



Connect Hackney: Focus

Quarterly Blog by Sarah Warman

Welcome to October's update on Connect Hackney – delivered to you this time as a new quarterly blog – Connect Hackney Focus. If you haven't already done so, you can also sign up for our quarterly newsletter which features a summary of highlights of our wider work. Sign up to the Connect Hackney newsletter [here](#).

This quarter at Connect Hackney we share what came out of our self-reflection in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, and we also feature one of our delivery partners – City & Hackney Carers Centre – sharing their experience of how they have responded to changing government guidelines regarding Covid-19 whilst delivering their projects to meet support older people most in need; and directly from older people who shared with us their experience of attending the project.

Black Lives Matter and Connect Hackney

Connect Hackney hold quarterly workshop sessions for all of our delivery partners to meet, discuss, share and gather key learning around the projects they run and the participants and older people we are engaging. Following lockdown, we moved them online allowing us to be more responsive and accessible to our delivery partners.

No sooner had we transitioned online, Black Lives Matter, the movement for racial equality, had gathered global momentum (long overdue we say). In response, we immediately held two Learning Network workshop sessions, co-produced with delivery partners, exploring the issues of structural bias and racism and how they are relevant to Connect Hackney, and what we could do to further the movement.

Our first online session, held in early July online set out to capture learning around how issues of structural racism and unconscious bias relate to Connect Hackney projects, processes and policies, and explored how we could be a part of the anti-racist movement for racial equality and change.

It was co-produced and led by two black-led Connect Hackney delivery partners, working with specifically with African heritage communities, Coffee Afrique, and African Health Policy Network. The first session was held as a “village meeting”, throwing out formality, and creating a safe space for all delivery partners to voice their experiences and concerns. This was an impassioned and informative session that illuminated the deep roots of structural racism and ever-present blind spots, and it felt important to be a part of.

The discussions really illuminated for me how a lot of charity projects deal with the outcome of structural racism, and attempting to mop up the results of inequalities, yet what is really needed, in

addition to this work, is a paradigm shift to get to the core and root causes, for a deeper societal healing and to bring about a re-balancing, to achieve a truer level of sustainable equality for generations to come. And what is interesting, is examining how we can all be a part of and push for that – in all aspects of our lives.

At the follow-up session in August and we were joined by two members of our Older People's Committee (OPC) who shared their experiences of racism through their lifetime and involvement in the antiracist movement.

Gloria Collins (pictured), who moved to the UK from Trinidad at the tender age of 18 to start her career as a nurse, talked candidly about daily incidents of racism upon embarking in her chosen career, but also about her determination to not have her life dictated by others who deemed her less simply because of the colour of her skin.



And whilst her life as a nurse had been riddled with racism, she explained why she had not attended any anti-racist marches, effectively her whole life had been an antiracist movement, with little time or energy left over to campaign for more, and felt that battle was for the next generation – she had done her bit.

We were also joined by two youth leaders that work within the Youth Team at Hackney CVS, most notably on the Account Group project (an independent advisory group of young people monitors researchers and represents the community policing issues in Hackney and hold them to account). The youth leaders gave personal accounts of racism they had experienced, or witnessed happened to others in their circle, and how this had inspired them to take a stand, and be part of the movement for racial equality.

One told us: *"I'm very involved in the BLM protests... During lockdown, black men were stopped and searched 22 000 times, however 80% resulted in no further action. I was stopped and searched under section 60 and this was very traumatic. A few weeks ago I was required to write a report, and was still experiencing the trauma when needing to re-live the experience as I was analysing the experiences of other people."*

Our second youth leader explained how she recognised the value in cross-generational conversations *"I grew up listening to grandparents, aunts and uncles, and their struggles when they arrived from Jamaica and St Lucia, and I am aware of their challenge. It's shocking that it's still going on, and we're experiencing the same experiences of our elders. To me racism is modern day slavery, in that it never went away, it became more structured, more hidden. It's less overt."*

The session was enlightening, moving and inspirational. And we came up with four key identifiable actions:

- We need to examine not only how we can support participants, but provide training opportunities to organisations on unconscious bias and structural racism
- To support and explore ways in which the younger generation joining the fight for racial equality agenda can continue to take lessons from the older generation who have helped paved the way for the progress made to date
- Work with funders to continue the dialogue on issues around structural racism, and the impact this has on organisations led by, and working with African heritage communities

- To share learning and insights with wider CVS to feed into discussions with policy makers and influencers.

Thanks to everyone who took part. It was an illuminating discussion and no doubt just the start of great change on a much bigger scale. To read more about what HCVS is doing to lead the way on the anti-racist movement in Hackney, please see the Hackney CVS website.

Juggling participants' needs with government guidelines and limited resources

As we transition into autumn, it feels that we are having to adapt to yet another set of Covid-19 related government guidelines, while needing to balance these with the needs of project participants. So in the second half of my blog this quarter I speak to one of our Connect Hackney delivery partners – City & Hackney Carers Centre (CHCC), delivering two projects for us 'Broccals' and 'Carers Collective' – about how they are managing switching between delivery approaches and balancing that with the needs of participants. I also speak to two participants with differing views and who provide valuable insight based on their personal experiences of on the service and the impact this has had for them.

Anne -Marie Payne, Project Manager, explained to me: *“Responding to the shifting demands of the Covid-19 crisis has been challenging. We’ve worked hard to adapt our services to the restrictions in place, which has been easier for some projects than for others. As an organisation we had a certain level of preparedness for the move to digital: since autumn 2019 we had been running a digital support group for dementia carers via Zoom, which featured live-streamed Q&A sessions broadcast on Facebook Live and YouTube. We had considered the project to be challenging as engagement had been low; but the familiarity with those platforms meant that we were able to shift to remote delivery in a fairly agile manner.”*

Delivering online services during lockdown clearly had its pros as it has *“forced people to engage, enabling us to work with carers we hadn’t met before as they’d been housebound due to the constrictions of the caring role.”* The positive impact was also felt by the 51-year-old Hackney carer, a service user of Carer’s Collective, told me that the online dancing with carers sessions were really supportive for her through the lockdown as it provided a community of people, which is really helpful, as it was something different every week.

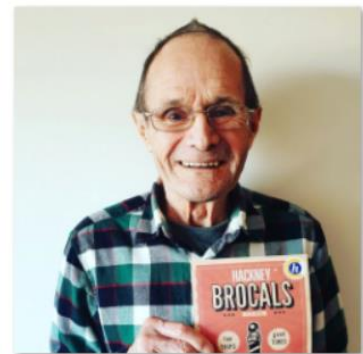
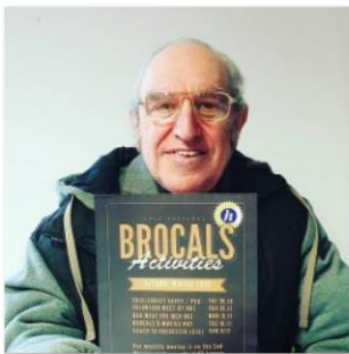
However, there are clearly significant downsides, as Anne-Marie explains: *“Not all services can be adapted for remote delivery, especially those aimed at engaging the severely isolated. A telephone call from a befriender is not the same as a face-to-face conversation. Remote delivery also creates obvious barriers to engaging new clients in services and building relationships with them – nothing beats face-to-face for this.”*

I spoke to Ryk Morgan who, prior to Covid-19, attended Broccals sessions regularly. He says, for him, online is not a replacement, it’s *“not even in the same universe”* as face-to-face in person interactions. In fact, he tells me that he has not attended any of the Broccals sessions online. Prior to lockdown he would be out and about most nights of the week socialising – that is a huge part of his life and his mental health management. Whilst he has attended one or two zoom events over the past few months, he has not engaged in them, and says it overwhelms and angers him.

He tells me he has experienced a huge drop in his social life, and that it is affecting his mental health considerably. Ryk is open about his mental health issues and says, *“I am really anxious. I could be a*

fatality of Covid”, telling me he means for his mental health concerns rather than Covid itself. But, he explains, “the problem is not the service [that CHCC offer], they are amazing. It’s me – I detest it [online services replacing in-person]. Anne-Marie is fabulous. She has become a friend. She is a wonderful woman.... But online sessions just don’t scratch the itch”.

Anne-Marie makes this same important point – that however flexible an organisation is to different forms of delivery, it wouldn’t suit everyone, and therefore some remain at risk of isolation. *“But some of the services – for example, the minibus and coach trips offered by Brocals – simply can’t be replicated remotely. The minibus driver training and the trips were a real USP of our project – we loved being able to utilise the low-cost Community Transport options offered by Hackney Community Transport over at Ash Grove – and without these the project is not quite the same. Ultimately the most socially isolated people don’t want to interact over Zoom – they crave real-world connection.”*



For Ryk, whilst socially distancing rules allowed some events to happen, this meant he wasn’t able to attend a lot of his previously regular activities – such as comedy nights, theatre etc. However, he agrees that where they were able to happen and he attended, socially distant was okay, and meant he could willingly participate.

But with evenings getting colder, and restrictions getting tighter everything is moving online again and there are those that feel worryingly excluded. Ryk tells us that whilst he is fairly IT literate, he struggles with Zoom, which leaves him frustrated and puts him in foul mood, so he has now stopped trying.

That is not uncommon – when we are learning new skills, it can feel overwhelming and that can easily lead to frustration and overwhelm. When I used to project manage the Silver Connections project (one of the Digital Inclusion Connect Hackney projects, run by Groundwork London) to help teach smart phone skills and simultaneously build community and support the growth of friendships for older people, this was a common experience at the start of the course. So a crucial piece of the puzzle for lasting success in learning these new skills, is creating a supportive and encouraging learning environment – in the group but also teaching individuals to have that more playful patient attitude with themselves as they learn.

Connect Hackney has funded three Digital Inclusion projects (with Newham New Deal Partnership, MRS Independent Living and Groundwork) and they are a great place to start closing the gap for those that are socially isolated but willing and able to learn new Digital Skills.

By the end of my conversation with Ryk, he was open to exploring online and expressed interest in signing up for one of our courses for over 50’s, once he could see there is a whole new community

online that is waiting for him, that wants and needs his contribution. It may not be ideal, but if things get tough and restrictions get tight, it might be the best option for him to keep in touch with his buddies from the Brocals project.

Anne-Marie's Top Tips



When asked for Top Tips for organisations when delivering sessions and in navigating the constantly shifting framework for delivery, Anne Marie advises: *“Be agile. Be experimental. Expect mistakes - technology is a capricious beast. Your Zoom connection will drop out at the worst moment. Be prepared to cancel anything, at any time. Mourn the way your project would have been and accept it for what it is now. If you have older children at home, recruit them as tech support!”*

Anne-Marie Payne

So it seems the same goes for participants and delivery partners alike, to some extent. Perhaps, as Anne-Marie put so eloquently, we all need to *“mourn the way [the] project would have been and accept it for what it is now”*.

Of course not everyone digitally excluded finds themselves in that position due to lack of will, some cannot afford Wi-Fi or devices or for some other reason are not able to use and access them. Anne-Marie includes a plan to support those people too as she explained in the future outlook for the projects she runs for City & Hackney Carers Centre:

“We’re going to continuously adapt and respond... Going forward, we will offer a mixed delivery model of Zoom and in-person sessions. We will deliver in the community at community centres, GP surgeries and other spaces such as the U7 Lounge, a large bar space in Hoxton which has been really supportive of the Hackney Brocals project. We will live-stream where we can at the same time as delivering in person. We’ve also applied for funding so that we can help people get online, and are commissioning digital content for our YouTube channel so that carers can access information whenever it suits them, even if that’s the middle of the night.”

This degree of responsiveness is admirable, but it’s also hard work – it takes additional project management and will have budget implications for many organisations. For CHCC, Anne-Marie tells me, there are more budget wins:

“In terms of budget it’s not so bad as my particular projects have developed an underspend due to not putting on trips and especially not needing to rent rooms for activities. Our budget for things like Zoom including webinar capacity and Socialbee to manage social media have increased, but still don’t match the underspend.”

CHCC has made additional savings, Anne-Marie tells me, since they have already taken quite a huge step in giving up their physical workspace. Other organisations are also making this decision, and of course there can be considerable monetary savings for businesses and projects, as well as for individuals (e.g. travel costs and travel time (therefore more free time), improving quality of life, more ecological, can get your washing done in your lunch break etc!).

But there are also costs for staff and organisations – monetary and otherwise. For example, increased mental health and isolation, spending on internet and daytime refreshments, heating and electricity for workers; as well as potentially less team connection, minimal opportunities for spontaneous collaborations and creative solutions through over-hearing conversations of colleagues or chats at the water cooler.

And with regards to other project costs caused by the shifting regulations, Anne-Marie tells me: *“There is additional project management work and some frustrations when things have to change. Staff time on social channels has increased. Some staff have had to take the time to learn to use these channels, which can be difficult if they’re not used to working in this way.”*

But overall, CHCC has found it to be a benefit. So why has CHCC found demands to adapt easier to manage? *“We’ve embraced tools like Slack (instant messaging for teams) in order to feel connected while working from home. We have taken advantage of some of the training offered by companies like The Media Trust so that the team are up to speed on social media and digital delivery. Management also implemented additional health benefits such as telephone counselling for staff in order to support staff suffering from isolation and feelings of loneliness brought about by working from home – ironic when our job is to help people suffering from the same issues!”*

These are important elements that all need consideration. We are all under prolonged heightened levels of stress at the moment, and this can be spiked even further if numbers increase or government guidance alters. So, as discussed in the last quarter’s article on the importance of self-care and resilience for staff, prioritising looking after yourself is paramount, especially in these extraordinary times, and what will enable you to be able to give to others when needed. As cabin crews always say during in-flight safety, you should *“put on your mask first, before a child’s”*.

Thank you for reading this quarters Connect Hackney Focus blog. I hope you’ve found it useful. Any questions or feedback please email me.

Stay well,
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