



# Participant Involvement Learning Paper

# Introduction

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This learning paper draws on evidence gathered as part of Ecorys' ongoing evaluation of the Building Better Opportunities (BBO) programme. It explores a range of approaches being used to get participants involved in services. The paper is aimed at other projects who wish to encourage more participant involvement and as such identifies the types of involvement possible, how they have been implemented and what the benefits of these are. It begins by defining what we mean by participant involvement and why this topic is being explored. Next, it provides examples of different types and levels of participant involvement across BBO projects and highlights what the advantages of these have been. The paper finishes with some key learning points, which include the challenges which could be faced when facilitating participant involvement and possible solutions to these.

## The Building Better Opportunities programme

The National Lottery Community Fund is matching funds from the European Social Fund (ESF) 2014-2020 programme to provide joint investment in local projects tackling the root causes of poverty, promoting social inclusion and driving local jobs and growth, particularly for the hardest to reach groups. The programme is supporting a variety of projects, ranging from those improving employability for the most disadvantaged, helping those with multiple and complex needs, to improving financial literacy. BBO has been designed to engage the expertise and knowledge of a wide range of stakeholders through encouraging partnership delivery, and thus create positive impacts for harder to reach groups.

# What do we mean by participant involvement?

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This paper has been written in response to an increased interest in participant involvement in services. At a strategic level the Fund have placed an emphasis on this through its People in the Lead Strategy, recognising that *"when people are in the lead, communities thrive"*<sup>1</sup>.

Participant involvement is central to BBO project delivery. Participants are encouraged to play a central role in developing their own action plan and projects are offering tailored support to suit individual participant needs.

From evaluation activity to date it is clear however that participant involvement - beyond being solely a recipient within a project - is widespread. The aim of this paper is to highlight the ways that

participants can be actively involved in BBO project activity in this sense, the benefits there have been and some of the learning points from project experience of facilitating this activity. By actively involved we mean a participant being involved beyond the planning and designing of their own employment, training or job search journey.

Indeed, there are many activities taking place which involve participants to a greater degree than this and mean they are more than just recipients of the BBO project they are part of. There are benefits not only to the participant themselves but also to the project (including other participants signed up to it). The models of such involvement and the advantages of them are discussed below.

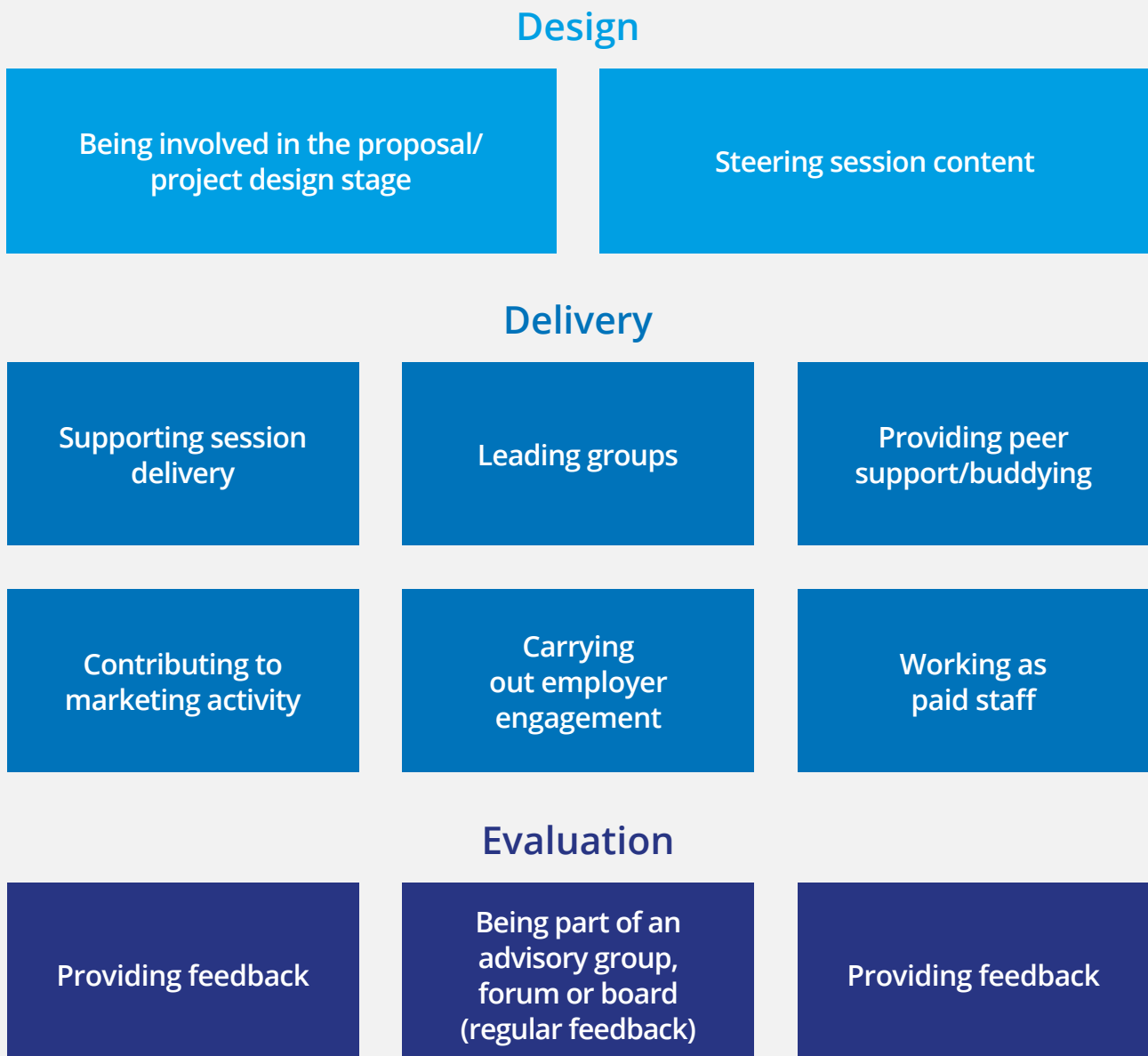
<sup>1</sup> The Fund Strategic Framework, available from: <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/about/strategic-framework#segment-1>

# Models of participant involvement within BBO projects

Within BBO projects there are many different examples of participant involvement. We have categorised the activity across three main areas of project activity as seen in Figure 1 below.

It can be seen that involvement can take place at many points within the participant journey as well as with or without professional support.

**Figure 1:** Different types of participant involvement within the BBO programme.



## Design

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We have identified two areas where participants can be actively involved in project design.<sup>2</sup>

### Being involved in the proposal/project design stage

There is evidence that projects are involving potential service users at the design stage of a project. For example the [Better Off Finance](#) project carried out surveys and ran three focus groups in different parts of the Liverpool City Region to discuss with beneficiaries what issues caused them financial hardship, who they turned to for support, what their aspirations for any service might be and what other support measures would help them. Participants from the lead organisation of this project (The Women's Organisation) shared their views on topics such as barriers to employment

too. They were asked about their experiences and how they thought the barriers they had faced could be addressed. As a staff team they then unpicked the contents of the conversations as well as used secondary sources to try and identify points of innovation to include in the project.

As a result of this process at this stage, specific support measures and actions were incorporated into the project design. These included:

- **Localised and neighbourhood access and delivery - to address lack of transport links to services and addressing beneficiary requests for the needs for local service access points e.g. at Children's Centres**
- **Timing of services delivery – to facilitate access for women with childcare responsibilities i.e. school pickups and drop offs**
- **Culturally diverse and equalities responsive marketing, community outreach and delivery - to address the needs of specific BME communities – deployment of diverse and multi-cultural staff was a factor in this**
- **Integration of confidence building and personal development training and support - to support individuals with very low self confidence levels**

<sup>2</sup> As a key principle of BBO delivery is participants working with their coach or key worker to set individual goals, we have not included this type of session design in this section.

Similarly, [Sheffield City Region](#) also involved users during the design stage, with their viewpoints sought when their proposal was being put together. The overarching aim of this work was to design a

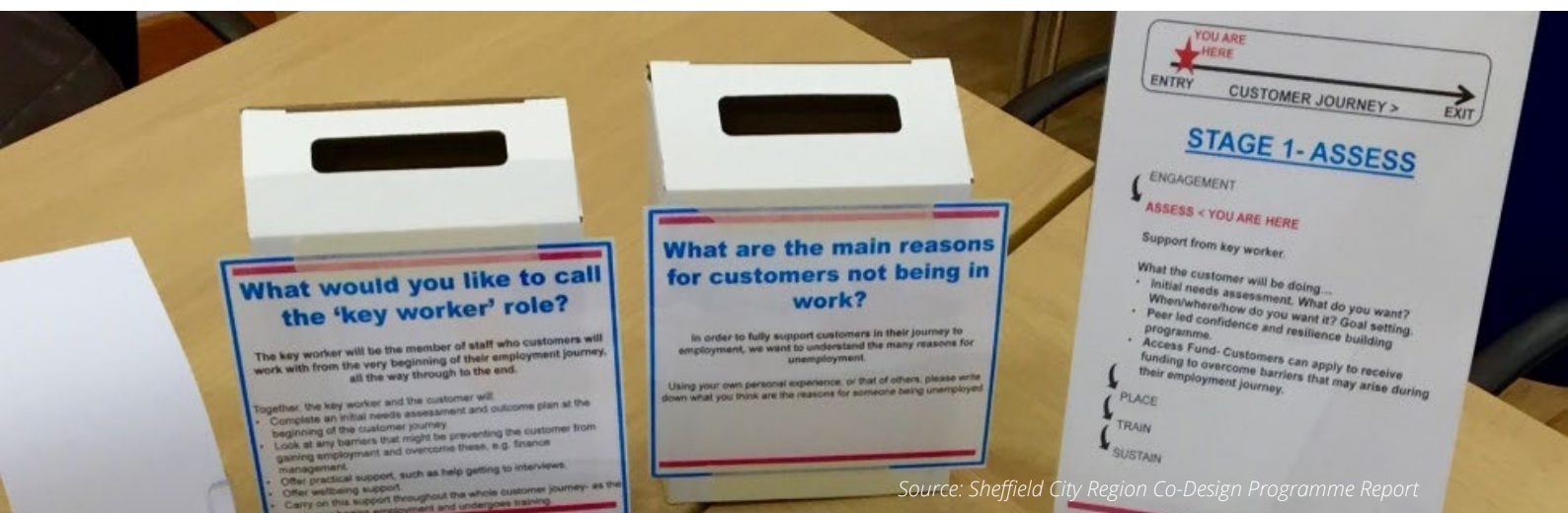
whole, 'holistic' package of employment support across all stages of a participant's BBO journey. Amongst the activities used to achieve this were:

- **Podium ranking:** Participants answered different questions on different coloured post-its and ranked their answers on a podium in order of importance.



Source: Sheffield City Region Co-Design Programme Report

- **Anonymous comments boxes:** Participants were asked to answer the questions on the outside of the comments boxes and then post their answers in them. Questions asked included "what would you like to call the 'key worker' role?" and "what are the main reasons for customers [participants] not being in work?"



Source: Sheffield City Region Co-Design Programme Report

Amongst the key lessons learnt from this design work was that first appointments can be really scary for participants and they wanted someone to accompany them, no matter what that appointment was. This was something which was subsequently built into delivery, with coaches

going with participants to initial appointments and meetings. The design stage work also identified that debt and benefit advice would be important. As a result, the proposed amount of support available in this area was increased to reflect the needs of the people they would be working with.

## Steering session content

Group session content has also been influenced by participants, with them providing steer on the activities and topics they would like to cover.

In the [Local Learning Perspectives](#) project led by Aspire Sussex participants had the opportunity to take part in an allotment scheme. This activity has been designed to ensure that participants are in the lead, with them deciding what to plant and do in the weekly sessions. Participants have enjoyed the scheme because they have been involved in decision making as well as learning new skills.

The importance of being involved in choosing content can be seen in the work of [RISE](#) (Refugees Into Sustainable Employment). Their local evaluation found that where sessions offered bespoke 1:1 support or where participants were given the opportunity to suggest discussion topics (such as attending a GP appointment or preparing for a specific job interview) there was increased attendance and popularity. They have reflected that the training and learning they offer needs to be flexible and adaptable to the changing needs of the participants they are working with.

## Delivery

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There are many instances of participants contributing to delivery as well as taking the lead in some elements of it. Participant involvement can be at different points of their BBO journey. For example, there are cases of supporting delivery whilst still being a project participant as well as instances of helping to deliver after they have exited. Involvement in delivery can also be on a voluntary or paid basis depending on the particular project and the role.

### Supporting session delivery

Participants have supported sessions across a number of different settings, working with professionals to deliver the content.

Instances of this include supporting delivery of a course they have previously attended as a participant. An example of this is the Loudspeaker course, which is a series of workshops run at Nottingham Contemporary Art Gallery, for female participants accessing the [Opportunity and Change](#) project. Sessions are supported by an artist, a support worker from the BBO project, and up to three peer mentors, including women who have previously completed the course through their engagement with [Opportunity and Change](#).

At [Step Forward Tees Valley](#), Ambassadors have helped deliver and co-ordinated some of the project's group activity. As well as building a rapport with participants and motivating people through their own stories, the project has noted

that they have been valuable in dispelling the myth that people will be financially worse off in work.

Participants can also be involved in supporting the delivery of training sessions to project staff. At [Sheffield City Region](#) in-house training is often delivered with a service user. One such example is during their training session to coaches on developing rapport with participants. Here, a service user talks about their experiences of good and bad rapport, providing examples of each that the coaches can learn from. This is not only seen by the organisation as an effective way of training coaches about the topic, but also "much more powerful than just standing up and saying 'this is the theory of rapport'". Benefits of this involvement for the participant include increased confidence and growing their skill set. Being valued and listened to is also seen as a positive outcome of this involvement.

There is also scope for participants to be involved in external training delivery. For example at [Sheffield City Region](#), participants have helped support staff deliver mental health awareness training to employers. Where they have done this, they have had real input into discussions and learning and given real insights into their experience and what was helpful and unhelpful to them when they were unwell. In terms of outcomes, the participants felt involved and that their voice and experience mattered. It also had other benefits including increased confidence speaking in groups, which has helped some with their journeys back

## Leading groups

As well as supporting delivery, participants are also leading delivery of a variety of different groups.

At [Who Dares Works](#), participants are leading groups including a community garden group and a socialising group. The community garden group was originally facilitated by project mentors, with them advising on how the garden could be used as part of the cross-cutting theme of sustainability. Activities included placing bug hotels throughout the garden and recording the activity there as a result. After some time, a group of participants began to self-organise, and go to the garden regularly themselves to carry on the work. Participants also facilitate a socialising group at a local community centre. The project informally introduces this group to new participants and it acts as an opportunity for them to meet together, without their mentors. The outcome of this is that it allows those who are often socially isolated and from rural or disparate communities to access new social networks and make new friends.

At [Step Forward Tees Valley](#) there are people taking the lead in women's groups, men's groups, walking groups and craft groups. They promote these groups on the website and encourage navigators to promote these groups to participants too.

Through the peer ambassador programme at [Sheffield City Region](#), ambassadors requested that special interest groups be set up for participants to attend. As a result, several groups were developed, including confidence building, creative writing and walking. Participants themselves now lead some

into employment. For employers it provided a more authentic and real experience which resulted in much better learning. The lead partner at Sheffield City Region has reflected that for their project, including the participant experience and voice in activity such as these has been really important to them, with the learning from them meaning they have delivered a better quality project overall.



of these groups. As well as providing a further support network for participants, another positive impact of these groups is that the people involved in leading them have been able to influence the services they use.

## Providing peer support/buddying

Peer support systems are in place across a number of BBO projects. Here, current or previous participants at a project provide mentoring or buddying to other project participants. The exact model of support varies. For example at the [Include-IT Mersey](#) project, digital buddies support participants on an informal basis. Here they offer informal support to other group members trying to improve their IT literacy. Acting as helpers like this not only helps the participants in the class, but the buddies too who feel they have done something positive by sharing the skills they have learnt in previous weeks with other group members.

At other projects there are more formal mechanisms of peer support. [Step Forward Tees Valley](#) also have a peer mentoring element to their project. Participants attend a training programme and then lead and support other participants on the project. They currently have 15 trained mentors, with one female (who is still receiving some support) now running a group for other women (participants) too. The [Better Off Finance](#) project has established a team of Money Mentors.

## Case Study: Better Off Finance – the benefits of being a Money Mentor<sup>3</sup>

At Better Off Finance participants who have been on the project have the chance to become a Money Mentor. Training is available in areas including: being a community based money mentor, being a savvy consumer and supporting Universal Credit claimants. The idea is that once participants have taken part in the course, they will go on to help other people with financial advice and support.

One participant of the course describes being a money mentor as "helping yourself and helping people be aware of debts, how they got into debt, ways they can get out of debt". They signed up for the course as they thought that as well as other people in the community being able to benefit from the information she could share, there would also be individual benefits. These included gaining experience to help her application to be a volunteer advisor at Citizens Advice, a role which requires giving out similar information to the public.

So far she has mainly helped members of her family, giving them advice with things such as household bills and food budgeting. As well as learning about



**Better Off Finance**

**Become a Money Mentor**  
FREE Accredited Training

If you are currently out of work and looking to develop your skills you could access one of the following courses:

- Being A Community Based Money Mentor
- Being A Savvy Consumer
- Supporting Universal Credit Claimants

Eligibility criteria applies, must be willing to take part in the wider Better Off Finance project.  
See reverse for more details.

new areas such as how to budget for a family, which she previously knew nothing about, another benefit of taking part has been an increase in confidence.

<sup>3</sup> Better Off Finance Summary Impact Report (2018)



## Contributing to marketing activity

Participants are also contributing to delivery in terms of marketing and communication activity.

One way they are involved is by helping to engage potential participants in BBO projects. At [Inspiring Enterprise](#), participants who have exited the project and who are now running their own businesses have been invited to speak at

networking events about their BBO experience. Here they have recounted their own personal journeys, including what to do (or not to do) when setting up a business and what they have achieved. These presentations have been well received by current participants who have been able to relate to the speakers and their experiences.

**“I promote the benefits of New Leaf across the Cheshire West and Chester area, speaking to potential participants, local groups and businesses to let them know what it can offer.”**

(BBO Participant)

At [New Leaf](#), Community Energisers are used to help promote the project and communicate its benefits. They too have used their own stories about their personal BBO journeys to help recruit others, for example by speaking at information days, attending events at community venues, and talking to potential future participants on a 1:1 basis.

At [eMploy-ABILITY](#) volunteer Community Champions also support marketing activity, with their role including attending events about the project as well as distributing fliers.

Similarly, ambassadors at [Who Dares Works](#) are responsible for the marketing and promotion of the project. Sometimes this can mean walking

through the local towns and telling people about the project. Ambassadors can nominate themselves, or be asked by the project to fulfil the role. Being an ambassador encourages conversation with people who are unfamiliar across a variety of different settings, all helping develop to skills that participants need for their future education, training or job search opportunities.

Participants have also been involved in developing marketing material. For example participants at [Stronger Families](#) have given guidance on written communications including the use of accessible language in their literature about the project. They have also provided input about which posts will have the most impact on social media channels.

## Carrying out employer engagement

As well as helping to engage potential participants, there are also examples of participants contributing to employer engagement. At [Sheffield City Region](#) staff often take a peer ambassador to employer engagement meetings and events. The project has noted that involving the peer ambassadors in this way has increased the authenticity of what they are doing and has meant that they can give real

life examples to employers about what is helpful in terms of wellbeing in the workplace. For the ambassador the benefit was that they felt they were contributing, and improving wellbeing in workplaces and challenging stigma. The meetings were beneficial for the employers as they were able to hear more genuine and authentic feedback.

Participants at the [Who Dares Works](#) project have also been involved in employer engagement. They have been supported to make a film called "Give us a Go" which aims to change attitudes towards a diverse workforce by breaking down barriers and showing the skills they have.<sup>4</sup>

# Make your voice count



## Working as paid staff

Previous project participants are also contributing to projects as paid members of staff. This may be in the form of paid mentors, as admin staff or as suppliers. [Inspiring Enterprise](#) is trying to use previous participants wherever possible.

For example, one of their former participants has recently conducted a disability audit for the project after establishing a consultancy company

<sup>4</sup> Who Dares Works Project presentation. Full video available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVdiXeKw7Sk>

## Case Study: Parent Participation at the Stronger Families Project

Stronger Families have been helping the voice of participants to be heard with a dedicated post of Parent Participation Champion. Their remit has been to enable parents to share their views to influence service delivery, gather feedback on what is working well and what could be improved and to address barriers to employment and engagement. They are also responsible for helping success to be recognised, celebrated and shared.

Examples of ways parents have influenced the design and delivery of the project include:

**Referral Process** – participants have helped to make sure the project is reaching the right people, at the right time, in the right way. Through parent feedback panels, participants were able to guide the project leads on how better to reach families and communicate to potential participants about the Stronger Families programme. Promoting in this new way has contributed to increased self-referrals and families that are more motivated to be engaged in the provision signing up.

**Celebration Events** – these have been planned and developed with families.

**Activities** – families have said which activities would best promote engagement, mental wellbeing and skills development.

Participation has been flexible and a variety of different methods have been used to capture parents' views. These have included:

- 1-2-1 meetings with parents, particularly those with barriers to engagement
- Action Groups planning specific pieces of work such as developing a Facebook group
- Parents attending meetings, including Key Worker Forums to share views
- Parents sharing their stories to help develop press releases and promotional videos

Participants have given positive feedback about their involvement. For example

**“I felt comfortable and heard and I am so proud. I got out and came here and met new people. I felt really happy talking about problems and solving them. It was great.”**

**“I loved today, love that you value our opinion so much. Would definitely love to be more involved.”**



Source: Stronger Families Project presentation

## Case Study: Paid mentors at Who Dare Works

The Who Dares Works project has just agreed to employ 10 FTE posts as peer mentors with seven recruited to date. These are people with lived experience of the issues potential participants may face and who have been through the project so understand the feelings and barriers that could be faced and how to overcome them. The project has noted that having relatable experiences to those of the participants that they work with, encourages engagement, diminishing 'us' and 'them' barriers to this.

All peer mentors will be given communications training and safeguarding training and will play a key role in the ongoing delivery of Who Dares Works, including project promotion, recruitment of new participants and facilitation of Community Club peer support networks and championing project activities including work related activities. Mentoring will give the participants the opportunity to gain paid employment and can act as a springboard to future work.

## Evaluation

In terms of evaluation activity, there are three main ways participants are involved in this.

### Providing feedback

One such way of providing feedback is on an ad-hoc basis or at special events. Examples of ways that participants are providing such feedback include through questionnaires. [eMploY-ABILITY](#) for instant uses Survey Monkey as a way of obtaining participants' views. Feedback can also

be given face-to-face, for example through focus groups. [Sheffield City Region](#) holds quarterly 'over to you' feedback sessions which use response cards and mind mapping to gain participant feedback on different aspects of the project.

### Being part of an advisory group, forum or board (providing regular feedback)

Another way that participants can give feedback is through being a member of an advisory group, forum or board. This forms a more of a formal mechanism for giving feedback, often on a regular basis. One example of this is at [Money Sorted](#) where a Participant Forum has been established to enable them to provide feedback on different aspects of the project. The activities members have been involved in to date include the development of the Participant Forum logo, a review of the [Money Sorted](#) promotional flyer and a review of the skills of a Personal Navigator. They have also discussed the opportunities available to reflect the voice of participants at project steering group meetings.<sup>5</sup>



#### Struggling with money?

Would you like support to help you feel more in control of your finances? Know you need to do something but don't know where to start?

This project can provide help that is tailored just to your needs. Whatever your circumstances, it can provide support to make a real difference around money, improving your ability to deal with it.

'Money Sorted in D2N2' helps people with money management and supports them to improve



<sup>5</sup> Money Sorted promotional material. Available from: <http://moneysortedind2n2.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Money-Sorted-Leaflet.pdf>

## Taking part in peer led research

Acting as a peer researcher has also been identified as a way of contributing to evaluation activity. At some projects participants are playing a significant role in the local project evaluation. At [Step Forward Tees Valley](#) for example two participants have been employed as Ambassadors to support the programme and conduct peer research as part of their evaluation process. An information session was advertised with the participants who attended asked to submit a CV and covering letter. After interviews, two candidates were employed and since commencing activity in August/September 2018 have contributed

significantly to the programme and the evaluation. As Ambassadors actively support the delivery of the programme (for example by supporting BBO staff in group based activity) their views from the frontline have been fully reflected in evaluation reports, based on what they see works (and what does not). They have also carried out one to one interviews with participants. The project has noted that this model works really well as the Ambassadors are well supported and their role is fully understood by all delivery partners.



Source: Ecorys

"The rigorous, scientifically-based evaluation of programme/intervention activities, characteristics, and outcomes determine the merit or worth of the programme/intervention. Evaluation studies provide credible information for use in improving programmes/interventions, identifying lessons learned, and informing decisions about future resource allocation." (United Nations)

# Benefits of participant involvement in BBO projects

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## Design

- The content of provision can be better tailored to suit participants needs (and therefore help to increase engagement)
- Projects can be more relevant and more targeted
- Marketing material can be designed to reach the right people in the right way

## Delivery

- Supporting or leading groups can help to build soft skills as well as make use of the varied skills participants have
- It also makes participants realise they have valuable skills and helps to increase confidence
- Those being supported (by a peer) also benefit
- Leading (and participating in user-led groups) is a good way to build relationships, friendships and social capital
- Involvement gives agency back to the people involved and helps to move away from the 'expert stance'
- Benefits to the project include that they are able to understand participants' needs better and as a result deliver the right kind of support, higher rates of attendance if sessions are more suited to the needs of participants, a better staff understanding of participants accessing the project and a wider range of support being available to their participants through the creation of self-led user groups

## Evaluation

- Feedback can help the project offer/content to be refined and developed to suit participants' needs better
- Feedback can help projects to understand specific issues better e.g. the barriers to unemployment

## Other (cross benefits)

- Greater involvement can extend the reach of the project (for example by recruiting new participants or by mentoring friends and family)
- Involvement beyond core activity can help with sustainability. For example if participants e.g. if participants become group leaders – these groups could continue beyond the BBO project itself, providing continued support and networks for people to access
- Participants can experience a wide range of personal benefits such as confidence building and learning new skills which can help their individual development as well as help them progress in their journey towards one of the outcome areas (employment, job search or training)

# Learning points

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Based on the experiences of the BBO projects to date, we have identified some challenges in integrating participant involvement into project delivery. Here we highlight some of the difficulties experienced by BBO partnerships as well as possible solutions to them.

## Staff resources

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An important consideration when implementing activities is that there are adequate staff resources in place. Projects have highlighted the fact that participant involvement needs someone to drive it within a project and that is cannot be treated as "*a bit on the side*". [Sheffield City Region](#) have noted the importance of a dedicated person to oversee, as have the [Stronger Families](#) project, who point out

that voice and influence work needs resource and somebody with a passion for it to lead the work.

Where activities have not been implemented as hoped limited staff time has been one of the reasons cited for this, with their capacity noted as important to developing participant involvement in the future.

## Planning and timing

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It is also important to factor in participant involvement at the beginning of the project. Grant holders have highlighted that facilitating user involvement can be a slow progress and that time needs to be allocated to it. However, they have also stressed that when implemented it can have long term benefits. As [Step Forward Tees Valley](#) sum up "*involvement is a really*

*time consuming process but [I think] in terms of sustainability it's certainly worth doing.*"

Projects that tried to implement involvement scheme that did not take off, reflect that the responsibilities that participants may pick up need careful planning to ensure they do not place too heavy a burden on participants.

## Supporting participants to be involved

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To enable participant involvement to take place it is also important that participants are given the support they need to be able to take part.

This could be in terms of providing a comfortable setting for participants to share their views. For example at [Better Off Finance](#), project staff have found that small groups work better than asking people for feedback on a 1:1 basis. They have held small lunch groups with clients to better understand their needs, for example with regards to what the barriers

to self-employment are and how they think the project could help address them.

Other considerations include making sure that activities are accessible and that factors that could inhibit participation (such as the need for childcare) are addressed. The use of incentives can also help to encourage participants to take part, as can seeing the outcomes of their participation work, which can help them feel motivated to take part again.

# Summary

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This paper has aimed to provide insights from the BBO programme on participant involvement, for the benefit of other professionals who are seeking to introduce or enhance involvement of service users. It has found that participant involvement (beyond being a recipient within a project) can add to project delivery as well as the individual participant's own person journey. Not only can participant involvement enable a participant to develop skills and build confidence, thus benefiting them personally, other participants can also benefit from their active involvement.

These wider benefits include: improved project content and design to meet participant need, enhanced delivery and an increased variety of support groups available for participants.

Drawing on the evaluation, the following key questions are intended to assist in thinking about the feasibility and suitability of participant involvement for a particular project. This list is by no means exhaustive, and might be viewed as a starting point for discussion.

- What areas of project activity could benefit from participant involvement?
- What does the project hope to achieve from participant involvement?
- What support will need to be provided to facilitate involvement?
- How and from where will the necessary expertise and resource come to support participant involvement?
- What will success look like, and how will this be evaluated?
- What is a realistic timescale for involvement and for outcomes to be achieved from the activity?



For more information on the evaluation contact  
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Or visit:  
[www.buildingbetteropportunities.org.uk](http://www.buildingbetteropportunities.org.uk)

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