

Bristol Ageing Better Learning Event: Community Researchers May 2019

In May 2019, BAB facilitated a shared learning event with 5 of the 14 Ageing Better areas that have been funded by the National Lottery Community Fund through the Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better Programme. Programme teams, local evaluators and volunteer researchers attended from [Age Better in Sheffield](#), [Leicester Ageing Together](#), [Ageing Well Torbay](#), [Time to Shine Leeds](#) and [Brightlife Cheshire](#) as well as [Bristol Ageing Better](#).

The purpose of the event was to share learning about the involvement of older people as volunteer researchers within the Ageing Better programmes. No two of these programmes were the same; all were at different stages of involving volunteer researchers, and all had different aims and methods for these activities.

Having volunteer researchers can add significant value to a piece of research or evaluation, beyond that which could be captured by a university, college or evaluation organisation alone. In addition to learning how this role operates in other areas, programmes took part in structured discussions to share learning on the following three topics:

1. **What might best practice look like when establishing a team of older people as volunteer researchers?**
2. **How can we ensure a diverse community is reflected in a volunteer researcher team?**
3. **Legacy: Looking to the future**

This learning report shares the content of these discussions. Within Bristol Ageing Better these volunteer researchers are called Community Researchers. A variety of other role titles are used in other Ageing Better programmes, often reflecting the types of activities undertaken. This report will use the term 'volunteer researchers' as an umbrella term to refer to all of these roles.



What might best practice look like when establishing a team of older people as volunteer researchers?

Factors to consider include:

1. **Striking a balance between structure and flexibility**
2. **What will the role be called?**
3. **Advertising and recruitment**
4. **Clear expectations and volunteer agreements**
5. **Package of support**



Striking a balance between structure and flexibility

Discussions at the event emphasised the need to find a balance at the outset between having a volunteer researcher role that is clear and pre-defined and one which allows for flexibility and shaping by the volunteers themselves.

Having a **role that is too vague may put people off or be experienced as frustrating and confusing** for those involved, possibly leading some people to drop-out or become demotivated. If there will be an exploratory phase where the role is trialled and adjusted, be transparent about this from the beginning. A role description can also help to ensure structure.

However, on the other hand, it was also deemed important for **flexibility and coproduction to be a central element and as such the role should not be too rigidly structured at the outset**. It is useful to give the volunteer researchers as much choice as possible about what, when, where and how the research is undertaken.

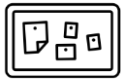
It can sometimes be tricky to strike this balance between structure and flexibility, particularly when the role involves external deadlines or funding requirements.



What will the role be called?

Emerging from the discussions was the advice to **take time at the start to decide what the role will be called**, and be open to changing this in the future if it no longer matches what the role evolves into. In addition to reflecting the content of the role, **the title will also influence who decides to apply for it** and therefore the diversity of the volunteer researcher team (see page 5 for further elaboration).

Role titles within the Ageing Better programmes include Community Explorers, Story Catchers, Citizen Evaluators, Peer Researchers, Volunteer Listeners and Community Researchers.



Advertising and recruitment

Your methods of promoting this volunteering role are likely to influence who applies for it (see page 6 for further elaboration). The channels you choose for **promotion should be appropriate for your local area**. Some options might include radio, social media, press releases in local newspapers, adult education centres, libraries, cafes, volunteer agencies, adult social services, citywide forums or word of mouth.

In addition to widespread promotion, the event attendees felt it was valuable to also **promote the opportunity through local community organisations**, particularly those which represent or work with different groups in the community for example ethnic minority groups or people with disabilities. It may also be useful to offer a **face-to-face information session (involving food) or informal discussion** about the role for those who are interested in finding out more. Some volunteers are likely to drop-out over time, for a wide range of reasons, so it is not usually necessary to set a maximum limit on the number of volunteer researchers who can be involved at the start.



Clear expectations and volunteer agreements

Some attendees recommended the use of **volunteer agreements in order to ensure expectations are clear**. These written agreements may need to be revised and possibly made more specific as the role evolves, for example changing from a looser framework at the start to a more detailed agreement once the researchers are in place and the role is underway.

Volunteer agreements help everyone involved to know what they are signing up to, the commitment required and the amount of support they will receive. It can be a **useful chance to openly discuss what type of communication and support work best for individuals**, for example whether they would like one-to-one support meetings. It also enables transparency about the purpose and boundaries of the role.

Similarly, when there are multiple organisations involved in coordinating the volunteer researchers (such as an Ageing Better programme and the local University conducting the evaluation) there should be a **clear written contract or agreement between these organisations** regarding what is needed to support the volunteers and who is responsible for each aspect; the more specific this agreement can be the better.



Package of support

A good package of support involves a number of different factors, including communication, training, strong working relationships, opportunities for sharing and, importantly, celebration and recognition. The **benefit of being connected to a university, college or other organisation** was a key part of attendees' discussions during the event.

Communication methods should be established which work for the individuals involved. This **contact should be regular while also respectful of people's other commitments**. Depending what works for the group, it may be useful to set mandatory meeting dates in advance or explore the possibility of taking part in a meeting via Skype or conference call

according to the wishes of the group. Written notes of meetings can help to ensure ideas are followed up and progress is made.

Appropriate training, both at the start of the role and on an ongoing basis, was deemed important by event attendees. The world of research can involve a whole new language to become familiar with. Similarly training about research questions, interviewing, focus groups, safeguarding, minute taking and ethics are likely to be useful depending on the role and volunteers' previous experience. Holding an initial programme of training close together at the start of the role can help to build momentum. Regularly ask the researchers what they would like training on and have an appropriate budget to be able to facilitate this.

Strong working relationships were positioned as key to any package of support. There should be **mutual respect between the volunteer researchers and the organisations** they work with, taking an asset-based approach which recognises the variety of skills, backgrounds and experiences which people bring. It takes time to build these relationships but it can be aided by having a **dedicated post within one of the organisations whose role it is to support** the volunteer researchers on a day-to-day basis and act as a mentor for any research queries. Depending on the team's communication preferences it might be an option to hold informal drop-in sessions to discuss things face-to-face.

Similarly, it can be useful to **facilitate opportunities for sharing knowledge and resources.** This might be internal within the researcher team, for example allocated time for this during meetings, or external with others undertaking a similar voluntary role in other geographical areas.

Remember that the team of researchers are all volunteers and are choosing to give up their time for free (potentially a very large number of hours). These **contributions should be recognised and celebrated,** for example through thank you messages or celebration events. Ensure that the role does not start to feel like a job, and that it **continues to meet individuals' motivations** for taking part. Similarly, be transparent about how the work will be used and the wider impact of this.

In order to provide a good package of support, an **appropriate budget is needed,** for example to cover the costs of a thorough advertising process, training, travel costs, resources, printing, recognition and many other aspects of being a volunteer researcher. Establish a culture whereby all volunteer researchers claim all of their expenses, introducing a formal process for this if needed.

How can we ensure a diverse community is reflected in a volunteer researcher team?

Factors to consider include:

1. **What do we mean by diversity?**
2. **Language**
3. **Advertising and recruitment**
4. **Flexibility and choice within the role**
5. **Team cohesion**



What do we mean by diversity?

When establishing a team of volunteer researchers whose focus is on people aged 50+, there are many aspects of diversity to consider beyond age. These might include gender, sexuality, ethnicity, educational background, language fluency, upbringing, familiarity with the local community, research experience or other skills. Many of these are not visual and cannot be guessed through appearance.

It is important to be **mindful about diversity** within the researcher team, and the **perspectives which may or may not be considered during research and analysis** as a result of this. The make-up of the researcher team will be influenced by the demographics of the local area, however some ideas were suggested during the event to try to increase diversity where possible...



Language

When recruiting volunteer researchers, the language and terminology used will affect the diversity of the team. As noted on page 2, event attendees felt that the **role title of 'researcher' or 'evaluator' may be interpreted as requiring academic experience** and therefore put some people off taking part, for example those with little formal education or who do not have a background in research. However this may not always be the case and there is no single term which will appeal to everyone.

It may be useful to explicitly state that you are looking for people with a certain background or characteristic in order for the team to reflect the local population. Similarly, an **emphasis on useful skills or interests rather than experience or qualifications** could be made explicit when recruiting, particularly for those who have had a bad experience of education. Examples of the financial and training support offered, for example that all transport costs will be covered and that full training will be provided, may also help to encourage a diverse range of applicants.

The language used should **match the function of the role** and may vary depending whether the researchers would be undertaking data analysis, evaluating against certain outcomes and writing up reports. Similarly, it will also vary according to whether the

volunteer researchers are striving to be as impartial as they can or whether they are speaking directly from their own experience and worldview as a representative from their community.



Advertising and recruitment

To increase the likelihood of a diverse volunteer researcher team, try going beyond those who are immediately forthcoming and **recruiting within the communities that you want to reach**. This might involve employing similar techniques to those used in community development projects such as having a pop-up stall in certain neighbourhoods or going into local shops, cafés, barbers, community centres or religious institutions.

As mentioned on page 3, it might be useful to **recruit through local community organisations or other individuals who act as ‘gatekeepers’** to certain communities, tapping into their expertise, knowledge and community networks. However it is important to remember that not all aspects of diversity have a representative local community organisation, for example diversity of educational background.

This process will **require time and patience and should therefore be started early** so that it is not rushed, especially if there are other deadlines for it to coincide with.



Flexibility and choice within the role

The volunteer researchers need to be genuinely interested in what they are doing. **Find out their interests and motivations so that you can tap into this passion** and try to adapt the role around these interests, for example an issue they would like to explore within the community.

Try to give the researchers **as much choice as possible regarding what they do and how they do it**, identifying training if someone wants to do something but is new to it or lacking confidence. Make it clear that the contribution is flexible and can fit around other activities and personal commitments.

Attendees believed that one of the key benefits of having volunteer researchers is that **they may be able gather different perspectives from an evaluation organisation**. This is particularly the case when the volunteer researchers are able to build a rapport with those they are interviewing.



Team cohesion

Strong bonds within the team of volunteer researchers can improve the quality and enjoyment of the role, as well as potentially enable any issues or concerns to be shared and addressed in a timely manner. Team cohesion can be encouraged through **working on a project in pairs or small groups**. If future cohorts of volunteer researchers are recruited then it is important for them to feel included in the team and equally valued. If there is a large inequality of experience between cohorts of researchers then one option is for **existing researchers to act as mentors for newer ones**.

Legacy: Looking to the future

Factors to consider include:

1. **What does success look or feel like for volunteer researchers?**
2. **How can older people be supported to continue as volunteer researchers after the Ageing Better programmes finish?**



What does success look or feel like for volunteer researchers?

One aspect of success discussed at the event is that **findings are heard and acted on by the appropriate stakeholders at the point when they will have the most impact.**

Volunteer researchers at the event said that they wanted to produce work that will be useful and that **action will be taken as a result of the findings**, for example by commissioners or other local organisations. Part of this success is being able to realise early on that something does not work and be able to change it along the way. As such, success is for the work to be valued and have an impact.

Another aspect of success mentioned is **empowerment of the local community** and third sector organisations. Attendees spoke about wanting local people to be empowered to do things for themselves and, in particular, for **community activities to become sustainable through the good practice being recorded by the researchers.** Through this research there is the ultimate aim of helping to reduce loneliness and social isolation among those aged 50+.

On a personal level, the volunteer researchers said that success is to continue **building on the skills developed during the role so far**, making use of these skills in the future instead of losing them. For teams of volunteer researchers, success is having established an engaged and passionate group of individuals who are equipped with the skills required to continue pursuing other research projects if desired.

Some successes will only be discovered through hindsight at the end of the Ageing Better programmes; many of the volunteers researcher roles are evolving and it is not always clear where the journey will lead – “our beginnings don’t know our endings”.



How can older people be supported to continue as volunteer researchers after the Ageing Better programmes finish?

Some of the researchers at the event expressed a possible interest in continuing to apply their skills to other research projects in the future. There is the **potential for these skills to be used for a range of other research projects** not just those focused on people aged 50+. Strong relationships have been established within researcher teams, sometimes over

the course of many years, and it might be possible for teams to work on future research projects together as an experienced and cohesive team.

However there were also concerns that they **may be viewed by other organisations as a free workforce** and would therefore need to be safeguarded against being exploited. As voluntary roles, any future opportunities would need to strike the right balance with the amount of time required.

Many of the volunteer researchers felt that having **ongoing support from an organisation, university or college** would be needed for them to feel confident applying their research skills to other projects in the future. It was felt by some that having the backing of an academic institution, in particular, may help findings to be listened to and valued.

It is important to think about the **timing when discussing future possibilities** with volunteer researchers. Discussing this at busy times of year may mean it is difficult for the volunteers to give this proper consideration, yet on the other hand it is also important for the researchers to be involved in these conversations from day one and to be consulted on any potential opportunities.