

FRIENDS AGEING BETTER (FAB)

July 2018 - March 2020

Delivered by Age UK Bristol in partnership with Bristol
Older People's Forum



Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) is a partnership of organisations working to reduce social isolation and loneliness among older people and help them to live fulfilling lives. It is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund as part of the national Ageing Better: Fulfilling Lives programme.

This report provides an overview of the Friends Ageing Better (FAB) project. In line with BAB's 'test and learn' approach, **this report will highlight key points of learning and recommendations** which may be useful for other projects and services both within Bristol and nationally.

Project Overview

Friends Ageing Better (FAB) is a **network of older people** who share information about what is happening in the city, while **building relationships with other people who live locally**.

FAB hosts cafes and events across Bristol on a regular basis in order for residents to **meet others in their local area and find out about upcoming events and activities**. A typical month is likely to involve 16 'Catch-Up Cafes' and 55 free or low-cost Tai Chi Shibashi classes, along with other events such as discos, exhibitions and tours. Members of the FAB network are also eligible for discounts at a range of local businesses in the city.

Friends Ageing Better is a project by Age UK Bristol, delivered in partnership with Bristol Older People's Forum (BOPF).

NB: The original funding from Bristol Ageing Better was due to end in March 2020, however an extension period was agreed until June 2020 using FAB underspend. This report mainly focuses on the initial funded period (July 2018 - March 2020). However in light of Covid-19 FAB has significantly adapted its activities since March 2020, and therefore learning and reflections from this period have also been included on page 14.



Network Members

Between 1st July 2018 and 31st March 2020, **Friends Ageing Better** built a network of **1,048 people aged 50+** in Bristol. Approximately a third of these network members attended face-to-face network meet-ups.

All FAB members are over the age of 50. 74% of them are between 60 and 79 years of age. **The membership spreads across Bristol**; 39% of the membership live in North Bristol, 25% in East Bristol and 27% in South Bristol.

The project has involved 17 volunteers, of which 16 (94%) were themselves aged 50 or over. **Together these volunteers have given an estimated 320 voluntary hours.**



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320 volunteer hours

Project Successes

Catch-Up Cafes

The FAB team used regular 'Catch-Up Cafes' in different areas of the city to **facilitate residents to build longer-term connections** with each other. They deliberately chose this approach above other shorter-term options (for example those which increase social activity but only for a select period of time) in order to have a **longer-term impact**.

FAB's 'local approach' of hosting Catch-Up Cafes in a number of local neighbourhoods was designed to increase the likelihood that members who have attended a cafe will **bump into each other in the local area and start a conversation**.

It worked well when Catch-Up Cafes were held on a weekly basis. **Weekly cafes helped to maintain momentum** if an individual had to miss a week, and also helped people to build deeper social bonds. It also **worked well when a cafe had a 'focus'**, for example a shared activity or a theme for that week, as this acted as an icebreaker and started conversations.

The Catch-Up Cafe held at the Withywood Centre is an example of a particularly successful cafe. The FAB team believe this is **likely due to a close partnership with the Healthy Together foot care clinic and New Beginnings day service** (both run by Age UK Bristol and held at the Withywood Centre). These partnerships enabled some individuals to attend the cafe who might not have done so otherwise.

The project has seen members meeting each other outside of Catch-Up cafes, sharing contact details and **moving on to join other activities together**.



Tai chi training and classes

The FAB project **trained local older people, as tai chi instructors**, specifically focusing on a form of tai chi that is designed for older people. In total, 40 older people were trained as instructors, the majority of whom were aged 60 - 69. Once trained, these instructors lead free or low-cost classes in their local community on a regular basis.

This has been a successful part of the FAB project. The physical exercise combined with being a low-cost and informal drop-in has **attracted people who have health conditions to take part**, as well as those who are **experiencing periods of transition** such as retirement.

In this way, the tai chi sessions aid wellbeing and can form part of a **preventative support package** against potential loneliness or isolation, as well as the physical health benefits of balance and coordination.

Some Catch-Up Cafes arranged for a tai chi class to take place in the same venue immediately beforehand. This worked well as it provided a **shared experience or 'focus'** which could easily prompt later conversations at the cafe. This may be particularly important for people who **feel under-confident and anxious about socialising** with new people.

“
**It made me
feel graceful
again.**”

*FAB member, aged 75,
taking part in tai chi*



Newsletters and sharing information

In addition to fostering new social relationships through activities such as tai chi and Catch-Up Cafes, a vital function of the FAB project is the **sharing of information within their membership network**.

The FAB team send out **regular newsletters** to members with information about local activities and events. These newsletters are distributed in **both paper format and as an e-newsletter**, with the e-newsletter having a very high open-rate (63% average opening rate). Information about local activities is often shared during the Catch-Up Cafes, either by the FAB team or through coming up naturally in conversation between residents. In this way the FAB team see the cafes as a type of 'face-to-face newsletter'.

There is the **potential for FAB to develop these newsletters even further**, for example sharing information and advice on topics such as going on holiday by yourself or how to use other platforms to meet new people.

The partnership with Bristol Older People's Forum (BOPF) was **key to reaching older people who are not online**. BOPF's membership stands at 3,000+ members and, as part of this collaboration, FAB was given a section on every paper newsletter BOPF produced during the project.



Creating a sense of membership and belonging

Although it is free to join FAB, all members are issued with a physical membership card. The team believe the **membership card is a key way to foster a sense of belonging to a wider network**. It is for this reason that FAB decided to issue membership cards from the very beginning of their project, before any business discounts were available. Now that business discounts are available, they act as an **initial incentive** for people to become a FAB member.

Having a physical membership card provides members with **reassurance that they are entitled to discounts or to attend certain events**. This can be valuable for those who feel anxious about attending for the first time.

Another way that the team have created this sense of belonging is through sending out newsletters in **paper-format every 2 months to members who are not online** (28% of the membership are not online). New members also receive the latest paper newsletter in the post along with their membership card, so that they know how they can benefit from the discounts and events from the beginning. These paper newsletters act to **regularly reinforce the feeling of being a member**.

Another aspect of the collaboration with BOPF was that **members were given the option of joining both memberships**, which allowed members to receive information about different projects. BOPF were able to reach a younger new cohort of older people, while FAB benefited from BOPF's reputation and reach among older people.

Survey of members

The FAB team **proactively carried out a survey of their members in order to help tailor future activities**. In addition to providing useful information about members (e.g. whether members in different areas of Bristol were interested in different activities), it also provided demographic information about who the project was reaching (e.g. age range).

This demographic information **improved the team's understanding of their membership and also helped when describing their project to others**, for example when talking to businesses who may wish to sponsor the newsletter.

Case Study: Hope Cafe

Hope Cafe was set up by Lawrence Weston Baptist Church as a way to use the physical space of the church and open it up for the community to enjoy. The cafe was first set up a few years ago, opening two mornings a week, welcoming parents after school drop-off with a light breakfast. The community created a bright and welcoming space using local talent and a thrifty eye. "It was exciting how that part of the church came to life as each person contributed", shares Bryony, one of the Hope Cafe volunteers and leads.

Although they managed to get a few regulars, business was patchy at times. The group did not feel like they had enough volunteers to keep the cafe going, so sadly they decided to pause their venture.

Through contact with Linkage Network, Bryony, Sue and John from Hope Cafe started conversations with Friends Ageing Better. FAB were exploring new ideas and locations for cafes, and the team was excited to start something in north Bristol.

Following an initial meeting, it was decided that Hope Cafe would be a great place for a pilot. The pilot stage held 5 sessions between the months of March and June. During this time, a new group of regulars started to attend the cafe, as well as a few FAB members who found out about it through the membership newsletter.

The Catch-Up Cafe has turned into a welcoming intergenerational space. Bryony says: "We are very delighted that many of the older people are coming and enjoyed it. I think it adds a really good dimension to say all ages, and we have toys out for the children, and the comfortable sofas for people who want to relax by the book corners. There is a variety of things." Sue adds: "It certainly helps people build friendships, we can see that from the few regulars that we have...it's hard to walk into somewhere on your own for the first time, but if you can arrange to meet someone at the cafe it's not so daunting."

Project Challenges

Change of project aims

The FAB project **had to significantly adapt its aims from those set when the funding was first awarded**. Initially, Bristol Ageing Better funded FAB to act as a city-wide network for individuals who had previously participated in BAB-funded projects, with the aim of collecting follow-up evaluation questionnaires (CMFs) from these individuals.

However it **soon became apparent that these initial aims would not be possible** and needed to be revised. FAB were unable to receive participant contact details from BAB-funded projects; partly because this had not previously been collected by many projects, and partly due the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

This meant that the **project aims needed to be revised and FAB needed to find new ways to reach older people in the city**. The process of revising the project aims created challenges at the beginning, for example when trying to clearly communicate what FAB could offer to other organisations.

Transport

Along with many other BAB-funded projects, **FAB experienced transport as a significant barrier to increasing social connections for older people in the city**. Some members, particularly those with higher frailty, did not feel safe taking a bus due to fears of falling over.

Age UK Bristol have a successful partnership with Uber to provide taxis for those who need them, enabling them to access a variety of Age UK Bristol services and activities. These taxis were used for some FAB members, for example when attending a Catch-Up Cafe. This worked well when the individual had a mobile phone number (regardless of whether it was a smartphone), but was more challenging to arrange for those without a mobile phone.

Steering group

The FAB project has a formal steering group consisting of volunteers aged 50+ who had previously been involved in other parts of the BAB programme (e.g. the Community Kick-Start Panel). This steering group has been valuable in shaping the project, informing the nature of the Catch-Up Cafes and making project decisions. The name 'Friends Ageing Better' was proposed and agreed by the steering group.

However, it would also **have been valuable to involve additional FAB members in the steering group who did not have a previous connection to the BAB programme**, for example those who regularly attend their local Catch-Up Cafe. This would have resulted in a steering group with a **specific passion for the FAB project** itself, separate from the rest of the BAB programme activity.

However the FAB team also **involved older people in their project design in a number of other ways**, for example through informal conversations with members, through a member feedback survey and through speaking to older people at meetings of the Bristol Older People's Forum.

This feedback informed the design and delivery of the project, for example some members reported that they would not feel comfortable in a 'community cafe' and would instead prefer to meet in a cafe run by a business. A number of the Catch-Up Cafes came about as a result of the FAB team **acting on the suggestions and requests of older people, identifying what is already available and seeking to complement** existing community assets.

Another example of this feedback was the FAB discos. FAB was able to **identify a need for evening events that included dancing** in friendly venues. In response, FAB set up monthly discos aimed at people aged 50+ in a local pub, which attracted an average of 20 people each time. The response from these was very positive and the project would like to look for further funding for this specific project.



Learning and Recommendations

Promoting the project activities

FAB worked hard to **try to reach older people who do not have access to the internet**. In addition to websites and social media, FAB used other forms of communication including **local papers, flyers and local radio**. This had some success as participants provided feedback that they had heard about FAB in local publications. However as a **city-wide project it is challenging to reach the wide range of communities in Bristol**, and this approach requires large amounts of local knowledge and time.

When marketing the project and its activities, FAB found it worked best to **avoid stating an age range** (e.g. “over 50s”) or using words such as “older people” or “seniors”. Many people don’t define themselves in this way, and **instead have a self-identity that is rooted in enjoying a certain activity, living in an area of the city or having a specific hobby**. For this reason FAB recommend **including photos of the activity itself or the venue** it will be held in, rather than photos of people. Images of people cause automatic assumptions about whether an event is ‘for me’.

Similarly, it worked well to **keep fun at the centre of any marketing**, for example emphasising the free food or activities available. The FAB team made sure the perspective of older people was kept at the centre of the project, always **considering why an older person would be interested in joining** the project and reflecting on what the 'pull' and 'push' factors could be.

FAB noticed that successful flyers were often those which had a less ‘sleek’ aesthetic (for example using images available from clip art), possibly because they were **more relatable and less intimidating** than more professionally designed alternatives. However, although flyers were important, FAB found word of mouth to be the most powerful way of raising awareness about their activities.



Location of events and activities

It is easy to assume that holding an event in the city centre is accessible for people to get to, however FAB found that **central locations were often more challenging for its members**. Some members, for example, found it so challenging that they would only travel into the city centre for urgent reasons such as medical appointments, not for social activities.

For this reason FAB found it **vital to hold activities outside of the city centre in a variety of local neighbourhoods**. The specific venue for an event or activity also makes a big difference. For example, some people would feel comfortable walking into venues such as City Hall or the Bristol Old Vic, whereas others would find this off-putting or intimidating. Events held in these locations would potentially require extra time to build relationships with local communities and support people to attend.

Staff and volunteer structure

The FAB team consists of two part-time project workers; a Communications Officer and a Development Officer. At the start of the project it was anticipated that administration tasks would be manageable between these two workers, however the project became increasingly popular and an admin volunteer was needed. In the future, it would be **valuable to build this administrative support into the staff hours**, for example allocating one day per week for this.

Similarly, **even more could be done to grow the FAB membership** if there were more staff hours available for this. The FAB membership has the potential to be an even larger network for older people in the city than it currently is. Learning from FAB is to carefully define the role of the FAB Development Officer. It is a role that develops the FAB project and uses an asset-based approach where communities drive the project. However FAB is a city-wide project and not based within any particular community. The role itself is therefore not a community development role, but instead involves working with numerous Community Development Officers in the city.

In order to help make the Catch-Up Cafes sustainable, the FAB team **tried engaging volunteers to 'host' the cafe**. However those who attended the cafes had limited interest in undertaking this role themselves, suggesting that they were satisfied with their current level of engagement and wished to focus on the social aspect instead of taking on additional responsibility.

Working in partnership with other organisations

FAB have worked in partnership with a number of different organisations in the city. It works **best when these organisations already have connections in the community but are also passionate about engaging with new people** as well. This partnership model meant that the neighbourhoods that FAB worked in depended on partnering with another organisation based in that area.

FAB used two different approaches to initiating a new partnership. One approach was for both parties to be clear and direct about what each one could offer and the resources available. The other approach was to keep each other informed about your activities and ideas over a longer-period of time, and then see what opportunities emerge. Both of these worked well in different situations.

The partnership with Bristol Older People's Forum (BOPF) works particularly well; **each organisation adds value to what the other can offer for older people**. FAB have partnered with some of the GP surgeries, which has tended to work well. Each GP surgery operates separately and **a different partnership and way of working is needed with each one**.

However some organisations **perceived FAB as 'competition' and did not want to collaborate with them**, while others supported the project in principle but were not able to follow-through in practice for a variety of reasons. **Partnership working improved after the project had redefined its aims** and could communicate these more clearly to other organisations.



Loneliness and social isolation

As part of the BAB programme, **the FAB project aims to prevent and reduce loneliness and social isolation** among people aged 50+ in Bristol.

Those who are experiencing longer-term loneliness or isolation will often be facing a range of complex barriers such as poor mental health, low mobility or financial difficulties. These make it more likely that **one-to-one support will be required before they feel able to attend social activities**. Within FAB, this has involved **working with social prescribing services or other community-based organisations** who can reach and support those who may be experiencing longer-term loneliness or isolation or who have lost social confidence.

It is important to remember **how easy it is to lose confidence** and how difficult it can be to walk into a group of strangers without support. It is reasonably unlikely that someone experiencing long-term loneliness or isolation will pick up a flyer and feel confident attending FAB activities by themselves.

FAB mainly facilitates preventative support by helping to build and strengthen connections between residents who live locally. This can help to prevent against future loneliness and isolation, or **reconnect someone who is experiencing shorter-term loneliness or isolation without the presence of other barriers**. The complex nature of loneliness and isolation, combined with a focus on prevention, means **it is challenging for this project model to measure its impact in this area**.

Possible ways that the FAB model could be adapted to reach those with higher levels of loneliness and isolation in the future include:

- ▶ **Focusing activity in areas of multiple deprivation** rather than taking a city-wide approach, concentrating on the connection between inequality, loneliness and isolation.
- ▶ **Working with partners and businesses who are already reaching those with higher-levels of loneliness and isolation**. Recent research highlights how certain pubs, for example, may attract older men with higher levels of loneliness and isolation.
- ▶ **A longer project length** would allow more time for information to spread through word of mouth. This form of communication can be highly effective, but initially starts with individuals who are already connected to their communities and therefore takes time.
- ▶ **Considering whether to change the current age focus of 50+**. There are significant differences in both life expectancy and health between different areas of Bristol. There is a risk that by focusing too much on a specific age range, the different experiences, abilities, interests and health conditions of someone in one part of the city compared to someone of the same age living in a different part of the city could be overlooked. Factors such as health, economic disadvantage, access to the internet or living alone all have the potential to be a focus of a project such as this.

Reflections regarding Covid-19

Since March 2020, FAB has **adapted its activities to meet the new environment of social distancing and self-isolation** during the Covid-19 pandemic.

FAB is part of the Support Hub for Older People. This hub is a collaboration of over 20 organisations in Bristol providing support for older people and their families during the pandemic. As part of this hub, FAB has worked alongside a number of other organisations to adapt activities so that members can participate from home, including those who do not have access to the internet.

FAB activities include a weekly telephone group focused on local history, adapted from the Catch-Up Cafe which previously took place in Withywood. Two tai chi sessions take place on a weekly basis over a videocall and can also be accessed by those without the internet. These tai chi sessions are run by a volunteer who trained with FAB in 2019. The FAB team are also adapting another Catch-Up Cafe to take place over the telephone aimed at those who would like to chat and meet new people without a specific topic to focus on.

Learning

Key learning from the FAB team during this time includes the importance of **finding out how existing members would like activities to be adapted and how they would prefer to engage**. FAB consulted with network members through phone calls and emails before deciding how to adapt the project activities. Although some activities can be held over the phone or online, **it does not mean that people will engage with them in the same way as before**. For example, some FAB members who regularly attended Catch-Up Cafes did not want to have a phone conversation with a bigger group and instead preferred to swap numbers with a few other members and have one-to-one phone calls.

These adapted activities have enabled FAB to **connect with people who previously found it difficult to attend face-to-face activities**, for example due to mobility difficulties. The FAB team hope that, through exploring new ways of connecting at a physical distance, this can be continued after Covid-19 in order to engage with individuals from home.

However, it has been **challenging to communicate these new activities to people who are not online**. Postal newsletters require more funding than e-newsletters and are less instantaneous. Keeping in touch with members over the phone is a highly effective and meaningful form of engagement, but can take a significant amount of project time.

Friends Ageing Better

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

