

OLDER VOLUNTEERS WITHIN THE BRISTOL AGEING BETTER PROGRAMME



Overview

In August 2019 a number of projects within the Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) programme came together for a roundtable discussion to reflect on their learning about the involvement of volunteers aged 50+.

As a programme championing the inclusion and voice of older people within projects and organisations, it was key for volunteers aged 50+ to be involved in BAB-funded projects. Indeed, one of the outcomes for the BAB programme is that more older people are able to contribute to their community through mechanisms such as volunteering.

Since the start of the BAB programme in 2015, almost 2,000 volunteers have been involved, giving over 40,000 hours of their time. 38% of these volunteers are aged 50 or over.

This report outlines the key learning to emerge from this roundtable discussion with BAB-funded projects. It is hoped that other organisations can use this learning, alongside existing literature such as that from the **Centre for Ageing Better** and **NCVO**, to reach and engage more volunteers aged 50+.

A specific evaluation report on the involvement of older people as volunteer Community Researchers within the BAB programme will be published in 2020. These are a group of 11 volunteers, all aged 50+, who evaluate the BAB programme alongside researchers from UWE Bristol.



8 of the 11 volunteer Community Researchers who evaluate the BAB programme alongside UWE Bristol



Value of having older volunteers

Older volunteers can bring a wealth of relevant skills and lived experience to a role. They may have had a personal experience that enables them to relate to those they are volunteering with, or they may have relevant knowledge from previous employment. If the role involves working with older people, it may be that older volunteers have a certain level of shared understanding with them, for example childhood experiences.

For some of the BAB projects it was beneficial for volunteers to have flexible availability, particularly during weekday daytimes. Some older volunteers, particularly those who are retired, may have this level of flexibility in a way that those who are in employment may not have. However, this is a matter of availability and flexibility and will therefore vary greatly between individuals of any age.



Finding older volunteers

When finding older volunteers, BAB projects found it worked well to...

- Approach older people who are already connected to the organisation or venue in some way. For example, current volunteers in the organisation's other projects, people who attend existing groups or access existing services in the building or those who are already on the organisation's mailing list.
- Make use of existing relationships with partner organisations. For example, they may be happy for you to attend their groups or services and speak to people about the volunteering opportunity directly. They may also be willing to share your opportunity through their communication and social media channels.
- Encourage existing participants to become volunteers. These volunteers are likely to be more engaged and committed than other external volunteers, as they know what the project involves. Having previously been a participant may also enable them to build up a rapport with the current participants more easily, for example through sharing their own experiences.



The way the opportunity is described can make a big difference!

BAB projects reported that if they already had volunteers from a similar demographic to those they were trying to recruit, then it worked well to include a case study of an existing volunteer along with the advert which describes what that individual does in their role and what they enjoy about it.

Similarly, BAB projects recommended paying close attention to the way a role is described. It can work well to describe it in a way that an older person will feel they have something valuable to bring to the role, for example highlighting transferable skills or the value of lived experience. If the role can be tailored according to the volunteer's interests then it can work well to also emphasise this on the promotional materials.

Remember that older volunteers will be attracted by different aspects of the role. Some may be primarily drawn to the focus of the work, for example because it involves literature or food. However others may instead be interested in volunteering with a certain type of person, for example other older people. It may work well to have a few different versions of the advert which emphasise different aspects of the volunteering opportunity for different audiences.



Traditional promotional methods had mixed levels of success

For some BAB projects it worked well to use traditional methods of promotion such as volunteering websites and social media posts.

However the method of advertising affected who applied for the volunteering role. These traditional methods tended to attract people with reasonable levels of confidence, who may already do some formal volunteering, and who tended to have a higher level of disposable income.

These traditional methods of promotion often tend to be via platforms that are city-wide, which had value for projects that were also city-wide. However when a project only worked in one specific neighbourhood of Bristol, BAB projects believed it may be more effective to advertise the role locally instead.



Older volunteers may look for opportunities that are local

The impact of transport on older volunteers emerged as a key area of learning. Older volunteers may look for opportunities that are local to them, in venues they are familiar with.

For BAB projects with a number of opportunities across the city, it worked well to emphasise that the volunteer was able to choose which area of the city they would prefer to volunteer within. Older volunteers may well choose the area that is local to them, but they may also choose other areas of the city where they feel comfortable and safe.

The barrier of transport is likely to affect the diversity of older volunteers, for example those with higher mobility and who have the confidence and resources to travel may be more likely to come forward as volunteers.



Role of the BAB partnership

Some older volunteers are involved in more than one BAB-funded project, or have changed project during the BAB programme. However key learning is that this could have been encouraged even more, for example establishing a process for this within the BAB programme so that there is a consistency in the opportunities available to the volunteers. However some projects knew that their volunteers were only interested in their specific project, and did not want to become more involved in the wider BAB programme.

Volunteers in the BAB programme are able to access wider opportunities, for example free trainings or other events organised by BAB. These wider opportunities may indirectly enable them to hear about other organisations and volunteering roles.



Is it possible to tailor the role around the volunteer?

BAB projects found that it worked well to be able to tailor the role around the individual volunteer, if possible. This included the number of volunteering hours per week as well as the content of the role fitting around their individual interests and motivations.

In some cases there was no minimum commitment at all, with older volunteers instead able to simply 'dip in and out' of the role. Even with no minimum commitment, volunteers sometimes went above and beyond in terms of the amount of time they committed per week or the length of time they volunteered for. It may be that having no minimum commitment enabled the volunteer to see that the role could be tailored.

However BAB projects advised that older volunteers first need to feel confident enough to suggest how they would like to shape the role, and to be honest about which parts they want to do more of and which parts they want to do less of. The one-to-one relationship with each individual volunteer is an important aspect of making sure they feel comfortable making these suggestions.

Until the volunteer has started the role, they might be unsure whether it can be tailored and to what extent, as adverts sometimes imply that they have to do all aspects of a role. On the other hand, sometimes it cannot be tailored and in fact may involve elements which the volunteer was not aware of at the beginning, which can affect volunteer motivation and retention rates.



Support and recognition

BAB projects varied in the type of support offered to older volunteers. Most offered an initial induction, specific training relevant for the role and then ongoing training and one-to-one support throughout the role. However one of the most important aspects of support found by these projects was to have an open-door policy where the volunteer feels able to ask questions, talk through decisions or raise any concerns.

Peer support was also a valuable aspect for some volunteering roles, particularly when a core group of volunteers had been involved for a long period of time, had built up relationships with each other and felt able to seek advice from each other directly. In this way, they felt committed to the project and as a team felt a sense of ownership over the activities.

For these BAB projects, recognition involved taking the time to thank all of the volunteers, regardless of what tasks they did or the number of hours they put in, and recognising when volunteers pushed themselves outside of their comfort zone. This included making sure that the volunteers felt a sense of achievement, either with a tangible 'end product' or through the impact they had on the project or participants. It also involved being transparent with the volunteers, treating them as equals and trying to include them further within the project or organisation.



Diversity

Many of the BAB projects had a lack of diversity amongst their volunteers, particularly around ethnicity and social class. This may be due to the way roles are advertised, for example traditional platforms may only be accessed by a certain demographic. It may also be due to assumptions surrounding what volunteering involves (e.g. a certain level of time commitment) as well as cultural and social norms about who volunteering roles are 'for' (e.g. those who can afford to retire early and give time to other people).

The term 'volunteer' itself tends to only encompass certain activities, and does not capture more informal forms of helping out, for example those who informally help out on the day of an event. Some older people may not feel they have the right skills or confidence to be a volunteer, and yet these same individuals might be regularly helping out on a more informal basis without a formal role title or description. Organisations should try to capture these contributions instead of trying to fit them into a formal model of volunteering.

These BAB projects mostly found it difficult to find older volunteers who were currently experiencing loneliness or isolation, although many may have experienced it previously. This may be partially overcome by encouraging participants to become volunteers. However it can often be difficult for projects to reach and engage with these individuals in the first place, let alone support them to feel confident enough to volunteer.

The way that a project engages with its older volunteers may also affect diversity. Some individuals will be intimidated by roles that involve formal meetings or going into an organisation's offices. This might particularly be the case if they have not met anyone from that organisation before, or if the organisation itself has a lack of visible diversity amongst its existing staff and volunteers.



Sustainability: supporting older volunteers to continue after the BAB-funding finishes

BAB projects expressed anxiety about their ability to retain their older volunteers after the BAB-funding finishes, mostly due to uncertainty about whether the project itself will continue and, if so, what format this might take.

Projects reported that, if their work did not continue after the BAB-funding, and therefore was not able to retain its volunteers, the staff would support existing volunteers to find other opportunities in the city. This might involve consulting with them about the type of opportunity they would like, and then researching possible options. It may also involve working with partner organisations who work within a similar field and who have an established culture of volunteer coordination, although the roles are likely to be different and therefore may not adequately fit what the volunteer is looking for. One route to assisting older volunteers to find other opportunities might be to encourage conversations between projects; the wider BAB partnership might be one way of enabling this.

Key learning is the need for organisations to have a paid volunteer coordinator in order to support volunteers on a day-to-day basis. There were fears that, after the BAB-funding finishes, if the project continued but did not have a staff member who could recruit, train and support the volunteers, then it would not always be suitable to have volunteers. This is particularly the case when the role involved volunteers working directly with vulnerable people in potentially complex situations. A high level of volunteer support is needed in order to provide a good-quality service. It is important for organisations to build in enough capacity to support volunteers and to keep up their momentum, motivation and enthusiasm.

Some BAB projects thought it may be possible for volunteers to continue their role independently of the organisation, but that this might only last a short time due to a possible over-reliance on one individual, with no new volunteers being recruited or trained and no volunteer coordinator to keep up levels of engagement. Projects tended to believe that, if this did happen, it would be on a small-scale instead of city-wide and therefore may have a reduced impact.

Funding streams have an impact on the involvement of older volunteers. In order for funders to support this involvement, there needs to be a certain level of volunteer coordination and support. There is currently an emphasis on empowering individuals to do things for themselves; 'done with' not 'done to'. Yet even within this approach, and with the most passionate and dedicated volunteers, BAB projects found that there still needs to be enough funding to cover volunteer support and administration, as otherwise it may lead to a situation where some volunteers are asked to take on roles that have a very different level of commitment to what they signed up to, and who may not have the

time or motivation to undertake this in the long-term. This is difficult to achieve in a context where many funding streams are for a fixed short period of time. One possibility may be to have longer funding streams with a transitional period of partial funding in order for the project to gradually shift its structure towards being volunteer-led with paid volunteer coordination support.

It is also important to recognise the context within which older people are volunteering. In some areas of Bristol, health inequalities mean that many of those aged 50+ have greater health difficulties and a lower life expectancy than in other parts of the city. These individuals may also be living in poor quality accommodation, with low levels of income. In these circumstances, projects have found that older people follow a similar structure to **Maslov's Hierarchy of Needs**; they need to prioritise their health and are therefore less likely to considering volunteering. In this way, the context of austerity and health inequalities has a large impact on older people's volunteering. Particularly within this context, it is important for opportunities to be flexible and allow for older people to 'dip in and out' which, again, requires a paid volunteer coordination to be able to support.



Further BAB learning resources can be found at:
<http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/learning-so-far/>