

# Ageing Better in Birmingham

Evaluation of Connect Sparkbrook local  
action plan

A report by CFE Research for Birmingham Voluntary Service Council



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**Report authors:**

Alex Stutz  
Rachel Moreton  
Chris Milner

For more information about this report please contact:  
Rachel Moreton

[Rachel.Moreton@cfe.org.uk](mailto:Rachel.Moreton@cfe.org.uk)

CFE Research  
Phoenix Yard  
Upper Brown Street  
Leicester  
LE1 5TE

0116 229 3300

[www.cfe.org.uk](http://www.cfe.org.uk)

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# Executive Summary

## About the Connect Sparkbook project

Ageing Better in Birmingham (ABIB) is a grassroots, asset-based approach that aims to create a new movement of community action on ageing and isolation across the city of Birmingham. It has four priority areas: geographic areas with a higher risk of isolation (Sparkbrook and Tyburn) and groups with a higher risk of isolation (older LGBT people and older carers). Local Action Plans were developed and introduced in each of the priority areas in Year 3 of the programme. They were designed to understand the causes of isolation and, through local interventions, create longer-term positive change for older people within the community.

The Muath Trust was commissioned to deliver the Connect Sparkbrook Local Action Plan project. A consortium of organisations was subcontracted to deliver the six activity streams and were core partners of the project. These were: Ashiana Community Project, The Springfield Project, Narthex Sparkhill and Disability Resource Centre. The six activity streams were:

- Venue assessments
- Volunteer management and social prescribing
- Social media development and ‘Telling Our Story’
- Resource development
- Group development and supporting small organisations
- Creating activity in open and green spaces

## About this evaluation

CFE Research was commissioned by BVSC in autumn 2018 to carry out an independent evaluation of Connect Sparkbrook. The evaluation provides a primarily qualitative narrative that explores the contribution of the Local Action Plan project to the wider ABIB programme aims. An iterative approach to the evaluation was adopted to reflect changes in project delivery.

## Project impact

In response to COVID-19, the government introduced a UK-wide ‘lockdown’ in March 2020. The impact has been considerable for project delivery, with most strands of activity affected. Delivery organisations have offered innovative approaches in the face of these restrictions, however, there is a sense that the overall project impact has been more limited than it would have been otherwise.

The project has positively impacted on the local voluntary and community sector within Sparkbrook. Participants reported that participation in activities has contributed to increased organisational knowledge, skills and understanding. There are signs that the project has begun to challenge preconceptions about the value of partnership working across the community. The value of this should not be

understated, considering the historical challenges that have existed across Sparkbrook. There is also evidence that participation in the project has led to increased organisational profile in some instances.

The project has also positively impacted on the wider community with several organisations pointing to better communication between community organisations and their beneficiaries. There remains considerable potential to build on these foundations and establish greater partnership working in the future, though this will likely require additional support and resource.

By providing opportunities for people to develop skills and knowledge the project has had a positive impact on the confidence and capacity of a small group of active citizens and encouraged some local residents to become more active.

### Conclusions and recommendations

The Connect Sparkbrook project had very ambitious aims for a relatively small and fairly short-term investment in an area with historical challenges in cross-community understanding and collaboration. The project has taken positive steps towards achieving the wider vision. However, creating sustainable impact is likely to take time and ongoing support. The foundations laid by the project offer great potential to be built upon. Aspects of planning and delivery could have been improved, which would have resulted in greater buy-in, more progress and, ultimately, greater impact. Based on the Connect Sparkbrook experience, the report makes a series of recommendations for similar community development projects:

- Involve stakeholders in project design and delivery and take time to understand the level and nature of need for support within organisations to ensure that activities are appropriately targeted.
- Where resource is limited, concentrate on supporting a small number of groups to provide in-depth and longer-term support.
- Undertake a programme of low-cost community activities that require partnership working between community organisations, making use of community assets to deliver capacity building projects.
- Resource sharing can be a practical solution to meeting local need. However, be aware that additional expertise and administrative support is needed to facilitate this.
- Focus on plans for legacy and sustainability from the outset. Include formal periods for review and reflection in project design and offer opportunities to change delivery as appropriate.
- Ensure a coordinated approach to communication, including between different project activities to maximise cooperation and collaboration.

# 01. Introduction

## Ageing Better in Birmingham: programme overview

Ageing Better in Birmingham is a grassroots, asset-based approach that aims to create a new movement of community action on ageing and isolation. By harnessing active citizenship, the programme aims to reduce isolation now and to prevent it happening in the future. Ageing Better in Birmingham (ABIB) has received £6.5m in funding from The National Lottery Community Fund for seven years (from April 2015) and is part of a wider programme of 14 [Ageing Better](#) projects located across England. ABIB is led by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC). The core aims of the ABIB programme are to:

- Tackle the underlying causes of social isolation and loneliness amongst older people in Birmingham and provide sustainable solutions for the longer term
- Empower residents to participate in and influence activities to reduce loneliness and social isolation
- Improve the way in which older people are considered by and within communities

Ageing Better in Birmingham operates across the city of Birmingham, with four priority areas: geographic areas with a higher risk of isolation (Sparkbrook and Tyburn) and groups with a higher risk of isolation (older LGBT people and older carers).

Local Action Plans were developed and introduced in each of the priority areas in Year 3 of the programme. They were designed to understand the causes of isolation and, through local interventions, create longer-term positive change for older people within the community. Local Action Plans are key to the programme's overall plans for sustainability and legacy and represent a considerable investment in tackling the causes of isolation and in developing ideas for achieving behavioural/attitudinal shifts. Specifically, they were designed to:

- Tackle specific causes of isolation that consultation and research have identified for each community
- Differ from existing activity
- Test what works best in reducing social isolation for each community
- Increase community resilience with regard to social isolation
- Impact strategically and operationally on social isolation
- Achieve sustainable outcomes that last beyond the life of the Ageing Better programme

To inform the development of plans, consultation exercises were carried out in each priority area to identify local causes of isolation and potential solutions.

## Sparkbrook Local Action Plan

The older population of Sparkbrook was identified as a priority for the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme as initial research showed that the risk of individuals becoming isolated in later life is especially high there. Subsequent consultation with 71 Sparkbrook residents and groups identified a number of key issues and concerns that help contribute to social isolation amongst older adults. These included:

- Difficulties in accessing public transport. Many older people do not feel comfortable using public transport and network services across Sparkbrook are perceived to be poor.
- While Sparkbrook is considered to be rich with community buildings and venues, they are perceived to be under-used, and in many cases not currently suitable for a range of reasons (including requiring investment and being poorly maintained). Venues are not always felt to be inclusive and do not always operate, or appeal across communities and neighbourhoods.
- Cultural differences between generations, and changes in the family unit are contributing to social isolation of older people in Sparkbrook. This is exacerbated by a perception that English being a second language for many residents creates a barrier to accessing services and creating social connections.
- There is a lack of self-confidence amongst many older people in the area leading to a lack of empowerment and participation in community life. Cultural and social boundaries, alongside community safety issues leave older people feeling that they are unable to participate in activities that may be available.

Local residents and stakeholders responding to the consultation identified five outcomes that they most wanted the Sparkbrook Local Action Plan to achieve:

- Increased self-confidence and a more positive view of, and feeling towards, the Sparkbrook area
- Greater connectedness across and between the communities of Sparkbrook
- Improved access to community assets for older people
- Promotion of active citizenship and good neighbourliness
- Increased collaboration and cooperation between organisations, providers and communities to increase reach, access and inclusivity of provision

The Connect Sparkbrook Local Action Plan project was designed to address the five outcomes by building on the ongoing activity of the ABIB programme in Sparkbrook. It was designed to consolidate activity in a sustainable way. The plan was structured around two work streams, 'Connecting Communities' and 'Promoting Active Citizenship':

*Connecting Communities* was designed to focus on place. It included measures to improve community infrastructure, address transport issues and improve accessibility of community-based provision.

*Promoting Active Citizenship* was designed to focus on people, and people-based solutions to social isolation amongst older residents. A key aim of ABIB is to develop activities that encourage the engagement and involvement of local citizens. It was hoped that by developing active citizens<sup>1</sup> and providing them with greater skills and knowledge of resources within the community, the Local Action Plan would help them achieve greater impact with their work.

The Muath Trust was commissioned by BVSC to deliver the Connect Sparkbrook Local Action Plan project. A consortium of organisations was subcontracted to deliver different activity streams and were core partners of the project. These were: Ashiana Community Project, The Springfield Project, Narthex Sparkhill and Disability Resource Centre. The Muath Trust, as the accountable body, had overall responsibility for oversight and compliance of these contracts.

## Methodology

CFE Research was commissioned by BVSC in autumn 2018 to carry out an independent evaluation of Connect Sparkbrook. The evaluation provides a primarily qualitative narrative that explores the contribution of the Local Action Plan project to the wider ABIB programme aims. We adopted an iterative approach to the evaluation to reflect changes in the delivery of the various activity streams. The impact of COVID-19 and associated lockdown also affected the evaluation and meant that face-to-face data collection, including observation conducted during the first year of the evaluation, was not possible in the second year. The final round of data collection was conducted remotely.

Table 1 below summarises evaluation activities completed during the lifetime of the project.

	<b>Phase 1 activities (undertaken April-Aug 2019)</b>	<b>Phase 2 activities (undertaken Aug-Oct 2020)</b>
Depth interviews with project staff	3	3
Depth interviews with activity providers	4	6
Depth interviews with project participants	3	10

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report an active citizen promotes the quality of life in a community through political and non-political process developing a combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to work to make a difference in the society. <https://www.euca.eu/activecitizenship>

Ethnographic observation of activities	4	-
Survey of project participants		57 respondents
Document review	✓	
Review of monitoring information		✓

**Table 1: Summary of evaluation activities**

### Qualitative interviews

Qualitative, in-depth telephone interviews carried out with Connect Sparkbrook project staff included the Connect Sparkbrook Coordinator, The Muath Trust’s Chief Executive and the Ageing Better in Birmingham Programme Director.

Project participants were identified through the use of a recall question in the survey.

### Visits and observation

We visited four different activity providers during the first phase of the evaluation. During these visits we observed activity and talked informally to participants and volunteers. Lockdown restrictions prohibited further opportunities for observation.

### Secondary data analysis

We analysed administrative monitoring information collected by BVSC. Activity providers were required to complete a monitoring report on a quarterly basis for The Muath Trust.

### Survey of project participants

We conducted an online survey of project participants. This was designed to assess the effectiveness and outcomes of the different activity streams. The survey was aimed at all those that have taken part in any Connect Sparkbrook activities including employees or volunteers of community groups and active citizens with no links to a community group. The survey was distributed by The Muath Trust and was live from December 2019 – August 2020. The survey received 57 responses. The survey was routed so respondents were only asked questions about activities they had participated in. As a result, base sizes vary by question and are often very low. The low number of responses to the survey means that care should be taken in interpreting the results.

## 02. Project activity

In this chapter, each activity strand is introduced with a short description of the purpose and activities undertaken, main achievements and key learning.

### Activity 1: Venue assessments

#### Purpose

This activity strand was designed to improve community infrastructure and improve cooperation between different community groups in Sparkbrook by improving access to community venues. Increasing usage of community assets is a worthwhile objective, and key to this is ensuring that venues are accessible and open to all members of the community.

*When you come to social isolation, one of the key things that we have found is that if, for example, the venue is accessible it will help individuals to go to those venues, and [they] will feel more confident or competent to go to those venues*

— Delivery organisation

The purpose of the venue assessment was to identify physical barriers that may be limiting use of the venue. It was hoped that the assessments would provide a clearer picture of the range of available community spaces and begin the process of improving access. Ageing Better in Birmingham included a capital works budget of £15k, which venues could apply for to make small adaptations as identified through the assessment. For major adaptations, it was anticipated that The Muath Trust would support organisations to develop proposals to secure funding from other sources.

#### Activity

Disability Resource Centre (DRC) was commissioned to undertake 16 venue assessments across the Sparkbrook community over the lifetime of the 2-year project. In total, 11 venue assessments were completed.

Venues were identified and selected by The Muath Trust, primarily through an initial mapping exercise undertaken by the project coordinator. Venues identified tended to be run by smaller organisations and were already in regular use by the community. The coordinator worked with DRC to broker initial relationships with the venues, and consultants from DRC undertook the venue assessments. These were designed to review access in the widest sense, whether it be physical access to a building or availability of facilities within, and to undertake a 'fit for purpose' assessment.

#### Outcomes

Analysis of the participant survey suggests that there have been some positive outcomes for those engaging in this activity. Almost all respondents (12 out of 13 respondents) reported that they had increased awareness about what factors are important in making their venue accessible to all.

Almost half (6 out of 13 respondents) reported positive changes to their facilities since the venue assessment, which is encouraging. Follow-up interviews indicated that in two instances improvements had either already been made or would be taking place as soon as is practicable.

*Currently we are unable to carry out any work due to Covid-19 lockdown. However, Birmingham City Council have pledged to carry out some of the identified improvements*

— Community organisation

Three survey respondents indicated that they had applied for funding to make improvements, with a further six indicating that they intended to. Only two respondents indicated that they would not be doing so. Of those that had made applications, one reported being successful in securing funding of £13,500, with the remaining two awaiting decisions. However, at the time of writing no applications have been made to use the Ageing Better in Birmingham capital grant.

### Key learning

Not all planned venue assessments were undertaken. To a large extent this was as a result of lockdown restrictions implemented due to COVID-19. However, the overall level of engagement of those organisations approached to participate was lower than expected. DRC reported that, despite support from The Muath Trust, it was challenging to engage the organisations at the outset of the activity and achieve their buy-in.

The process of venue selection does not appear to be as systematic as it could have been. For example, three venues that were initially selected for inspection were owned or managed by Birmingham City Council, which precluded their participation in an external assessment process. Adopting a more thorough and systematic approach to selecting venues and working collaboratively with organisations would have allowed the project to identify individual needs and address any concerns at the outset. The set-up period could also have been usefully used to establish links with other activity strands and identify opportunities for further collaboration. This is important as it is unlikely that this activity strand alone could lead to a widespread increase in use of community assets. A longer initial lead-in period, focused on establishing understanding between The Muath Trust, DRC and target organisations could have resulted in greater buy-in and potentially led to greater impact.

*I think [organisations] just needed to understand how beneficial an assessment can [be] for them in regard to making [their venue] much more accessible for people, and I think the lack [of understanding] could be the barrier.*

— Delivery organisation

Some participating organisations would have welcomed greater follow-up support to help them implement recommendations from the assessment. This suggests the availability of funding and support with fundraising was not effectively communicated.

*The improvements we made were self-funded, we bought some furniture and other things. We needed some more funding for building a wheelchair ramp [...] the lead needed to contact the funders for us maybe or help us with how to apply for funding*

— Community organisation

Working more collaboratively from the outset would have helped to provide organisations with greater clarity on the purpose of the exercise, the potential for future funding and available support. Feedback from participating organisations suggests that this was lacking, which may be one contributing factor to explain the low level of engagement with the project post-assessment.

Commissioning the right organisation to deliver the activity is important. DRC offered a number of benefits for the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. It is considered a sector expert on disability and is experienced in undertaking similar accessibility audits. Participants felt that the assessors also had substantial wider knowledge, which was useful in providing solutions to related issues some venues faced.

*We were talking about our car park, and sometimes we get young lads on there taking laughing gas, so, [the assessor] just whipped out their phone and showed me the app 'Clean My Street' and within a few hours someone from BCC was there removing [debris and rubbish], and that's an app that we've now downloaded and we use ourselves in the vicinity of our space.*

— Community organisation

## Activity 2: Volunteer management and social prescribing

### Purpose

This activity strand was designed to increase the reach and effectiveness of grassroots community groups. There is a perception that across Sparkbrook, volunteering in community organisations, particularly smaller organisations, is not always well managed. It is not always clear that groups understand what motivates people to volunteer, nor the different ways in which people may wish to volunteer.

The rationale was that by supporting organisations to reflect on and strengthen their organisational processes it would better position them to benefit from emerging opportunities, including offering activities as part of the growth in social prescribing.<sup>2</sup> It was also hoped participating organisations would cascade learning to embryonic and emerging community groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Social prescribing is a means of enabling health professionals (such as GPs and practice nurses) to refer people to a range of local, non-clinical services, such as gardening, befriending, sports and volunteering. For further information, see: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/social-prescribing>

## Activity

The Springfield Project was contracted to deliver this activity. Two work strands were offered.

### Social prescribing and volunteering support

The Springfield Project designed a training session for organisations interested in becoming involved in social prescribing. The Springfield Project has a partnership with the SmartCare Federation (a GP Federation within Birmingham) that is involved in social prescribing and is therefore well placed to deliver this activity. The sessions provided participants with information on what social prescribing is, its function and provided details of those GPs that were offering social prescribing. Three face-to-face sessions were delivered with a final session delivered via Zoom.

Seven volunteer management training sessions were scheduled to be delivered between March and June 2020. However, due to lockdown restrictions, only the first session could take place. During this session ten people from seven different community organisations attended. 24 people representing 17 community groups who had signed up to participate in the later sessions received session materials alongside an offer to engage with them at a later date if required.

### Improving operating procedures

The Springfield Project developed the Connect Sparkbrook Quality Standard Guide (CSQS). This provided support in developing key organisational policies across a range of areas including: health and safety, risk management, safeguarding, data protection and equality and diversity. Support was also offered in creating job descriptions and employment contracts.

The package of support including training sessions and one-to-one support was offered to 19 different organisations identified by The Muath Trust. Six organisations took up the offer of support and, working with The Springfield Project, received a CSQS Certificate as proof of their participation in the training.

## Outcomes

Interest in social prescribing is strong across community groups we consulted. It is viewed as an opportunity to extend their reach in the community and promote their activities that they consider to be strongly aligned to the wider objectives of social prescribing.

*...what we do within the community room is healthy-lifestyle workshops, we do classes. We do things like that. We wanted very much to be involved in this social prescribing, because obviously social prescribing is what we do, through activities, through mental wellbeing.*

— Community organisation

Results from the participant survey suggest that taking part in the social prescribing training has been beneficial. The biggest impact reported is in increased knowledge and understanding of social prescribing (12 out of 13 respondents). Importantly, respondents indicated that they have a greater understanding of how their

organisation could get involved and are better prepared to offer services as part of social prescribing (11 out of 12 respondents). One organisation interviewed highlighted that knowledge gained would be shared through their network, broadening the impact of the training.

*We do have a better understanding of social prescribing so we can discuss it with community-led groups we work with and support. Very informative sessions.*

— Community organisation

Almost half of respondents (6 out of 13 respondents) indicated that they had begun to put their learning into practice and had started to build relationships with GPs or other organisations that are potential sources of referrals, which is positive. Two respondents reported receiving more referrals through this route.

## Key learning

The Springfield Project found it challenging to establish working relationships with smaller community organisations across Sparkbrook. In part this was perceived to be due to the Project having a limited ‘footprint’ in certain areas within Sparkbrook as well as being more commonly associated with early years provision. This may have led to some reluctance amongst organisations to engage with the activity. However, the wider work of The Springfield Project has provided additional benefit for some participating organisations. Active citizens from these organisations have been introduced to other activities offered by The Springfield Project. This has resulted in five people attending their ‘Place of Welcome’ programme<sup>3</sup>.

There was a lower-than-expected take-up of organisational support with 13 out of the 19 organisations offered support deciding not to participate. In a small number of instances, the activity lead felt that the organisations approached did not require the support. In a much larger number of cases, it was felt that the organisations lacked the capacity to take advantage of the opportunities offered.

Affecting lasting organisational change takes time. The interventions offered by this activity strand required considerable commitment from community organisations, something that is often limited, particularly so for smaller groups often run by older people. This has been exacerbated during COVID-19 where services may have been suspended and staff placed on furlough. More work was needed at the outset to identify and engage organisations that are seeking help and/or are at the right point in their organisational development. This would allow the delivery organisation to focus resources in a more targeted way, and provide more support to fewer organisations to deliver sustained improvement. It is clear that there were participating organisations that would have welcomed additional support and were in a position to benefit from it.

*Social prescribing was something we were really interested in and wanted to get involved in but didn't get anywhere. There wasn't a follow-up... We were thinking,*

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<sup>3</sup> The Place of Welcome is a weekly drop-in session for all ages that provides a relaxed and safe space for activities, relaxation and conversation.

*how do we get involved? How do we get access? Who are the coordinators? Who can we get involved with to look at how we can bring people into the community, to what we do, to the activities, how can we access funding for that as well. So, we did not get anything after that.*

— Community organisation

Furthermore, organisations would benefit from post-activity support to embed the learning and put it into practice. Future project design should consider whether levels of support are sufficient within the timeframe available to increase the likelihood of lasting change. Additional support and time may be needed in order to see the impact of the activities.

*When you're helping people understand how to manage volunteers, you've got to give them time to recruit them. And even to grow their own organisation until they've got to the point of being able to recruit volunteers. But some of them were small groups.*

— Delivery organisation

## **Activity 3: Social media development and 'Telling our story'**

### **Purpose**

This strand was designed to support local community groups to consider new ways of networking and publicising their work. Levels of understanding of the ways in which digital and social media can inform an organisational strategy vary considerably across community groups in Sparkbrook and this is demonstrated by the varying extent of its usage. However, there is a sense that social media is becoming more important than other, more traditional ways of communication and the introduction of lockdown has acted as a catalyst, and 'intention to use is higher'.

It was hoped that increasing groups' use of social media to tell their story would raise their profile and increase awareness of their services within the community.

### **Activity**

This activity strand was delivered by the Ashiana Community Project (ACP) and associates. Research undertaken by ACP found that digital skills within voluntary and community organisations across the West Midlands are below the national average. Whilst previous work undertaken by ACP reported relatively good levels of individual usage of social media (particularly WhatsApp and Skype), the lower-than-expected organisational use of social media suggested that groups may not possess the necessary digital skills to make effective use of it.

The focus of this activity was therefore on community organisations rather than on Sparkbrook residents and comprised two work streams:

## Improving understanding of digital and social media

Social media training sessions, or ‘surgeries’, were held across the community. Sessions provided support on use of digital tools, social media and how to create and manage profiles on specific social media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Activities were based around participants’ organisational requirements to help them see the relevance of social media to them.

The surgeries were undertaken in partnership with a consultant from Neighbourhood News Online (a website offering community news, local directories and events) and supported by volunteers, known as ‘surgeons’, who assisted with delivery and provided support to individual participants during sessions.

Lockdown restrictions introduced in March 2020 have impacted on work stream activity. A number of training opportunities have not taken place. Efforts to provide activities online have been explored, but overall interest was low. Feedback from participants who had already undertaken face-to-face training suggests that the nature and complexity of the training would not be practical in an online format. However, other challenges relating to lockdown (and explored elsewhere in this report) are also likely to have affected take-up.

## Telling our story

This work stream was managed by an associate and delivered to eight community organisations. The associate used their experience as a community film-maker to support organisations to produce a range of outputs, including short films, audio interviews and photographs, to capture and promote their activities. This work stream complemented the surgeries and training sessions, which provided the ‘nuts and bolts’ of constructing a social media presence. Outputs created featured participants promoting community activities in order to increase the appeal to local residents.

*So, if you can tell a story where somebody says 'Oh, I come here every week, it's really fun' and you identify with that person. Because [without this encouragement] it's not going to be enough to get people to make that first step [to join a group], especially if people are elderly, vulnerable and scared of new experiences*

— Delivery organisation

In some instances the roll-out of materials produced with the eight organisations has been delayed. Strategic decisions were taken to delay release until lockdown restrictions ease and organisations’ activities can begin again.

## Outcomes

49 individuals from 21 organisations took part in social media activities. This included four social media surgeries and five training sessions. Follow-up support has been provided by ACP to three community organisations to explore how their use of social media can be used to promote their services. ACP report that a number of participants have subsequently used the Neighbourhood News Online website to promote their group, helping to raise their profile across the community.

Participants have valued the social media training, viewing it as an important but often neglected medium in which to promote their activities. This is seen as particularly timely since the introduction of the lockdown.

*As we are now having to practice social distancing, social media is being used by us to keep in touch with our vulnerable clients who are in isolation*

— Community organisation

The survey also suggests participants benefited from getting help with social media. Almost all respondents (17 out of 19) reported that they have a greater awareness of how social media can help to promote the work of their organisation and communicate with other local organisations. The majority of respondents (14 out of 19) reported that they had developed their social media skills as a result of taking part.

Respondents also reported that participation in the training has translated into improved understanding of the importance and role of social media across their organisation. 12 out of 19 respondents reported that senior managers are more willing to embrace social media and have a better understanding of how to manage the potential risks of using social media.

Survey respondents reported that involvement in social media training has enabled them to use social media to engage more residents and more organisations (14 and 15 respondents out of 19 respectively). This was corroborated by participant interviews.

*For me, I think my learning has improved my social media understanding. [...] I used some of the tips that were given to us, to build on our followers, so people were able to access more things. So, yes, it has helped*

— Community organisation

## Key learning

The diverse nature of the organisations that attended each session meant that the skills and needs of participants varied. Organisation details collected beforehand were often incomplete or incorrect. As a result the organiser only had a partial understanding of each attendee's social media policies and practices. Some participants felt that this impacted on the effectiveness of the training provided, commenting that the training was not as relevant to them as they had hoped.

Lack of ownership of social media within an organisation can be an obstacle in ensuring organisations have effective social media strategies in place. Not having one named individual can mean that responsibility can fall 'between the cracks' and limit the impact of support provided. There was a perception from some stakeholders that organisational factors could limit the impact of the training. In some instances, it was reported that senior management were less willing to delegate social media tasks to others in the organisation.

There may be value in considering investing more support, but in fewer organisations to help embed change over a longer period of time. This may help to strengthen organisational usage of social media and strengthen the likelihood of sustained change.

*I always think that you need more training, because a one-off here, one hour here, one hour there, it is not always enough. Ideally, you want a bit more so you learn a bit more all the time.*

— Community organisation

Participants welcomed the opportunity to apply learning directly to their own organisational needs. Undertaking a comprehensive skills audit across the target groups at the outset of a future project would help identify and categorise levels of need. This would potentially allow training programmes to be pitched at the right level for participants. A series of sequential training programmes (for example, beginner, intermediate and advanced) that participants can progress through may help to embed learning and lead to lasting change in practice.

Drawing on community resources has a number of benefits. Using digital community resources as examples when promoting the value of social and digital media has proved fruitful, with a number of organisations making use of Neighbourhood News Online. Future activities should consider where and how this approach could be replicated.

The use of local venues increases accessibility and offers the opportunity for further cross-promotion of services. Being able to identify and draw support from skilled volunteers not only adds capacity to the project but also broadens the range of knowledge that can be shared with participants.

*[The organiser's] own network of people, the media surgeons, were brought to the set-up so that people with different skills could run different sessions and provide a better mix of skills to the trainees*

— Training programme staff

## Activity 4: Resource development

### Purpose

This strand was designed to assess the need for, and the feasibility of, sharing assets between community groups across Sparkbrook. It was hoped that identifying resources for inclusion in a 'library' and developing a system for sharing these resources would allow organisations to extend their services and potentially provide a greater range of activities for older people. In part, this activity was designed to address challenges with local transport provision identified during the consultation. It was thought that by sharing underused assets, for example minibuses, organisations could increase the reach of their activities for older residents.

### Activity

This activity strand was delivered by the ACP group. It involved a consultation with 19 local organisations, identified primarily by ACP and supported by The Muath Trust. Each organisation was asked to identify resources, including transport that they would be willing to share. Discussion also focused on the adequacy of transport provision for those older people that the organisation engaged with.

A directory of resources across the 19 organisations has been produced and submitted to The Muath Trust but not shared amongst partners. This provides information on organisations' capacity and equipment and highlights any limitations to its use. At time of writing this directory has not been shared more widely with community organisations.

## Outcomes

Sparkbrook community groups have a positive attitude towards sharing resources. They understand the potential that this has for expanding their offer to older people. The participant survey suggests being involved in this activity has improved knowledge of the local community and voluntary sector across Sparkbrook (11 out of 15 respondents). Almost half (7 out of 15 respondents) reported having a greater understanding of the resources and assets other organisations hold, an important prerequisite for resource sharing. Encouragingly, respondents also report that they are both more likely to use the resources and assets of other organisations (11 out of 15) and share their own resources and assets (10 out of 15).

Follow-up interviews with participants indicated some limited examples where organisations had collaborated. These tended to be use of venue space either for activity delivery (such as Tai Chi) or as meeting/training space for other elements of Connect Sparkbrook (see activities 2, 3 and 5).

*And we have a scheme called 'Community Monday' where we offer free or peppercorn rates to community voluntary groups to access high quality space on Mondays. So, we talked about that, the room was used a couple of times by a couple of the groups.*

— Community organisation

## Key learning

Overall, take-up of resource sharing between organisations has remained low. In large part this is because the directory of resources remains unpublished and unpublicised. The directory of support and resources should be made publicly available and promoted across the community using platforms such as Neighbourhood News Online. This would allow groups and active citizens to identify resources, make contact with the owner and establish relationships with them.

Sharing assets is perceived by organisations to be dependent on close relationships between organisations. Common understanding between host and user groups may not always exist. Trust, often based on past experience, was regularly cited as a barrier during the consultation exercise, particularly in relation to sharing movable resources (for example tools and equipment). The lack of progress in resource sharing suggests that the initial dialogue with organisations has not been effective in addressing this.

Organisations report a range of challenges that their clients face in accessing appropriate public and community transport. Despite this, and the challenges that some organisations have faced in maintaining their own vehicles, there remains little

interest in sharing vehicles between organisations. A vehicle represents an important organisational asset, and one that should be protected.

During the initial consultation activity, organisations also cited a range of practical barriers that they felt would limit the potential for greater resource sharing. There are often costs associated with sharing resources, such as requiring additional insurance, which can prevent greater cooperation.

Participants also reflected that they were not presented with tangible ways that a system of resource sharing could be established.

*There seems to be mapping ... but I don't feel [there are ...] actual practical ways of being able to book [resources or assets] ahead to marry the activities with space and the instructor with an activity. It's just trying to bring it all together ... maybe an online booking system or a central place where you could put in, 'I'm booking for this, is anybody else?'*

— Community organisation

Lack of progress with sharing resources was also reflected in the fact that the possibility of establishing a community transport scheme was explored but ultimately never followed up.

A formal procedure, including written hire agreements to protect all parties, may be required to help overcome the lack of trust and clarity about how to share resources. A dedicated organiser may be needed to promote and coordinate sharing, seek practical solutions to local challenges and maintain the directory.

Sharing of venue space has taken place. Organisations recognise that this offers benefits for their clients, though recognise that there are practical challenges too, including the need to cover costs, such as staffing the venue. Notwithstanding, some organisations have been willing to offer free or reduced rates for venue hire and show a willingness to share their space for community groups that are starting out. This should be built upon.

Organisations also indicated that they may be more willing to pool resources to work together on a specific project. This could be explored further.

## **Activity 5: Group development and supporting small organisations**

### **Purpose**

Partnership working between community sector organisations offers many benefits to organisations and their beneficiaries. For larger organisations, this can mean being able to provide services/activities to a wider beneficiary base through the myriad of informal networks that grassroots organisations maintain. There is some evidence to suggest that Ageing Better funding has been most impactful for larger community organisations in Sparkbrook by kick-starting relationships with older residents that have continued post funding. Larger organisations running a range of activities are better placed to link beneficiaries once engaged into a range of services.

Smaller organisations often deal with large volumes of beneficiaries, but through lighter-touch interventions. Conversely, grassroots organisations often do not have the required infrastructure (nor indeed wish) to expand their offer. These groups could benefit from support from a larger organisation that already has the required infrastructure in place.

Partnership working can also give organisations a larger collective voice. Activities supported through this work stream suggest that an active focus on expanding networking is a way to influence local decision-making. Support for networking should continue to be developed.

This activity was designed to provide support to local organisations that had received Ageing Better funding and strengthen and sustain their success. In part, this was to ensure organisations were able to participate in other Connect Sparkbrook activities. This strand was also designed to increase networking between organisations, allowing them to explore partnership opportunities and develop joint activity.

### **Activity**

This strand identified and engaged with 12 community organisations in receipt of funding from the Ageing Better Fund. Organisations were selected by Narthex based on ‘capacity, reach or impact’. Organisations selected based on ‘capacity’ were larger organisations considered to be local ‘anchors’ offering a range of services, including commissioned services, with higher turnovers and the necessary infrastructure in place. Organisations selected based on their ‘reach’ tended to be smaller organisations, in which the Ageing Better funding constituted approximately half of their total income. These groups were not necessarily specialists in working with older people but did engage with large numbers of older people. The final group were selected based on ‘impact’ on older people. In most instances these were informal groups which had been created using the Ageing Better funding and deemed to have had a positive impact on those older people that they engaged.

The organisations were supported to take part in networking activities to raise their profile across the community. Organisations benefited from advice on how to effectively engage commissioners and were supported to identify local issues to work on cooperatively.

Organisations were supported by the activity lead to explore opportunities to work together on potential projects. This tended to focus on health and social care work streams as well as securing funding from the Neighbourhood Network Schemes (NNS)<sup>4</sup>. Activity was designed to help establish collaborative relationships between the larger and smaller organisations and challenge the hierarchical relationships that were perceived to have existed between them.

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<sup>4</sup> The Neighbourhood Network Schemes are designed to enable the engagement with and investment in community assets. This is for the purposes of supporting older people to connect to individuals, groups, organisations, activities, services and places in their neighbourhoods <https://brumnns.wordpress.com/>

## Outcomes

Survey respondents report that receiving support through this activity has inspired them to become more active in local community action (21 out of 24 respondents). The majority (19 out of 24 respondents) reported that they felt more able to influence what services are provided locally.

Local community groups were supported to participate in public consultation activities organised by Birmingham City Council and Birmingham Public Health. The activity lead provided guidance to groups to enable them to make impactful contributions. In some instances, this included assisting organisations to consult with their beneficiaries (of which there are many) to strengthen evidence and influence local decision-making. These activities provided opportunities for local residents to come together to discuss community challenges, explore themes including welfare, employment and debt advice, and influence future local service provision.

These opportunities were perceived to have helped to instil and develop confidence among cohorts of residents that historically may not have been comfortable in making public contributions, thereby potentially helping to create more active citizens. It had the additional benefit of raising organisational profiles and opening up opportunities for future funding, including in at least one instance, a successful funding application.

*We assisted [the leader of a community organisation] to facilitate a meeting with the police, public health and different agencies ... for her, it was a transformational change. Her reach was large, she was well connected in the community, but, when it came to structured delivery, she had no mechanisms of support. Within a three-month period, she was invited to attend meetings and given an opportunity to present her story. [...] Then, she applied [for funding] and was successful. It transpired, the reason that she was successful was because the commissioners that were sitting at the table knew this organisation*

— Delivery organisation

Survey respondents also reported positive impacts for their group. Encouragingly, all respondents (24) reported that the support received had helped them to consider how their group could meet unmet local need. Most (21 out of 24 respondents) reported that they felt more confident about setting up new community activities or services and that their group has more active helpers or volunteers (19 out of 24 respondents).

Some participants indicated that they had begun to establish informal relationships with other organisations. In part, COVID-19 has been the impetus, as local groups have taken on responsibility for meeting urgent need, for example the distribution of food or PPE equipment. There is some evidence that suggests that longer-term issues associated with COVID-19 are being discussed between groups. In two instances groups indicated that their awareness of other local organisations has increased as they have explored issues such as debt management and benefit advice. They suggest that greater partnership working may occur in the future.

*We're getting to know organisations who are just next door to us, we didn't know about. Yes and sharing resources, so the Job Centre is looking at coming here and advising people and at some point may be providing us with some computers where we can help [residents] with their universal credit application.*

— Community organisation

## Key learning

Establishing strong local partnerships is challenging. Across some communities in Sparkbrook there is a historic lack of trust between organisations, exacerbated by perceptions of local bias and unfairness in the ways in which services have been commissioned. It was also clear that organisations often have varying aspirations, which makes it challenging to align these. Competition for funding can work against greater collaboration. There is a role here for commissioners in encouraging collaboration between organisations seeking to deliver local services.

*Challenges remain to break down boundaries between organisations that 'protect' their beneficiaries. There is a sense that there is a lot of competition with a scarce amount of resources. It's like, an organisation says, 'and what can I get out of it so I can help my people?' Not the ideology of, 'How can we work together so we can help our people?'*

— Project staff

Engendering trust between organisations is an essential aspect of success. This was challenging to achieve. A programme of collaborative activities to build trust could be a powerful way in which to embed the positive steps organisations have taken through this activity strand.

There were also barriers in engaging the smallest and very new organisations. Group leaders, in particular from small BAME-led groups, were often concerned by the prospect of taking on greater responsibility. They did not believe that they had the infrastructure in place to make the most of any additional funding that may have been available. Better consultation with target groups at the start of the project may have revealed what are reasonable concerns and enabled the project to work with the aspirations of small groups rather than finding they were often not interested in the type of support on offer.

## Activity 6: Creating activity in open and green spaces

### Purpose

This activity strand aimed to develop local community assets for use by older people. It was designed to encourage older people to make use of open and green spaces across Sparkbrook. It also aimed to improve the appearance and usability of areas that had become derelict and, in the process, encourage older people to be more active through gardening and provide opportunities for social interaction.

## Activity

The Ashiana Community Project (ACP) delivered this work stream. ACP supported local community groups, national organisations, faith groups and a local primary school to deliver activities with older people to develop local community assets.

Activities included restoring unused communal spaces to create attractive green spaces. The activities were undertaken to restore unwanted spaces that could be used and sustained in the longer term.

Approximately 35 people across a range of ages and ethnic backgrounds were involved in the transformation of eight spaces across the community. By providing opportunities for the over-50s to develop skills in horticulture and basic DIY, it was hoped that individuals would be able to maintain the sites in future. By involving a mix of people, both young and old, the activity created opportunities for intergenerational understanding and friendships to develop.

*So there were older and younger people mixing and sharing stories, developing friendships whereby the isolation for the older people is less because they've created a friend, and that might be with someone more able-bodied [who] could do things for them, should they need it in the future, as well.*

— Delivery organisation

ACP also supported several groups wishing to provide exercise sessions for older people. Support included assistance with funding applications and consultation on new activities including a cycling club, further gardening activities and Tai Chi sessions.

## Outcomes

The participant survey suggests that participation in this activity has led to greater awareness of local green spaces (9 out of 10 respondents) and importantly a greater understanding of how these spaces could be used by their group. This has translated into action with the majority of respondents (7 out of 10) reporting that they had started to help maintain local green and open spaces in their area.

With the support of ACP, one group has established a relationship with The Prince's Trust, a national charity established to help vulnerable 11- to 30-year-olds. An agreement is in place to create a community garden within part of an unused car park after lockdown restrictions are ended. An added benefit of this relationship is that the group have been able to refer some of their young clients to The Prince's Trust.

*A relationship has developed with Prince's Trust [and] because of this, we've referred young people to their programmes, and it's good to be able to do that.*

— Community organisation

## Key learning

Opportunities to develop local community assets offer a range of benefits to participants and the community. The activity lead reported that participants were physically active and learnt new skills whilst interacting with others and experiencing

the benefits of giving something back. Community organisations reported that being able to develop underused spaces provides them with potential new opportunities for activity, something that may be particularly helpful since the advent of COVID-19.

*We're actually developing an outdoor classroom in the space within a community garden. COVID-19 is here to stay we reckon, so an outdoor classroom that's sheltered, has electricity and external heaters, but doesn't have walls, is what is going up in that space by Christmas.*

— Community organisation

There is an appetite amongst Sparkbrook residents to participate in activities that use open and green spaces in the community. Participation rates suggest that these activities have the potential to attract a large and diverse audience. Importantly participants are often willing to continue to volunteer once the task is completed.

These types of activities are relatively low-cost and potentially offer considerable benefits: there is evidence for a range of positive health and wellbeing impacts associated with gardens, gardening and use of green spaces.<sup>5</sup> Future opportunities to support these types of activities should be explored. There may be scope to make local links with the NNS programme and promote the activity with health providers, particularly those involved in social prescribing.

Many local green spaces are difficult to access for older people, particularly when using public transport. This resulted in participants having to make complicated travel arrangements or not being able to get involved. However, ACP was able to work with some residents to provide travel solutions for them so they could participate.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 meant that all activities associated with this strand were suspended and the majority of groups involved closed down for many months. Activities are planned to resume once restrictions are eased, but at the time of writing it is not clear whether they will continue.

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<sup>5</sup> See The King's Fund report: Gardens and health: Implications for policy and practice  
[https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/field\\_publication\\_file/Gardens\\_and\\_health.pdf](https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/field_publication_file/Gardens_and_health.pdf)

# 03. Project impact

## Introduction

In this chapter we explore the impact of Connect Sparkbrook. We reflect on impact in terms of impact on the voluntary and community sector as well as the wider community.

We also highlight and discuss those factors that have impacted on the delivery of the project. Clearly, the impact of COVID-19 has been considerable and we set out our findings within this context.

Evidence of impact is drawn from information provided by activity leads, project staff, and participants that we either interviewed or engaged with through the online survey.

## Impact on the local voluntary and community sector

It is worth noting that, historically, Sparkbrook has been one of the areas within the city that has received the highest levels of investment in the voluntary and community sector. There exists a range of large community organisations that play a dominant role across service delivery. However, the level of investment is not perceived to have led to a culture of collaborative activity across the community and there is a perception that relationships between groups are at times divisive, which may negatively impact on referral pathways for residents seeking support.

### Improved skills, knowledge and understanding

Participants reported that involvement in project activities has contributed to an increase in organisational knowledge, skills and understanding. Importantly, participants indicate that they are able to use this knowledge to improve the way they work. For example, one organisation stated that their involvement in the project had 'held a mirror up' to what they do, allowing them to reflect on and respond to their strengths and address limitations. This, they reported, would help them to become more effective in the future.

It is positive to note that, despite the significant challenges of lockdown restrictions, some participants reported immediate benefits to their organisation (covered in more detail in the previous chapter). It is clear that in these cases, training has empowered participants to build on and enhance their services.

### Improved collaboration between VCS groups

There are some signs that Connect Sparkbrook has begun to have an impact in challenging preconceptions about the value of partnership working. Activities provided through activities 1, 4 and 5 in particular have provided opportunities for organisations to explore ways in which to align activities and establish collaborative working relationships.

*So, some of our best work happens when we collaborate with the smaller organisations that have that deeper reach into residents*

— Community organisation

The value of this should not be understated, considering the historical challenges described. Most stakeholders reported that the environment now is more ‘constructive’ and ‘cohesive’ than it was before the launch of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme and several delivery organisations and community groups pointed to stronger relationships between organisations.

Several stakeholders reported that they have been part of conversations about how organisations could communicate and work together in the future to address local challenges, as illustrated by the following quotation:

*What's happened at the moment is that some of the smaller groups are beginning to develop their skills and beginning to attract additional funding to do some of their activity and, in some cases, are a bit more willing to work in partnership with some of the bigger ones. Some of the bigger ones are now exploring how they can attract funding, but then feed it down to the smaller ones. This has started that process.*

— Project staff

However, the extent to which we are able to evidence real change in organisational behaviour is limited. While in part this is due to lockdown restrictions limiting activity (see for example, Activity 1 Venue Assessment) it is also likely that it will take time and additional support for changes in perceptions and understanding to translate into collaborative projects. While organisations participating in Activity 4 (Resource Sharing) indicated a willingness to identify and share resources in principle, implementation has been limited.

### **Improved profile of organisations within the community**

Participation in Connect Sparkbrook activities is reported to have had a positive impact on participating organisations’ profile. Some community organisations pointed to a (pre-COVID) increase in the number of residents accessing their services as a result of changes in the way in which they communicate.

*The people that didn't know about us that came to the venue increased their awareness about us and the services that we do, and we've built relationships with those as well, and we wouldn't have reached them or got them through the door if we hadn't hosted the training.*

— Community organisation

The project has had a bigger impact, particularly through participation in activities 2, 4 and 5, in creating greater understanding of the local community infrastructure across Sparkbrook. A greater awareness of local assets and services across the community is a necessary building block in establishing a more collaborative local community infrastructure. We found some instances in which this had led to immediate gains. Some smaller organisations reported being more aware of referral pathways through other organisations that will benefit their members.

*We benefit by being able to refer our service users to [other organisations], to access things we don't do. So, that referral [and] signposting is really beneficial.*

— Community organisation

In a small number of instances, we found evidence that community organisations had been approached by organisations not involved in the project to become involved in service delivery. Organisations report that this is due to increased awareness of their organisation. In one example this has led to an organisation being commissioned to deliver training sessions. Others report that new relationships are still at an early stage, though they hoped they would prove fruitful in the future.

*As a wider result of connections made we were approached by Accord, the housing group that are the local Neighbourhood Network Scheme managers. They have asked us if we, in the upcoming months, would like to do some capacity-building training in those areas because of our previous involvement with Connect Sparkbrook, and we're actually doing three workshops with Accord around funding and bid-writing*

— Community organisation

## Impact on the community

### Improved awareness of available support amongst residents

There is some evidence that points to better communication between community organisations and their beneficiaries. Some delivery partners and community organisations report improved communication with their beneficiaries, particularly those involved in Activity Strand 3. In the best examples, organisations have improved their social media presence and are using local resources such as the Neighbourhood News Online website to promote their offer. More organisations state that as the community emerges from lockdown communication is likely to improve further.

There remains considerable potential for Sparkbrook community organisations to increase awareness of their offer to residents. The foundations laid to establish greater partnership working in Activity Strand 5 could prove fruitful, though will likely require additional support and resource. Greater collaboration between larger, well established organisations with good infrastructure and smaller, grassroots organisations that often have considerable local reach, could be a powerful tool to increase access to activities and support for residents.

*I've signposted and taken people to [organisation name], for their advice and benefit and so on. That is a good thing. In terms of the impact it has on the older people, these [grassroots] organisations are vital because lots of people are just lonely and they need activities going about*

— Community organisation

## Promoting active citizenship

There is some evidence to suggest that the project has encouraged some local residents to become more active. This is clearest in participation in consultation activities (Activity 5) and volunteering opportunities (Activity 6). However, taken as a whole, progress has been limited.

However, if we consider active citizenship more broadly, and consider the impact on those already active, then the impact is arguably greater. By providing opportunities for people to develop skills and knowledge, Connect Sparkbrook has had a positive impact on the confidence and capacity of a small group of active citizens.

## Improved wellbeing and sense of cohesion amongst residents

Connect Sparkbrook has provided the opportunity for residents to come together. However, there is little evidence to indicate this has directly resulted in improved wellbeing and social cohesion. Evidence provided by delivery partners highlights general improvements in confidence or enjoyment as a result of participation in activities.

Activity 6 (Developing community assets) shows the clearest evidence of improved wellbeing and cohesion. The activity encouraged informal relationships between volunteers of different ages and provided an opportunity to build community feeling.

*Coming together to do community garden activity got a lot of older people out of their house and networking amongst each other, and coincidentally because of needing younger people to do some of the more heavy work, it also brought some intergenerational people together. Some places actually had quite a mixed set of community people working together, so it actually broke some of those barriers, having something to come together around is very important.*

— Delivery organisation

## Factors that have affected delivery of the Connect Sparkbrook project

### Impact of Covid-19

In response to COVID-19, the government introduced a UK-wide 'lockdown' in March 2020. Shops selling non-essential goods were closed and gatherings of more than two people in public were banned. People were advised against all unnecessary social contact with others and unnecessary travel.

While these restrictions eased over time, the impact has been considerable for the Connect Sparkbrook local action plan project, with most strands of activity affected to a lesser or greater degree. Some activities (1, 3 and 6) remain uncompleted and delivery methods have changed for others (activities 2 and 3). Delivery organisations have offered innovative approaches in the face of these restrictions and, where practical, support and training has been provided remotely. However, there is a sense

that the impact of these alternative approaches has been more limited than it would have been otherwise.

What is harder to assess is the impact that COVID-19 has had on embedding lasting change across Sparkbrook. The general suppression of activity and the extent to which it has knocked people's confidence and willingness to go outside means that understanding whether the project has been effective is challenging. It is clear that maintaining social distancing, particularly amongst at-risk older generations, has limited opportunities to put learning into practice.

## **Project design**

Connect Sparkbrook was designed with ambitious aims and objectives. Stakeholders suggest that these may have been too ambitious, requiring a much longer delivery timescale, particularly taking into account time required to tender for work streams. This may be why, at the organisational level, we are not able to identify changes in behaviour. In many instances, learning may require more time to impact on organisational culture.

Some stakeholders, particularly project staff, suggest that on reflection the project may have been too complicated. While individual work strands were considered to be straightforward, how they would work together to contribute to the core objectives could have been simpler and better articulated.

*I think it needed to be simpler, in a way, so that the concept of what everybody was collectively doing could have been held by more than one person.*

— Project staff

Consequently, there was a sense that some activities drifted away from the core objectives over time. There were also missed opportunities for adding value through more closely linking activities.

Project design, and the commissioning of activities with associated performance indicators also raises challenges when considering evaluation of overall impact. It is always challenging to measure the success of a model of delivery where benefits are not always going to be visible in the short term. The existing tool used by the wider Ageing Better Programme (CMF) was not appropriate and was not used by activity providers.

## **Project delivery**

One strength of the model was to commission local organisations to deliver activities. At their best, these organisations have established community relationships, credibility and important community development skills. At times however, they were perceived to be less able to operate strategically, grasp the 'bigger picture' and see how the different activities and stakeholders could work effectively together in a non-political way. This relates to the point above about the lack of a shared vision.

Delivery providers discussed the Connect Sparkbrook project mainly through bi-monthly partnership meetings with project staff. More could have been made of these opportunities to better coordinate the different strands of activity and create a

more cohesive sense of working towards common goals. Several delivery partners indicated that at times they felt somewhat disconnected from other strands of activity. The project may also have benefited from a more active leadership and better communication to ensure collaboration between activities and delivery organisations.

### **Organisational capacity**

The emphasis towards engaging with ‘emerging and embryonic’ organisations presents challenges for any fixed-term programme of support. These groups, by their very nature, can be informally organised and are often heavily reliant on a very small number of volunteers to manage activities. This lack of capacity, exacerbated by lockdown, has undoubtedly had an impact on the extent to which they have been able to engage and benefit from interventions offered.

Co-production with older people is a key characteristic of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. We recognise that Connect Sparkbrook was co-designed at the outset through the East Birmingham Collective and reflected earlier analysis of previous funding programmes’ structure, delivery and outcomes. However, the lower-than-expected levels of take-up of activities suggest that there were operational challenges that organisations faced which were not identified and/or addressed at the implementation stage. Greater involvement of these target organisations would have helped to address these challenges and enhance project impact.

## 04. Conclusions and recommendations

The Connect Sparkbrook project had very ambitious aims for a relatively small and fairly short-term investment in an area with historical challenges in cross-community understanding and collaboration. There is evidence that the project has contributed to greater awareness of community assets and understanding of opportunities for and benefits of cooperative working. These are positive steps towards achieving the wider vision. However, creating sustainable impact is likely to take time and ongoing support. While the project has laid some useful foundations, there is great potential for these to be further built upon. Aspects of planning and delivery could have been improved, which would have resulted in greater buy-in, more progress and, ultimately, greater impact. We make the following recommendations for similar community development projects.

### **1: Involve stakeholders in project design and delivery.**

Initial consultation activities identified thematic areas of need across the community through co-design with partners. The project was less successful in engaging target audiences in co-design and delivery of activities to address these needs. Greater co-production of the project would help ensure buy-in and that interventions are appropriate.

### **2: Take time to understand the level and nature of need for support within community organisations and ensure that activities are appropriately targeted.**

A more systematic approach was needed to identifying community groups and their needs. Those selected were not always able to take up and make best use of the support on offer for a range of reasons. Training and support was most effective where it took account of, and addressed these reasons. Where there were diverse and numerous participants, this was harder to achieve. Conducting a skills audit across targeted organisations to categorise levels of need could inform the development of tiered training packages (e.g. beginner, intermediate, advanced levels). Longer lead-in times may be needed to build relationships and understand organisations' needs and preferences.

### **3: Where resource is limited, concentrate on supporting a small number of groups to provide in-depth and longer-term support.**

Community organisations welcome the opportunity to apply learning directly to their own organisational needs. Participating organisations would have valued follow-up support to enable them to put into practice ideas learned as part of training and other activities. Focusing scarce resource on a select group of organisations over a longer period of time offers opportunities for participants to embed learning, change their practice and achieve greater impact.

#### **4: Undertake a programme of low-cost community activities that require partnership working between community organisations.**

Community organisations have expressed a willingness to engage in partnership working and share resources when working on specific projects. A programme of collaborative activities to build trust could be a powerful way in which to embed the tentative steps that organisations have already made. The learning from this project has identified that relatively low-cost activities, such as community gardening projects, could provide these opportunities.

#### **5: Additional expertise and administrative support is needed to facilitate resource sharing.**

Building a culture of collaborative activity requires trust between the organisations involved, and confidence that relationships will continue. Sharing valuable resources, such as vehicles, requires coordination and practical administrative support. This would remove some key barriers and encourage more organisations to make resources available to other groups.

#### **6: Make use of community assets to deliver capacity building projects**

Hosting training and networking sessions in community venues, using local groups as case study examples and getting volunteers to support delivery helped raise participants' awareness of community assets and activities. This delivered added value for the project in the form of new connections between groups.

#### **7: Include formal periods for review and reflection in project design and offer opportunities to change delivery as appropriate.**

The wider Ageing Better in Birmingham programme takes a test and learn approach. This was a missed opportunity for Connect Sparkbrook. Interventions largely remained in line with initial design, even when progress and early indicators of impact were limited. Including a formal period of review can be an important way in which to reflect on activity and consider alternative approaches.

#### **8: Ensure a coordinated approach to communication, including between different project activities.**

While some organisations participated in more than one activity, many did not. The extent to which opportunities were promoted across strands appears to be limited. A centralised communication programme could improve knowledge of project activities and increase uptake. In addition, there were missed opportunities to make links between activities. It is important that all organisations involved in delivery understand the wider project aims and activities and how they can work together to achieve shared goals.

#### **9: Focus on plans for legacy and sustainability from the start**

Some activity remains incomplete and should be completed once social distancing restrictions allow. Other activities have not been seen through to their logical conclusion, for example, the directory of support and resources should be made publicly available and promoted using local platforms. Plans for ending the project and ensuring outputs and outcomes are sustained are unclear. The NNS programme

in particular may provide opportunities for additional funding and/or support for organisations, but there may be others. These should be explored and communicated to participating organisations.