Black Country Community Renewal Fund (CRF)
50+ Project Evaluation

December 2022

This report was produced by Christine Brown, Future Excel, an independent consultant contracted to conduct the Research & Evaluation of the Black Country Community Renewal Fund (CRF) 50+ Project

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THE PROJECT
At a glance

320+ INTO TRAINING & EDUCATION

200+ QUALIFICATIONS

60+ ACCESS TO BENEFITS

790+ LIFE SKILLS OUTCOMES

ADVICE
OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT
SUPPORT GROUPS
HEALTH & WELLBEING
JOBSEARCHING
ACCESS TO JOBS **75+**

NAVIGATOR

ENGAGEMENT & SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

INNOVATION FUND

6 MONTH PROJECT

50+ PROJECT

Community Renewal Fund (CRF) 2022

1300+

Black Coutry Residents Aged 50 Years + Engaged & Supported

36

Locally Rooted Organisations

SANDWELL DUDLEY WALSALL WOLVERHAMPTON

600	546	155
Economically Inactive	Unemployed	Employed
46% Of Total	**42%** Of Total	**12%** Of Total

INCLUSIVE

45% Of participants from

Ethnic Minority Communities

"I wouldn't still be here without the project".

"They (the project) have helped me achieve my dreams of being able to get back to work while not overdoing it because of my health."

"I've been in the same job for 22 years and really didn't know where to turn before I came here.".

SECTION 1 - INTRODUCTION TO AND OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

1.1 About the report

1.1.1 This report presents the findings from the qualitative research of the Community Renewal Fund (CRF) funded Black Country 50+ Project. The findings incorporate evidence drawn from several elements of research:

- Interviews with the Project Lead (Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council).
- Interviews with each of the four Borough Lead Organisations.
- Interviews with local delivery providers from each of the four Boroughs including both management staff, support staff and project navigators.
- Interviews with strategic and supporting partner, the Centre for Ageing Better.
- Interviews with participants eligible for and participating in the project.
- Observations of delivery interactions, activities and interventions between project delivery staff and participants in the project.

1.1.2 The report also includes findings from analysis of:

- Project reach and outcome data captured between March 2022 and end of November 2022, including additional outcomes captured through the qualitative research process.
- Individual provider caseloads (sample)
- Desk-based review of relevant documents and reports including lead and delivery provider progress reviews and case studies.

1.2 Background to the Project

1.2.1 The project, led and developed by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council formed part of a suite of applications shortlisted by the WMCA to be taken forward for funding by the UK Government Community Renewal Fund (CRF).

1.2.2. There were significant delays in funding being agreed with final outcomes not agreed until late 2021/early 2022 but with spend profiled to commence from February 2022 and delivery starts from March 2022. Financial spend was backdated to 1st December 2021 and Starts from February 22 but it was not possible for many partners to mobilise by this time.

1.2.3 The funding was short term in nature (initially circa 6 months), designed to pilot and inform future Shared Prosperity Fund activity and funding plans.

1.2.4 The project delivery period end date was latterly extended until the end of November 2022 to enable delivery to be completed and capture outcomes for participants starting later in the project.

1.3 Driver and Need for Project

The project was driven by data and evidence that indicated:

1.3.1 A significant increase in unemployment rates for older workers (50 years+) since the pandemic.

1.3.2 Large numbers of 50+ residents who were economically inactive, outside the benefit system, at risk of redundancy and/or in part time/low wage jobs.

1.3.3 Older workers are more likely to experience long term unemployment and additional barriers including poor mental health, social isolation & low confidence.

1.4 Project Aims

1.4.1 The overall aim of the project was to build a Black Country 50 Plus partnership that would bring Public, Private and Voluntary sector partners together to provide a collaborative programme of support for residents aged 50 years or more.

Specific aims of the project were to:

1.4.2 Support all 50 plus residents - unemployed, employed and inactive.

1.4.3 Focus on plugging gaps in mainstream/existing funding, as well as trialling new approaches to support the age group.

1.4.4. Provide navigators to support residents to understand the support available to them by providing triage to a bespoke pathway of support for example advice, 1:1 coaching, confidence building and engagement activities.

1.4.5 Enable reach into the community and provide the infrastructure and facilities needed to engage with 50 plus residents in the community.

1.4.6 Through a multi-agency approach provide access to a vast array of complimentary services to support individuals such as health and wellbeing, financial inclusion and digital inclusion.

1.5 The Partnership Model

1.5.1 The intention was that each of the four Boroughs would have an Area Lead Provider, identified in the initial proposal, who would be responsible for day-to-day management of the project within their Borough and who would develop their own supply chains of delivery providers to reflect the needs of their local area.

1.5.2 The Centre for Ageing Better was identified as a strategic and supporting partner.

1.6 The Delivery Model

The delivery model had three distinct elements:

1.6.1 The Navigator Role

At the heart of the delivery model was the navigator role. This was a common feature across all four Boroughs/area partnerships. The primary role of the navigator was to provide a co-ordinating coaching and triage role; delivering practical support and advice as well as signposting to other support to help participants to move forward at their own pace towards their own personal goals.

1.6.2 Engagement and Support activities

Alongside the role of the navigator, it was envisaged that a range of engagement and support activities would take place based in the heart of communities that were not just focused on employment but supporting individuals' wider needs including health and wellbeing.

1.6.3 Innovation Fund

This was ringfenced funding for each of the four Borough partnerships. It was envisaged that the funding would be used flexibly to support engagement and interventions where other funds were not available.

1.6 The Funding

Funding from the Community Renewal Fund (CRF) of circa £750,000 was agreed to support the delivery of the project; with expected match funding of around circa £16,000 from public sector leads/partners.

1.7 The planned outputs, outcomes and impacts

1.7.1 The final agreed framework of outcome targets:

Engagements	Number
Of which were:	
Unemployed (UE)	546
Inactive (IA)	455
Employed	109
Total	1100

Outcomes	Number
Into Education or Training (All)	360
Gained a Qualification (All)	218

Engaged in Job Searching (EI only)	364
Life Skills Support (EI and UE 18 month +)	728
Entered the Benefit System (EI only)	182

1.7.2 It is important to note that this project was not just targeted at unemployed individuals but those economically inactive, as well as those already in employment. Inactive participants were not required to be job ready or even job seeking and there were no formal job outcome targets set with the funder for this reason. However, it was agreed that wherever possible employment outcomes would be captured and reported.

SECTION 2 - EVALUATION PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Background to & Purpose of Evaluation

2.1.1. Following a competitive tendering exercise, the Project commissioned Future Excel[1] in Spring 2022 to undertake an independent evaluation of the project.

2.1.2 The purpose of the evaluation was aligned with the technical guidance provided by the WMCA CRF fund, namely to determine:

The appropriateness of the initial design – including:
- The projects planned outcomes and impact.
- The rationale for the project design in the context of its objectives.
- Changes to context from the original application – and any benefits from these changes.

Delivery and Management – including a qualitative analysis of:
- The implementation, management/governance structures and delivery of the project.
- Supply chain management including delivery partners recruitment/selection and management.
- Reach/engagement of beneficiaries.
- Project activities and outputs.

Outcomes and Impacts – including:
- Analysis of intended activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts – including supporting the project, if not already in place to build a theory of change against which an impact assessment can be made.
- Providing data to support value for money assessments and where appropriate social value assessments.

2.2 Evaluation Methodology - Our Approach

2.2.1 Future Excel's philosophy is that evaluation should not be seen as a separate activity but embedded within projects, with the evaluators becoming a core part of the project team. Based on our experience this approach engenders and develops trust and openness with both stakeholders and participants.

2.2.2 Evaluation is also most effective when the approach taken reflects the nature of the project and meets the needs of the beneficiary group. Future Excel has specific expertise in working with individuals who face multiple barriers to work. This enables interviews/consultations to be facilitated in a supportive, non-threatening way that enables individuals to fully participate in the process and share their experiences openly.

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[1] a locally based consultancy and specialists in the employment related and support service sector

2.2.3 On this basis Future Excel proposed the use of a mixed research and evaluation methodology using a wide range of techniques and approaches:

- One-to-one and group sessions/forums
- Delivered face to face and through online meetings and feedback
- Direct observation of activities on project sites
- Detailed data and case study review/analysis

2.2.4 As well as meeting a broad and diverse range of stakeholder needs, the approach provided maximum flexibility in what was at the time a dynamic COVID 19 environment. Whilst there were no direct COVID restrictions, it was recognised that many of the beneficiaries within this project will have been/or continued to be severely impacted by the pandemic.

2.2.5 Where face-to-face interviews or forums were being proposed this would be facilitated by the evaluator 'in person' at a community venue in the area or through video conferencing depending on COVID risk assessments carried out at the time of the evaluation activity.

2.2.6 Where beneficiaries did not have access to digital technology - telephone access would also be provided for any remote interviews/sessions.

2.2.7 All research and evaluation interviews/consultation meetings would be semi-structured with documented interview questions/scripts and protocols in place whether they are carried out in a group or on a one-to-one basis.

2.2.8 Group forum/feedback was proposed in relation to beneficiary views and experiences. It is a particularly effective way of capturing larger volumes of feedback quickly, but often requires individual follow up to captured detailed information.

2.2.9 Of vital importance in the overall methodology is field work, combining both observation of interventions and activities taking place and the opportunity to meet with and interview project participants. Stakeholder insights and feedback can be key to understanding what has worked well, what the challenges and why – and most importantly the difference it has made.

2.2.10 Field work also supports the development of independent and more detailed case studies of individual journeys which reflect their experiences in their own words, as well as capturing the outcomes achieved and impact/different the project has made to them.

2.2.11 Whilst data analysis and assessment is a core component of the evaluation methodology, it needs to take place alongside good field work in order to better understand the project's theory of change and the difference it is making.

2.3 Delivery of the evaluation

Due to the size of the final partnership (nearly 40 different organisations across the Black Country involved) time in the field needed to be prioritised to have as much

direct contact time with project staff, beneficiaries and observing interventions as possible within the allocated consultant days.

Fieldwork was also of particular importance in this project, where large numbers of participants were facing barriers to inclusion because of digital skills or language needs, and we therefore needed to make extensive provision to get that feedback face to face and with wider support (interpreters).

2.3.1 Qualitative research with organisations

Accountable Body and Area Lead Organisations - Interviews were carried out with the project teams from the lead accountable body and four area lead providers in the early part of the project, with a total of 10 staff being interviewed and follow up interviews taking place with around half at the latter part of the project.

Delivery Providers - All the navigator organisations were contacted by the evaluation team to participate in the evaluation resulting in:

- 22 project management and support staff interviews
- 15 navigator interviews
- 60% of navigator organisations receiving observational visits.

Innovation Fund Providers –a sample of innovation fund providers were also interviewed, with supporting evidence provided through information and reports on activity provided by Area Leads.

2.3.2 Qualitative research with participants

When interviewing participants who were engaging with the project the overall aim was to:
- Explore their experiences of the project including the nature and type of support they had received, how this had been delivered, what had been particularly effective and where improvements could be made.
- Understand the difference the project had made to them, including the relative importance of those outcomes and differences from their perspective.

Delivery providers helped facilitate the interviews by providing private space for participants to speak to the evaluation team, as well as translators where required. The interviews in the main took place at the same time as naturally occurring or planned project interventions and activity in order that this could also be observed. This reduced the risk of providers filtering participants.

In total, 64 participant interviews were conducted (5% of total project participants) between May 2022 – July 2022.

It was a privilege to not only be able to observe the activities and meet with the participants, but in a few cases participate in the group activities with them. Joining

group activities enabled participants and staff to talk more openly about their experiences and the changes that had taken place as a result of the project.

2.3.3 Observational Research

Sixteen observational in-person visits at delivery providers premises and project sites were carried out.

Various interventions were observed including meetings between the participants and their navigator (both initial and follow up); group engagement and support sessions, ranging from digital training sessions to women's group therapeutic craft session to a gardening and wellbeing sessions to language support sessions and job search sessions.

The observations were analysed for information that included how the provider staff delivered interventions and interactions; how participants responded and the use of tools and resources.

2.3.4 Presentation of Qualitative Findings

In this report the findings from the provider and participants interviews and observational research are, for the most part, integrated into the relevant report sections.

2.3.5 Analysis of Data

The project team collated reach and outcome data from the beginning of March 2022, when direct delivery commenced. The project team checked this data to ensure it met the necessary evidence requirements in relation to making funder claims before passing anonymised data to the evaluation team.

Additional data was collated by the evaluation team through detailed analysis of sample providers caseloads, which helped identify to support the identification of further outcomes.

Analysis of data can be found in Section 4 of this report.

SECTION 3: FINDINGS & EVALUATION RESULTS

3.1 Project Timeline

3.1.1. It is important to recognise that there was extremely short timeline for a project of this nature, with the original and planned delivery window of only 6 months.

3.1.2. Delays in signing off the project, impacted and shortened mobilisation and implementation period.

3.1.3. Spend was profiled from February 2022 with direct delivery (profiled starts from March 2022 and completions by September 2022.

3.1.4. To mitigate the impact of the short-term nature of the funding, most local partnerships chose a strategy which maximised the use of existing and established networks of providers, where good working relationships, knowledge and evidence of track record already existed.

3.1.5. Despite local partnerships and providers 'hitting the ground running' the pressure of a short window from implementation to delivery remained a constant challenge. Timescales was consistently reported by all stakeholders as the biggest challenge and pressure to both the management and delivery of the project.

3.1.6. Mid way through the project, the funder indicated some flexibility in spend profile, enabling the project timeline to be extended into Autumn 2022.

3.1.7. For some core delivery partners the extension allowed them to pivot their delivery, with navigators working over a longer period of time, albeit on a more part time basis (less weekly hours on project). For others, it was not possible to do this, and project activity/spend was completed in line with the original timeline.

3.2. Project Management Arrangements

3.2.1 Accountable Body & Project Lead

The accountable body and overall lead partner for the project was Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, with the day-to-day management and delivery of the project sub-contracted to four Area Lead organisations through their own delivery partnerships/supply chains.

The project was led and managed by an experienced Programme Manager and support staff. There were grant agreements, reporting, monitoring and claim processes in place between the accountable body, area leads and delivery partners to manage the contractual and financial arrangements.

Overall good working relationships existed between the accountable body and area leads. The accountable and lead partners were well known to each other, with some

previously having worked together and all highly experienced in managing projects of this nature.

It should be noted that in three areas the accountable body had a direct relationship with the Navigator Delivery providers, as it had been agreed funding for navigator salaries would be paid directly to them and not via the Area Lead. This was challenging for some organisations, particularly where there was no existing relationship with the accountable body. Some delivery providers, particularly smaller organisations found the financial, payment and evidence requirements complicated and payments slow in coming through.

3.2.2 Area Partnerships – Lead Organisations

There were four Area Leads managing the four Black Country boroughs.

Area Leads & Managing Partner	Legal Status	Geographical Area
Sandwell Consortium	CIC – 3rd sector consortium	Sandwell
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council	Local Authority	Dudley
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council	Local Authority	Walsall
Wolverhampton Voluntary and Community Action formerly known as Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council (WVSC)	Registered Charity - VCS Umbrella Organisation	Wolverhampton

Each Area Lead took an individual approach to developing their local delivery partnerships. They were responsible for forming and managing their own local supply chain of navigator organisations.

Some utilised existing voluntary sector networks and partnerships, whilst others built new partnerships and some a mixture of both.

All Local Area Leads harnessed locally rooted and specialist providers. This included engagement with several Ethnic Minority Led and Disability Led organisations which supported extensive reach into specific communities and with priority groups. **This brought about the most positive impact of this approach – the ability to be able to reach parts of the community that mainstream or traditional projects would not ordinarily be able to access.** More details on the reach of the project can be found at Section 4.

Overall good working and open relationships existed between the area leads and delivery partners. Many delivery partners were well known to the lead partners and each other in their partnership through existing networks and projects. Where there were established relationships and communication structures, this supported open dialogue and trust to be developed quickly.

There was evidence of regular contact and one to one support from the Lead Organisations which was valued by providers. However, there was little opportunity within the project for local delivery providers to meet with other delivery providers to share their experiences and good practice about the project. In some areas, it was specifically felt this was unnecessary as the partnership comprised of existing local organisations who already met regularly.

It was much more challenging for those partnerships with newly engaged organisations to build relationships and trust quickly, but overall providers felt well supported by the Area Lead Organisations.

Due to the time constraints of the project and external factors relating to funder updates, changes to monitoring and reporting processes, some providers, particularly smaller providers found the experience frustrating and at times complicated. Some providers required additional support from the accountable body and area leads to navigate the project requirements.

3.2.3 Local Delivery Partnerships/Providers

In total 37 individual organisations were involved in the project, of which 36 were locally based.

There were 31 direct delivery organisations of which 21 were designated navigator organisations, with the remaining 10 organisations supporting delivery through the Innovation Fund. A small number of organisations supported multiple Local Area Partnerships.

A list of the delivery providers by Local Area, nature of delivery and size of project cohort is shown in **Annex 1**.

Most delivery partners were from the voluntary sector and the majority were locally rooted organisations who were part of existing support networks of support. This enabled extensive reach into communities across the Borough both geographically and based on need.

This large delivery partnership model was not however without its challenges. With so many partners involved in some areas, this invariably meant smaller caseloads and cohorts. This was not just in relation to Innovation Fund providers but some navigator organisations as well - for example in areas like Sandwell.

However, the level of investment in implementation, management and delivery required for small scale delivery often requires similar levels of resources as larger scale delivery but without some of those economies of scales. This can be challenging and was challenging for some of the smaller organisations involved. Some smaller organisations required additional support to engage with the project and understand fully the financial and outcome reporting requirements.

The size of the partnership combined with the timescales limited the opportunity for good practice to be shared across the whole partnership and the project was dependent on existing local networks and relationships for this activity. Having said

that there was an opportunity to disseminate information on a wider stage, with the Sandwell Area Lead invited to share their project experiences at the national 50+ employment forum facilitated by Employment Related Services Association (ERSA) and Centre for Ageing Better.

3.3 The Delivery Model

3.3.1 How did participants engage with the project?

Individual local area partnerships and delivery providers were responsible for promoting the project locally to referral partnerships/stakeholders and to individuals within the community. In some areas, this was carried out on a collective basis and in others undertaken by individual providers.

Referrals were received from Jobcentre Plus, from within the delivery providers other services, other providers outside the project including mainstream employment providers, voluntary sector organisations and services and self-referrals.

The mix/source of referrals varied greatly across individual delivery providers, based on the nature of their cohort and work. However, most providers who took part in the qualitative research indicated that the level of referrals from Jobcentre Plus was lower than originally expected despite having existing relationships in place. This may in part reflect the fact that the project was specifically designed to target gaps and needs in provision and any referrals needed to add value to existing support participants were receiving. This did not affect the overall achievement of reach targets and demand for the project was strong.

3.3.2. Identification of the type and level of support

All participants engaging with the project received some form of initial assessment to establish the nature and level support required. This was primarily delivered through professional discussion between the provider staff and the participant; with plans on the type and level of support to address individual needs captured in an action plan.

Engagement with the project was on a voluntary and part-time basis. Most participants were able to access navigator support on a drop in or appointment basis dependent on the nature of the intervention or their individual support plan. For those navigator organisations delivering a more structured programme and wraparound group activities timetables and schedule of project interventions were in place.

There was evidence of follow up and review sessions between providers and participants, as well as follow up by providers with those participants who were had stopped engaging with the project.

3.3.3 The role of Navigators

The navigator role was a central component of the delivery model and a common feature across all four boroughs.

What is a 'Navigator'? At its heart the role of a navigator is a coach, and in this context a work-related coach, but they also have a wider facilitation and signposting role which helps participates navigate the right pathway and different types of support available within their community.

As part of the field work, the lead evaluator met with, observed and interviewed 15 project navigators as well as interviewing a further 22 project staff involved in leading, managing and supporting the project. The delivery provider staff insights were invaluable in understanding better the challenges being faced by 50+ residents, what worked well in addressing these challenges and what else could be done.

The experience, skills, knowledge and personal qualities of individual navigators was a vital element in both the engagement and retention of participants and the support they needed to progress.

It was observed that effective navigators had several common qualities:
- Empathetic with good listening skills. This was particularly important to and valued by participants who felt that they were often not 'visible' as a group and their perception was that support and initiatives were often targeted at younger people. It was also a key component of building trust and good rapport with individuals.
- Good organisational skills – essential to the navigator role, and those who were particularly effective also demonstrated excellent caseload management skills.
- Supportive but challenging – with the ability to get people to move outside their comfort zone and try new things. There was some good of examples of this approach in action across the partnership. One navigator had developed a group programme which wrapped around their one-to-one support sessions. A regular slot at these weekly group sessions was encouraging participants to 'try something new', whether it be a hobby or craft or go somewhere they hadn't visited before.
- Knowledgeable about the labour market, skills provision & local support available.

Most navigators were existing experienced front line employment support and employability workers who also had extensive knowledge of the support available in their local area. This was essential in ensuring the right links and referrals were made for individuals, many of which supported positive outcomes and change for them.

However, there were some missed opportunities to do more in the space of developing the skills of dedicated 50+ navigators. For example, The Centre for Ageing Better in partnership with Institute of Employability Professionals have developed specific adviser training modules for those front-line staff working with the 50+ group. It would have been good to see this incorporated into the project and training made available to navigators.

3.3.4 Engagement and Support Activities

Most navigator organisations developed a range of group activities and interventions to support engagement and tackle wider issues.

The driver for these groups and activities was to help tackle holistically some of the common challenges this group were facing. For example, it is well documented that this group had been hardest hit by COVID 19 in terms of the negative impact on loneliness and isolation. A large proportion of participants interviewed were living alone – either having been divorced or widowed, often with grown up adult children and in some cases with little or no local social networks as family lived away. Even when family was close by, often people were reluctant to share their concerns and worries with family.

Feelings of loneliness and isolation in turn had negatively impacted on people's mental health and wellbeing. There was evidence that people had lost confidence and motivation to move forward in their goals. There were at times some difficult stories to hear from project participants. There were many examples of people falling through the gaps and even for those that had previously worked up to relatively recently being such a low point in their life, they had attempted to take their own life.

The activities delivered centred around creating groups and intervention that helped participants tackle some of these issues and to help participants:

- Develop social connections & networks
- Improve their mental health and wellbeing and
- Build up their self-confidence & motivation

3.3.5 Types and nature of engagement and support activities

Activities were often co-produced with participants and extremely wide ranging. They included specific women's and men's groups being set up where people could meet, socialise and talk; therapeutic group activities like craft sessions, sewing classes/enterprise activities and even gardening activities at local allotments and community gardens; social events like trips to local museums which led to several participants volunteering in their communities.

Participants **valued these opportunities highly and in some cases the difference this had made to their wellbeing was valued over and above the support that had got them into back into employment.**

One participant interviewed had gained a job because of the support received but overwhelming, he identified the group support as having the biggest impact, due to have been at such a low point when he accessed the project. Terry's story can be read in more detail at Section 4.

> *"I wouldn't still be here without the project".*

Through the field work and observation of the project in action there was evidence of the difference group interventions had made to individuals' confidence and self-assurance.

Case Study: Dudley Women's Group

These are just four stories of project participants who joined the same women's group as part of the engagement and support activities put in place to help them achieve their goals.

Joan is in her early 50's and suffers from health problems including high levels of anxiety. She has not worked for several years. She became increasingly isolated through the pandemic and has been reluctant to leave the house or travel on public transport.

"I know I lack confidence. Coming here to the group sessions has really helped me to be more confident. As silly as it sounds it's even given me the confidence to get on the bus so I could attend some digital training support. I really enjoy coming to the women's group because of the different activities we do – I've enjoyed trying new things and learning new skills, as well as making some new friends. I can see a big change in me over the last few months. I've been attending the job club and job search sessions. If I carry on like this I feel I could start looking for work again soon."

Tina is in her late 50's and experiences significant mental health issues following a breakdown a few years ago, when she had a period of hospitalisation. She also suffers with significant memory issues and requires long term support and help.

"Coming here is brilliant. It takes my mind off everything else that is going on. They are good to talk to and help sort out issues. I get very anxious when things come out of the blue and they've helped me practically get stuff sorted."

Belinda is her early 60's and experiences several physical health conditions. She started as a participant but is now volunteering and helping to run some of the craft based therapeutic sessions.

"Well, I never thought when I joined the project that I'd the have the confidence to help run some of the group sessions. It's really built me up doing this. It has proved to me what I can do with the right help and support. It's such a good idea, having these groups where you can meet and talk in a relaxing space with no pressure. We've used what we've made to help our community and it feels good to be giving back."

Sarah is in her early 50's and has autism. She likes attending the group sessions but prefers to sit on her own. She finds communicating challenging and very rarely speaks to other group members, wanting the contact but focusing on doing her own thing. A breakthrough came at one of the sessions, where the women's group were doing a jewellery making activity. For the first time since she joined, she sat next to the other women and fully participated in the session and excelled at the activity. She started to open up to the others, talking about herself and the things she liked to do. For Sarah this was a real milestone on what will be a much longer and complicated journey.

The activities and interventions also provided tailored and bespoke support for key skill gaps for specific groups, for example, digital skills, embedded language support and functional skills.

Case Study: Sandwell Employment and Language Support Group

Aamira was the navigator for a cohort of 30 participants, all from Ethnic Minority Communities and most speaking little or no English. This meant many lacked confidence when not speaking in their first language which was a significant barrier to finding and securing employment.

All participants were digitally excluded and struggled to get online to jobsearch, access training or even log into their daily Universal Credit journal, always requiring support from family and friends. Many did not have any qualifications or relevant work experience.

The provider delivered integrated language and employment support sessions each week to specifically focus on improving written and oral communication skills for work. Through these sessions participants were able to develop confidence, motivation, planning, organising and problem-solving skills, alongside receiving practical support to create a CV, complete application forms and cover letters.

All participants received one to one mentoring and support session including information, advice and guidance on employment and training opportunities. As part of the project, they were able to access to a range of activities to support specific needs including language and employment support sessions, digital skills support, health and wellbeing sessions, social and other group activities from exercise classes to sewing classes.

25 of the 30 (75%) of participants achieved positive outcomes and progressions including going into further training and education, active job seeking or gaining further employment.

Through translators supporting the field work, we were able to meet and talk to several groups and individuals who had little or no English language skills at all. For them the language support was a vital element of this project that enabled them to participate. We met with a small group of women from the Employment and Language group outlined in the case study. They were bright, vibrant and full of positivity. They spoke multiple community languages and through a mixture of basic English and translation they talked about the difference the project had made to them.

They spoke passionately about the project and the support they had received. They valued greatly the group activities, recognising how it had enabled them to be socially connected, got them out the house and motivated and helped them to build their confidence. They also valued the range of activities and support that was on offer. For them the most important aspect was the language support and English classes. They had developed a mantra they kept repeating "No English, No Job". They also recognised that without one-to-one sessions being delivered in their first language they would not have been able to access the project or support.

3.3.5 Innovation Fund - Background

The purpose of the innovation fund was to provide a flexible fund for local areas to meet any further identified needs and add value to the core offer. It was also an opportunity to test and pilot approaches and delivery in respect of the 50+ group. Each area an allocation of £50,000 allocation. There was an area-based application process with a short Expression of Interest process. Some general guidelines were set centrally around the value of applications – for example, individual applications should be a maximum of £5,000. Each area lead led on the commissioning and management of the fund. Some chose to ringfence applications for existing navigator organisations, and some undertook a mixture of both – which included opening the fund up externally to include additional and new providers.

3.3.6 Types of innovation fund activities

The activities & interventions funded were diverse. They included:

- *Targeted support to engage & deliver essential skills interventions to specific priority groups & ethnic minority communities.*

For example, tailored support was delivered to specific ethnic minority communities across the Black Country including Central and Eastern European communities, the African French Speaking Community, Somalian and other African communities, Communities of South Asian heritage.

- *Engagement activities to widen reach of the project.*

For example, the project worked with a local Community Café - Coffee on the Clock in West Bromwich to support the identification and referral of residents who would benefit from the project.

- *Tailored and bespoke training e.g. digital skills and inclusion pilots.*

Digital skills and inclusion was a common theme in terms of both wraparound & innovation fund support. The approaches in the delivery often supported other outcomes for individuals, for example developing social networks and wellbeing interventions.

Case Study: Wolverhampton Bringing People Together Project

SNJ Charitable Trust delivered the Bringing People Together Project in Wolverhampton which focused on getting men talking through supporting them to get connected both face to face and online through the development of digital skills.

Through targeted marketing campaigns in the community in both English & Punjabi and through work with local faith groups, Health & Beyond Centre & Migrant Empowerment Group (MEG) to reach residents – they recruited circa 20 residents aged 50+ the majority of whom who were men from Ethnic Minority Communities with ESOL needs.

They provided digital devices to those with no equipment and delivered 2 groups sessions a week over 8 weeks focusing on digital skills, and to support the development of a strong social networks, plus two events which focused on wellbeing & health.

- *Funding also supported activities focusing on wider needs including improved mental health, confidence building & development of social networks.*

The innovation fund also enabled specific approaches and concepts to be piloted and tested. For example, it helped support the provision of a hub-coordinator for the 50+ Hub in Sandwell, with the Centre for Ageing Better supporting some of the initial premise's costs.

Case Study: Sandwell 50+ Hub

The Hub Concept was to provide a dedicated physical space and focal point in Sandwell for 50+ residents looking for support. It would operate as a one stop shop, bring a range of organisations and services together under one roof. It would be a space that would both participants and professionals i.e., navigators, coaches, trainers etc.

Overall, the Hub approached worked well. The Hub operated on a part time basis and was used for multiple interventions including drop-ins, navigator appointments, advice sessions, small group training, a small job club. It was also used by a range of local organisations to deliver advice & services e.g., welfare rights, local college, health and wellbeing partners. It created a safe space specifically for 50+ residents to meet. The space felt inclusive and was project rather than individual organisation branded. Over 200 individual appointments were carried out from the Hub in the short time it was open.

"Very friendly, made me feel welcome and gave me plenty of helpful advice on every visit."

"I've really enjoyed the experience of attending the hub and meeting different people. The staff have been really helpful in developing my skills and helping me find work."

"Thank you so much for all your help at the Hub, I've been in the same job for 22 years and really didn't know where to turn before I came here."

The Hub was not without its challenges. Opening a new resource within a short project timeframe was challenging. Originally the concept had been to staff the Hub on a rota basis from providers with the project network. It was recognised quickly that to be effective it needed a dedicated resource i.e., hub-co-ordinator to keep it open and running smoothly.

The small physical space limited the number of activities that could be run at the same time, however this ended up a strength as participants valued the small group interactions over larger group work. It was recognised quickly that it had limited geographical reach and became a Town based 50+ hub. The concept would need significant additional resources and commitment by partners to roll out to each town. Overall, there was insufficient project time to implement, fully develop and test the concept from scratch but without doubt the Hub had gained significant traction and impact towards the latter stages of the project.

Overall, the Innovation Fund was well received by stakeholders. It enabled local areas to work flexibly to meet local needs. In some areas it was used very effective to extend reach further into marginalised and excluded communities, engaging very small organisations with specialist skills and experience. However, getting a balance between flexibility and structure for the fund was more difficult, with some areas wanting more guidance and clarity for the accountable body on how the fund could be used.

4   Analysis of Reach and Outcome Data

The Project Participants

4.1 How many Black Country residents were engaged and supported?

Between March 2022 and end of October 2022, 1301, employed, unemployed and economically inactive residents aged 50 years or more engaged with the project on a voluntary basis. This represents 17% increase from the agreed target (an additional 191 beneficiaries).

Figure 1: Actual Engagement & Starts against Target

Total Number of Project Participants	Original Target	Difference	% change
1301	1110	191	+17%

4.2 Local Area Partnership Reach

Whilst it was initially envisaged there would be a broadly equal split of participation across the four local partnerships, Walsall and Wolverhampton partnerships achieved higher levels of engagement. This is in part due to project management arrangements, and those areas setting stretch targets within their local provider partnerships, as well as the use of the innovation fund to extend reach further.

Figure 2: Split of Engagement & Starts across Identified Local Area Partnership – By number & Percentage

Total Number of Participants	Dudley Partnership		Sandwell Partnership		Walsall Partnership		Wolverhampton Partnership	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
1301	223	17%	299	23%	426	33%	353	27%

4.3 What were the characteristics of the participants?

Economic or benefit status

Figure 3: Total Number of Engagement & Starts across each participant group – By number & Percentage

Of which were:	No	% of Total	Original Target
Unemployed	546	42%	50%
Inactive	600	46%	40%
Employed	155	12%	10%
Total	1301		1110

Figure 4: Total Number of Engagement & Starts across each participant group by Local Area Partners – By number & Percentage

	Dudley		Sandwell		Walsall		Wolverhampton	
Of which were:	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Unemployed	91	41%	188	63%	142	33%	125	35%
Inactive	111	50%	81	27%	240	56%	168	48%
Employed	21	9%	30	10%	44	10%	60	17%
Total	223		299		426		353	

4.3.1 Economically Inactive

The largest group supported by the project were those classed as inactive. In total 600 participants, nearly half of the total cohort (46%) were part of this group. This was 6% higher than originally forecast. In some areas, for example the Walsall area, 56% of the cohort were classed as economically inactive.

The higher numbers of economically inactive participants engaged is due in part to the nature of the partnerships and the use of voluntary sector locally rooted organisations. Many of these organisations were able to reach often hidden or marginalised communities who would not normally be eligible for or willing to access mainstream support and more likely to be economically inactive.

Case Study: Walsall Partnership Area

A good example of the reach into communities by project providers is Manor Farm Community Association. Located in the heart of the community in Rushall in Walsall, and established for over 40 years, they provide all-age services including a range of wellbeing services to older residents. The majority of LSOAs within the ward they are located are within the 30% most deprived in England. They worked with 1 in 4 of all Walsall area participants engaged (over 100 individuals) of which 65% were economically inactive.

"I'm 67 and getting my pension but want to find a part time job. I really needed help to do this, particularly using the computer to apply for jobs. I've used this place in the past. It's a friendly place here, everyone helps you and there is no pressure applied."

Health was the biggest reason for inactivity, but it did also include people who had just left the labour market following COVID and who hadn't returned. However, people felt more motivated than previously to take part in this type of project; many were concerned about the increasing costs of living and others simply wanted to explore opportunities that were open to them and may not be available before.

Case Study: Aaden's Story

Aaden hasn't been in work for a long time due to family and health reasons. work. The family had been through some very tough times, and this had led to depression. The impact of lockdown has compounded this.

English is his second language, and he doesn't always feel confident communicating. He didn't have a computer at home and didn't really know where to start when it came to applying for jobs.

Aaden saw the project as an opportunity for a fresh start and a chance to get the support he needed to find flexible work that would fit around his family needs. He had identified driving work as an area he felt would help meet this need. The navigator spent time with Aaden to better understand what would be required with the role, specific skills and interview practice. He was supported to gain a DBS certificate, essential for the licence he required. He was practically supported to use the computers and apply for jobs.

The project ultimately supported him to secure a driving job. He feels this has lifted a weight off his mind, being able to work flexibly, whilst still being able to support his family.

"They (the project) have helped me achieve my dreams of being able to get back to work while not overdoing it because of my health. The staff were wonderful, helpful and very patient, as I thought my case would be too much for them. They persevered with me until I accomplished my goal. I thank them whole heartedly".

Case Study: Parveen's Story

Parveen is 57 years and is currently unable to work due to serious and multiple health conditions. However, she wants to get active again and feels when she has her conditions under control would like to explore the possibility of part time work.
She recognised though that the job market had changed and that she needs to improve her computer (digital) skills and understand better online job searching and applications. She joined a women's group as part of the project and welcomed the opportunity to talk to meet with and talk to other people of a similar age.

4.3.2 **Unemployed**

The second largest group (42%) was those who were unemployed. This was slightly lower than expected and reflected across all local partnership areas except in the Sandwell local area partnership where nearly two thirds (63%) of their participants were classed as unemployed.

The lower numbers overall were due in part to not all providers receiving the level of referrals from Jobcentre Plus than originally expected despite having existing relationships in place and a higher take up by those economically inactivity.

It is important to note that the project was specifically designed to target gaps and needs in provision and any referrals needed to add value to existing support participants were receiving. However, we did see examples of project participants being referred who were also part of the Restart programme where it was felt an additional referred to target support would be beneficial.

The unemployed group was a complex and mixed group in terms of unemployment ranging from those who had been made redundant, often because of COVID through to very long-term unemployed people and benefit claimants, often rotating between inactivity and job seeking.

One unemployed participant had never had a job and had felt he had been written off as 'unemployable'.

Case Study: Joe's Story

Joe has never had paid employment. He has been referred to and attended lots of different employment training courses over the year but has never progressed. He's also been told in the past that he is 'unemployable' but that simply isn't true.

The navigator team spent a lot of time getting to know Joe to find out more about his challenges but also his strengths.

Joe lives on his own and following the death of his father nearly 20 years ago has become increasingly isolated. This has affected his social skills and his confidence in meeting other people. When he first attended the centre, he couldn't look anyone in the eye and barely said two words.

The team took a bite sized approach to building Joes confidence up. They helped him to:

- Attend short sessions and workshops that focused on improving his confidence, wellbeing and skills.
- Take positive action, for example applying for financial support through the Assure scheme to get help with his water bills.
- Get his CV and covering letter up to date.

The project started to see a real change in Joe after he attended and completed a basic IT course. This showed him he could learn new things and move forward but also gave him the opportunity to meet other people and work in a group which he really enjoyed.

The project explored with Joe how he could keep moving forward and positive. With no work experience they explored how volunteering could help. They identified a voluntary placement at a nearby charity and supported him to attend an interview. Joe secured a volunteering placement and is really enjoying the role. The placement has given Joe a real sense of purpose for the first time in years. Joe understands that whilst this is voluntary work, it is still work and that he is not unemployable. The feedback from the placement has positive too – they said Joe is a kind, considerate and helpful volunteer. With his confidence improved, he is now working with a local job brokerage team and feels paid employment is a viable outcome.

Case Study: John's Story

I was made redundant at the beginning of the pandemic after 30 years of work. I was referred by the Jobcentre to the project. I was sceptical to start with, but they have really helped. They helped me get on training to update my skills and sorted out my CV. Then they helped me get a part job at vaccination centre. I absolutely loved it. They've also offered me a part time job working at the weekends at the centre while I find full time work. That's the main reason I come down, to get the help and support I need to get a job full time. Nothing is ever too much trouble.

4.3.3 Employed

Around 1 in 8 participants were employed and this slightly exceeded the original target. Overall, the employed group demonstrated a very specific set of needs relating to their personal circumstances. There was far less evidence of wider needs relating to health, wellbeing, loneliness, and isolation. Regardless of this the group valued the opportunity to access the support available to them.

Case Study: Roger's Story

Roger is in his early 50's. He works part time in retail and doesn't claim benefits. With the increasing cost of living, he wants to find a job with more hours and with better pay. Full time opportunities are not an option with his current employer. He spotted a sign for 50+ employment hub whilst out shopping on his day off. He dropped into the centre to find out if they could help.

He was allocated a navigator and spent time exploring the types of opportunities available and undertaking practical activities like getting a CV completed. The navigator walked him through job search approaches including online sites and applications that he wasn't familiar with. He was also keen to develop some new skills and his navigator explored and research local further and adult education course options with him.

"I happened upon the project by chance. I wouldn't have known otherwise where to go for help. You can't just drop into a Jobcentre anymore. I liked the fact they helped me with the specific things that I needed. It was very professional but still friendly. I haven't got a printer at home so it's good to have some hard copies of my CV as well as an up-to-date version on a memory stick. Everything seems to be online now, so I know I need to brush up my IT skills."

Case Study: Paul's Story

Paul has a part time job working as a maintenance operative. He suffers with chronic arthritis and feels it would be difficult to work full time with his health condition. Due to his low hours, he is still required to attend appointments at the Jobcentre, which is financially costing him to attend, along with the pressure he feels to find a job with more hours. The project explored with him what additional hours he would need that would enable him to stop attending Jobcentre appointments but would also not be detrimental to his health. On assessing the situation, only one additional hour a week would be required. His navigator suggested talking to his existing employer around increasing his daily shift to meet the additional hour over the week. The employer agreed to the increase in hours.

Age, Gender Identification & Ethnicity

4.3.4 Age

Whilst this was already an age targeted project, there was an interest in understanding better any differing needs between for example someone in their early 50's compared to those approaching State Pension Age (SPA).

Additionally, due to their being no legal retirement age, the project did not put an upper age limit on the project and residents claiming State Pension could also access the project support.

In terms of reach and participation there was a broadly even split across each of the sub-age groups, with the largest group being the 55-59 age group (28%) and one in five participants being aged 65 years plus.

Local area partnerships broadly reflected the overall area percentages, with a couple of exceptions. For example, in both the Dudley and Walsall area one in four participants was aged 65 years, more likely to be inactive and reflecting greater number of inactive project participants in those areas.

Case Study: Jim's Story

Jim is 70 years old and retired from a professional job as a quality inspector 8 years ago due to ill health. When he initially contacted the project, he was not specifically looking for paid work but the opportunity to be active and was potentially interested in looking at voluntary work opportunities.

He got involved with some of the group activities taking place and had a regular one to one session with his navigator to review his goals. Through these sessions Jim recognised that he missed working and his navigator talked about how he could manage his health and work, albeit on a part time basis. As a result, Joe is back working for his old employer one day a week and loving the experience.

Figure 5: % participants by Age Group - Overall

ALL AREAS	Number	%
50-54	321	25%
55-59	362	28%
60-64	336	26%
65+	282	22%
	1301	

Figure 6: % participants by Age Group - By Local Partnership Area

Dudley	Number	%
50-54	53	24%
55-59	50	22%
60-64	61	27%
65+	59	26%
	223	
Sandwell	Number	%
50-54	84	28%
55-59	86	29%
60-64	79	26%
65+	50	17%
	229	
Wolves	Number	%
50-54	82	23%
55-59	110	31%
60-64	94	27%
65+	67	19%
	353	
Walsall	Number	%
50-54	102	24%
55-59	116	27%
60-64	100	23%
65+	108	25%
	426	

4.3.5 Different needs in the age groups

There was very little evidence of difference between needs of the age groups. Regardless of the age, there were common perceptions and feedback from participants. For example, common themes from the qualitative interviews and feedback including:

- Feeling on the scrapheap and largely ignored by society.
- Perception that employers would consider them too old for work.

- Wanting to find work which recognised utilised their skills but did not have the same levels of responsibility or pressure they may have had in previous roles.
- Wanting flexible and/or part time work due to not feeling physically or mentally able to work full time or the same pace as previous employment.
- Poor health and disabilities were regularly cited as a barrier to finding the right job.

Case Study: Wahid's Story

"I'm only 18 months from retirement so I was really shocked when I was let go from work in February. It has really knocked my confidence. I realised that I needed to get some structure going – something to get up for in the morning. I originally popped in to get help with a CV but then found out about this project and the other support I could get. I've really enjoyed getting up to date with my skills. I'm still exploring what the next job looks like. I feel I can't do physically and mentally what I've done previously so it will need to be a change of direction."

Case Study: Mike's Story

Mike was in his early 50's and recently been made redundant from his LGV driving job. He had been referred by the Jobcentre to the project. He was looking for a local driving job as he felt he could no longer cope with the long distances and hours he had previously done. He felt the project had really helped him to update his skills, particularly his digital skills and understanding how to apply for work online. He had secured a job whilst on the project and was grateful for the help he'd received.

4.36 Gender Identification

There was a broadly equally split of participants identifying as men (47%) and women (53%) and this also reflected across the Local Area Partnerships, with some exceptions. For example, participation by those identifying as women was higher in Sandwell (56%) and Walsall (60%).

As part of the wider engagement and support activities, several providers delivered specific men's and women's groups. There was good evidence that these supported some participants to engage more fully and aided their progress because of the project.

Figure 7: % Gender Identification Overall & By Local Partnership Area

Area	Total	Men	%	Women	%
Total Project	1301	607	47%	694	53%
Dudley	223	110	49%	113	51%
Sandwell	299	132	44%	167	56%
Wolverhampton	353	193	55%	160	45%
Walsall	426	172	40%	254	60%

4.3.7 Ethnicity

Nearly half of participants (45%) identified as being from Ethnic Minority Communities (EMC) and in Sandwell over 70%. Across all areas participation by people from Ethnic Minorities Communities exceeded local demographic data.

> Case Study: Sandwell Area Partnership
>
> In Sandwell, over two thirds of participants were from EMC (72%), over double the Borough EMC population of 34%. And whilst this to some extent reflects the fact that we know there are higher rates of both unemployment and economic inactivity for people from Ethnic Minority Communities, it is also the approach taken in developing a locally based partnership model with existing links and reach into specific Ethnic Minority Communities that supported these high levels of reach and participation.
>
> Many Sandwell navigator organisations were EMC led organisations or were highly focused in working with EMC residents. They provided targeted and integrated language and employment support interventions as part of the core project delivery model. To support EMC participation further the Sandwell Partnership utilised the Innovation Fund to provider highly targeted small projects of support to specific communities, for example African French speaking community, Somali community, South Asian Community.

Figure 8: % Ethnic Minority Community (EMC) Participants Overall & By Identified Area with comparison against % EMC residents for the area

Area	Total No of Participants	Total No of Participants from EMC's	Project %	Borough EMC population (Census 2011)
Total Project	1301	585	45%	23.9%[2]
Dudley	223	35	16%	11.5%
Sandwell	299	215	72%	34%
Wolverhampton	353	188	53%	32%
Walsall	426	147	35%	23.1%

4.3.8 Disability

Overall, 1 in 4 participants declared a disability (PWD), and in Dudley nearly half of all participants declared a disability. This included people with learning disabilities and people with mental ill health. Even for those who did not declare a disability, health conditions were regularly cited as a barrier to work. Many participants talked about looking for different employment to that they previously had, whether that be a less physical job or one that was less taxing mentally.

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[2] Population – Demographics - ActiveBlackCountry

"I want to work but I just can't cope with the stress I used to deal with".

Figure 9: % Participants declaring a disability - Overall & By Identified Area

Area	Total No of Participants	Total No of Participants declaring a disability	%
Total Project	1301	343	26%
Dudley	223	104	47%
Sandwell	299	50	17%
Wolverhampton	353	89	25%
Walsall	426	100	23%

Case Study: Martin's Story

Martin is long term unemployed. He was referred specifically to the project as it was felt a more bespoke approach would support him to focus on his specific challenges and barriers. Mark has a learning disability, a high level of literacy needs and requires additional support to job search, manage correspondence and complete application forms. He supports his elderly mother but is himself suffering with mobility issues and other health issues.

The project helped work through his benefit entitlement and supported him to appeal a previous PIP[3] decision and get the additional financial help he needed. This was a significant milestone as previous applications had been refused as they had been incorrectly completed due to Marks learning disability. This was recognised and he received 2 years back dated benefits.

The project helped identify and secure Mark a place on a community-based pre-entry functional skills course to support his learning needs.

"Thank you for all your help. I can't believe it, I can't believe I've actually sorted my money and have found a course which is so fun."

4.4 What difference has the project made?
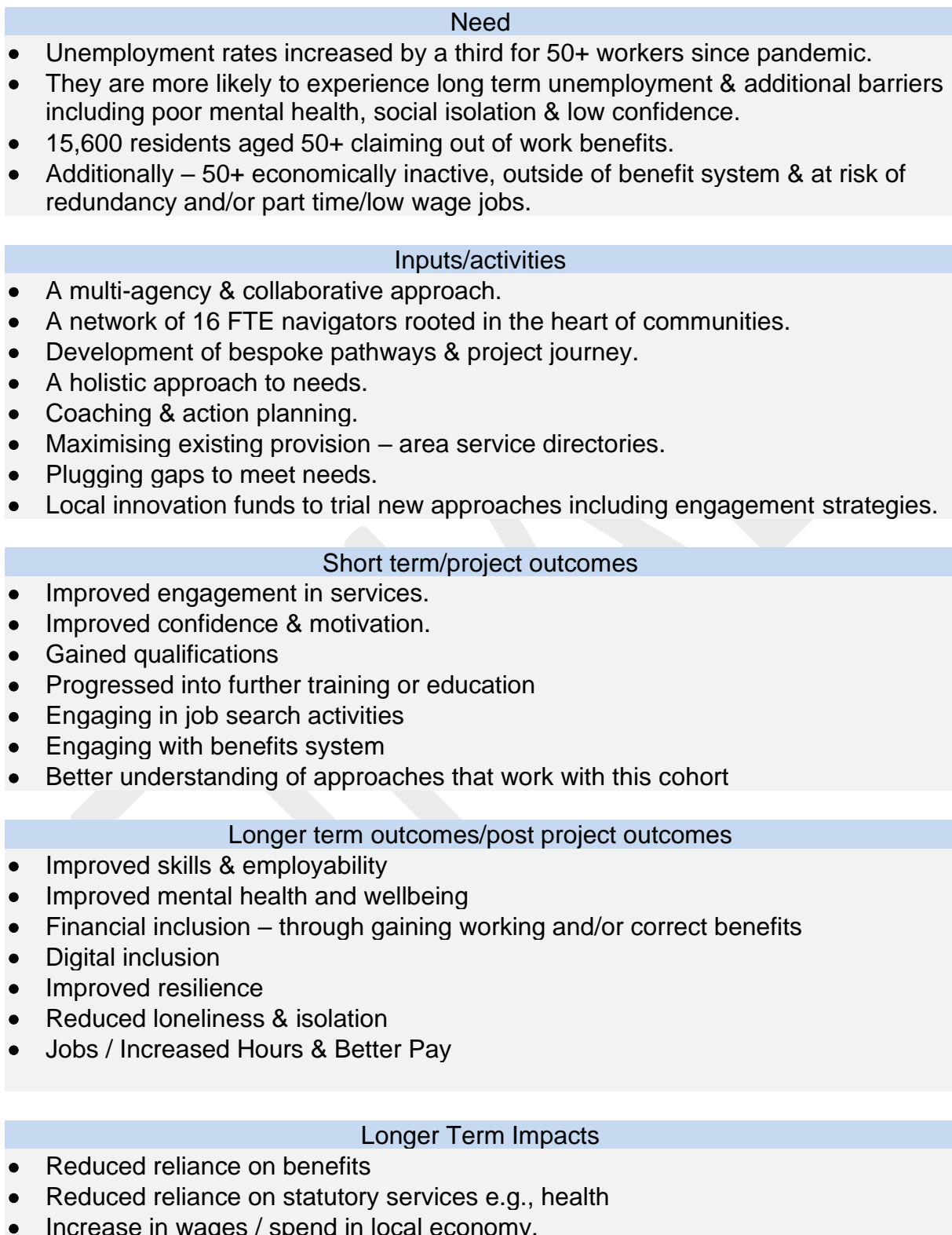
4.4.1 Theory of Change

A theory of change was developed in respect of the project. It details the drivers (or need) for the project, the input and the activities and the outcomes and impact of the project.

Outcomes were split between short term outcomes achievable as part of the project, and the longer term/post project outcomes and impact.

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[3] Personal Independence Payment

Figure 10: Project Theory of Change

Need
- Unemployment rates increased by a third for 50+ workers since pandemic.   - They are more likely to experience long term unemployment & additional barriers including poor mental health, social isolation & low confidence.   15,600 residents aged 50+ claiming out of work benefits.   - Additionally – 50+ economically inactive, outside of benefit system & at risk of redundancy and/or part time/low wage jobs.

Inputs/activities
- A multi-agency & collaborative approach.   - A network of 16 FTE navigators rooted in the heart of communities.   - Development of bespoke pathways & project journey.   - A holistic approach to needs.   - Coaching & action planning.   - Maximising existing provision – area service directories.   - Plugging gaps to meet needs.   - Local innovation funds to trial new approaches including engagement strategies.

Short term/project outcomes
- Improved engagement in services.   - Improved confidence & motivation.   - Gained qualifications   - Progressed into further training or education   - Engaging in job search activities   - Engaging with benefits system   - Better understanding of approaches that work with this cohort

Longer term outcomes/post project outcomes
- Improved skills & employability   - Improved mental health and wellbeing   - Financial inclusion – through gaining working and/or correct benefits   - Digital inclusion   - Improved resilience   - Reduced loneliness & isolation   - Jobs / Increased Hours & Better Pay

Longer Term Impacts
- Reduced reliance on benefits   - Reduced reliance on statutory services e.g., health   - Increase in wages / spend in local economy.

4.4.2 Measuring & Evidencing Outcomes & Impact

It was agreed with the funder that due to the short-term nature of the project, the outcome framework, used for day-to-day project reporting purposes would focus primarily on capturing and evidencing short-term outcomes within the theory of change. However, it was agreed that any employment outcomes that did occur during the project period, where possible would be captured and reported. In line with funder requirements, short term outcomes were also specific to individual participant groups.

The short-term outcomes which formed part of the project outcome reporting framework had agreed definitions and evidence requirement aligned to the funder's guidance.

Figure 11: Agreed Outcome Targets

Outcomes	Project Target
Into Education or Training (All)	360
Gained a Qualification (All)	218
Engaged in Job Searching (EI only)	364
Life Skills Support (EI and UE 18 month+)	728
Entered the Benefit System (EI only)	182
Into Employment	0

Wider outcomes and impacts which were outside the agreed reporting framework but formed part of the theory of change, would be captured through qualitative evaluation, specifically using individual case studies to demonstrate the type and nature of the difference made.

4.4.3 Outcomes – Into Education & Training

1 in 4 of all participants progressed to further education and training because of the project support. Courses ranged from vocational courses through to essential skills training and education in literacy, numeracy, language and digital skills. With some provision linked to academic/September start dates there was invariably a lag in this data and falling in the latter part of the project.

Figure 12: Achievement of Outcomes Measures – Into education and training (all participant groups)

Outcome	Numbers	Actual % against starts	Target % against starts

Progression into education & training (ALL)	321	25%	32%

4.4.4 Outcome – Gaining a qualification

Over 200 qualifications were achieved by project participants. These were recognised and accredited workplace and/or vocational qualifications at various levels in line with funder and project guidance.

Figure 13: Gaining a qualification (all participant groups)

Outcome	Numbers	Actual % against starts	Target % against starts
Gaining a qualification (ALL)	201	15%	20%

Case Study: Sammad's Story

Sammad had been unemployed for many years. He felt he had no skills and was lacking confidence. Previously he had struggled to access training opportunities in warehousing/FLT due to frequently failing assessments. Immediately the navigator identified low levels of literacy and numeracy as holding him back and referred Sammad to Maths and English support delivered in the community.

His navigator also encouraged him to join the weekly activities on offer including digital skills, job search sessions, social groups and an allotment group that had recently been set up. The group had recently started cooking sessions, and Sammad proved to be a natural. The project supported him to obtain Food Safety qualification. This helped opened his eyes to other potential employment opportunities in the hospitality and catering sector.

Sammad feels much more optimistic about the future. He has developed new skills, gained qualifications and started a training course to improve his English and Maths. He has built a new network of friends and support through the project.

4.4.5 Outcomes – Engaged in Job search (Inactive Participants only)

Figure 14: Numbers & % of Participants Engaged in Job Searching – Economically Inactive Participants

Outcomes Measure (Economically Inactive Only)	No of outcomes	% Of EI starts (target)	% Of all starts (actual)
Engaged in Job Searching (EI only)	189	30%	32%

Feedback from delivery providers indicated that initially reaching the economically inactive group and supporting achievement of the specific outcomes to their participant group would be a challenge. However, with the increasing worries of the cost-of-living crisis for inactive participants including those above State Pension Age this group were motivated to get help to start working again, job searching and earning more income.

Case Study: Christie's Story

Christie was retired and was claiming state pension but not entitled to pension credit. She was starting to 'feel the pinch' of the cost-of-living crisis and wanted to secure some part time work to help with some of the increases in the bills.

The first thing her navigator did was worked with the local welfare rights team to make sure Christie was claiming all eligible benefits and payment.

They agreed that Christie would benefit from improving her digital skills which would support her to job search, as well as develop new workplace skills. She attended an accredited training course and started volunteering to help build her confidence back up and gain some recent work experience.

She enjoyed being with other people again and made new friends through the project. This also helped boost her confidence and increased her motivation to get work.

As a result of the project, she has attended training, volunteered, increased her skills, developed more confidence and motivation and started actively job searching.

4.4.6 Outcomes – Entered the Benefit System (Inactive Participants Only)

Figure 15: Numbers & % of Participants Entering the Benefits System

Outcomes Measure (Economically Inactive Only)	No of outcomes	% Of all starts (target)	% Of all starts (actual)
Entered the Benefit System (EI only)	64	15%	11%

4.4.7 Outcomes – Accessing Life Skills Support (Economically Inactive Participants & Unemployed (18 months+))

Over two thirds of long term unemployed and economically participants have engaged in some form of life skill support following project interventions. These are further inventions which will have a direct impact on individuals' future employability.

Figure 16: Numbers of Participants Accessing Life Skills Support

Outcomes Measure (Economically Inactive Only)	No of outcomes	% Of all starts (target)	Target Outcomes	% increase
Accessing life skills support as result of the project	792	69%	728	9%

4.4.8 Outcomes - Jobs

Analysis of the data indicates an under reporting of job outcomes. This is partly due to not all job outcomes being fully captured and reported through outcome reporting framework and some areas/providers not completing correctly or fully additional reporting requirements.

Through independent review of several provider cohorts and review of reporting data, there is evidence of the project supporting at least 77 previously unemployed and inactive into employment and supporting a number of employed participants to increase their hours/pay.

There was no target set in relation to jobs due to the wider scope of the project in terms of the target participants, the nature of the interventions and short-term nature of the project.

Figure 17: Numbers of Participants Gaining Employment

Outcome	No of reported jobs	No of identified jobs	% Of all UE & IE starts
Gaining employment	44	77	7%

4.5 Value for Money & Social Value Assessment

4.5.1 Unit Cost Per Participant

The basic unit rate per participant for the project was circa £580 per person. It has been difficult to find directly comparable projects from which to compare unit costs and value for money. For example, this project has participants from multiple groups i.e., unemployed, economically inactive and employed. It was shorter in nature than other mainstream and discretionary employment support programmes with a focus on pre-employment outcomes. A table of average unit costs in respect of current and previous employment support programmes has been included for comparison.

Figure 18: Unit rate comparison table

Project Name	Cost[4] per participant	Approx. length of support
CRF 50+ Project	£582	Up to 6 months
Restart	£1,800 - £2,429	Up to 12 months
Work Programme	£1,760	Up to 2 years
Work and Health Programme	£1,560	Up to 18 months.

4.5.2 Social Value

The evaluation was asked to consider where possible the Social Value of the project. This is the value that people place on the changes they experience in their lives. An account of social value in affects tells the story about the changes experienced by people.

As part of this we have assessed and used an example case study to demonstrate the type and nature of the social value delivered by the project. The case study used shows the participants journey, the support they received and the difference (impact) it has made to them. In assessing this we have focused on those outcomes considered most important to the individual as the primary stakeholder, and ensured all outcomes are material and not over-claimed in line with social value principles.

In placing a value on these outcomes, a wide evidence review was undertaken and a range of external sources[5] were consulted to identify relevant unit costs/financial proxies. We recognise that a range of valuation techniques exist in the evidence base reviewed and that the process of selecting value proxies can be relatively subjective. On this basis, where multiple proxies exist, we have provided a valuation range for openness and transparency.

Case Study: Terry's Story

Terry was referred to the project by his local jobcentre as someone who might be able to benefit from the project. He was a very private and proud man who up until COVID 19, when following a period of furlough, he was made redundant. Before this he had worked for 30 years in the same sector and had not had any contact with the benefits system.

Problems started to escalate when redundancy money had run out. He had left claiming benefits too late, was financially struggling with rent arrears and in debt.

Initially on joining the project he was reluctant to open up about his life and the challenges he was facing. The navigator one to one sessions focused on support to resolve the declared debt and financial issues. His navigator worked with him to look at where savings could be made, where additional support could be gained and developing a payment plan.

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[4] William Eichler article, 2 December 2022
[5] HACT previous social values, Greater Manchester Unit Cost Databased, Global Exchange Database, Assured SROI network individual evaluations

For example:

- They cancelled an old leisure centre membership from when he was working and applied for a free swim pass.
- Applied for the Assure Tariff[6]
- Applied for Discretionary Housing Payment[7].

As trust was built, Terry opened up more to his navigator about what he was experiencing. He confided that because of everything that had happened, he was feeling very low. He was experiencing poor mental, to such an extent he was experiencing suicidal feelings and had made an attempt on his own life prior to being referred to the project.

The navigator encouraged Terry to attend the 50+ group sessions that were available including a gardening group, a weekly job club and social activity sessions. Through the groups he met new people, made friends, and had an opportunity to talk to people experiencing similar things to him. Within a short space of time his confidence grew, and he reported feeling more confidence and having significantly improved feelings of welling.

Through attending the regular job club sessions and with support from his navigator he created an up-to-date CV, improved his digital skills through accessing online learning and was supported to secure a job. The charity supporting Terry raised additional funds to pay for a smart phone which he needed as part of his new job in the care sector. Working with another local provider a DBS was funded and secured.

"This project has made a massive difference to me. It's got me meeting people, it's got me doing positive stuff and out of the house. I've loved all the different activities. Yes, it's help me to get a job, but much more than that it's made me feel me again and that I have something to live for. I've never needed help before, so I had no idea about what was available in the community. I am going to carry on attending the community gardens regularly and it's even given me a place I can come to with my son."

Case Study - Outcomes & Estimated SROI

Description of outcome/ change for participants	Estimated SROI	Description or Source
Full time employment	£13,400	Cost of UC Single Person Per Year Capped
Engaged in training/learning	£1,567	SROI Evidence reviews which used HACT database – work related training
Improved confidence and motivation	£1,556	SROI Evidence reviews which used Global Value Exchange
Improved feelings of mental wellbeing – feeling less stressed and anxious	£300 - £830	The cost of private counselling to treat depression (5 sessions x £60) - Average cost of service provision for adults suffering from depression & anxiety[8]

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[6] The Assure tariff can help customers who are on a low income or struggling to pay their water charges; it aims to reduce water poverty and make our bills more affordable.

[7] A Discretionary Housing Payment is a discretionary and short-term payment made in the United Kingdom that helps people with their housing costs

[8] Mental health problems cost UK economy at least £118 billion a year - new research (lse.ac.uk)

Reduction in debt – debt relief	£1,593	SROI Evidence reviews which used HACT database
Better able to manage money	£2,155	SROI Evidence reviews which used HACT database
Value of the Membership of a social	£1,850	SROI Evidence reviews which used HACT database
	£22,421-£22,951	

4.5.3 Project Wide Social Value

To indicate the type and level of project wide social value the project has been able to deliver, one of the primary outcomes relating to engagement with training and education has been assessed as an example. Training and education is an area where there is strong value evidence base. There was not a sufficiently robust evidence base on which to value or place financial proxies against all the outcomes within the framework. However, this one outcome is a strong indicator for the total value produced across the whole project.

The economic benefits associated with accessing further education, learning and training are well documented, with some research indicating significantly improved prospects of better paid jobs, better job security and promotion opportunities.

There are also significant non-economic benefits associated with undertaking learning and training. A study[9] on the impact of further education reported that 80% of completers indicated that they had gained self-confidence or self-esteem; 49% indicated that undertaking the learning and training had helped them undertake more voluntary work or community related activity. In addition, 75% who completed the qualification or training also indicated that the training had helped them keep active and make better use of their spare time.

The financial proxies available to evidence fiscal return vary greatly across the level of training/qualifications being undertaken and the evidence available. A conservative financial proxy based on individuals undertaking similar training and education courses to this project has been used. Specifically, training and education that is work related in nature and designed to increase skills that support accessing employment. Based on a financial proxy of £1,567 per person, the project returned in the region of over £500,000 in respect of this single outcome.

Outcome	Numbers	Value per Outcome	Total
Progression into education & training (ALL)	321	£1567[10]	£503,007

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[9] [The impact of further education learning (publishing.service.gov.uk)](publishing.service.gov.uk)

[10] SROI Evidence reviews which used HACT database

Case Study: Bilan's Story

Bilan is an active member of her community volunteering at weekends to run a womens group. She said the centre played an important role and "brings her happiness and a sense of community".

She spoke passionately about how many people within her community are in low paid or part time jobs and how for her access to training and education is the key to getting better jobs.

She became part of the 50+ project in order to gain access to more opportunities. The centre is supporting her to set up her own business.

SECTION 5 – CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

In summary, we found the project:

- Was effectively led and managed by the accountable body, and the designated area lead organisations, although the short mobilisation period did create challenges within the partnerships.
- Was able to mobilise quickly and effectively through the utilisation of existing local area partnerships and networks.
- Harnessed and maximised an existing and vibrant network of locally rooted community-based organisations, predominantly from the voluntary sector.
- Was delivered by knowledgeable and experienced delivery provider navigators and support staff.
- Was exemplar, in terms of its reach and engagement into diverse communities, both in terms of both geography including areas experiencing high levels of deprivation and priority groups including those who often do/will not access mainstream services or provision.
- Provided a flexible delivery model which was adapted by local providers to meet the individual and specific needs of their own 50+ community.
- Created safe, friendly and respectful dedicated employment and support spaces specifically for 50+ residents which was greatly valued by participants.
- Delivered a wide range of additional and added value opportunities that enabled participants to build their confidence, improve their mental wellbeing, develop social networks and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- Exceeded its reach and engagement targets and was particularly effective in engaging with those economically inactive 50+ Black Country residents and residents from Ethnic Minority Communities (EMC).
- Broadly met agreed progression and outcome targets in line with the funder outcome framework, but also achieved a much wider set of outcomes and impacts for individual project participants.
- Demonstrated overall good value for money, with strong indicators of significant added and social value.

5.2 What Worked Well?

5.2.1 Taking a local approach and harnessing a network of locally rooted and community-based providers

This was a fundamental part of the delivery model strategy. It was recognised as part of the early project modelling that to be able to implement and deliver a project of this nature within such a short time framework it would require local existing infrastructure to be maximised. It was also recognised the reach into the community, voluntary and community-based providers would support engagement of economically inactive and employed residents. The level and depth of reach

achieved by the Local Area Partnerships reflects the diverse nature of the delivery providers and the community-based nature of their operations. This supported higher numbers of economically inactive participants engaged than planned, and nearly 1 in 2 participants coming from Ethnic Minority Communities.

Most areas already had in place existing networks, supply chains or relationships with experienced employment related support providers from the voluntary and community sector. This provided a springboard for the project to mobilise, implement and deliver quickly.

It also meant that much of the key infrastructure needed to deliver a project of this nature was already in place including in most cases staffing who could be redeployed flexibly to support the project, without the need for a lengthy recruitment process and short-term contracts of employment.

5.2.2. Delivery of a broad and flexible range of group engagement and support interventions to tackle wider needs relating to wellbeing and loneliness and isolation

The project was non-prescriptive about the type of engagement and support interventions that could be delivered by providers to support the core navigator function. The core principle was that interventions should support key needs relating to health and wellbeing, loneliness and isolation, confidence, and motivation.

Activities ranged from skill development sessions (digital, language support, communication, work-related skills) to groups where people could meet, socialise and talk. There was a range of therapeutic group activities available like craft sessions, sewing classes and community gardening, and even access to social events including trips to local museums and further afield.

There was evidence of activities being co-produced by participants, which supported better engagement and attendance. Participants valued these activities highly, often valuing the benefit over and above more tangible outcomes like gaining a job.

Some of these activities:

- Were developed and delivered by the navigators themselves as a way to bring their caseload/group together and provide additional support and structure to their one-to-one meetings.
- Developed to meet a specific need, and required additional funding, and the innovation fund was used to support this.
- Were supported through funded and complimentary activities being delivered locally, either by the organisations or their local partners.

5.2.3 The navigator role

A single point of contact was maintained between the participant and the project through the navigator approach providing consistency for participants and enabling trust to be built.

Effective navigators had good local knowledge of the employment market and wider support available to individuals, combined with excellent coaching and mentoring skills. They demonstrated compassion and empathy whilst still encouraging and enabling participants to push out of their comfort zone and explore new things and opportunities.

Whilst skills and experience overall across the navigator base were high, there was a missed opportunity to develop further specific skills relating to the 50+ group. For example, by facilitating access to specific adviser training modules for those front-line staff working with the 50+ group developed by the Institute of Employability Professionals and the Centre for Ageing Better.

5.3 What were the challenges and lessons learnt?

5.3.1 Short mobilisation period and overall timeframe of project

One of the most significant challenges and risks to the project was both the short mobilisation and overall timeframe of the project. In real terms, there was a 6-month window of delivery, with little or no real mobilisation or implementation period. Whilst the project modelling mitigated the risk, it still created pressures and frustrations within the partnership. Activity needed to commence in parallel with finalising contracts, agreeing and disseminating reporting frameworks, often leading to changes in processes.

Whilst greater flexibility on the timeframe and an extension was latterly granted by the funder enabling a longer period to work with participants and track outcomes, for some providers the decision came too late, and resources had already been allocated and spent.

It also meant that some elements which were being piloted through innovation fund, like the 50+ Hub in Sandwell were just starting to get traction when they had to be closed.

Whilst this has not in general terms negatively impacted on the achievements and outcomes of the project overall, it did in some cases create unnecessary pressures and challenges across some of the provider base. This in turn put strain on individual organisations, particularly small organisations and partnership relationships in delivering the project. The accountable body and lead organisations provided support to overcome these challenges, but often themselves were waiting for clarification or additional guidance.

"I (CEO of small voluntary sector partner) will think twice about getting involved with such a short-term project again. In comparison to other funding streams, for the small numbers we have been working with the reporting has felt onerous and the funding has not reflected the true level of management and administration costs involved"

5.3.2 Data Reporting Requirements

In order that the data reporting did not become overly onerous, the reach and outcome data reporting requirements implemented by the project management team were aligned with the funder's outcome framework and guidance.

It took time to fully implement and support the provider base around the outcome guidance, definition and evidence requirements. Some of the outcome measures were significantly different to previous or similar projects. Significant time was committed by the project team in reviewing and cleansing data with local area partnerships and delivery providers.

Job outcomes were a secondary reporting outcome, not forming part of the main targets or reporting mechanisms. As a result, not all job outcomes were fully captured and reported as part of the routine reporting.

5.3.3   Size of the partnership

One of the strengths of the project was the breadth and depth of its delivery partnerships, but with 37 organisations involved it also presented challenges. For example, it invariably led to some providers have very small caseloads and cohorts, but these still required the same level of management and administration.

There is also risk that too smaller opportunity for individual providers can affect the level of buy-in and investment in the project. The opposite is true from an accountable body and lead perspective – the greater the number of providers the more management and administrative resources required.

Section 6: Contact Details

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Annex 1 – Table of Project Management, Area Leads & Delivery Organisations

Overall Lead & Accountable Body	Legal Status
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council	Local Authority

Area Leads & Managing Partner	Legal Status	Geographical Area
Sandwell Consortium	CIC – 3rd sector consortium	Sandwell
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council	Local Authority	Dudley
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council	Local Authority	Walsall
Wolverhampton Voluntary and Community Action formerly known as Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council (WVSC)	Registered Charity - VCS Umbrella Organisation	Wolverhampton

Sandwell Navigator Providers	Type of Organisation	Additional Innovation Fund Delivery	Participant Numbers
Brushstrokes Community Project	Registered Charity	No	25
Bangladeshi Women's Association (BWA)	Registered Charity	Yes – a variety of interventions including supporting social connectedness & digital skills development	31
CBO - Confederation of Bangladeshi Organisation	Registered Charity	Yes – targeted digital skills development	32
CCF - Community Connect Foundation	Registered Charity	No	27
Ideal for All	Registered Charity	No	33
Illeys Community Association	Registered Charity	Yes – targeted confidence & skills development to Somalian & African communities.	29

SWEDA	Registered Charity	Yes – support to provide targeted digital skills development.	24
SYCC	Registered Charity	Yes – targeted activities to support integration	34

Additional Providers Engaged through the Innovation Fund	Type of Organisation	Type of Support Delivered	Participant Numbers
African French Speaking Community Support	Registered Charity	Small scale targeted delivery for French African speaking communities on legacy benefits.	11
Community Advice Service (CAS)	Voluntary Sector Organisation	Small scale targeted delivery shaped around the Midlife MOT.	15
Empowering People In Change (EPIC) CIC	CIC	Small scale targeted skills delivery to Central & Eastern European communities	12
BeBlessed	Voluntary Sector Organisation	Small scale targeted essential & digital skills support for the Asian community	26
Sandwell Consortium	CIC	Funding for provision of Hub engagement worker	N/A
Just Straight Talk	CIC	Funding to support engagement & referrals to the Hub.	N/A

Dudley Navigator & Innovation Fund Providers	Type of Organisation	Participant Numbers
Black Country Housing Group (BCHG)	Social Housing Provider	42
Just Straight Talk (JST)	CIC	83
Job Change	Not for Profit	66
Top Church Training	Registered Charity	32

Walsall Navigator & Innovation Fund Providers	Type of Organisation	Participant Numbers
Aaina Community Hub	Registered Charity	74
Black Country Health Care NHS Trust	NHS Trust	88
CAB – Walsall	Registered Charity	24
Jobchange	Not for Profit	89
Manor Farm Community Association	Registered Charity	105
Old Hall Peoples Partnership (OHPP)	Registered Charity	8
Ryecroft NRC	Registered Charity	38

Wolverhampton Navigator Providers	Type of Organisation	Additional Innovation Fund Delivery	Participant Numbers
Access to Business	Registered Charity	Yes – additional interventions focusing on life skills, confidence & wellbeing	100
Bilston Resource Century	Registered Charity	No	51
Jobchange	Not for Profit	Yes – targeted support for women to support social connectedness & confidence building	46
Refugee Migrant Centre	Registered Charity	No	49

Additional Providers Engaged through the Innovation Fund	Type of Organisation	Type of Support Delivered	Participant Numbers
SNJ Charitable Trust	Registered Charity	Targeted support focusing on essential digital skills for groups of men & women.	21

Sian Computers Community Initiative CIC	CIC	Focus on digital & business admin skills	9
Gloucester Street Community Centre (GSCC)	Not for profit	Focus on digital skills.	16
EK NIWAS	Faith Organisation	Targeted support at specific communities.	30
Ethnic Minority Council	Registered Charity	Targeted support for Asian communities (predominantly inactive)	16
I-Enter Skills	Registered Charity	Targeted support for French Speaking /African communities (predominantly inactive)	15

Strategic & Supporting Partner	Legal Status
Centre for Ageing Better	Registered Charity