



Black Country Futures

YEAR ONE UPDATE -
MAY 2020 - APRIL 2021



This project is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund



Project Performance

The funding has enabled us to reach the groups who often fall through the safety net of support services due to entrenched barriers .

Participants include people impacted by loneliness and isolation , mental health , drug and alcohol misuse , poor physical health , unemployment ,low skills and qualifications and those at risk of homelessness . People we have engaged within the project have become more socially active, believe in themselves again, increased their confidence to do things that they haven't been able to for a long time and become more independent. It has given us the time to spend time with our customers and given them a purpose or reason to change their lives. Which as resulted in 583 participants saying their confidence and motivation has increased, 530 say their self-esteem has increased, 561 have become more motivated to search & apply for work, 588 feel more confidence in accessing services by themselves, 548 feel more optimistic about there futures and 554 participants have reported that they are more positive about their wellbeing.

Partnership performance to date:

855

Starts
achieved

Target - 820

The partnership is currently 35 starts over our profiled target.

108

Employment
Progressions
Achieved

Target - 80

The partnership is currently 28 employment progressions over target

113

Training
Progressions
Achieved

Target - 100

The partnership is currently 13 training progressions over target

The Story of our project this year:

The BCF Project has allowed us to offer many different types of support to over 855 individuals in a very tough year for everyone. We have been able to offer employment support such as helping with CV's, online job searching, supporting people to complete application forms, online interview techniques to increase confidence, telephone interviews etc.

The BCF project has enabled partners to develop a community café by setting up an emergency food hotline. We have prepared freshly made meals for those struggling during lockdown, including senior residents, families with young children and those with underlying health issues. Furthermore, we have also been able to target those who are homeless by working with community groups, churches and hostels that have engagement with some of these cohorts. The funding from the BCF project has opened up a wealth of accessible support for our specific participants group of Deaf, Deafblind, hard of hearing and Deafened customers. This funding has helped us to provide longer term and more in depth support to participants rather than a 'light touch approach'.



One of the biggest factors over the last 12 months has been around confidence and mental health. We have seen a dramatic increase in people wanting support around the health and wellbeing as well as the employment side. We have also seen a huge increase in people needing support around budgeting due to circumstances changing through Covid. We have been able to offer many different online webinars which we have supported beneficiaries to access such as:

- Health and wellbeing
- Healthy Body Healthy Mind
- Confidence Building Session
- Mindfulness Session
- ESOL
- Functional Skills
- Support for individuals isolating
- Housing support
- Emergency food hotline
- Money Matters (Budgeting)

We have also offered Online Job Clubs each week covering topics such as Application Forms, Speculative Letters, Retail Roles, Admin Roles and Warehouse Roles.

BCF project has enabled those most affected financially to be in receipt of grants for food, fuel, digital equipment and avoid further isolation and hardship. This has become a lifeline to those most at risk of poverty whilst addressing loneliness and isolation. Additionally this funding has given us scope to reach those that are really struggling on zero-hour contracts and unsustainable income streams. An area that was unsupported previously.

Participant feedback has been really positive:

“Just Straight Talk has been a life saver for me over the last 12 months; I honestly do not know what I would have done without this service. From my mental health, to Covid befriending and support it’s been surreal. Rovena has giving me help in all areas of my life from recommendations, researching and supporting me with courses that can help with my mental health, being a listening ear when I needed someone to talk to. She has helped with food shopping and prescriptions and even when she may not have known the answers or could help personally, she has then gone and done the research to point me in the right direction. Just Straight Talk has gone above and beyond to help people like myself and I will be forever grateful that a service like this exists and has helped me at a time when i would have broken without them”

“This course is very exciting and it’s useful for healthy body also we learn more different English words.
Grateful”

‘It’s nice to know someone is trying to help me’



"I have found this Zebra Access very useful and helped me a lot to find quickly a job and I did during COVID-19 I though it is impossible after 4 months I really did found a job thank to Bob Marsh who is really amazing support with CV, Cover Letter and advised me what to do when I start with my interview so I am glad and I want to say a massive thanks to Bob! I have recently recommended one of my friend to register with Zebra too." Alije - Smethwick

"Finally having someone that listens to me and support me in the way that I need has made such a difference and I wouldn't have known how to start all this process."

"Thank you for helping when no one else has."

How have we involved people from our communities in the work you do?

We have set up more online groups such as coffee mornings. These were first sent out direct to our participants and now the information is shared online through social media avenues such as Facebook etc. We encourage people to get involved with the wider elements of the partnership and feedback to us as much as possible. The BCF project encourages quotes, case studies and involvement however this is something we would like to develop further with the use of volunteers.

Due to the pandemic not only has the organisation had to adapt so has the communities we support, by applying for multiple grants for equipment and digital KIT to get people connected we were able to ensure people were still supported and protected. We have accessed local grants to support those in hardship and promoted the services from the water hub and warmer homes.

We have also taken the initiative to develop relationships with other organisations in the local area including Mount Shiloh Church, Gazebo Theatre, Bilston People's Centre, Wolves At Work, Adult Education and local councils and identify ways of collaboratively working together. We have also done some work with One Walsall in supporting them with surveys for a health and well-being project liaising with residents through BCF. The partnership has strong relationships with JCP offices and local churches etc. As a partnership we are always looking at identifying ways of strengthening relationships with other organisations and groups.

Our Social Prescribers are recruited from the communities we are delivering services within .

We use an Expert By Lived Experience approach to recruiting ensuring we appoint Link Workers who are authentic to the customers we wish to engage within the project .

The partnership enables us to draw on the strengths and assets of each organisation . For example, if we have a participant who has language support needs, we can ask a member of the partnership for assistance . If another partner in the project has a query around housing, they can direct the question to other partners .The partnership enables us to draw on the strengths and assets of each organisation . Through listening to what our communities required, we have also been able to develop this offer and have now included specialised job clubs as well as the Confidence Building and Mindfulness session.



The difference we have made, both big and small?

So far in the BCF project has supported 113 participants into Education and 108 participants into employment, despite being in the middle of a pandemic.

We have been a lifeline for social interaction and emotional guidance and support. By providing well-being checks and doorstep deliveries and crisis intervention this has ensured that people do not get further left behind. Even in strict lockdown when necessary this has happened with BCF participants to provide emergency response to situations which would've otherwise escalated.

Ensuring we reduce isolation for those living on their own, single parents needing adult conversation to bounce ideas as a way of 'looking forward' beyond the covid-19 restrictions

We have provided links to services such as housing, mental health, grant applications, hardship and budgeting advice and guidance.

We have completed PIP applications and followed the process/journey to the end to ensure those that should be entitled to the benefit receive it.

We have supported those whom where in receipt of benefits rectify changes in circumstances and that would otherwise leave their money as it is because it is easier that way. We have provided the confidence to challenge and amend where necessary. This project is helping local people get back on their feet and back into a sustainable form of employment or self-employment. Not only doing this, buy doing it with confidence and the skills and knowledge to be resilient enough to know their welfare benefits entitlements, rights and where they can access information and/or advice. We know this from our feedback, daily interactions with participants and how they sound, act or look, Case Studies, Thank you Letters, Distance travelled Forms and results achieved as part of the project.

We have also had feedback to say how fantastic it has been to be able to access the online sessions but also been able to speak to other people online. This is especially so for many of our beneficiaries who are isolated and alone. Examples of the feedback we have received:

"It has helped in welfare and confidence, but I just have not yet been able to put it into practice."

"I would definitely recommend the Project to others. The team are very knowledge about finding employment and other work-related issues, so they are a valuable resource, and have genuine empathy with their clients."

"I am grateful for the support through the BCF project and being able to gain practical skills in catering. All this experience will help me with finding work in the career I love."

"The project has helped me by reassessing my CV, looking at how to tackle my CV to make it look more attractive. It has also led me into volunteering in a field where I want my career to progress in."



What we have learned?

Contacting people by Phone, SMS, Whatsapp, Whatsapp video calls, Messenger, ZOOM calls etc have all had a positive reception from the participants of BCF. The move to online sessions has gone well for the most part and most people have been able to access this support but there are a few which have struggled due to no IT skills or no IT at home, this is where we have been able to support on a one to one basis over the phone with job searching, applying for roles, accessing their UC Account, updating their journal etc.

The online webinars have gone down really well with many have come on for a second time as they enjoy not only the topics but the social interaction they offer.

Some of the challenges have been that the majority of our new and current participants had some access to a way of making contact and we maximised this to ensure we had contact. But for those without we facilitated “loan schemes” of devices and supported with the skills and confidence to use them. People have been very adaptable to the changes created by the pandemic which has been interesting.

We have facilitated 2 way meetings where we have simply walked people through online processes to apply to jobs and other areas and online portals.

We are still trying to establish regular faces and attendance to the BCF Coffee mornings as many of the participants do not want to share time with others and prefer the 1:1 contact with the workers. Although we are also aware that many people still want the online groups to meet post restrictions and covid.

Paperwork has also been, as most of the support so far has been remote getting paperwork signed by participants.

One of the most unexpected things has been the diversity of the participants that we are working with .

Every customer is different as are their needs so its important we deal with them in their own unique way. Customers have presented with a range of backgrounds but all of them require someone to invest time into them . We have worked with older people who are lonely and isolated , young people who are also lonely and isolated , lone parents , people with mental health illness, disabled people , people with learning difficulties , people who are homeless and people with drug and alcohol misuse . Generally, the majority of the customers we have worked with have made positive progress achieving their goals and improving outcomes . The covid pandemic was much unexpected, however, also the resilience of our local community and BCF partnership coming together. Through this BCF project we have been able to work with beneficiaries so they can contribute their talents or skills to the project, whilst improving their self-esteem and confidence.

We think it is important to realise that many organisations, community groups and people have a diverse number of strengths. It is about channelling those strengths through the right channels collaboratively, without the feeling of being threatened but rather, having a joined up approach at achieving the same goal, while supporting each other in the work we do. Furthermore, we have also learnt to get to know our community and partners by exploring their interests, talents, skills and how they can be utilised as part of the project .



How we are changing what we do, moving forward?

We are a reflective partnership and can flex and adapt our approach as required .We recognise the importance of people being online and are working behind the scenes with internal colleagues to support people to develop Digital Skills .

We are changing our approach actively seeking out referrals rather than relying on them being made . We are looking to reintroduce classes from May time when restrictions are lifted, this means we will be able to help a lot more people within the community improve their language skills and be able to integrate. However, we will carry on with a focus on IT skills, and potential even carry on delivering elements of our support in the future via remote means to emphasise the importance of IT skills to clients (this is key as it seems some employers will be carrying on with virtual interviews, and some colleges are indicating blended learning of some in the class and some online, will become the new normal).

We will continue to build on and use everything we have learned throughout this first year to improve our service whilst transitioning out of lockdown. We will support the transition with our participants and promote good practice with regards to Covid and the rapidly changing rules and how you can improve your opportunities and activities within the rules as we progress. We will support people mental health and promote how to maintain good mental health.

We will offer a wide range of tailored and individual employability support at a very important time for our community and the wider society. We will help people find employment and training, increase confidence and resilience and support our participants to move forward. This is always important but especially now as our community begins to recover from the pandemic.

We will also be trying to find new ways of funding the services that the BCF partnership provide, as the last 12 months has shown us that the need for our services and the BCF partnership is very much needed.