Building Better Opportunities Evaluation:

Delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic

Annual report Summer 2021

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Contents

Summary

This summarises the fifth annual report of the evaluation of the Building Better Opportunities (BBO) programme, which launched in 2016 using funds provided by the National Lottery Community Fund to match funds from the European Social Fund (ESF) 2014-2020 programme. BBO aims to provide investment in local projects tackling the root causes of poverty by supporting participants to move towards the labour market.

From the 2016 launch to June 2020, 132 BBO projects have supported **117,158** participants.

Projects have been effective at engaging those with complex difficulties. On joining the programme:

- 47% of participants were economically inactive (that is, not looking for work or unavailable for work due to ill health or caring responsibilities)

- 49% of participants had a disability

- 41% of participants had more than one indicator of disadvantage.

In the fifth year of the evaluation, research was couched in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has presented challenging circumstances for the labour market and economy. Interviews with BBO projects, a review of the programme's management information (MI) and early findings from a survey with participants told us that:

There was an immediate contraction in BBO activity at the start of the pandemic. A shift in focus to deal with the crisis meant a reduction in referrals and engagement activity; there was a 74 percentage point decrease in engagement in March – June 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. Projects found it difficult to engage participants remotely and gathering evidence and identification to sign participants up was challenging.

Projects quickly adapted to provide support remotely. Although this shift proved challenging for a number of reasons, participants were largely happy with remote delivery. Project staff developed inventive approaches to keeping in touch with participants, and social media has proved important. The focus of support has shifted, with a greater focus on wellbeing and mental health, although the "core business" of employability support has restarted following the initial crisis-management approach.

Digital exclusion was a significant challenge for participants and staff. This manifested in two ways; a lack of access to devices to access online provision, and a lack of skills and knowledge to use them. Projects secured funding to provide equipment, supported participants to develop IT skills, and provided support over the phone where challenges were insurmountable.

There were some benefits arising from remote delivery. Projects were able to offer greater flexibility to participants; barriers of geography were removed and courses offered outside the immediate locality became more accessible. A lack of travel freed up staff capacity to support more participants.

Achieving results

The analysis of programme MI data tells us that to June 2020, 85,046 participants had left the programme, of which 54,871 left to a known and verified destination. Projects funded through BBO are required, as a condition of their of ESF funding, to record progress against three key results indicators. We found that:

A high proportion of participants leaving the programme moved to a positive destination. Our review of the programme data showed that after leaving BBO, 80% of those with a known destination achieved a key result.

- **35%** of participants entered employment;

- **31%** moved to education or training; and

- **14%** moved from economic inactivity to job search.

There were successes for those facing barriers to work. Of the 54,871 people with a verified destination after BBO, more than a quarter (27%) of those with a disability moved into work on leaving the programme. In this group of leavers, there were also successes for those who had been part of a jobless household when they joined the programme;

32% had moved into employment after BBO. Finally, 28% of those who were economically inactive when they joined the programme moved into work on leaving.

COVID-19 had a significant impact on the rate that people left the programme. Far fewer participants left the programme in the early days of the pandemic compared to the same period in the previous year. However, interviews with BBO project leads showed that while the rate of participants leaving had decreased in the first part of the pandemic, rates were showing improvement into the second part of the year. There were also signs of promising practice in the achievement of employment outcomes around increased employer engagement and local job creation.

Participants found the support they had received from BBO vital in moving them into work. Of the participants involved in our survey, 61% of those in work felt they would have struggled to find their jobs without the help they received from BBO. Furthermore, of those not working, 47% felt the support would help them to find a job in future. Reasons included improved confidence, improved motivation and a better idea of the career options open to them.

Looking forward

Through further research with BBO grant holders and participants, the evaluation will continue to track the impact of the pandemic on engagement and results. The participant survey will provide insights to sustainability of jobs, as well as trends related to working hours,

quality of jobs and under-employment as the labour market evolves and recovers. Answers to the research questions will shape learning not only for BBO itself, but for the development of programmes to come.

Introduction

## About the Building Better Opportunities (BBO) programme

The National Lottery Community Fund (hereafter the 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. Through this funding, the BBO programme was developed using a decentralised approach, with 37 Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) involved in producing project outlines to inform the development and delivery of the programme at local levels. These outlines were used to guide the allocation of funds to 132 BBO projects that deliver interventions to address local priorities. The programme, which launched in 2016, is supporting a variety of projects to improve the employability of the most disadvantaged, including helping those with multiple and complex needs with a range of support including confidence building, skills development and help with financial literacy. BBO was designed to engage the expertise and knowledge of a wide range of stakeholders through encouraging partnership delivery, thus creating positive impacts for harder to reach groups.
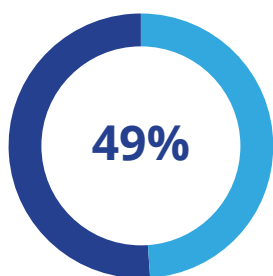
In 2019, the Fund undertook an exercise to secure and confirm extensions for many of the BBO projects, either in the form of additional
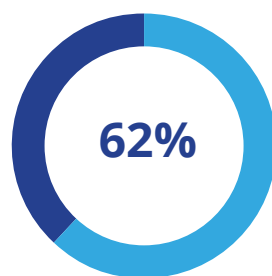
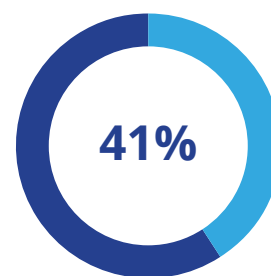## Engagement with the programme to June 2020

117,158
Total number of engagements

47%
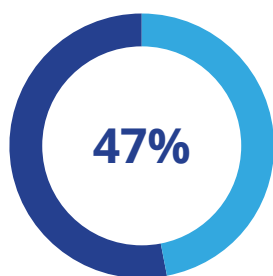
Participants who were economically inactive

49%

Participants with a disability.

62%

Participants from a jobless household.

41%

Participants with one or more indicator of disadvantage).

funding or extended delivery timescales for projects to achieve their original targets. In total, 121 projects received an extension to 2022. The Fund is also in the process of confirming further extensions to allow delivery to continue into 2023 for the majority of projects.

Programme targets were revised following the first extension, and the programme now aims to engage 150,532 people by the end of 2022. Good progress has been made on this, and in the four years from the programme launch to June 2020 funded projects had engaged 117,158 people. This is an increase of 30% from the total number of engagements to June 2019. As noted, the programme aims to support the most disadvantaged, and previous assessments of the programme's Monitoring

Information (MI) data have shown that people receiving support from BBO projects do face complex difficulties in their lives. Our review of the latest validated programme data shows that this is still the case; in fact, 41% of people engaged since 2016 had one or more indicator of disadvantage, such as homelessness, offender status, disability status, or living in a jobless household. Almost half of the people on the programme reported having a disability (49%).

At the point of engaging with the programme, 47% of participants were economically inactive, meaning that they were not looking for work or not available for work. The other 53% of people were unemployed on engagement, meaning they were looking for and were available for work.

Current delivery context

The COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the UK in the first quarter of 2020. In order to reduce transmission of the virus, in March 2020 the UK Government issued a "stay at home" order which meant those who could work from home must. All non-essential services were to close immediately, and social distancing measures have meant that businesses in sectors such as retail and hospitality were intermittently closed in the year that followed. For the BBO projects, this meant that face to face recruitment, engagement and support had to cease, and staff transitioned to working from home; for the most part, this remained the case by March 2021. Restrictions are scheduled to ease more significantly from April onwards.

BBO projects aim to support people facing a range of barriers to move towards the labour market. However, the pandemic has presented challenging circumstances for the labour market and economy. Forecasts for the impact on unemployment were worse than the reality, although research from the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Office for National Statistics shows that the number of people in payrolled employment fell by more than 800,000 in 2020; the largest decrease since the early 1990s.

The UK Government's Job Retention Scheme – known as furlough – played a significant role in supressing unemployment. However, one third of the labour force were off work or working reduced hours at the peak of the pandemic.

As paid furlough was initially not available for those working reduced hours, this essentially translated to pay cuts for a significant proportion of the workforce. As such, in this year GDP fell by 10%.

The crisis has not hit all groups equally; some demographics have been worse affected, and it will be important for both the evaluation and BBO projects to understand the trends the pandemic has created for the targets groups the projects support. For example, young people have been particularly hard hit; three-fifths of the total fall in employment is accounted for by people aged 18-24, and there are now 400,000 fewer young people in work[1]. Research conducted by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) on behalf of Gingerbread also found that single parents had been adversely affected and were more likely to be furloughed or have their hours cut than couple parents or those without dependent children[2]. Figure 1 shows the gaps in the employment rates between people with disabilities, people from ethnic minorities, older people, younger people, and the wider 16-64 population (excluding those groups). BBO projects support a high number of people with disabilities, and as Figure 1 shows, the gap between the employment rate for those with disabilities and the wider 16-64 working population has now stopped narrowing. There has been no improvement for those aged between 50 and 64, and as already highlighted, the gap for young people has increased[3].

1   https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/news/addressing-youth-unemployment-crisis-challenges-and-opportunities-unprecedented-times
2   https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/caring-without-sharing-0
3   https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/IES%20briefing%20-%20Labour%20Market%20Statistics%20February%202021.pdf

Figure 1: Employment rate gaps for disabled people, ethnic minority groups, older people and younger people not in full time education, 2015-2020
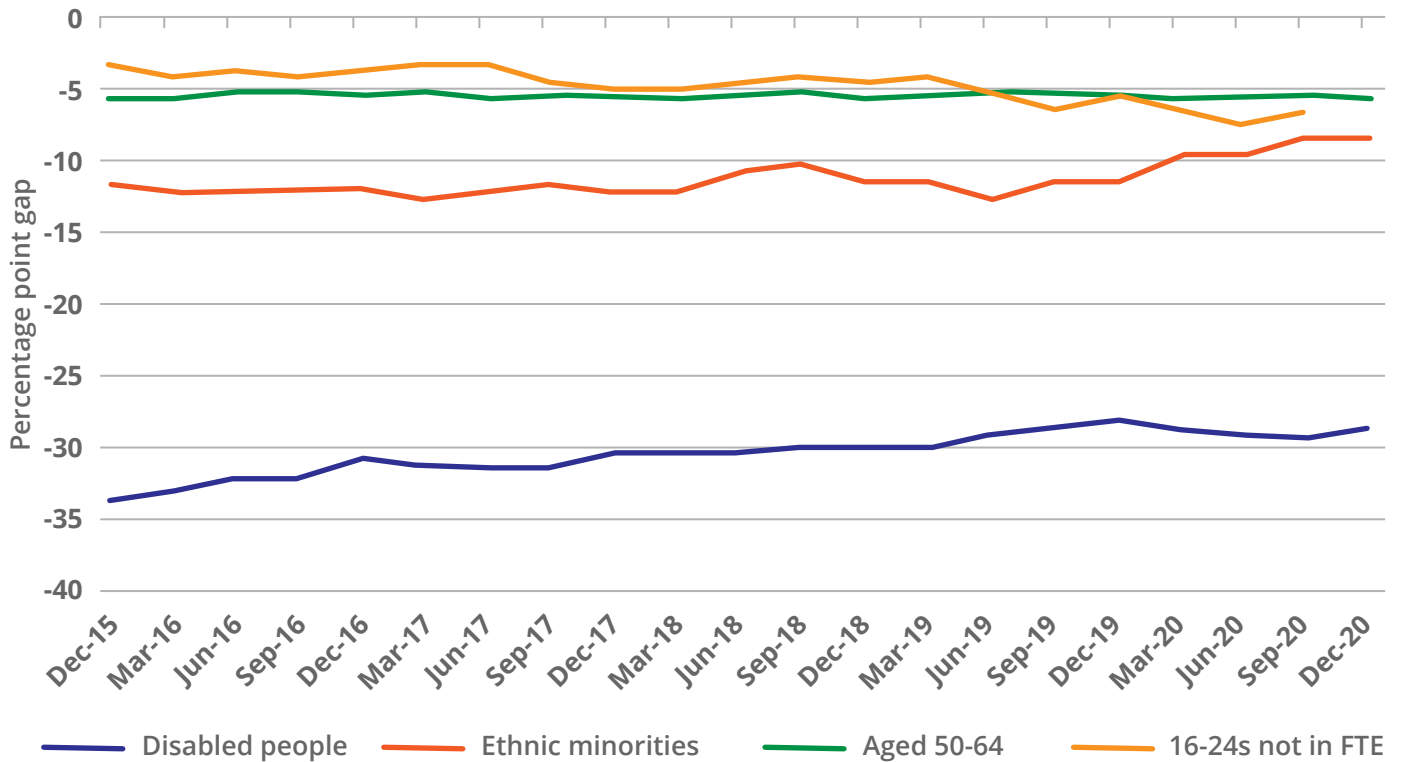
Source: IES analysis of Labour Force Survey. Gaps are calculated as the percentage point difference in employment rates between the rate for the disadvantaged group and the rate for the overall 16-64 population excluding that group.

Encouragingly, the gap for people from ethnic minorities has narrowed, though this is not the case for people from all ethnicities, and particularly not for young people in those groups who have been disproportionately affected. IES analysis of the Labour Force Survey also shows that the low paid are three times more likely to have lost their jobs.

However, the pandemic has also supported the creation of jobs, and there has been growth in the health and social care sector and the administration and support service sector. Construction has also seen growth, while unsurprisingly there have been significant decreases in employment in accommodation and food services, retail and manufacturing[4]. These developments will be important for BBO projects over the remainder of the programme, but equally help to contextualise the landscape they have been working in for the past year.

4   Ibid.

About the evaluation

In 2016, the Fund commissioned Ecorys to deliver an evaluation and learning contract for the BBO Programme. Along with the extension to the funded projects, the initial four-year evaluation was extended in 2021 and will continue until the end of the programme extension period in 2022 and potentially to the end of BBO in 2023. In this period, the evaluation will continue to examine the approach to programme implementation on the ground using the formative perspective it has taken in previous years to generate insights and timely lessons during the life of the programme.

The broad areas for investigation and analysis through the national evaluation continue from the previous years of the evaluation. They can be categorised as access, impact and learning, and cut across all strands of the methodology. However, more specifically, the evaluation will explore the impact of COVID-19 on the way projects deliver services and what the pandemic has meant for the attainment of results, the impact the programme has on participants in terms of progression and skills development, and how funded projects impact on existing services locally. Throughout the evaluation, various outputs will draw out learning for projects, practitioners and future funding programmes.

About this report

Our previous annual report[5], the fourth published for this evaluation, was written in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that point, projects were developing their approaches to supporting participants in an uncertain and heavily changed environment. It was difficult to predict that a year later, England would still be experiencing social distancing measures and restrictions on movement.

These measures have had a significant impact on all aspects of the BBO programme, and as such, this report will primarily focus on the approaches projects have taken to support participants during the pandemic, including challenges and enablers they have encountered. It will also explore the impact of the pandemic on the achievement of results.

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5   https://buildingbetteropportunities.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-07/Building%20Better%20Opportunities%20Evaluation%20Annual%20Report%202020.pdf

The report draws on several pieces of work undertaken throughout 2020-21, including:

Project learning events: Virtual events for BBO grant holders were held in October 2020 and March 2021 focusing respectively on delivery and results during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 100 attendees at each event shared their experiences and learning on these themes. Discussions were recorded, and transcriptions have been analysed for this report.

Interviews with grant holders: A number of grant holders took part in telephone interviews following the learning events, providing more detail on issues that were raised during the events. A further 25 grant holders submitted further information in writing through feedback forms which had been tailored to gather more details on project experiences during the pandemic.

Participant survey: The first wave of participant survey was launched in February 2021. The survey targets participants who have left the programme, with the aim of collecting information on destinations and outcomes. In order to explore sustainability of outcomes, the survey will engage participants at two intervals; four to six months after leaving the programme, and up to six months after the first interview. The first wave of interviews yielded responses from 92 participants, and 450 will be engaged over the lifetime of the evaluation.

Review of other sources of evidence: In addition to evidence gathered directly by the evaluation team, this report draws on a range of other evidence including local evaluation reports, case studies collated by grant holders, and other outputs developed by individual projects including social media posts. Furthermore, Programme level Management Information (MI) data[6] is received periodically and analysed to map the profile of participants and assess the results being achieved across the programme.

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6   This programme data is compiled by the Fund drawing on monitoring returns from projects, specifically the participant entry and exit forms.

The impact of COVID-19 on BBO

This section of the report will explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on two key areas of BBO activity: engagement of participants and project delivery.

Engagement

Interviews with BBO project staff suggested that when the COVID-19 pandemic began and the related lockdown measures were introduced, there was an immediate contraction in BBO activity and engagement while everyone – participants and staff alike – adjusted. A review of the programme MI data for the first four months of the pandemic (March – June 2020) proved that this was the case when compared to data for the same four months of 2019; there were 10,302 fewer engagements in this period in 2020, a decrease of 74 percentage points. Anecdotally, some projects reported seeing an upswing in engagement towards the end of the year, although for others engagement has remained challenging. In part, this can be attributed to the type of target group being supported: for one delivery partner whose activities focus on supporting parents, closures of schools and childcare settings had a significant impact on engagement in the first six months of the pandemic. They anticipated that there would be an increase in participants returning to the project in September, but this didn't happen due to the continued uncertainty about school closures.

For other projects, a reduction in engagement arose because referral partners were themselves focused on the pandemic response and were not looking to move their own participants on to other support, or referral partner staff were themselves working from home carrying out skeleton tasks. Some projects reported that referrals from partner agencies, particularly statutory ones, remain low even at this point. Conversely, some projects reported that while referral levels had stayed relatively high, the rate of conversion to full sign ups was low; this was even the case for people who had self-referred to the projects. In some cases, this was related to a difficulty in providing signatures and evidence electronically; some potential participants found this too complicated so withdrew from the process (see below for further detail on this). Projects also highlighted that people were more used to receiving face to face support and didn't want to engage remotely, and as such, wanted to wait until contact could resume.

In order to address some of these issues, projects described in interviews how they have turned to new referral partners such as local social prescribers and other community organisations that they had not previously worked with. Grant holders also reported taking the opportunity to increase self-referrals, shifting their focus to advertising directly to participants and other more creative approaches. One project highlighted that they have started advertising in places where people are during the pandemic, such as supermarkets, village noticeboards and leaflets included in food parcel deliveries. One grant-holder had developed a new website specifically for referrals to make it easier for people to self-refer to the project, while others talked about how they too had put their referral forms on their websites for easy access. One project had considered offering vouchers as an incentive to sign up to the project during

an online event. As restrictions ease and non-essential retail re-opens, new opportunities for advertising become available; one project flagged that they were considering a socially-distanced stand in a local shopping centre to provide leaflets and increase visibility. Our 4th annual evaluation report highlighted that projects had increasingly turned to social media for communication with participants, but as the year progressed, projects report an upswing in their activity on social media for recruitment and awareness raising.

The process of signing up to the programme remotely has been challenging for projects and participants alike, and the evidence provided by projects suggests this is a contributing factor to the low numbers of engagements during the pandemic. They also faced a number of barriers in obtaining signatures and evidence from participants. For example, there were practical issues around submitting forms and documents online; projects felt that emailing identification was not secure enough, so had tried to use file sharing sites. However, for participants with low digital skills, this was challenging, and even where skills were not particularly an issue, participants were largely unfamiliar with these sites and processes. There were also cultural issues which manifested in reluctance around sharing documents online which was a particular problem for those projects supporting people from ethnic minorities. Difficulties in securing electronic signatures were also specifically highlighted by a project targeting older people, where low digital skills are a more prevalent issue. Projects had tried various approaches to work around these issues, for example by posting documents. However, this can be unreliable and insecure; as such, participants are often reluctant to post identification documents. Alternatively, projects have met participants in a distanced way outdoors to complete sign ups.

Engaging carers during COVID-19

Working for Carers found that their target group were disproportionately affected by COVID-19; services they relied on were stopped, and they were largely caring for people who were shielding so were more likely to be shielding themselves. Project staff were conscious that for this group, engaging with the project was just not a priority during the pandemic.

> ## "There was a lot of fire-fighting going on in people's lives."

[BBO grant-holder]

Where referrals for new participants were made, there was a lower rate of conversion to starts with the project as a result of the additional challenges people were facing. The project has developed a recovery plan; part of this is a focused approach to improving referral routes. Staff have been proactively working with Jobcentre Plus to improve links and have delivered carers awareness training for relationship managers there. The project has also taken note of statistics which show that an increased number of carers left paid employment during the pandemic.

Finally, previous research with BBO projects has highlighted the importance of a trusted relationship between participants and their project advisers, particularly in supporting ongoing engagement with a project. While projects have tried to carry out meetings by video call, there have inevitably been barriers to accessing technology. As such, in many instances early meetings have had to be carried out by phone, and projects flagged how difficult it was to build a relationship when you can't see a person or be able to read body language. As one project manager pointed out, *"some of those early meetings really do need to be face to face."*

Project delivery

As could be expected, when the first lockdown measures were announced in March 2020, projects immediately moved to home-working and remote delivery. Our 4th annual evaluation report outlined some of the measures which projects took in the first month, focusing on communication with participants to ensure they knew support was still available to them. Remote delivery has, for the most part, continued to be the primary delivery mechanism for the programme, though some projects flagged that they had had some face to face, socially distanced contact with participants where necessary, particularly over the summer as restrictions eased for most parts of the country. Projects noted that this was more the case where delivery partners could facilitate access to safe premises; for example, one project has a housing association in their partnership who could provide wellbeing courses outdoors in woodland.

While remote delivery has proved challenging for many reasons which are outlined throughout this report, some projects found that for the most part, participants were happy with the arrangements and did not want face to face contact. One reported that they had surveyed participants and at first, around 80% had said they did not want face to face support at that point. The survey has been conducted at repeat intervals and the number of people wanting face to face contact has never gone above 50%; as such, decision-making about restarting contact has been led by participants as well as concern for staff welfare. Another project noted that for their participants who were shielding, there were benefits of remote support as they could continue with the project without needing to travel. However, for this cohort, social isolation was a significant issue and the project provided outdoor, distanced face to face visits where they were needed. As the project lead highlighted, *"the contact was important because they'd seen no one else."*

Early findings from our participant survey show that 55% of the 92 respondents said their support had changed as a result of COVID-19; it is likely that the remainder had engaged with the project for the first time during the pandemic, although we don't have data to confirm this. For the most part, those who had seen changes found this was because face to face contact had to cease. While some respondents said that they would have preferred face to face contact, for the most part they were satisfied to receive support online

and by phone in the circumstances. For some participants, support was stepped back to "keeping in touch". Participants often requested a stop or pause to support during the pandemic due to their personal circumstances which often involved home-schooling or caring responsibilities. One project told us that some people disengaged completely, while others asked for light-touch support.

In terms of the mechanisms used by projects to deliver support remotely, phone calls were common but email, messaging apps such as WhatsApp, and video calling such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams were all regularly used. However, this was sometimes challenging for delivery partners with more restricted polices on social media and GDPR which can limit the use of such platforms. However, social media and messaging platforms have been beneficial for facilitating contact not just between participants and advisers, but also for providing access to support from peers. One project told us that all participants are invited to join a project Facebook group when they join the project. The group has proved an efficient way to deliver support, allowing advisers to reach participants right across the projects with limited input needed. The project has developed themed posts such as Motivational Monday, Training Tuesday, Work Wednesday and Feel Good Friday. For other projects, social media has also been used for signposting and awareness raising of other services which might be useful for participants.

> **"The chats and conversations that [participants] would be having previously - they updated that and they've been finding that they can call into groups and hold sessions via mobile phones and WhatsApp groups where people are keeping in touch. That's helped in particular the whole social isolation thing, not just the job search… just to have another person to do that peer support, that seems to have worked really well."**
>
> [BBO grant-holder]

Project delivery

The 4th annual evaluation report highlighted that in the early days of the pandemic, support had shifted in focus to more immediate and pressing issues such as wellbeing and emotional support, as well as crisis issues. To a large extent, these approaches remained a high priority throughout the year. Projects reported that they were often focused on dealing with participant's immediate needs such as making sure people were getting their prescriptions delivered or were able to access food parcels.

Previous analysis for the evaluation has shown that mental health was already an issue for a high proportion of BBO participants, and the pandemic has exacerbated that for many. Projects reported that anxiety was commonplace, with some participants being worried about having to leave the house or be around others.

Projects have taken a range of steps to address mental wellbeing. A number of projects have developed specific mental health support; in one case this was offered through a mixture of group and one to one sessions which are delivered by a partner who was already focused on providing support for mental health. Meanwhile, another project has expanded their partnership to include a new partner focused specifically on providing mental health support. Since the pandemic, one organisation offering mental health awareness training modules has seen uptake levels increase 200%, showing the additional importance people are placing on addressing mental health in uncertain times. Interestingly, although people's mental health has benefitted from taking the module, they also viewed it as a useful addition to their CVs.

> **"We feel it's a really important part of the jigsaw. When people are trying to move on, giving them the skill to job search isn't enough really. If they haven't got the resilience, or have anxiety or other mental health issues… we very much take a focus around happiness, confidence, wellbeing. Two of our four coaches on the team are life coaches."**
>
> [BBO grant-holder]

Just as the delivery mechanisms of online groups have helped facilitate peer support, some projects are encouraging real life peer support to help address social isolation. One project gave the example of two single mothers who were engaged with the project and lived near to each other but were otherwise isolated. The project encouraged them to meet outside for walks so they could build some face to face contact and their own support mechanism; a form of building community assets.

Supporting wellbeing during the pandemic

At the **Wise Steps Project**, staff complete a review with participants after 12 weeks of engagement to assess distance travelled towards softer outcomes. The project has found that during the pandemic there has been a noticeable change in participants willingness to complete the review, namely because they don't feel like there's been any change in the last year in the progress they've made. This has driven the project to put a much stronger emphasis on wellbeing activities and supporting people to remain engaged until they are in a better position to make changes.

However, interviews with projects highlighted that although wellbeing and mental health support continue to be important to participants, as time has passed the "core business" of employability support has restarted. This has alleviated concerns from some project leads that they were facing some mission drift during the pandemic.

Once projects and participants alike had found their feet and dealt with some of the more immediate crisis issues around money, housing, access to food, and mental and physical health, attention has turned to developing approaches to deliver employment and training support as effectively as possible in a remote way. While projects acknowledged

that there was still a cohort of participants for whom active job search was not feasible due to childcare responsibilities, other caring responsibilities or shielding, they commonly felt that it was important to keep momentum going for when restrictions begin to ease.

> **"OK, we're in this, but that doesn't mean we can't use the time effectively to start moving forward. So we dealt with the immediate needs if you like. I then tried to move to business as usual, well, as usual as it could be."**
>
> [BBO grant-holder]

Projects have carried out work around financial capability and support with debt and benefits as well as ongoing employability support. Projects highlighted how they have provided activities around CV development and interview skills remotely, as well as providing online courses on a range of subjects. One project noted that they have brought in guest speakers to their online courses which has made involvement more interesting for participants while also inspiring them to "think outside the box" with their employment options and routes forward. In the same vein, projects also had an increased focus on self-employment related activities; in a flagging and crowded labour market, the ability for participants to create their own opportunities has become more important.

"We've certainly seen participants now that we've kept throughout this period, who because of home-schooling haven't been able to consider [work], but now we're feeling they're ready to move forward. We've kind of kept that confidence… and we've kept them kind of still doing something, and still doing some training courses, still doing job searching… and still focusing on their objective. But we have had to be more realistic about what we could do… and we've probably done less of it during that time, but I think… if you keep people's confidence up they're ready to go now."

[BBO grant-holder]

Challenges and enablers

It was clear from interviews with projects that they have taken creative approaches to supporting participants through the pandemic, while keeping as much of a focus on employability as was realistic and feasible.

However, the projects have faced a number of challenges – and enablers – in implementing their new ways of working, which we will explore in this section of the report.

Access to technology

The primary barrier projects faced was the high level of digital exclusion amongst participants. This manifested in two ways; a lack of access to devices to access online provision, and a lack of skills and knowledge to use them.

Projects explored ways to address and overcome digital exclusion. Some projects purchased IT equipment for participants, although this in itself was challenging to do within the ESF guidance on purchasing equipment for participants. Some highlighted that the guidance stipulates projects can buy equipment that will overcome barriers to engagement and believed that buying devices such as tablets which are priced under £50 fell within this remit during the pandemic. In such cases, projects asked participants to sign a document to agree it would only be used

for accessing the projects' support and other related activities. Other projects had managed to access other sources of funding such as local grants. However, many participants lacked access to the internet and while some projects have purchased items such as internet dongles, these come with ongoing costs that are difficult for projects to justify and sustain. To work around this, one organisation secured a donation of mobile phones loaded with data from Business in the Community and Tesco.

The lack of digital skills amongst participants was a significant barrier which proved more challenging to overcome within distancing guidelines; as a number of projects flagged, it's almost impossible to teach a person to use devices or software when you can't have close contact face to face.

"It's very short-sighted to assume that if you just drop a laptop or a tablet off at somebody's doorstep that, then they can magically work with you. They just can't. Even switching people from standard text phones to smartphones, it's nigh on impossible to teach them without having that one-to-one contact… No amount of money in the world can help us with that problem of not being able to get within two meters of that person, but being expected to teach them how to use IT."

[BBO grant-holder]

These issues were more prevalent for particular target groups within the overall BBO cohort, for example migrants and refugees, where English is a second language or there is very little English in place at all. One interviewee highlighted that it's particularly hard to explain how to use technology remotely in those circumstances, and others felt that remote delivery had exacerbated language barriers. For example, one project focused on supporting migrants and refugees offered an English conversation club online but found that take up was low. Projects working with older people and those supporting people with learning difficulties also flagged that they had faced challenges supporting people to access IT.

Access was not the only problem participants faced. Projects had concerns related to making sure their participants were safe online, and as such, one offered workshops on online safety, as well as other digital skills like online job search and interviewing online using video calling software.

Working around digital barriers

At **Choices Cumbria**, project staff worked hard to help participants to get online and secured funding from other sources to provide IT equipment. However, for some participants living in rural areas, poor mobile signals and a lack of internet access meant online support was not an option. Staff were conscious that trying to access online training when connectivity is poor can be off-putting, and doesn't make learning a positive experience. To address this challenge, the project developed a range of approaches and delivery mechanisms. These included:

- Job search sessions, with staff trained on how to deliver them over the phone. This approach was well received and the project reports that some participants made good progress.

- Mental health awareness training, which was adapted to a suitable level and into a workbook for participants to progress through in their own time through independent study, with support from advisers over the phone. Alternatively, the courses could be wholly delivered by project staff over the phone.

- Food hygiene training, in a workbook posted to participants with additional tuition provided over the phone. This course was particularly successful, and all participants who engaged passed the course. In order to achieve certification, participants had to take a test online; to facilitate that, the project opened up their office in a COVID-compliant way to allow participants to access the internet. To further support accessibility, the workbook was translated into Arabic for one participant who subsequently secured a job.

Generally, where barriers to accessing IT could not be circumvented, projects relied on providing support to participants over the phone. Participants who responded to our survey most commonly had used the phone to keep in touch with their key workers and advisers when they could not see them face to face. However, projects did point out that where participants did learn new digital skills, they also had learnt skills that would support them in job searching and moving into work (such as being able to email CVs). It was not only participants who faced challenges around using IT. For some organisations and staff, it was also a significant learning curve to move to remote delivery. Many had never worked from home or remotely before because their jobs were previously entirely focused on working with people face to face. Where organisations had used software such as Microsoft Teams internally pre-pandemic, the transition to using video calls to support participants was less challenging. For others, project leads reported that the culture change had been challenging and that staff confidence was very mixed around using technology.

Staff wellbeing

As well as the cultural shift of using technology to remotely support their participants, projects reported that staff had faced a number of other challenges during the pandemic, and staff wellbeing has been a priority for BBO grant holders over the past year.

While the shift to delivering emotional wellbeing support has been essential for participants, it has been challenging for project staff. As one project lead noted, mental health support is generally not their specialism or expertise and it is emotionally draining for them to provide. This is particularly the case because staff are having contact with more participants on a daily basis – it's feasible for advisers to have ten calls in a day as opposed to two face to face meetings.

> **"Participant anxiety and mental health is a massive, massive issue which we could talk about for hours and hours. But obviously project staff mental health is equally important."**
>
> [BBO grant-holder]

Staff have also had to work flexibly to cover illness or absence in their teams. One project noted that at one delivery partner, almost 70% of staff working hours had been lost to absences. Some of these were due to COVID-19, but others were due to mental health and the isolation which comes from delivering intensive support from home. In this case, the project had employed peer support workers with lived experience, who were more likely to have underlying conditions and were therefore more vulnerable.

Projects were also conscious that at the time restrictions are eased, not all staff (or participants) will have been vaccinated against COVID-19. While some staff are very keen to resume face to face delivery, others feel more anxious about this change. Grant holders were conscious that there will be a difficult balance to strike to protect staff while still supporting participants.

Supporting staff and safeguarding organisational capacity

TCHC runs three BBO projects; **Opportunity Suffolk, Connections, and Enterprising People**.

Before the pandemic, TCHC had implemented delivery partner meetings across their projects to facilitate peer learning. The benefits of this approach were reaped once the pandemic hit and advisers moved to home working, as having a regular opportunity to catch up helped reduce feelings of isolation and allowed advisers to share experiences. The relationships which had been built between advisers through this structure were also helpful for backfilling capacity to support participants when advisers were unavailable due to furlough for caring responsibilities or staff sickness; the existing relationships meant that advisers were more willing to take on and 'look after' participants from other advisers' caseloads. Teams within each delivery partner worked together to cover participant support; as such, during the peak of the crisis participants had an allocated partner rather than an allocated adviser, which meant they were always able to access support.

During interviews, projects highlighted a number of mechanisms that they have developed to support staff while remote working. One project has put clinical supervision in place for their coaches to help ease the emotional burden, and to give them a safe space to talk through their cases. Being able to work alongside a counsellor in this way has had a dual benefit, as it has also helped give the coaches ideas on how to deal with participants' issues around anxiety.

Flexibility in delivery

Despite the challenges, the evaluation has highlighted that there were also benefits arising from online or remote delivery. The primary factor was the flexibility offered by remote support; for example, the lack of travel freed up staff capacity, leaving them able to support more participants because of the time saved. The convenience offered by remote support was also convenient for participants, and as noted, particularly those who were shielding during the pandemic. However, remote delivery also opened up new activities to participants as the barriers of geography were removed; courses offered in other areas or by different delivery partners became more accessible.

One project noted that telephone support had made participants facing more complex challenges feel more comfortable about opening up around sensitive issues, for example when disclosing convictions. Removing face to face contact, and being able to have those conversations from the security of their own home, made participants more amenable to difficult conversations. Some project staff were keen to retain phone calls during initial assessments for this reason.

Projects saw advantages in retaining some online delivery and as a result, frequently discussed their desire to retain a blended approach to delivery going forward. For some, they were keen to retain face to face meetings early in the process to support engagement, but then shift to delivering support through video and telephone calls, with face to face meetings interspersed as appropriate and relevant. One project estimated that they would like to see around 40-45% of their work with participants delivered remotely in future.

Achieving results

BBO projects are required, as a condition of their of ESF funding, to record progress against three key "results". These results relate to participant progress into or towards employment - specifically whether they are:

1. in employment,

2. In education or training,

3. moving from being economically inactive when joining the programme (meaning that they are not looking for work or are unavailable for work due to ill-health or caring responsibilities) to actively job searching when leaving the programme.

Although these results are important indicators of the success of the programme, it is also expected that participants will benefit more widely from the support they receive, with participants achieving "softer" outcomes such as increased confidence, the development of new skills, and improved physical and mental wellbeing.

The following sections explore the achievements of the programme to date in relation to results and outcomes, drawing on the programme monitoring information (MI) data but also the early results of our participant survey.

Leaving the programme

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Participants leaving the programme up to June 2020

Total number of participants leaving the programme

85,046

Total number of leavers with a known, verified destination

54,871 (64%)

Total number of leavers with an unknown destination

30,175 (36%)

</div>

Our review of the programme MI up to June 2020 showed that 85,046 people - 73% of those who had engaged with the programme - had finished their support and had left or exited BBO. Of those, 54,871 participants (or 64%) had "signed off" the programme by informing the project of their destination - that is, they had provided evidence that they were employed, engaged in education or training, or confirmed that they were now available for work or actively looking for work), or economically inactive (and thus, not available for work or actively looking for work). This process allows projects to claim a result or outcome for participants. It is the outcomes for these 54,871 participants we will explore in this section of the report.

However, our analysis found that there were 30,175 participants who left the programme without registering a result with their BBO project (36% of all programme leavers). This could be for a number of reasons, but it is most likely that the participant disengaged early with the project rather than leaving

at a point agreed with their coach or key worker, or did not provide evidence of their destination. As the evaluation progresses, we will explore this issue in more detail with grant holders, not least because this gap in information means that project efforts in supporting and progressing participants are not fully represented in the programme data – for example, it's possible that more participants had moved to employment, but had not informed the project. BBO is not a payment by results programme and as such, there is no financial impact for projects if data on leavers is not recorded. However, this issue could have a significant financial impact in other commissioning contexts. As a result, it is important that projects address any issues related to tracking participants in the context of longer-term sustainability. We will continue to monitor this issue as the evaluation progresses.

We have already seen the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic, national lockdowns, regional restrictions and social distancing had notable impact on the overall engagement with

the programme. However, the MI data suggests that the impact was even more significant on the number of participants exiting from the programme, with far fewer people leaving than in previous years - when comparing exits in March – June 2019 with those of March – June 2020, there was a reduction of 79 percentage points (-14,568). There were a number of reasons for the reduced number of exits, but primarily participants were reluctant to leave the relative "safety" of the support provided by BBO at an otherwise uncertain time.
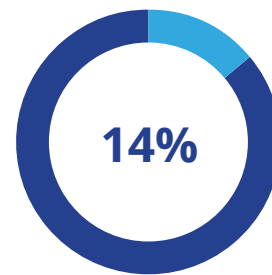
Achievement of BBO's key results

Results achieved by participants with a known, verified destination (to June 2020)

35%

Participants moving to employment

31%
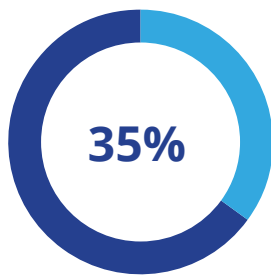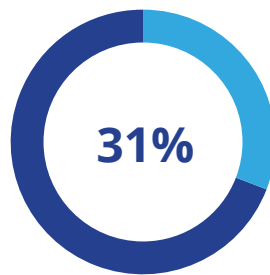
Participants moving to education and training.

14%

Participants moving from economic inactivity to job search

Analysis of the programme MI data showed that 80% of leavers with verified destination data had achieved one of the three key programme results after their participation in BBO. More than one-third of these participants (35%) had moved into employment, and a similar number (31%) had moved into education or training.

Importantly, the programme MI showed that BBO projects had successfully supported those who were some distance from the labour market back into or towards work. For example, the analysis showed that of the 54,871 people who have left BBO with a verified destination, 26,866 were economically inactive on joining the programme. Of this group:

- **28%** moved into employment;

- **29%** moved into education and training; and

- **28%** were searching for a job.

There were also successes for those facing other barriers to work. Of those who have left BBO with a verified destination, almost half reported that they had a disability (25,945 people, or 47%). Of this group:

- **27%** had moved into employment;

- **32%** moved into education and training; and

- **15%** were searching for a job.

There had been a significant reduction in the number of people with a disability who were economically inactive, dropping from 52% at engagement to 31% at exit. This suggests that for this group, health was no longer a barrier to work.

There were similar successes for those who had been part of a jobless household – that is, a household where no working-age adults are in employment - when they joined the programme. For this group (totalling 32,846 of the 54,871 leavers with a verified destination):

- **32%** had moved into employment;

- **31%** into education and training; and

- **12%** into job-search.

The early findings from our participant survey, which so far has engaged 92 BBO participants who left the programme in August and September 2020, show a slightly less positive picture in relation to key results than the programme MI data. However, it should be noted that this is a small sample – from the first wave of survey interviews – and as such only provides early indications of results, outcomes and sustainability. These issues will be explored further in our next annual report, when the survey cohort will be larger.

Participants were interviewed in February 2021, with the aim of understanding to what extent they had benefited from BBO support, what they were doing immediately after they left the project, and what they were doing at the time of the interview.

The survey found that immediately after leaving the programme, 28% of participants had moved into some form of paid employment or self-employment, and 22% moved into education or training – a figure lower than that of the wider programme MI. However, as the chart in Figure 2 shows, the rate of sustainability of these outcomes was encouraging, considering that a third round of lockdown measures had been introduced, as well as prior regional tier restrictions that were implemented in the period between the participants leaving the programme and being interviewed. While there was a slight dip in employment, the figures for what participants were doing at the time of interview some 5-6 months later still stood at 23% in some form of paid employment, and the number of those in education and training had increased.

Figure 2: **What were you doing immediately after leaving BBO, and what are you doing now?**

Legend: Immediately after leaving (dark blue), Now (light blue)
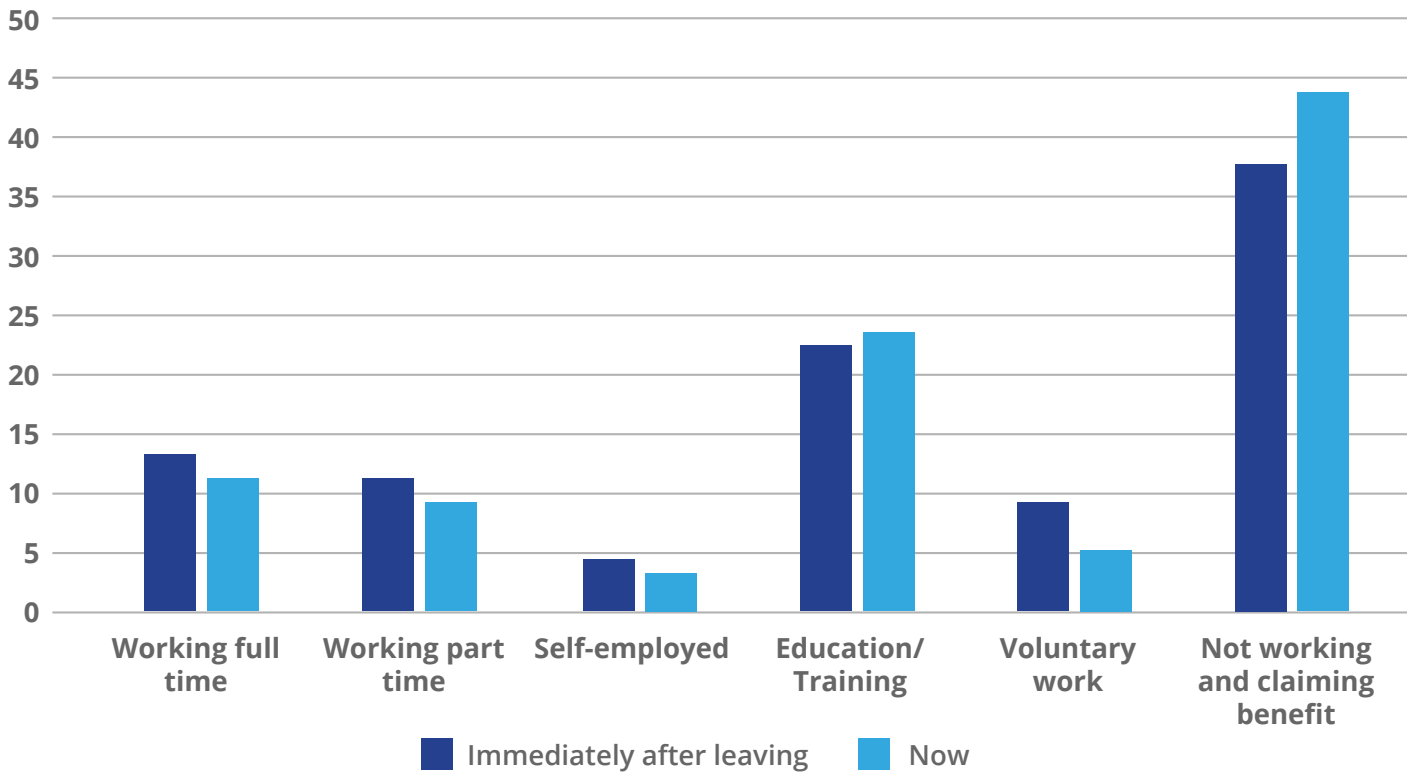
Importantly, 55% of those who had moved into work after leaving BBO were still in the same job at the time of the interview, around six months later. Where people had left their job, this was primarily because it was a fixed- or short-term contract. 30% of those who had left their job had resigned themselves, but of that group, half had gone on to find other employment and were now working full time.

Although half of the respondents who were in work had been taken on permanently, 17% were working in zero hours contracts. However, of the whole cohort of those in employment, 67% worked more than 15 hours a week. These trends will be important to monitor going forwards, as the risk of insecure employment or under-employment (i.e. working fewer hours than a person wants to, or taking work that does not align with their skills or training) could increase in an unstable economy.

Interviews with BBO project leads showed that while the rate of exiting participants had decreased in the first part of the pandemic, rates were showing significant improvement into the second part of the year. There were also indications of promising practice in relation to the achievement of employment outcomes. Employer engagement has been vital and there were some good examples of proactive work on the part of BBO projects to broker job opportunities with employers. At one project, advisers had worked with self-employed people to help them to become employers themselves, focusing on local job-creation. This project had secured two job outcomes through this route; although not large numbers, this strategy

not only supports BBO participants but the wider community, and could reap broader long term benefits. Other projects had taken a similar approach as local trades experienced increased demand; in one example, a self-employed shed-builder had approached the project to explore the possibly of employing a young person. The project provided support on how to recruit and shift from being a sole trader to an employer, securing an employment outcome in the process.

been working in a test and trace centre for around eight months, and some colleagues in the same roles have been given permanent positions.

Although the pandemic has created work opportunities, other sectors of the economy have been hard-hit and project leads flagged that the labour market is becoming increasingly competitive, particularly because BBO participants are now job-searching alongside

> **"[Our project has] a history of getting people rather peculiar self-employment jobs… I paid for a training course for people to learn how to do dog walking or some such thing. And you know, there's money to be made in dog training."**
>
> [BBO grant-holder]

Projects were able to attribute some of their success in securing employment outcomes to the jobs created in the country's response to the pandemic, or, as one project lead termed it, the "pandemic sector". The jobs which were being created in vaccine and testing centres were jobs which were accessible to BBO participants, and a number of projects had moved participants into those roles. One noted that they had been concerned that the temporary and part time roles were not a long-term solution to employment for the BBO cohort, although the roles have become more secure than previously anticipated. One participant who left the project in question has

those who have been made redundant during the pandemic. Project leads also highlighted that they are facing "competition" from other employment support programmes such as the Kickstart scheme, which creates job placements for 16-24 year olds. One project lead observed that entry-level roles which would otherwise be recruited in an open market are now being shifted to be filled via Kickstart. Others flagged that they had previously worked closely with recruitment organisations who have since become providers for Department for Work and Pension (DWP) programmes, and as such are sharing their opportunities less because there is more competition in the market.

However, in the face of these challenges it is important to recognise that participants largely found the support they had received from BBO vital in moving them into work. Of the participants involved in our survey, 61% of those in work felt they would have struggled to find their jobs without the help they received from BBO. Furthermore, of those not working, 47% felt the support would help them to find a job in the future. The reasons cited included their improved confidence, improved motivation and a better idea of the career options open to them.

> **"[Without the support from BBO] I would not have had the confidence to go to interviews and to try to get a job." [BBO participant]**
> **"I would not have been so motivated as I am now [without the support]."**
>
> [BBO participant]

As Table 2 shows, regardless of destination after the programme, almost a third of participants involved in the survey still felt they had increased their confidence, and wellbeing and skills were improved for others.

> **"I have a lot more confidence now, and I am now doing some voluntary work in my own area."**
>
> [BBO participant]
>
> **"Having the support when it came to interviews and help on the computer, BBO gave me that skill and confidence."**
>
> [BBO participant]

Table 1: Which of the following things have changed for you as a direct result of support from the BBO project?

Outcome	% of all respondents
Improved confidence	29
Improved wellbeing	21
Learnt other new skills	14
Improved their financial situation	10
Developed work skills	9
Got involved in the community	7
Improved housing situation	3
Other	6

"I would not have had a chance to have got a job, without the support that I received from [BBO]."

[BBO participant]

The interviews with project leads supported our findings that training and education outcomes had remained successful during the pandemic. While some sectors of the economy closed down, training continued to be provided remotely and participants were able to join courses from home. One project lead noted that there is now so much choice available to participants that they are actively supporting them to choose the right options for their individual needs.

As our review of the programme MI data shows, the number of participants moving from economic inactivity to job search has increased since 2019 (when the rate stood at 11%). However, this outcome was still viewed with caution by some project leads involved in the evaluation. Some felt that their staff still felt a reticence to stop working with people and exit them from the programme when they reach job search stage; advisers feel that they wanted to get them all the way into work even though it might mean working with someone for 18 months. Some project staff hold the view that job outcomes "trump" job search; however others noted that although the move into job-search is an important progression, some staff can find it hard to quantify, questioning whether applying for one carefully targeted job a month is enough, or whether participants need to be meeting high targets for applications such as those set by Jobcentre Plus. The move from economic inactivity to job search is an important one; clearer guidance on this issue in any future programmes could be beneficial to support project decision-making on how and when to claim for this result.

One project highlighted that the pandemic had impacted on participants' desire to leave the project at an uncertain time, and instead preferred to keep the support they were receiving when everything else felt uncertain. Other project leads also flagged that participants were displaying fear and anxieties about "getting back into the wider world". For these participants, moving to employment will be more challenging post-pandemic. To deal with "re-entry anxiety", as one project lead termed it, projects were starting to develop approaches to help people ease back into life, or "step back into the world". Analysis of programme MI data showed that the average duration of engagement over the lifetime of the programme was 226 days, or around 7.5 months. In future reporting for the evaluation, it will be interesting to assess to what extent that figure evolves as a result of the pandemic as new data emerges.

Looking forward

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a series of challenges for BBO projects and participants, there are some positive points to note: projects and their staff have shown flexibility and adaptability in shifting their services to be delivered remotely, ensuring participants stayed supported, and most importantly, safe. Although new engagements and exits from the programme have been hit hard, there is anecdotal evidence from interviews and evidence from the participant survey that as the pandemic has progressed and people have "found their feet", exits to positive destinations have increased. There are still opportunities available to BBO participants, although projects may need to revise their approaches to some extent to find them.

The new delivery models created by BBO projects have shown that there are some benefits to be reaped from remote delivery. Indeed, many projects are keen to retain a blended approach to their projects in the future as restrictions lift; online and telephone support has given flexibility for both projects and participants. Where anxiety about re-entering society is present, remote support allows participants to remain engaged without the need for travel for example. Online activities also remove geographical boundaries and open opportunities for participants to engage with courses and groups that would not otherwise have been possible due to the location of the sessions.

Employer engagement has proved to be important so far in securing jobs for BBO participants and this will continue to be the case in a crowded labour market. BBO project leads involved in interviews for this report were concerned about the 'competition' BBO participants face from those who are newly-unemployed due to the pandemic. Employer engagement will help to position BBO participants in the market. Exploring self-employment will also enable people to create their own opportunities; some creative and imaginative thinking around destinations will be needed.

We have seen that the rate of exits fell significantly in the early days of the pandemic and future reviews of the programme MI data will help us assess to what extent this remains the case across the rest of the pandemic period. However, project leads were clear that there has been a cohort of participants who have been reluctant to leave BBO projects during this time of uncertainty, and staff are conscious that dependency has become an issue for some. Gentle support to help people move back into normality will be needed going forward. In our 4th annual evaluation report we highlighted how BBO projects were already working hard to address significant social isolation amongst people engaged with the programme; this will be a bigger challenge still in the year to come. Although we have seen projects putting extra emphasis on wellbeing and confidence, this focus will need to remain.

We have seen examples of projects recruiting new partners to support participants' mental health, and partnership working will continue to be important to address evolving participant needs. This also applies to working with partners outside the BBO delivery partnerships; referral pathways and pathways for signposting outside the programme will remain important to meet participant needs. However, this may prove challenging in an environment where there is less money to go around. Although Jobcentre Plus referrals have slowed during the pandemic, close working with the organisation in future will likely become more important as their services reopen and refocus.

Finally, work continues on the development of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and BBO offers much learning for new programmes. The UK Community Renewal Fund and the review of the roles of the Local Employment Partnerships may also be significant for BBO project development, strategic direction, and learning.

Next steps for the evaluation

The coming year will see the evaluation team working more closely with grant holders, conducting a series of case study "visits" – either virtually or face to face depending on COVID-19 restrictions. Our research with participants will also continue; further waves of the participant survey will be conducted, and the follow-up survey interviews will begin. These will see participants be contacted six months after their initial interview and will help the evaluation further explore the sustainability of participant outcomes and the role the BBO programme plays in this. We will also be preparing a paper showcasing case studies from the participants involved in our research so far. Finally, we will continue to review the programme MI data. Throughout this period of the evaluation, we have identified a number of important themes to explore throughout the next phase. These include:

- Issues relating to competition in a crowded labour market. To what extent does a changing economic context impact on the ability of BBO projects to support their participants into employment?

- Whether the pandemic has impacted on the duration of participant engagement with BBO projects, and whether that evolves over time.

- Monitoring how and when projects use the result for moving economically inactive participants into job search.

- Exploring the extent to which grant holders and projects are able to track participants after they exit the programme, and how this impacts on understanding participant results and destinations.

- Reviewing whether there are links between participant demographics or characteristics and participant destinations, as the participant survey sample size increases. We will also continue to assess the impact of the pandemic on results as our sample grows.

- Trends relating to working hours, quality of jobs and under-employment as the labour market evolves and we obtain more data from participants.

The above questions and approaches will help the evaluation to understand the impact of the pandemic on projects and participants alike, and to will shape learning not only for the BBO programme, but the development of programmes to come.