

Bristol Ageing Better Community Researchers

Interim report on five years of learning
& achievements



(September 2014-October 2019)



Community
Researchers Learning
Event May 2019

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Bristol Ageing Better

<http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/>

Centre for Public Health and Wellbeing

<https://www1.uwe.ac.uk/hls/research/publichealthandwellbeing.aspx>

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September 2014-October 2019

Executive Summary

The Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) programme is a partnership of organisations and individuals working together over a five-year period (April 2015-March 2020) to reduce loneliness and isolation amongst older people in Bristol.

The involvement of older people as volunteer researchers – ‘Community Researchers’ (CRs) – has been an essential element of the UWE-led evaluation of the BAB programme and its impacts, particularly the qualitative aspect. This report provides an overview of the identity and role of the CRs, how they became an integral part of the BAB programme, the activities and achievements of this team to date, and the lessons learnt from CR involvement in the evaluation process.



The present CR team (*as of September 2019*) is composed of 11 individuals aged from their mid-60s to late-70s who live in various parts of central and suburban Bristol. From an early stage of their involvement, the CRs were invited by UWE to choose which research and evaluation activities they would like to be responsible for. Similarly, they have been enabled to withdraw from activities whenever they did not feel suitably interested or engaged, or able to commit the necessary time. This freedom and flexibility has been a cornerstone of CR involvement and appears to have worked very well. The methodology employed in the various evaluation activities which the CRs have undertaken has also been adaptable, and the CRs have been encouraged to identify new areas of research training which are of particular interest to them and relevant to their work.



Many of the individuals who chose to become CRs were at a significant transitional stage in their life, adapting to their retirement when they volunteered to take on the community researcher role, and the role appealed to them for various reasons. Their voluntary input to the programme has been impressive. Individual CR estimates of the time they have worked on BAB-related activities range from 250 to 770 person hours amongst those who were original team members. In total, UWE estimates that the CRs have volunteered 11,000 work hours, excluding travel, from their first involvement up until May 2019¹.

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BAB Community Researchers Information Sheet, distributed at the national BAB CRs Learning Event, 9th May 2019.



The CRs have been involved in a range of research and evaluation projects that include:

- Audit of Volunteer Involvement, *September-December 2014*
- The Greater Fishponds Neighbourhood Asset Mapping, *July 2015-May 2016*
- BAB Aardman animation evaluation, *July-November 2015*
- The Greater Brislington 'area profile' and Mini-Project, *May-December 2016*
- CRs as 'Maximizers' of the Common Measurement Framework (CMF), *2016*
- Evaluation of 'Growing Support' and 'Alive!' Care Home Interventions, *2017*
- Wellspring Social Prescribing Pilot Project evaluation, *2017*
- Community Webs project evaluation, *2017*
- Community Kick-Start Fund: Audit, Process Review and Evaluation Report of Successful Applicants, *November 2016-April 2017*



Ongoing projects include:

- Community Kick-Start Scheme – Final Evaluation
- Evaluation of the Community Navigators project
- Evaluation of the Community Development for Older People (CDOP) projects
- Evaluation of Age-Friendly Cities project



The CRs are involved in a number of ongoing evaluation projects, including Kickstart, Community Navigators, Community Development and Age Friendly City.



An enormous variety and scope of work has therefore been undertaken by the CRs, with cumulative impacts on the information and knowledge produced by the BAB programme. A number of key lessons have emerged from the CRs' work to date. Building on community researchers' experiences, assets and interests in developing the scope of their responsibility and providing them with appropriate training and support is one important aspect. In the case of the BAB evaluation, an early focus on the asset mapping of selected wards and neighbourhoods of the city was a highly successful approach which built the CR team's confidence, developed greater understanding of certain geographical areas which were a priority for the programme, and fed directly into subsequent BAB commissioning. This approach can therefore be recommended for any similar programme work.



Frank and regular discussions about the needs and expectations of CRs and other stakeholders have been essential, and it has taken time to build and sustain the close relationships required to establish a common understanding of and consensus concerning roles and responsibilities. The 'co-produced' approach pursued in the evaluation, whereby research was jointly owned by UWE and the CRs, was a complex undertaking. The CRs appreciated the freedom and autonomy they were given overall, but there were certain key points where a greater academic steer and engagement from UWE would have been valued in terms of planning and executing the work. Conversely, there were moments when data collected by the CRs were shared with UWE researchers and CRs found themselves not as involved as they could have been in the analysis and write up of findings. Systematic information-sharing concerning the results of the various evaluations and how this learning has shaped decisions about future funding cycles has been important to enhance CRs' understanding of their contribution to the BAB programme; establishing an effective 'feedback loop' is essential. A central feature of the CR project has been the emergence of monthly group meetings where the CRs and UWE and BAB staff can share progress and concerns.



Certain intense periods of work for the CRs have created substantial pressure, and it is questionable, perhaps, to what extent volunteers can or should feel the stresses which are normally associated with a remunerated role. On rare occasions tensions have emerged regarding the distinct volunteer role of CRs and the paid role of UWE evaluation staff, possibly emerging from the afore-mentioned pressures. This, again, flags the importance of maintaining common, transparent understanding and consensus about roles, responsibilities and expectations.



For many of the CRs their research and evaluation work has involved very little direct contact with older people. While this has been an inevitable outcome of the methodologies employed in various aspects of the evaluation, this has flagged for some the importance of identifying appropriate ways to include ‘beneficiaries’ or the ‘service users’ in any rounded evaluation. There are ethical challenges in including older people in evaluations conducted in certain settings such as care homes, for example, but the lonely and isolated are key stakeholders in the BAB programme and hence finding ways of including their voices is essential.



The current CR team constitutes ‘community’ researchers in the sense that they belong to the Bristol population of the over-60s. In the majority of cases (*apart from one exception*) the CRs do not identify as being part of any specific local geographical or cultural community in Bristol. Hence for the most part the CRs have been evaluating various projects by travelling to sites and communities outside of their home areas. Their relative socio-demographic homogeneity, and the lack of ethnic and cultural diversity within the team has led some CRs to describe themselves as “fraudulent” as they only represent one particular ‘community’. Important lessons have been learnt regarding how to enhance diversity in the establishment of a CR team, such as where CR openings are advertised, the overall timing of and strategy for recruitment. The possibility of renaming the role ‘researcher’ has also been proposed, as for some people with less formal education backgrounds this may be an intimidating or off-putting term. The potential difference in recruitment potential if the CR role was to be paid has also been considered. There have long been academic debates regarding the nature and value of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ researchers. Recognition of the value of researchers with different backgrounds and the advantages of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ involvement has led some CRs to conclude that an ideal team to conduct research in any given local community might include a mix of both those from inside and outside that community.



Finally, as well as their intellectual engagement with their evaluation work for BAB, the CRs have provided the programme with new insight into the concepts of loneliness and isolation stemming from their observations and lived experiences. These reflections highlight the importance of unpicking the concepts of loneliness and isolation and their relationship with ageing and what interventions and support work best in addressing older people’s varied lived experiences and distinctive requirements.

Chapter One:

Introduction



Bristol Ageing Better – Background and Aims

The Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) programme is a partnership of organisations and individuals working together over a five year period (April 2015-March 2020²) to reduce loneliness and isolation amongst older people in Bristol. BAB is led by Age UK Bristol and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund through its 'Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better' programme, which is running across 14 areas in England.

To fulfil its objective the BAB programme is commissioning projects across four main themes:



BAB funds a wide range of activities across Bristol focusing on personal and group-based interventions, and community development, service innovation and integration, and structural change.

² The programme has a one year extension until March 2021, which will involve the wind-down and embedding of activities.

The 'Community Researchers' within BAB

Rationale and Overview

From its inception, the BAB programme developed plans to evaluate its work comprehensively following a number of different approaches.

The University of the West of England (UWE) was contracted as the local agency leading on the programme evaluation, with an express approach of reflecting the interests and concerns of a wide range of stakeholders, including older people, the BAB partnership, and policy, service development and funding agencies at both local and national levels. Four specific outcome areas were defined in relation to the evaluation:

- **Social contact:** an increase in the number of older people who report that they have the amount and type of social contact that they want to reduce isolation and loneliness;
- **Community contributions:** more older people contributing to their community through mechanisms such as volunteering, belonging to a forum, steering group or other activity;
- **Influencing decisions:** a greater number of older people saying that they can influence decisions that affect their local area and how services are designed and delivered; and
- **Building an evidence base** to ensure that future services in Bristol are better planned and more effective in reducing loneliness and isolation.

Through routine programme monitoring and evaluation, considerable evidence is being collected related to these various outcomes. However, it was also considered essential to collect further in-depth evidence regarding in what ways and for whom the BAB programme has been providing benefits, and the characteristics of particular projects and group formation models and their associated achievements (*Jones et al. 2018*), in order to inform ongoing and future interventions related to reducing loneliness and isolation.

One of the key elements of the UWE-led evaluation proposed during the planning phase was the involvement of older people as volunteer researchers. This approach was founded on the notion that by 'co-producing' the BAB evaluation with a group of 'community researchers', this work would be carried out 'with' older people rather than 'on' them (*UWE 2018a*) as well as on the various benefits understood to be gained from older people working as researchers themselves. *Burholt et al. (2010)*, for example, posited that older people who conduct research can uncover insights which may not otherwise have been unearthed, while this research involvement also can and should empower this group of researchers; the process itself can develop a sense of community as older people are working together for a common cause in which they believe³. Community Researchers (CRs) aged over 50 therefore became an essential element of the evaluation, particularly the qualitative aspect, in line with BAB's overall commitment to involve older people in all aspects of programme work and worked closely with the UWE team in evaluating a range of projects.

3 All references here cited in UWE 2018.

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This report provides an overview of the identity and role of the CR team, how they became an integral part of the BAB programme, the activities and achievements of this team to date, and the lessons learnt from CR involvement in the evaluation process. The information presented is drawn from BAB documentation – both published and unpublished – and group discussions and a number of one-to-one interviews with the current CRs and one former CR, as well as discussions with both UWE and BAB staff. Collecting information for this report has resulted in the CRs’ providing detail about their own personal learning and reflections related to their work for BAB, much of which is included here and certain aspects of which will be written up elsewhere.

Some key aspects of the learning to date were also shared at a national Community Researchers Learning Event which took place in Bristol on 9th May 2019, bringing together the BAB CR team and staff and volunteer researchers from five other ‘*Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better*’ areas.⁴

This report summarises the formal activities and outputs of the CRs’ work, some of which has had a tangible impact on certain BAB approaches and funding allocations, and may yet inform decision-making beyond the lifetime of BAB. However, it should also be noted that the process whereby the CRs have been working has itself led to less obviously discernible, but nonetheless significant, impacts on the BAB programme.

The CRs have had a unique exposure to a range of projects funded by BAB through their regular conversations and meetings with project staff as part of their varied evaluation brief. Through this contact they have often been in a position to relay questions and issues of concern back to BAB management, providing a unique and important independent point of advice and insight to both BAB staff and programme beneficiaries. This ‘bridging’ role has been aided by the regular monthly meetings which take place between the CRs and BAB staff, facilitated by UWE. Indeed, the various forms of engagement between the CRs and the BAB programme teams meant that as early as 2016 the CRs were considered to be “embedded in the DNA” of the Bristol Ageing Better Programme (UWE 2016) and the CRs’ active role in the overall development of the programme has been widely acknowledged.⁵

4 See <http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/userfiles/files/Summary%20of%20learning%20from%20Bristol%20Community%20Researchers%20learning%20event%20May%202019.pdf> and [http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/userfiles/files/Learning%20from%20Bristol%20Community%20Researchers%20learning%20event%20May%202019\(1\).pdf](http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/userfiles/files/Learning%20from%20Bristol%20Community%20Researchers%20learning%20event%20May%202019(1).pdf) for a report on the discussions held at this event.

5 See <http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/evaluation-reports/>



The CRs have had a unique exposure to a range of projects funded by BAB through their regular conversations and meetings with project staff

Recruitment

The first group of CRs was recruited in 2014 through various channels, including Age UK networks, the Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme (RSVP), an e-mail circulated through networks such as Bristol City Council and University of the Third Age (U3A) and posters placed on notice boards on the Gloucester Road in central Bristol. This was a self-selecting process; all individuals who put themselves forward were accepted to work as CRs after an initial discussion with the UWE team⁶, which was committed to training any person who came forward to take on the role. While UWE has had responsibilities for supporting the development of the CRs as researchers, UWE and Age UK Bristol jointly have oversight of the CRs as volunteers. One idea mooted during the first phase of CR involvement was for the group to become a social enterprise (Means 2013), although this proposal was not taken forward due to limited interest.

Nearly 20 CRs were recruited in this first phase, all of whom were retirees from a range of backgrounds, although a small number dropped off quite rapidly due to personal circumstances. This included two women who were significantly older than the majority of the group (*both were in their 80s*) and a man from East Africa (*the only person recruited who was not white British*). The initial cohort of CRs were aged between their late 50s and early 70s; the majority of CRs recruited were women.

All of the volunteer researchers had been in paid employment prior to retirement, and in many cases raising families. Some who came forward had already undertaken other voluntary work prior to applying to become a CR; indeed some continued with other volunteer work while embracing their new community researcher role. None of these aforementioned characteristics was stipulated as essential to those wishing to take on the CR role. The only requirement was some extended time-commitment to the work, although even this was not binding, given the voluntary nature of the work. Some CRs' prior work experience included research, evaluation, management and planning, activities directly relevant to those they would undertake with UWE for BAB. However, the previous work or voluntary experience and existing skill sets of the CRs were not explicitly audited during their recruitment and planning of the tasks they subsequently took on. Tasks were allocated according to the CRs' personal preference rather than on their previous experience.

There have been a number of changes to this original CR team, including various individuals leaving the programme at different points and a new 'wave' of CRs arriving in late 2015. One of the aims of this second round of recruitment was to enrol a number of researchers who resided in, and could therefore provide local knowledge and insight about, some of the neighbourhood priority areas of BAB (UWE 2015a), and to increase the ethnic and socio-demographic diversity of the CR team.

6 The initial UWE team responsible for the BAB evaluation, and hence the recruitment, training and mentoring of the CRs, was composed of Professor Robin Means and Naomi Woodspring, supported by Richard Kimberlee. This team has undergone various iterations over time and is now led by Mat Jones, supported by Amy Beardmore and Richard Kimberlee.

Although 10 new CRs were recruited through this process, which enlarged the original team, there were challenges meeting some of the aims of this second recruitment wave. Important lessons were learnt for the diversification of community researcher teams in any similar programme work in future (Baghirathan, 2017).

Approach

At an early stage of their programme involvement, the CRs were invited by UWE to choose which research and evaluation activities they would like to be responsible for. Similarly, the CRs have always been enabled to withdraw from activities whenever they did not feel suitably interested or engaged, or able to commit the necessary time at different points in the work. This freedom and flexibility has been a cornerstone of CR evaluation work and appears to have worked very well. As one CR described:

“I do want to do something useful, but it’s also about me and what I want and what I find is satisfying and what isn’t... so I’ve chosen stuff that I find is stimulating and interesting and you’re always learning about yourself as you go along, which is very interesting”

– CR1⁷

There has also been considerable flexibility in the methodology employed for the various evaluation activities which the CRs have undertaken. During the first phase of their work, the ‘Test and Learn’ approach pursued by the wider BAB programme was employed, whereby individuals are encouraged to use their skills, experience, and knowledge in a novel, unknown setting, thereby learning through trial and error.

Following some expressions of concern by the CR team concerning the appropriateness and integrity of this approach for the execution of programme research and evaluation, the CRs subsequently worked with the UWE team in devising an appropriate method for each evaluation activity undertaken.

This generally involved the CRs becoming familiar with different research approaches through introductory presentations as well as specific training on areas such as research interviewing and ethnography. In addition, since 2016 the CRs have been encouraged to identify new areas of training which are of particular interest to them and relevant to their work, which are then provided by the UWE team and/or UWE research partners. Box 1 summarises the research training topics covered since 2015.

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In the interests of anonymity, citations from individual CRs will be presented using a coded identifier.



Box 1: **Summary of some research training topics**

- Key ethical issues: consent, confidentiality, anonymity
- Lone working and working in teams
- Introduction to interviewing techniques
- Developing research questions
- Evaluation approaches for the community and voluntary sector
- Developing case studies
- Introduction to ethnography
- Appreciative enquiry
- Narrative interviewing
- Social return on investment
- Introduction to SPSS and data spreadsheets
- Research and community development
- Data recording and data protection
- Structuring reports
- Reflexive practice for researchers
- Qualitative data analysis

A central feature of the CR project has been regular group meetings which, from the outset all CRs were asked to give a commitment to attend where possible. These started on a bi-monthly basis, and from early 2016 shifted to a monthly basis, running between 10am and 12.30pm. The meetings were initially held at the BAB offices and, in 2017, moved to alternate between BAB and UWE's city centre building. The format for the meetings has evolved, but usually consists of a UWE member of staff acting as chair and facilitator, and minutes being prepared on an alternating basis by two of the CRs who volunteered to take on this role. A member of BAB staff joins the meeting to give an update on programme developments and respond to any questions. The group then discuss evaluation project updates and cross-cutting issues. Over the programme period to date there have been 43 meetings.

Current team of Community Researchers

The present CR team (*as of September 2019*) is composed of 11 individuals aged from their mid-60s to late-70s who live in various parts of central and suburban Bristol. The CRs are white British and primarily middle class, with professional employment backgrounds, in many cases related to social work, education, health and management. All have been educated to at least secondary school level; a number have studied to degree and post-graduate level. The current ratio of women to men is 8:3. One of the CRs is embedded in the geographical areas where they conduct much of their evaluation work, having lived in this area for many years, while over time other CRs have developed a good familiarity with a wide range of neighbourhoods across the city where they have been working for the BAB evaluation. Eight of the current community researchers have been involved since the inception of the CR team five years ago, in 2014. Their voluntary input to the programme has been impressive. Individual CR estimates of the time they have worked on BAB-related activities range from 250 to 770 person hours amongst those who were original team members. In total, the UWE team estimates that the CRs have volunteered 11,000 work hours, excluding travel, between June 2015 and May 2019⁸.

8 Monitoring report data, May 2019. It should be noted that travel time for some CRs is considerable as it can involve moving to different areas of the city for certain meetings, interviews etc. and so can take up to two hours in some circumstances.

In terms of the motivation to become CRs, many individuals were at a significant transitional stage in their life as they adapted to their retirement, and the community researcher role appealed to them for different reasons. Several CRs described missing the world of work, for example, including the status, identity and relationships that this had provided. As two CRs described:

“Identity is very important to people in their 60s. It really is”

– CR2

“It was quite scary in a way finishing work and thinking ‘What am I going to do now? You’ve suddenly got a big gap in your life’”

– CR3

For some, taking on the role of CR helped ease this sense of dislocation or loss. Indeed, for a number of individuals becoming a CR signified a milestone activity as they faced the prospect of becoming older. One community researcher who was aged around 65 on joining the team commented, for example:

“I thought, well, given my age this is going to be the last opportunity probably to do anything like this, so I’ll give it a go”

– CR4

Some CRs described the attraction of an intellectually interesting activity that also offered different forms of social connection. A number of those amongst the two cohorts of CRs recruited in the two ‘waves’ were relatively new to Bristol and were therefore attracted to the idea of becoming a CR due to the opportunities it would provide them of learning about the city and its different neighbourhoods and communities, as well as getting to know new people.

Further, many amongst the CR team had a personal interest in developing a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of loneliness and isolation and strategies to prevent or alleviate it, and were particularly attracted to the prospect of becoming part of a programme working in this area.

In a few cases, this interest stemmed from observations of family members becoming increasingly isolated as they got older, or their own personal experiences or fears of loneliness as they aged.



A central feature of the CR project has been regular group meetings and discussions



Carol Fry

After a career in administration in the NHS, two Universities and other companies, I retired in 2013 and began various voluntary roles all supporting older people, some just needing moral support, some with dementia. When a friend sent me information about the BAB project looking for volunteer researchers, I felt it would be good to use some of my skills in a productive way. The project has grown and developed greatly since the beginning but we hope to have improved the lives of older people in Bristol, as well as our own!

Anne Jensen

In 2013 I retired from my social work job in Adult Social Care in Bristol. I had worked as a social worker since 1977, having trained in Scotland. The possibility of volunteering from 2014 as a community researcher

appealed to me because it was linked to my last job working with older people. Research [] has been a learning curve, very challenging sometimes but also enjoyable. It has been inspiring meeting other retirees and all those involved in BAB and its projects.



Jan Fullforth

I have really enjoyed developing my skills as a CR, the intellectual stimulation and camaraderie. My career was in the NHS and I've lived in Bristol for over 30 years. older people in Bristol, as well as our own!

Jenny Hoadley

What a great team of people to work with who have all combined commitment to the task in hand with humour. It has been a fascinating five years. Plenty to do and plenty to argue about!



Ginny Burdis

Having recently retired from working for three decades in NHS community nursing, I was keen to find a volunteer role where I could contribute my experience and skills. For me being a CR means lots of things, including: working in a

team of volunteers from varied backgrounds, maintaining links and interest in community issues, keeping my brain and discussion skills active, learning and gaining support and friendship from others in our team, Community Navigators, Age UK Bristol and UWE.





Penny Beynon

I helped out with my toddler twin grandsons when first retired. Once they were in school I wanted something to keep my brain working. My working life was varied - a primary schoolteacher, 10 years in the voluntary sector working with local TV in social action broadcasting, then 20 years in Bristol Trading Standards Service in consumer advice and support. I've learnt new skills and revived old ones but the best part has been working together with others in the team on things we care about and making new friendships.



Community Researchers

The CRs are white British and primarily middle class, with professional employment backgrounds, in many cases related to social work, education, health and management. All have been educated to at least secondary school level; a number have studied to degree and post-graduate level ...



Christopher Orlik

I heard about BAB and the request for researchers through the University of the Third Age, U3A. Having previously worked in the field of social services I thought that the lottery grant to reduce loneliness and isolation among elderly people was highly apposite given the demographic changes we are experiencing, so many single householders, so many more bereaved elderly people. I have learnt that people need transport and 'mates' to encourage them to leave the house. The future focus must be on more intergenerational mixing.



Jeremy Groome

I had worked overseas for over 10 years and arrived in Bristol in 2013 not knowing much about the city. The chance to join a group of other oldies with a wide range of experiences seemed a perfect opportunity to learn more about my new

home. I have enjoyed it... and learnt a lot more about different communities. Perhaps the best bits have been meeting and talking to such a variety of enthusiastic and dedicated people and working as a member of a team.



Christine Crabbe

After retirement I was seeking a new challenge. I wanted to use the skills and abilities gained from studying a PhD in History. The job [] appealed because of the research and evaluation []. In my role [] I have had the opportunity to

learn about the excellent work carried out in Bristol to reduce loneliness and isolation in older people. [] I have met new people and enjoyed working alongside my fellow community researchers on interesting projects.



Eddy Knasel

After thirty years researching education provision for adults and young people, volunteering as a BAB Community Researcher let me use my experience and skills to the benefit of people my own age in my own city. I've been involved in evaluating the first round of projects in care homes and the Test and Learn project in Horfield and Lockleaze.

I've thoroughly enjoyed the role. It's been great to feel part of the BAB team and I really appreciate the thoughtful and constructive guidance from the UWE team.

Jill Turner

Before retiring I worked in housing, advice and project management. On retiring I completed a Masters and joined BAB as a Community Researcher in the second intake. I have enjoyed and valued the friendship of other CRS. I have gained a real insight into the varied lives of older people in Bristol, and enjoyed the variety of work as a CR, meeting professionals, older people and academics, receiving excellent training from UWE on Research Methods and from BAB on other areas of learning related to older people.



The involvement of older people as volunteer researchers – 'Community Researchers' (CRs) – has been an essential element of the UWE-led evaluation of the BAB programme and its impacts, particularly the qualitative aspect.

Eight of the current community researchers have been involved since the inception of the CR team five years ago, in 2014.

... In total, the UWE team estimates that the CRs have volunteered 11,000 work hours, excluding travel, between June 2015 and May 2019.



Many in the CR team wanted a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of loneliness and isolation and strategies to prevent or alleviate it.

Chapter Two:

Achievements To Date – a chronological overview

Audit of Volunteer Involvement

September-December 2014

The first piece of work completed by the new CR team established in 2014 was an audit of volunteer involvement amongst BAB partners.

For this activity the CRs conducted interviews with partner organisations to ascertain the number of volunteers currently active and the range of activities in which volunteers are involved, including a breakdown of the number of volunteers aged over 50. This activity was treated as initial ‘hands on’ exposure to interview techniques for the CRs as well as providing data for one of the baseline outcome indicators against which the overall BAB evaluation is being conducted (*“more older people are able to contribute to their community through such mechanisms as volunteering, belonging to a forum, steering group or other activity”*).⁹

The Greater Fishponds

Neighbourhood Asset Mapping

July 2015-May 2016

The second piece of work conducted by eight of the newly recruited CRs was the mapping of assets in the area of Greater Fishponds in north-east Bristol – one of BAB’s priority geographical areas.

Concern had been expressed by various BAB stakeholders that little was known about existing neighbourhood assets in this area – and its three wards: Hillfields, Frome Vale, and Eastville – compared with other areas in the city prioritised by the programme. None of the CRs had any experience with asset mapping. Following a ‘Test and Learn’ approach, the CRs were provided with one day of training by an asset mapping specialist and then tasked with organising themselves using this initial training, an outline protocol and a pro forma for collecting information, to develop an asset map of the area. Dividing themselves into separate small teams per ward the CRs identified and researched these three areas through a process of local visits and consultations, and conducting interviews and focus group discussions. The separate findings were merged into a summary report that provided detailed sections on the three ward areas (*Means and Woodspring 2016*).

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The quantitative findings of this audit are aggregated in the document ‘Final audit baseline results’ and the work summarised in UWE 2015.

Some of the new insight elicited by the asset mapping exercise is captured in one CR's description of this work:

"I really enjoyed it... and learnt a lot more about who, potentially, in the community could give some input. I did things I'd never done before, like go into pubs and things and start talking to the barman about how his pub is used by older people and things like that. And a community policeman who was brilliant, and knew all the really isolated older people to the extent that he sends them a birthday card, you know. I thought it was very useful because there were all sorts of things we found out about that we wouldn't have known about otherwise"

– CR1.

Key findings of the mapping exercise included the lack of infrastructure for local meetings and the limited mobility of many older residents. This raised awareness of the fact that despite apparently comprehensive public transport links in particular areas of the city, actually accessing public transport points such as bus stops remains problematic for some people. The Greater Fishponds work not only provided BAB management with in-depth information on a collection of wards about which there had previously been little knowledge, but also had other impacts.

Findings also included how residents in the three wards access assets both within and outside their residential area. For those who were sufficiently mobile, regular movement across areas was identified, related to different community and family histories and networks, a finding which had important implications for effective service delivery. A crucial insight from this work, therefore, was the artificial nature of the boundaries of wards and neighbourhood partnership areas from the point of view both of many older people and of local community groups. This finding was a key factor in the decision taken by BAB management to review how the programme could best commission and deliver a city-wide network of community development projects. In this sense, the results of the asset mapping work fed directly into the configuring of the BAB commissioning process, which subsequently placed less emphasis upon neighbourhood partnerships; a substantial impact. The final Greater Fishponds Asset Mapping report is showcased on the BAB website as one of the outcomes of the evaluation programme.¹

The successful Greater Fishponds work was important in informing the CRs' other evaluation work. Based on the learning from this exercise a smaller team of CRs conducted a 'mini-audit' of Greater Brislington, another area of Bristol about which little was known (*see below*).

10 <http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/userfiles/files/CR01.pdf>

BAB Aardman animation evaluation

July-November 2015

BAB worked with the renowned Bristol company Aardman Animation in co-producing a short film piece which aimed to inform the public about loneliness and communicate several key messages regarding its impacts on health, the fact that loneliness is not inevitable, and that improvements to well-being are always possible.

Following the screening of a rough cut of the film to the UWE team and a group of CRs it was decided to capture initial audience responses to the film. At the launch screening a group of CRs therefore conducted a questionnaire survey with 44 members of the audience (*who were of a range of ages*) regarding their opinions on the film. The CRs contributed to the analysis of this survey, which confirmed that the short film could serve not just as a tool in promoting public understanding of loneliness and social isolation faced by many older people in Bristol, but a prompt for discussion and action (*Kimberlee and Means 2015*). Subsequently, the film has been screened in various settings in Bristol and there remains potential for the animation to be adapted for dissemination to promote ongoing projects continuing beyond the lifetime of BAB.





The Greater Brislington 'area profile' and Mini-Project

May-December 2016

Building on the success of the Greater Fishponds Asset Mapping a largely desk-based 'mini' asset mapping was undertaken by several CRs in Greater Brislington.

There had previously been little significant funding of local organisations in this area, which is situated in the south-east of Bristol, is extensive and highly variegated, with a known disparity between the East and West wards.

Through internet searches and trawling notice boards and cards in shop windows two CRs produced a spreadsheet identifying approximately 73 voluntary organisations operating in Greater Brislington.

In the light of this work, and given that no applications had been received from Greater Brislington in the first two rounds of one of BAB's key funding initiatives, the Community Kick-Start scheme (*see below* ¹¹), it was decided that more applied research was required. Further knowledge was needed regarding how to enhance the capacity of third sector organisations in Greater Brislington to engage with BAB and secure new funding. A team of four CRs therefore planned and conducted interviews with representatives of six distinct organisations selected from the 73 organisations identified in the area profile.

These interviews aimed to elicit information about the organisations' activities, ascertain awareness amongst group members concerning BAB and small grant funding schemes (*particularly Kick-Start*), and find out how engagement with BAB could be improved, as well as local views on the current barriers to social participation amongst older people in the area. Awareness of both BAB and Kick-Start was extremely low amongst those interviewed. Barriers to participation identified from the interviews included financing, transport, publicity, meeting facilities and the availability of volunteers. The study concluded that publicity regarding BAB and Kick-Start could be disseminated more widely in the areas using local notice boards in churches and halls. As a result of the links made by the CRs when carrying out the study the BAB office was contacted by at least one local organisation in the area seeking assistance (*BAB and UWE 2017a*). The final report is showcased on the BAB website as part of the learning that the programme has made so far through the programme evaluation work.¹²

The two pieces of asset-mapping work undertaken by the CRs were used to inform the Community Development for Older People (CDOP) initiative. Both Greater Fishponds and Brislington were defined as 'Areas of Exceptional Need', in other words areas with high numbers of older people in which neither the City Council nor charitable organisations have made funding investments (*Woodspring 2016*), and hence became two of the target areas for the CDOP work (*see below*).

11 <http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/community-kick-start-fund/>

12 <http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/userfiles/files/CR02.pdf>

CRs as 'Maximizers' of the Common Measurement Framework 2016 -2017

The Common Measurement Framework (CMF) is a standard element of the monitoring of BAB-funded activities and their impact (UWE 2018).

This two-part evaluation tool was developed for all 14 programmes in England funded by the National Lottery Community Fund's 'Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better' programme by external contractor, Ecorys. The CMF draws on measures such as the De Jong Gierveld Scale and the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS) to assess loneliness, isolation and general sense of well-being. The CMF is being employed in several stages, firstly through a baseline form that summarises the situation of users of the projects and services, hence providing important background profile information, and then a follow-on form which measures any changes in users' situation following their involvement activities. It is then completed a third time 6 months later to see if any changes have been sustained.

Part of UWE's responsibility is to help BAB obtain good CMF responses and assist stakeholders in supplying enough completed forms to the programme for meaningful, statistically significant analysis. In 2016 BAB made early progress in implementing the CMF with pilot projects. A group of CRs was asked to provide support to existing commissioned group and peer support projects, with the aim of maximising CMF responses. The group ('Maximisers') ran until March 2017. Over this time BAB redesigned the CMF form to be more attractive and the Lottery Fund made translations available to enhance accessibility.

Over the 12 months of their involvement as Maximizers the CRs had face-to-face meetings with project staff to explain the importance of the CMFs, discuss their use, and assist a number of participants in completing the forms on a one-to-one basis. As a result of this 'grass roots' involvement with CMF implementation the CR team became aware of issues pertaining to monitoring and evaluation of BAB impact through the CMF process. These included:

- In some cases initial CMFs not being completed on participants' first involvement, thus affecting the validity of subsequent data.
- Doubts about the suitability of CMFs for certain commissioned projects and activities, such as 'drop in' classes or activities which participants might join on a casual basis, or fixed training activities. As the CMFs are designed to measure change over time they are most suitable for a series of activities over an extended period.
- Some community organisations commissioned through BAB faced significant problems in encouraging project and service users to complete the CMF forms, due to the detailed and in places cumbersome and repetitive nature of the questions and also the probing and personal nature of some questions which could be considered negatively framed and inappropriate to use with certain participants.

These issues were strongly articulated at CR meetings, emphasising the need for all BAB project providers to be fully aware of CMF requirements and integrate necessary CMF-related activities within service model design, such as encouraging participants to complete the forms, planning the support required to facilitate participants in filling in the forms and establishing follow-up administration for CMF submission to BAB. While the Maximiser's role was significant in providing practical assistance to projects to increase the uptake of CMFs, it also therefore raised important issues to be addressed by BAB at the bidding/commissioning stage of subsequent projects.¹

Evaluation of 'Growing Support' and 'Alive!' Care Home Interventions 2017

BAB provided funding to two separate pilot projects that explored group activities and peer support in care homes.

Alive! aims to combat social isolation, loneliness and depression amongst care home residents by organising stimulating workshops, training care staff, and facilitating linkages between care homes and local communities. Growing Support runs social and therapeutic horticulture sessions for groups of older people and those living with dementia in care homes to address the negative effects of inactivity, loneliness and social isolation. The two pilot projects aimed to tailor existing activities to enable stronger connections to be made amongst residents and care home staff, including through the recruitment and training of peer volunteers to provide support and company to residents using an iPad app 'Tangible Memories'. A team of CRs conducted interviews with a range of stakeholders involved in the pilot, including organisation and care home staff and volunteers. Ethical concerns and challenges meant that the evaluation team were not able to speak directly to the care home residents (*the planned 'end beneficiaries' of the pilots*) and assess what kind of impacts the interventions had had on their inactivity, loneliness or sense of social isolation. This was acknowledged as a significant limitation to the scope of this work. The evaluation report identified elements of project success as well as the specific challenges associated with the projects.

13 An initial analysis of BAB outcomes, partly based on completed CMFs, has already been conducted by UWE (Jones et al. 2018).

Factors of success included the empowerment provided by new training, enhanced collaboration and the engagement of new groups of highly skilled volunteers. An unanticipated impact of the pilots was the new partnership forged by the two funded organisations. Overall it was concluded that the peer volunteer model was one that can be taken forward to be replicated in other settings (*Barke, Bickerton and Knasel 2017*).

Wellspring Social Prescribing Pilot Project evaluation 2017

The Wellspring Healthy Living Centre (WHLC) was awarded a contract by BAB to deliver a pilot project in partnership with primary care health professionals in their local area, composed of four surgeries in a local GP cluster (Lawrence Hill; Wellspring; Air Balloon and St. George), and Bristol Community Health (District Nurses and Community Nurses for Older People).

The pilot explored the use of a psychosocial intervention to address emotional difficulties exacerbating loneliness and isolation in people aged 50 years or older. This involved working holistically across mental and physical health, via referrals, to meet clients' wellbeing needs. The nature of this intervention lent itself to a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis, to provide insight into its social value. A small team of CRs received training in SROI as an approach to interventional analysis and evaluation and the CRs conducted interviews with seven stakeholders from the project-steering group to identify the range of outcomes from the pilot. CRs were also involved in analysing 22 CMF baseline returns, and WHLC data were also reviewed. No interviews were conducted with client beneficiaries. The CR team contributed to the analysis and write-up of this work. The evaluation concluded that lonely individuals were being correctly identified by professionals and the pilot had some impact on these vulnerable clients via referrals. Important challenges remained: difficulties in recruiting volunteers to the surgeries of the cluster which were essential to the project; and mobility – some clients were housebound and required appropriate transport to access services (*Kimberlee 2017*).

Community Webs project evaluation 2017

The Community Webs project was established to test the idea of primary care services working with community assets at a neighbourhood level to best support adults, particularly with regard to their social needs.

The project was piloted in North and South Bristol, covering three GP practices in both areas. Referrals operated through a signposting service staffed by a Project Coordinator with two Community Webs 'Link Workers'. Southmead Development Trust led on the evaluation, with support from UWE and the CRs. The CRs contributed through conducting several interviews and one focus group discussion, analysing the findings from these activities and providing inputs to the final report. The evaluation led to a summary of lessons learnt which could be applied to future projects (*Brown et al. 2018*). The final report is showcased on the BAB website.¹

Community Kick-Start Fund: Audit, Process Review and Evaluation Report of Successful Applicants

November 2016 – April 2017

The Community Kick-Start Fund became one of BAB's flagship initiatives, which encouraged any organisation, community group or group of older people to seek up to £2,000 for a new activity likely to reduce isolation and loneliness for older people.

Successful applicants were selected through panel review of written applications which were scrutinised by a committee which included older people representatives, originally recruited through the Bristol Older People's Forum, as well as BAB management. A total of £250,000 has been committed to the scheme, which has run through the course of the BAB programme through a series of ten different application rounds.

UWE and the CRs decided to critically review Kick-Start during its early stages in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme from the perspective of different stakeholders and identify ways to improve its implementation.

These early reviews, both conducted by teams of CRs through a series of stakeholder interviews, aimed at ensuring that Kick-Start met its full potential in enabling sustainable new ventures which would provide a demonstrable impact. The first was an audit conducted in 2016 that examined the experiences and perceptions of the scheme amongst unsuccessful applicants, through 11 face-to-face interviews.

14 <http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/userfiles/files/CR06%20%20Community%20Webs%20Final%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf>

This work resulted in direct changes in how Kick-Start was managed, namely:

- widening the dissemination of publicity material through various channels, and not being over-reliant on online dissemination;
- improving the signposting of potential applicants to appropriate information and resources;
- simplifying the application form to make it more accessible;
- providing feedback to all applicants to inform their future grant submissions;
- improving the selection procedure for successful applications; and
- streamlining methods of disbursing funds.

In 2017, a team of CRs assessed the strengths and limitations of Kick-Start through semi-structured interviews with 17 of the 26 groups that were successful in the first round of funding, supplemented by an analysis of programme records collated by BAB staff (*BAB and UWE 2017b*). This evaluation found that the revised application, panel decision and post-award support processes resulting from the earlier review appeared to be working well.

This evaluation recommended further adjustments that could improve the publicity and applications process, provide opportunities for feedback and mutual learning between fund-holders, and establish links with other funding opportunities and sources of support. BAB has showcased this evaluation report on the BAB website as a key element of the learning that the programme has made so far.¹⁵

In addition to the formal output from this evaluation, through their interviews with Kick-Start funded groups the CRs built up supportive relationships, providing some of these groups with guidance related to their partnership with BAB, and also acting as a conduit for information between the two parties. Two CRs also sat as observers on some of the Kick-Start funding selection panels, and over time provided particular advice on the allocation of extended Kick-Start funding to successful projects.

The various assessments the CRs have conducted in relation to Kick-Start, and their direct and tangible outcomes, can be considered a particularly successful direct collaboration with BAB management. The CRs are currently completing a final round of evaluation work related to Kick-Start (*see below*).

15 <http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/userfiles/files/CR03.pdf>



Some of the activities funded through the Community Kick-start Fund

Chapter Three:

Ongoing Evaluations

The team of 11 CRs are continuing to work on a series of activities that are scheduled to be completed before March 2020. Evaluations that are still underway are as follows:

Community Kick-Start Scheme – Final Evaluation

This final evaluation is examining to what extent and in what ways the Kick-Start awards have made a difference to isolation and loneliness amongst older people, the opportunities offered by Kick-Start, and the challenges to sustaining the impact of the activities funded by the scheme.

The CR team involved in this work has conducted 15 interviews with staff and volunteers involved in various projects funded by the scheme, and analysis of these interviews is underway. Two literature reviews were also conducted by two members of the CR team, one regarding the role of small grants in the success of projects aimed at reducing loneliness and isolation in older people, and another on the relationship between loneliness and isolation and physical and mental health. These literature reviews are providing important context to the analysis. An online survey of 22 further successful applicants has also been completed, as well as an analysis of key documentation and observations at panel meeting. The findings from this final round of evaluation, which are due to be released in late 2019, are likely to provide important lessons, which can inform future micro-funding strategies.

Evaluation of the Community Navigators project

A group of CRs is conducting interviews with the Community Navigators project, which offers free signposting to services and support to people over 50.

To scope out the main areas to explore, the CRs undertook initial interviews with the project leads from the two delivery organisations. Members of the CR team built upon their personal work experience of community health services (*notably in health visiting and social care*). They also drew upon the learning from the Community Webs Evaluation.

On this basis, the CRs worked with UWE staff to design the research questions and main methods for data collection. Currently, through a series of interviews with a range of stakeholders, the CRs are developing an understanding of the ways in which this project is perceived to be effective, and opportunities and challenges of implementation.

The evaluation also includes an exploration of the links between services and projects working in partnership with the Community Navigators. This work has wider implications for projects in the city that are making use of similar models.

One difficulty has been that mismatch between the timing of local NHS commissioning of similar services and the publication of the findings from the evaluation of the Community Navigators projects.

To overcome this issue the CRs developed an early stage briefing on initial learning from the evaluation for the BAB team to use with partners.

Evaluation of the Community Development for Older People (CDOP) projects

This is a substantial area of evaluation that covers several BAB projects.

Small teams of CRs are working in Greater Brislington, Greater Fishponds, Horfield and Lockleaze, Stockwood, St Paul's and Old Market and with LinkAge Network to examine the added value the projects have brought in promoting community development amongst older people.

The CR teams are looking particularly at what has worked best, where the challenges lie and what the planned and unintended outcomes have been, particularly in relation to BAB's planned core outcomes. This evaluation is distinctive from previous CR activity as it is largely based on an ethnographic approach. The CRs attend a range of CDOP project events in order to make observations and hold conversations with project staff, community group members or activity participants, as well as formally interviewing project staff, all of which provides them with their evaluation data. This work is providing some CRs with a rare opportunity to engage directly with some of the older people who are the intended beneficiaries of the BAB programme, an opportunity that has been lacking in some of the previous evaluation work.

The conversations being held with project beneficiaries through this work are perceived by some CRs to provide appropriate opportunities for exploring sensitive topics such as loneliness and isolation in some depth; subjects which are difficult to broach in more formal interviews or through working on the CMFs.

Chapter Four:

Discussion of the Key Learning Points

The descriptions above detail the enormous variety and scope of work undertaken by the CRs, and also reveal some of the cumulative impact of the information and knowledge produced on the BAB programme. There is potential for further wide-reaching impact through timely dissemination of the findings and recommendations emerging from the evaluation activities that the CRs are currently finalising. A number of key lessons have been learnt from the CRs' work with BAB to date which have implications for the planning and implementation of similar initiatives in the future.

Build on community researchers' experiences, assets and interests

It has been recommended that the wealth of experience and talent offered by older people should be recognised as a rationale and starting point for involving them in research (Bowers *et al.* 2013). The BAB CRs' experiences have confirmed this as an important point of departure, both practically as well as theoretically. Lessons were learnt quite rapidly on this front. All CRs began work on a level playing field, as it were, all receiving the same training organised and provided by UWE, and taking on broadly similar roles and responsibilities in the first instance.

At the beginning of their involvement in evaluation work for BAB they were introduced to a 'Test and Learn' approach, whereby for their early tasks they were placed in research situations with very little background knowledge or structure. This led some to feel that their existing knowledge and skills were not recognised or used effectively (*and there was also felt to be a significant risk that they were wasting their respondents' time*).

This experience highlighted some of the limitations of 'Test and Learn' as a research or evaluation method, as well as the importance of recognising each team member's assets, experiences, skills and interests, and building a consensual methodology.

As further evaluation activities materialized and more fluid and transparent discussions were held between the UWE team and the CRs, the methodology for each activity was agreed together. This also meant that each CR was able to select which evaluation activities they committed themselves to, and in some circumstances when working in small teams, their particular responsibility for certain elements of the work.

In the case of the final Kick-Start review work, for example, one team member was responsible for conducting a literature review, while for other research and evaluation activities specific team members have been responsible for writing up findings. In terms of certain regular responsibilities within the wider team, such as minute-taking during monthly CR meetings, a number of CRs chose to play to their strengths.

On the other hand, certain CRs felt quite strongly that they did not want their activities to become too much like ‘work’ so shied away from certain tasks that closely resembled their previous responsibilities, such as project management, even though some individuals might have played an excellent role drawing on their proven skills in these areas.

Allowing the CRs autonomy in their choice of activity, yet ensuring consistent activity management and outputs, was therefore a careful juggling act amongst both the CRs and the UWE team (*“like herding cats!” as CR4 described it*). A lesson drawn from this experience might be for the initial induction training workshops to explore in detail CRs’ individual backgrounds and interests, as well as their expectations, and agree appropriate methodologies and workplans accordingly, which can be revisited on a regular basis.

Linked to this is the importance of working with each CR individually – providing bespoke mentoring in some cases – to ensure each person is nurtured and supported to reach their potential and make the community researcher role their own.

Given the CRs’ educational and professional backgrounds, the final allocation of responsibility has been relatively successful. For example, most members of the team took on some analysis and writing responsibilities at different points. However, if the group had been composed of individuals with more diverse educational backgrounds it might have been necessary to review the various assets, skills and interests the members of the group brought with them and develop a range of quite distinct and tailored responsibilities.

This would have required an even more flexible approach to the evaluation process, and the various activities of the CRs and the outputs produced may, indeed, have looked quite different.

Overall, a substantial sense of achievement and satisfaction with the work accomplished was expressed by the CRs. In some cases the challenges tackled and overcome through the various activities has had a significant positive impact on individual researchers’ confidence. The underlying sense of both the professional and personal challenges and achievements associated with working as a CR was captured in the presentations two of the researchers made at a national learning event in May 2019 when they detailed the different highs and lows of their ‘journeys’ as CRs. Similarly, when interviewed for this report, one of the community researchers described his feelings of accomplishment when travelling to a conference to present on behalf of the BAB CRs, not merely because of his professional responsibility, but because it was his first extended journey independently since experiencing a stroke.

A strong team ethos is now evident amongst the CRs, who have gelled well over their extended period of working together. Indeed, several CRs have already expressed concern about the potential loss they will feel when BAB ends, given their enjoyment of their time as CRs, and the fact that there are few such volunteer opportunities available to older people. Both UWE and BAB staff are mindful of the imminent end to the CRs’ responsibilities and the potential impact of this transition on some of them, and aim to support any CRs who express an interest in continuing voluntary research, evaluation or advisory work to identify appropriate opportunities.

Co-production is complex

As already outlined, the approach to the CRs' work shifted from an early Test and Learn methodology to one which gave the researchers substantial autonomy.

UWE's strategic involvement of the CRs in the BAB evaluation was always founded on the notion of a 'co-produced' enterprise whereby UWE and the CRs were equal partners.

Co-production in research is a highly lauded approach for which certain guiding principles are beginning to emerge (*INVOLVE 2018*). Co-production can be considered as operating on a spectrum, but full co-production, with real power-sharing, whereby research is jointly owned and people work together according to a common understanding, is a complex undertaking. While the CRs appreciate the freedom and autonomy they have been given overall, for example, there have been certain key points where a greater academic steer and engagement from UWE would have been valued in terms of planning and executing the work. Some CRs consider that this might have made a difference in ensuring activities were more effectively timed, and even more appropriate and innovative. This issue may partly have arisen from the UWE team not wanting to push any particular agenda too strongly as well as the intense and conflicting demands on the time of academic staff.

Conversely, there have been moments when some of the data collected by the CRs was handed over to UWE researchers and CRs found themselves not as involved as they could have been or possibly wanted to be in the analysis and writing up of this work.

Some of these issues and tensions related to the management and execution of work may be inherent in any joint research enterprise. An important lesson here, perhaps, is the amount of time it takes to not only build but maintain the close relationships required to establish and sustain common understanding and consensus about roles and responsibilities. Frank and regular discussions about needs and expectations are also essential.

Establishing a 'feedback loop'

Discussions in preparation for this report have prompted some CRs to reflect upon their present lack of understanding of what difference they have made so far to the work of BAB and hence, potentially, to programme outcomes, and how the existing knowledge developed and associated recommendations will be disseminated in order to have future impact.

While the regular monthly update meetings held with BAB management are extremely valued, a more systematic information-sharing along the lines of '*You Said, We Did*' – or perhaps more accurately, given the nature of the CRs' work: '*You Found and Reported, We Did*' – would be welcomed. A particular question remains about the results of the many and varied pilot projects funded by BAB and how this learning has shaped decisions about future funding cycles.

More information would enhance CRs' understanding of how the learning emerging from their work is making an ongoing, and importantly, appropriately timed, difference to programme learning and operations. It is, however, also understood that the CRs' work is not yet over and some of the lessons learnt from their evaluation activities may still carry over into relevant programme work up to BAB's extended deadline of March 2021, as well as beyond the lifetime of the programme. To ensure that key lessons are learnt and feed into existing funding cycles prior to the end of BAB, the CRs are currently developing a set of 'topline findings' from their ongoing evaluations for BAB staff to share with local decision-makers.

Early focus on understanding priority geographical areas was successful

Both the Volunteer Audit and the Greater Fishponds Asset Mapping initially came about partly due to the fact that the CRs had been recruited and had received some initial training but limited programme work had yet been undertaken for them to evaluate.

In fact, the Greater Fishponds Asset Mapping, and the subsequent Greater Brislington mini-profile which replicated some of the approach of the Fishponds work, were both highly successful pieces of work which provided a solid knowledge base for BAB commissioning approaches and also facilitated a grounded awareness of priority areas. This approach can therefore be recommended for any similar programme work. Early exposure to a range of different Bristol neighbourhoods was also essential to the CRs' growing understanding of various parts of the city, which fed into further CR activities, such as the CDOP project evaluations.



The CRs are currently developing a set of 'topline findings' from their ongoing evaluations for BAB staff to share with local decision makers

Ensuring contact with ‘end users’ or ‘beneficiaries’ in evaluation activities

For many of the CRs there has been very little contact with older people as part of their evaluation work – the main exception being those now conducting the CDOP ethnography.

A minority of CRs have described that contact with older people was an important expectation for them when they first became involved in the BAB programme; whilst they are enjoying the intellectually stimulating work they carry out as community researchers, they were also seeking meaningful engagement with older people, albeit through a research interview or group discussion. The majority of CRs did not, however, have this expectation, but for some their professional experience in public service provision has long confirmed to them the importance of including the voice of the ‘beneficiary’ or the ‘service user’ in any evaluation and the limitations and potentially compromised academic robustness of ‘one step removed’ evaluations.

There were ethical challenges to being able to interview beneficiaries in some settings such as care homes, for example, but this was nonetheless recognised as a limitation in several of the evaluations which were undertaken. In the words of one CR:

“We never got onto talking to the recipients of the service and I found that really frustrating because I always think that’s the valuable bit”

– CR2.

The essential nature of the inclusion of community perspectives was highlighted by a number of CRs. As already described, the CDOP evaluation and possibly the final evaluation of Kick-Start are the closest most CRs have come to engaging with older people directly through their work for BAB. There are signs that the interviews and discussions associated with this work may bring new insights, regarding not only the diverse experiences of loneliness and isolation, but the role of community development projects in identifying and supporting the vulnerable.

Volunteer approach

Advantages and disadvantages

The volunteer nature of community researchers' involvement in the BAB evaluation means that, as already described, while the CRs are committed to the work they are responsible for, they also experience relative freedom in which tasks they choose to carry out and their availability and deadlines. This autonomy appears to have been valued.

The lack of formal work 'contract' or agreement has meant that CRs could withdraw from activities they were not enjoying or felt were not progressing effectively, and even leave the programme without much advance notice. This has required some flexibility and has inevitably influenced the continuity and stability of the various work streams, and the overall planning of the evaluation work. On the other hand, certain intense periods of work for the CRs have created substantial pressure, and it is questionable, perhaps, to what extent volunteers can or should feel the stresses which are normally associated with a remunerated role.

On rare occasions tensions have emerged regarding the distinct volunteer role of CRs and the paid role of UWE evaluation staff, possibly emerging from the afore-mentioned pressures. This again flags the importance of maintaining common, transparent understanding and consensus about roles, responsibilities and expectations.

From the financial perspective of the BAB programme, of course, the CRs have provided a vast amount of time for free, hence there are substantial financial benefits. Volunteerism is predicated on the availability of individuals who are able to freely donate their time; many people who might make excellent CRs may not be in a financial position to do this. Not only that, but being able to freely offer time does not mean that those recruited as CRs are in a position or willingly able to volunteer other, often 'hidden' costs, such as travel and stationery. The BAB programme is able to meet such expenses, but in practice some CRs have rarely used the expenses system, while over time there has been some recognition that individual small expenses do add up and can leave people substantially out of pocket.

Several CRs expressed embarrassment at having to claim small expenses and hence refrained from doing so. Stipulating expense claiming as a standard procedure which is managed at every monthly CR meeting, or a basic allowance being made available to each CR in recognition of the inevitable costs incurred by them, is advisable. The issue of paying CRs or providing them with an expenses budget is also potentially worth exploring for future similar initiatives.

Which 'community'?

Diversification and the Insider/ Outsider debate

The current CR team constitutes 'community' researchers in the sense that they belong to the Bristol population of the over-60s. As described further below, this means they have their own particular interest in issues relating to ageing, loneliness and isolation, and engage with these issues in different ways. In the majority of cases (*apart from one exception*) the CRs do not identify as being part of any specific local geographical or cultural community in Bristol. Hence for the most part the CRs have been evaluating various projects by travelling to sites and communities outside of their home areas. Their limited embeddedness in any local community, their relative socio-demographic homogeneity, and the lack of ethnic and cultural diversity within the team has indeed led some CRs to describe how they feel "fraudulent" as they cannot claim to represent particular communities in Bristol.

As already noted, a concerted attempt was made to diversify the group in a second round of recruitment but unfortunately this endeavour was not successful. Important lessons have been learnt regarding how and where the community researcher openings were advertised, the overall timing of and strategy for recruitment, to ensure a greater mix of backgrounds amongst those enrolled in the work (*Baghirathan 2017*). The possibility of renaming the role 'researcher' has also been raised, as for some people with less formal education backgrounds this may be an intimidating or off-putting term. The potential difference in recruitment potential if the CR role was to be paid has also been considered.

There would clearly have been some benefits from a more ethnically and socially diverse CR team, including a number of born and bred Bristolians embedded in different local communities. This would undoubtedly have resulted in quite different pieces of evaluation work. It might also be interesting to consider and reflect upon what ways the evaluation would have differed if it had been conducted by a group of researchers of different age ranges (*be it older or younger than the CRs recruited*), or more CRs had been male, or the entire team had been composed of people from markedly different professional backgrounds.

There have long been academic debates regarding the nature and value of 'insider' and 'outsider' researchers. Insider researchers are categorized as those that have a broad identification with the group they study and are thought to possess intimate knowledge of the context they research (*Hodkinson, 2002; Southgate and Shiyang, 2014*). While in this sense the majority of CRs were rarely insiders apart from the 'context' of age (*with one exception who has been conducting evaluation work in their own home geographical area*), the literature on insider/outsider researchers also reveals the strengths and weaknesses of these different approaches (*see, for example, Salway et al., 2015*).

Recognition of the value of researchers with different backgrounds and forms of identification and the advantages of insider and outsider involvement has led some CRs to conclude that an ideal team to conduct research in any given local community might include a mix of both those from inside and outside that community.

Photo credit (opposite): © Jelena Okjan – Dreamstime.com



The CRs have also provided some perspectives related to ageing, loneliness and isolation

Reflections on Loneliness and Isolation from the Community Researchers

Burholt et al. (2010) argued that older people who conduct research can uncover insights which may not otherwise have been unearthed. As well as their intellectual engagement with their evaluation work for BAB and the outputs from this work, the CRs have also provided some perspectives related to ageing, loneliness and isolation. These stem, at least in part, from the fact that they are part of an older – and ageing – group, for whom these issues are likely to be of direct concern. The CRs' exposure to BAB's practical attempts to ameliorate loneliness and isolation amongst older people has provided many of them with new, or more informed, reflections upon the meanings of the concepts of loneliness and isolation. These include the importance of not only focusing on a generic 'over 50s' population, to which many older people do not relate, but distinguishing between different demographic groups in terms of their risk of and vulnerability to loneliness and isolation, and identifying distinct strategies for targeting these different populations and working to alleviate their risk. Particular groups could include: those in the initial period following retirement (*a group to which many of the CRs belong*), particularly men with limited social networks outside of work; those who experience a loss in mobility; those who live alone; those who gradually experience worsening health and the death of their peers due to increasing age; those who are child-less.

Understanding the mechanisms whereby loneliness and isolation may increase as one ages and, correspondingly, 'asset-building' through the life course to avert these phenomena, as well as developing appropriate responses for older people, including inter-generational responses, were also flagged as key issues. One CR shared some personal reflections from their work with BAB:

"It's made me think, well, in terms of building those social networks that inevitably shrink to some extent as you get older; it's no good waiting. You've got to have those to begin with, and they're going to shrink geographically, as perhaps you're not as mobile"

– CR1.

Another CR's candid reflections highlighted a number of these different issues:

"When I think back to my younger days, old age was just something in the far distance and then when you arrive there it becomes very real, obviously, because it's what you're living with all the time... I think there's probably quite a significant difference between 'early old age', if you like – and I'm probably in that (I'm 65), and then later old age when you start to hit a lot of health issues. Contemporaries die. I think they're two probably fairly different worlds in a way."

I've experienced loneliness... I certainly have experienced loneliness, definitely, and it's not a pleasant feeling at all, and I dare say I will again as well. Sometimes it can creep up on you, and you don't even realise it's happening, and you suddenly feel quite strange and depressed and you think 'Why is this?' You sort of start blaming yourself for it as well as much as anything. I don't know, it's just a feeling where you start becoming quite introspective and the only real answer is to get out there and start connecting with people. It's the only way really, but it must be a lot harder for 'older' older people, particularly as they become less active, they've got health issues, they start to become housebound"

– CR5.

The complex aspects of emotional well-being which lie beneath the categories of loneliness and isolation and the objective/subjective tensions inherent in these concepts have also been highlighted by a number of CRs. A person may live what might be considered by others to be a relatively isolated life without feeling lonely, for example. Conversely, a person may have a large family or social network but feel emotionally lonely or isolated through not feeling they have a meaningful status or are being heard.

Some people may be 'loners' naturally or through early life experiences and this may work for them during certain periods of their lives, but this may become a significant problem for them as they get older and have increasing needs for support. As one CR commented:

"I think you can be 'isolated' and perfectly content. Loneliness implies that you want something else, that there's something missing. I think that's very difficult and I think there are different sorts [of loneliness]... You know, not even giving others the chance to hear you or to listen. I think loneliness is one of those blanket terms. We need more words, really, to describe it"

– CR6.

It is, perhaps, important to note that while public 'conversations' about and studies of loneliness in the UK may have grown over recent years, loneliness and isolation are still rather taboo, personal and potentially difficult topics. This partly explains some of the problems BAB partners have faced in encouraging individuals to discuss these issues and complete CMFs which reflect their own personal circumstances. Findings from the CRs' continuing evaluation work are likely to yield further qualitative insight concerning meaningful ways of addressing what is increasingly being recognised as a chronic social problem.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

The contribution of the CRs to the BAB evaluation to date has been significant, as evidenced by the range of activities completed, which has contributed to programme learning and planning, and the final ongoing work scheduled running to the end of the programme in March 2020. To date the CRs' formal evaluation work has particularly informed the evolution of the Kick-start scheme and the Community Development for Older People projects. In addition, the CRs have had a unique exposure to a range of projects funded by

BAB through their regular conversations and meetings with project staff as part of their varied evaluation brief. Through this contact they have often been in a position to relay questions and issues of concern back to BAB management, providing a unique and important independent point of advice and knowledge to both BAB staff and programme beneficiaries. The analysis of the CRs' experiences, as presented in this report, offer insight for future initiatives aiming to involve community members as volunteer researchers.



The Community Researcher and UWE team in August 2016

Chapter Six:

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Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) is a partnership working to reduce social isolation and loneliness among older people and help them live fulfilling lives.

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