

Evaluation of Improving Lives Project 2016 to 2021

On behalf of Equality Action by CASE

Summary

The Improving Lives Project (ILP) has been a success on its own terms and given the context. The main factors including the work to connect with the group of people the project was working alongside and the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, which in effect cost the project a year of results at the time they would have been most impactful

The project and the activities were warmly talked about and there was a passion and belief in the project with regret at it concluding.

The scope of the project was wide ranging however was also focused on a relatively small population; this created a series of challenges.

The project members showed they had reflected and learnt from the project. There was no learning or observations which would have significantly altered the impact of the project. The wide-ranging nature of the project goals would have likely meant that any improved performance in one area would have reduced the impact in another strand of the project.

There are some reflections from the evaluation below, however they are for consideration in the recognition that any action needs to be proportionate to the capacity of Equality Action and the main learning from the project are for consideration for future projects and in considering the legacy of the ILP.

The project

The Improving Lives Project, funded by The National Lottery Community, worked with men from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds primarily to:

1. Improve health and well-being, confidence to be more active in society, and ability to deal with family issues.
2. Increase their employability skills through IT, language training, and accessing further education.
3. Increase their knowledge, awareness and resilience against radicalisation and extremism.

Background

Equality Action had run a successful project, Chances for All, working with BAME women, funded by the Big Lottery Fund from 2012 to 2017) to work with BAME women on the following 4 aims 1) Improved attitudes towards healthy living 2) Improved awareness of issues facing their families and an increased knowledge of how to address these. 3) Increased numbers of women actively undertaking community and society development roles 4) Improved representation and increased cultural integration locally.

The women participating in this project were from a South Asian background and engaged well, with a strongly voiced wish that there was a similar project for men, “why always the women”. This laid the foundations and working assumptions for the ILP project and the basis of the successful bid to the National Lottery Community Fund.

Inputs

A small project team of two people with the associated support of the Equality Action core team. The project kept within its resources was able to call on a significant amount of in-kind support and partnership work as evidenced by the wide range of activities and high level of involvement of other local organisations.

The Outputs: Activities and Participation

There was a wide range of activities over the project including health and well-being sessions, swimming, football tournaments; ICT sessions; one-to-one driving theory sessions ; Pre-ESOL basic English ; CV and interview skills; annual trips ; improving lives café; hate crime awareness; Prevent conference and radicalisation awareness as well as cookery sessions.

The End of Project report summarises the numbers of events and participants and covers the details so can be referred to for the numbers and infographics.

The range and ambition of these sessions are noteworthy. The level of participation was growing throughout the project. The coronavirus impact was significant for this project and so in effect the project lost a year. The project was effective in developing a response to the pandemic, in so far as practicable given the context and building on the work already started, for instance the use of What’s App groups.

The project workers highlighted the progress made in widening the relationships and valuing difference, to acknowledge differences respectfully.

The level of activity and participation was initially less than expected. The project's remit was BAME men with a working assumption of these been men primarily from a South Asian background. The group the project mainly worked with were men of Bangladeshi origin. The men were a group whose lifestyles and working lives made connecting with them a more challenging prospect than connecting with the women and was originally anticipated in the project planning stage. The recruitment of a project worker who was well connected with this community was of notable benefit as is the challenges of connecting and earning the trust of the participants by the other project worker.

The impact of the challenges to the project of connecting with the participants at the start of the project, the time needed to be invested in relationship building and the impact of the pandemic which overlapped the main delivery stage of the project left the team with more like a 3 year project than a 5 year project.

The different goals of the project set their own challenges for the project. In order to engage with the men and to build relationships then many of the activities needs to be single sex and within places and activities where they were comfortable however to support reaching out to the wider communities and accessing the full range of activities on offer needed a willingness to meet in places and engage in activities which could be both uncomfortable and challenging. The project seemed to manage these well however in many ways this was limiting factor and maybe not reflected in the activity plans as much as they would be with hindsight.

The Outcomes:

The project did well with meeting short term outcomes with an improvement across the range of changes in awareness, skills and understanding by those men who participated.

There is evidence of an ongoing wish by a significant number of the men to continue the activities. The football tournament which brought many people together, and as a standalone activity, met many of the participation targets of the project, was a common theme of an activity which connected different people where there is a strong interest in this continuing. This is detailed in the End of Project report.

The participants survey showed some participants expecting their changed self-scoring to continue after the end of the project. This reflects the approach of encouraging behaviours which can be role modelled from within the community as well as by the project workers.

The ILP will have had a longer-term impact in terms of the connections made and new activities however the potential to have a longer term impact especially with the older men in the Bangladeshi community of Loughborough were significant; especially for connecting with a group of men often not readily connected to local services especially around health, which has been put at risk by the impact of the pandemic and the ending of the project.

The project did raise a greater level of deeper-rooted problems than anticipated; outside of the impact of the pandemic which exacerbated these underlying issues.

Assumptions

The evidence from the project suggests the core assumptions in terms of an approach and the effectiveness was robust. These were based on the assumptions and learning from the previous successful Chances For All project.

The assumption which was revised as the project progressed was the ease of engaging with the men was more challenging than anticipated and engaging with the women; this was due to a number of factors including work places and their impact on availability and the level of existing engagement outside of the home and workplace.

The level of translation needed for some of the activities was also an area which was responded to by the project.

External Factors

The coronavirus was the biggest external impact and coming at the end of the project had a significant impact on the ability of the project to fully achieve its potential and to support the continuation of some of the activities and relationships.

Participant's survey

The participants survey was positive and reinforced the perception of the Equality Action team and there would be an opportunity to encourage greater levels of participation.

The age profile reflects the project's success in reaching older men in the community.

The positive comments included:

“It was set up very well and organised with a good timescale”

“Driving theory lessons and one to one support”

“ILP cafe sessions”

“Swimming sessions”

“Football tournament”

“Project serves all communities”

The areas for improvement fell into two areas, both recognised by the project team. The continuation of the popular activities after the project, notably the football tournament. The other main comment was for more flexibility on the times of events to recognise the working patterns of many of the participants and their availability for longer sessions.

We also explored wider thoughts and reflections and these included:

“Uniting any group of people requires motivation from the organisers and this has been successful project from the group in doing so. We learn from it every year and take that experience forward to better the following project.”

“I was struggling to learn driving then ILP members of staff helped me with driving theory one2one lesson and I have passed my test in December”

“I always look forward to coming to the ILP café on Monday. So pleased that I can meet other people and play carrom board and other sports.”

“Feel so happy that I am able to share my thoughts and experience with others at the ILP café”

“Very happy that one of my favourite book which is written in Gujarati Katha displayed at the Charnwood Museum.”

“Thanks a lot for the project worker as he has been a very supportive for me and made all the link for me with all the activities.”

“I always look forward to the ILP football tournament every year. It has become and unique family and friends event in Loughborough where people from different culture meet, play football and celebrate the diversity in Loughborough.”

“Completing driving theory with the project staff was very important to me. I have got regular updates even during lockdown and project staff helped me to prepare myself for the examination and also helped me to book my test”

“Helping all communities represent different cultures”

For consideration

These are points for consideration by Equality Action and are emerging thoughts given the capacity of the evaluation study and those directly involved are better placed to consider

How are the learning of the projects considered to integrate the learning and to keep the conversations going.

One of the observations was the focus of the project and how far this was a managed focus or an evolving one based on the men who participated mainly being from the Bangladeshi community. There were interchangeable references to BAME, South Asian and Bangladeshi men

A useful exercise would be to combine the experiences of the Chances of All project and the ILP into a Theory of Change and to then test this with other experiences and for other communities. This could prove valuable for delivery of existing contracts, new projects and funding bids.

A key factor in this project was the ability of the project workers to use their own life experience to be trusted by the participants especially as some of the deeper, normally unexplored challenges, and frankly more uncomfortable topics were discussed. The project workers once trusted were able to help with wider issues on behalf of the participants and act as “ambassadors” for example with the Council. This may be an area worth exploring and factoring in when designing future projects and assessing capacity and impact.

The measurement and presentation of the harder indicators of the project was not as fully developed and shared as could have been useful.

There is an opportunity to talk with local agencies especially around health and wellbeing on sharing the learning and including some activity to continue the successes of the project and also the football tournament.

Annex: Participants Survey Report

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