each session. Learning was consolidated through reflection sessions some months after attending training in order to re-cap key messages. A large number of participants described the **particularly impactful nature of the 'lived experience' approach**, whereby the personal stories and perspectives of different groups were shared at many of the training events. The training programme highlighted the **level of demand for free training within the voluntary sector in Bristol** focusing on particular 'at risk' demographic groups particularly people with dementia.

LinkAge's seven Share and Learn events adopted a strategic approach to bring together people interested in community development practice across the city and to transfer innovative and practical solutions to common issues faced by practitioners, volunteers and community members. Feedback on the sessions showed that they provide **networking opportunities**, a chance to **develop and reflect on practice skills**, an arena to learn about the wider reach of the BAB programme, and an opportunity to visit projects. The Share and Learn programme therefore provided an **informal continuing professional development platform in a context where such opportunities were rarely available**.

This type of project work is very **difficult to evaluate meaningfully using quantitative methods**. There are few 'standardised' impact measures for partner agencies, groups or individuals. Instead the evaluation showed that the project produced **diverse, complex and mixed types of impacts for beneficiaries**. These impacts were also often **difficult to fully predict**. As a consequence the team needed to adopt an **agile and highly personal approach** to their work. This included **building trust, making use of informal work environments, and spotting important opportunities as they arose**.

This project has been quite innovative by **coordinating activities amongst agencies across sections of the city rather than focusing on small area neighbourhoods**. LinkAge's CDOP project illustrates the potential for **community development work at a large population scale**

where, in many instances, local agencies appreciate the support from LinkAge to build partnerships and to act more strategically.

The project encountered a range of challenges. Its remit covered a considerable population and organisational field. The origins of the project were the consequence of a lengthy development process in which there were **different ideas about the central goals of the project**. The three year funding period added **pressure on the project to create change within a relatively short period** for community development. A further complication was the **reduction in public investment in local government and voluntary sector services** over the period of the project. **Uncertainty about the funding landscape dampened confidence** across the local sector to make long term investments in community development.

There is little doubt that each area of focus for the project has been valued and, moving forward, constitute important parts of the community development landscape for the city. The **coordination function clearly has had a role in addressing the uneven character of patchwork and often dislocated community development projects**; there is a clear demand for the workforce development role of **practice forums and training; brokerage and assistance with funding opportunities is particularly appreciated by small community groups**. Given the scale of the issues facing the ageing population, there is a need for specialised agencies to champion the interests of older people, especially those at risk of isolation and loneliness.

Further BAB learning resources including the full CDOP Strategy, Organisation and Coordination evaluation report (available Spring 2021) can be found at:

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

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