

Bristol Ageing Better Community Kick-Start Fund

Summary of evaluation findings from UWE Bristol and Community Researchers

This document provides a **summary of the evaluation findings relating to the BAB Community Kick-Start Fund**. [Click here to read the full report and addendum.](#)

Background

The BAB Community Kick-Start Fund (CKSF) **offered funding of up to £2,000** to support the development of new activities designed to reduce loneliness and social isolation in people aged 50 and over.

Applications could **cover supply of goods** (e.g. equipment needed to start a new activity), **delivery of services** (e.g. training provision, room hire) **or a mix of both**. However, under the grant conditions of the National Lottery Community Fund, it was not possible for BAB to make a grant of money to an applicant. **BAB therefore purchased the goods and/or services on behalf of the successful applicants**. A Project Officer within the BAB team was responsible for coordinating the fund.

Applications were assessed by a panel of volunteers who were themselves aged 50+.

Applications were open for a 3-year period between January 2016 and March 2019, with 10 rounds of funding applications. During this time, **the fund received 221 applications and made 141 awards**, with a total expenditure of over £229,300.

Participation and Impact

The CKSF involved **6,337 participants** and **423 volunteers** (contributing **7,966 voluntary hours**). Most activity groups **achieved high and consistent attendances** over the funding period.

126 participants provided their demographic details. These suggest that at the start of their involvement with an activity funded by the CKSF, the average age of participants was **72** years old, **45%** were living alone, **45%** had a long-standing illness or disability and **23%** had carer responsibilities. **81%** were female and **22%** were from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups. However these 126 respondents only reflect a minority of the total participants taking part in CKSF projects.

Only a small number of participants (27) completed both baseline and follow-up outcomes questionnaires. **This number is too small to make reliable judgements about impact**, however the results **indicate positive changes** for reduced **isolation**, involvement in the **development of activities** and **social participation** in group activities.



Key learning and evaluation findings



1. Broad range of activities funded

The CKSF has resulted in a **wide variety of new activities** across a **diverse range of communities** in the city. It is likely that the **ability to apply for both revenue (recurring) and capital funding** was a factor in this broad range of activity; costs such as venue hire and staff sessional fees are usually challenging for small groups but could be covered by CKSF.

Many applicants implied they would not have thought about setting up a new group or activity without the opportunity to apply for funds; **they were inspired purely because they had been made aware of the CKSF**. In this sense it is clear that the CKSF has inspired the creation of activities that did not previously exist locally, adding to the broad range of activities on offer across Bristol.

In addition it has given some of the larger organisations the **opportunity to diversify and extend their work to include people over 50**, because they could experiment on a small scale.



2. Size of applicant organisations

BAB designed the CKSF to **primarily target small local groups of people aged over 50** wanting to develop an activity within their own community. Despite including many good practice features (e.g. a simple application form, support for applicants, no requirement to have a bank account or be formally constituted), the fund made **less than 10% of its awards to small community groups**.

There were **some potential barriers for smaller groups applying to the fund**. These include limited advertising and outreach for the fund as well as a lack of community networks outside of BAB-funded work through which to circulate such information. **Getting information out to smaller organisations and offering support throughout the application process** to groups who are new to the process of managing money is therefore important.



3. Independent selection panel

An innovative feature of the scheme was the **independent selection panel consisting of volunteers aged over 50**, some of whom had life experiences in common with applicants and a good knowledge of community work in the city. In particular, a lot of time was spent in **discussing the marginal applications** and on several occasions the applicant would be asked to re-apply with an improved application.

However, with hindsight, the evaluation team felt that it would have been **desirable if there had been a greater diversity of the panel and more resources put into promoting the opportunity more widely**.



4. Supporting the application process and the significance of the Project Officer role

If a fund is aiming for a broad range of activities then **it is not enough to simply launch the funding on its own; a support system is needed.** This is particularly valuable for smaller groups who do not have a skilled bid writer within their organisation.

The BAB Project Officer was a crucial part of this support. They were **accessible via phone or email** and would meet organisations **face-to-face** to answer queries, **particularly when groups were unfamiliar with making funding applications.** They would also **support rejected applicants to improve their application** before it could be submitted again. About 25% of successful applicants later asked for help in identifying continuation funding at the end of the project.

During the last round of applications, the Project Officer held **pre-application workshops in parts of the city where there had previously been fewer applications.** These were popular and it would have been valuable to deliver these throughout the CKSF process.

One reason the Project Officer role was vital was due to a **lack of other community networks within the voluntary sector in Bristol, largely due to austerity and cutbacks.** If there was a bigger and better network of community hubs available to share ideas, concerns and expertise then small groups would probably be more able to tap into funding sources like CKSF.



5. Size and type of funding

Most award holders thought that **the size of the funding (up to £2,000) was appropriate.** However, where the applicant's project required **advertising** (for example through paid adverts or printed posters), or where it required **transport** due to encouraging the participation of those with mobility difficulties, then £2,000 was often not sufficient.

For some applicants this was the first funding application they had made and so had omitted various expenses from their application. In these situations, BAB allowed a 10% overspend allowance. Future funding schemes could similarly have a **small additional fund to help make up for minor oversights in the initial costings** (on presentation of relevant receipts), or include a **pre-application checklist or a part-itemised budget form** to ensure that things like publicity and printing are not forgotten.

Applicants' opinion was split evenly between preferring a controlled budget with goods/services purchased on behalf of the award holder (the system BAB used), or preferring a cash award (which the National Lottery Community Fund did not allow). **Larger organisations preferred cash awards** which could then fit in with their accounting procedures, but **smaller organisations were generally pleased that they did not have to worry about invoices, bank accounts and payments.** Ideally, if the aim is to encourage small local groups to thrive, then **both options should be on offer.**



6. The 12-month delivery period

A time-limited 12 months for the delivery of a small grant-funded project is common. However, several of the applicants remarked that **the 12-month period was not long enough** (this was echoed in the research literature). **Set up times were much longer than anticipated**, especially where volunteers were doing much of the preparation work. In the future **funding organisations may wish to consider a longer period** (for example, up to 2 years) for completion.



7. Monitoring and evaluation

Funders are, rightly, **keen to want to know if the money in a micro-grant scheme has achieved appropriate outcomes**. BAB's experience was that the quarterly reports were not always completed and it was uncertain how reliable the data was. However, the evaluation team's contact with the applicants indicated a **high level of commitment to delivering a good activity, and that was what most people wanted to put their energies into** – good regular attendances at the activity was sufficient for many to show that they were doing a good job.

The research literature **questions how realistic it is to expect small groups to have sophisticated data collection systems**. In some circumstances it might be appropriate to seek support from an academic institution. As researchers we felt that the **case study was a useful tool for recording the impact of an activity which did not require special skills or a lot of time**. Our experience of this evaluation led us to feel that although public money needs to be accounted for, **monitoring impacts should be proportionate to the value of the award**, and not deter enterprising people setting up activities which would enhance their local community.



8. Sustainability and continuity funding

Sustainability was one of the criterion of obtaining the funding but **it is unrealistic to assume that all groups can be self-financing after an initial injection of up to £2,000**; it often depends on the type of activity and the participants' income levels.

Many groups that are ongoing need some level of funding in order to ensure continuity. Whilst some may charge their members a small fee, this is not always practical and could act as a barrier to attendance. There may also be changes within the local area, increased costs or unexpected expenses which can make it **very difficult for some activities to be self-sustaining**.

In some cases, applicants were unsure where to go next in terms of securing more funding and the BAB Project Officer provided advice. Whether a small grant fund coordinator should also provide this advice after the initial funding had ceased is an issue up for debate; it may be more cost effective to ensure that **city-wide organisations are funded adequately to provide this service** to small groups.

Furthermore, small groups **often do not wish to expand** once they have found a model which works. **Funding bodies often require a new activity, instead of the same activity**, even if there is evidence that the original idea was popular and fulfils a need.



9. Impact on loneliness and isolation

Activities funded by the CKSF **offer opportunities for people to re-engage with others and extend their number of social relationships**, often within their own neighbourhood. Many groups worked hard to **create environments where people felt safe and welcome** right from the moment of walking through the door.

However the CKSF should be seen as a **preventative scheme, rather than necessarily reaching those who are already isolated**. By creating localised and tailored community activities, individuals can become involved with these activities at an earlier stage and are then more likely to stay engaged and maintain social links for longer into older age.

Individuals experiencing high levels of loneliness and isolation **may need one-to-one support first in order to break down barriers, overcome anxieties and build up the motivation to attend a group**. This support may come from their family, a social prescribing service, social work or carer staff. It is unrealistic to expect that small community groups, whose staffing is limited, can also provide this tailored support to individuals.

That said, the evaluation revealed many instances where **people's lives had been transformed** by the experience of attending an activity funded by the CKSF, as their confidence, health and wellbeing had improved.



10. Capacity building

Micro-funding schemes like the CKSF are essential building blocks for a vibrant community sector in the future. They provide **opportunities for individuals to develop skills** including fundraising and project management, and for communities to work together to solve 'problems' and build a better quality of life.

Funders need to **consider how best to support potential and fledgling organisations to provide activities in their communities**, some of which will want to expand and others who wish to remain small and local. The role of Bristol Older People's Funding Alliance and the City Council's One City Plan will be critical in taking forward the learning from this micro-funding work.

Recommendations

- 1.** If a fund is targeted towards smaller organisations the application form should be prefaced by a **checklist of items**, including items such as publicity and resources for the activities provided.
- 2.** The funding organisation should finance a **dedicated staff member** to provide administrative and technical support to applicants, as well as to successfully funded projects. Having this staff member is a critical component of the support required.
- 3.** In the absence of extensive community networks, applications from smaller organisations should be encouraged by **targeted advertising, outreach activities and structured ongoing support** by the fundholder throughout the application period.
- 4.** The possibility of **linkages between organisations** in the provision of services to potential users should be promoted.
- 5.** To encourage vibrancy and diversity within small organisations a **structured support system** should be implemented throughout the application process; pre-application, during the application process and during either the initiation/set-up process or to assist in re-application.
- 6.** The **involvement of older volunteers in the selection process** should be encouraged. They should, as far as possible, represent all sections of the community and receive relevant induction training and support from the funding organisation.
- 7.** Grants should be structured to provide a **recurring element as well as capital**. This enables a greater diversity of applications.
- 8.** Fund users should be **free to decide how they would like to receive their funds** – either by direct payment for goods and services by the funder or via a controlled budget allocation.
- 9.** The funder should consider establishing a flexible system whereby a sum up to 10% of the award is available to **cover unforeseen costs** that were not factored into original bids.
- 10.** An **extended time-frame in which to spend the money** should be negotiable e.g. two years rather than one; this would be particularly beneficial to smaller groups.
- 11.** The funding agency should provide **opportunities for the successful applicants to share experiences**, which may help new applicants with their funding applications, build skills, develop collaborative ventures and, where possible, swap assets.
- 12.** The funding agency needs to provide **information regarding continuation funding**, where needed, to all fund users. Continuity funding needs to be available for groups with different aspirations: those wishing to continue to provide the same activities; expand these activities; or change to different activities.

Implications of Covid-19

The evaluation team investigated **whether some CKSF groups had continued during the Covid-19** pandemic, and **how the facilitators of these small groups felt** about the 'new normal'.

[Click here to read the case studies in the full CKSF evaluation addendum.](#)

Some of the activities funded by CKSF lend themselves to online tuition more than others, and **some have found a way to deliver classes over video conferencing facilities** such as Zoom or Skype. Others have recognised that their classes transcend the activity itself, and have **prioritised maintaining friendships and bonds** that have already been established in order for members to stay in touch remotely. Some have found a way to **continue with classes outside**, whilst for others it has **not proved possible to continue**, and this loss has been keenly felt by participants.

Although 2020 has brought with it many challenges, the CKSF evaluation addendum illustrates **potential opportunities and unexpected outcomes of the lockdown period**. Although not all groups have managed to continue during this time, this appears to be largely due to **a lack of resources rather than a lack of appetite from participants**, and with support - and perhaps some funding - it is possible that other groups will be able to follow suit.

Of course there is a danger that some older people will still be left behind, so it is imperative that **measures are put in place to ensure that everyone has access to the internet and the appropriate technology** to allow them to join online classes and activities. Time and effort must now be invested in this, and if successfully achieved then the impact of the virus on loneliness and social isolation might at least be mitigated to some extent through an increased use of technology and engagement in the virtual world.

Further BAB learning resources including the full Community Kick-Start Fund evaluation report and addendum can be found at:

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

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