

Active Reach Phase 2 – Storytelling Impact Report

Written by Sarah Cassidy, Old Fire Station, Oxford, October 2021

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Executive Summary

Active Reach aims to support residents in areas of high deprivation in Oxfordshire, to keep physically active during Covid-19, and overcome some of the inequalities surrounding physical activity. The project targets low socio-economic groups, people with long-term health conditions and disabilities, and Black, Asian Minority Ethnic groups. It is funded by the Sports England Tackling Inequalities Fund and is led by Active Oxfordshire in collaboration with local partners. Phase 2 of Active Reach (AR2) began in October in 2020 and focused on working with communities in the Banbury and Grimsbury area. Local groups and organisations came together to offer a range of different activities, including online boxercise, swimming classes, PT training, wellbeing walks and more. This involved partners from across the area, including Banbury Mosque, St Leonard's Church, The Lighthouse, Aspire, Age UK Oxfordshire, Oxfordshire Mind and Cherwell District Council.

To help evaluate the impact of AR2, we used the Storytelling methodology - an evaluation approach led by the Old Fire Station (OFS), which is based on the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique. This process involved collecting the stories of 6 people involved in AR2, including staff, volunteers and participants. OFS story collectors had conversations with these individuals (the storytellers) about their experience of AR2 and what it meant to them. These conversations were recorded and transcribed, and then edited down into shorter stories which aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller's insights into impact and significance in their own voice and words. OFS then held a Discussion Session which brought together people with different perspectives and relationships to the project to discuss the stories and the learning emerging. This report shares the key insights and learning which came out of this process.

The stories reflect the impact that the AR2 has had on those involved - people felt a sense of pride, purpose and motivation through taking part; it improved the physical and mental wellbeing of both staff and participants; it helped to foster new connections and relationships both between residents and across partners; it supported new groups and communities who had not previously engaged in

physical activities to be active; and it enabled community leaders to put provisions and infrastructures in place so that activities could be sustained long-term.

The stories showed us that the following things were important in enabling this to happen:

1. Listening to people on the ground and designing projects together.
2. Supporting and trusting residents and volunteers to lead activities and make decisions.
3. Recruiting people with existing relationships and connections in the community.
4. Involving passionate trainers who were able to inspire and motivate others.
5. Being open to new ideas, how they might grow, and where they might lead.
6. Thinking long-term about how to embed activities and make them sustainable.
7. Focussing on the little things that can make a big difference.
8. Recognising that there is diversity within any group; there is no one size fits all.
9. Being brave, taking risks and being ok when things fail.
10. Being flexible and responding to the needs of different partners and communities.

Alongside this report we also urge you to read the stories, which reflect the impact of AR2 through the voices and words of those involved.

Section 1: Background & Introduction

Storytelling Evaluation Methodology

The Old Fire Station (OFS) is a centre for creativity which encourages people from all backgrounds to understand and shape the world in which we live through stories, creativity, and connecting with others. As part of this work, OFS trains and supports partner organisations to use the Storytelling methodology to evaluate impact and amplify voices.

The Storytelling methodology is based on the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique¹. MSC is used in international development circles, and in Asset Based Community Development (strengths-based) work. It involves the collection of stories of significant change from participants, and the participatory interpretation of these stories. Unlike conventional approaches to evaluation, MSC does not employ quantitative indicators developed in advance, instead the storytellers decide what the most significant impact is for them. MSC is particularly effective for measuring change that is intangible or fuzzy – unexpected, emergent, personalised or diverse – as well as understanding how change happens.

The methodology involves the following key stages:

1. **Identifying storytellers** –people who represent a range of different perspectives on the project being evaluated.
2. **Collecting stories** – each storyteller meets with a trained OFS story collector. They have a conversation about their experience, what had changed for them through their involvement, how this change came about, and what we can learn from it going forward. Crucially, this is not an interview but a discussion – relaxed, informal and on the teller’s terms.
3. **Editing stories** – these conversations are recorded, transcribed and then edited down into 1-2 page stories, which aim to:
 - Faithfully reflect the teller’s insights on the impact of the project

¹ <https://www.mande.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2005/MSCGuide.pdf>

- Accurately keep the teller's 'voice' in the story – telling it in their own words
- Vividly capture the reader's attention.

The stories are then sent to the storytellers for their input and approval before being shared.

4. **Discussion Session** – we hold a facilitated discussion which brings together people with different perspectives and experiences on the project to discuss the stories and the themes and learning emerging from them. These discussions form the basis of an evaluation report.

It is worth noting that the learnings which come from the Storytelling methodology are predominantly very positive. Another process might have highlighted some of the things that, perhaps, did not work so well. This approach focusses on what changed for the better for those involved and how that happened so we can build on those positives in the future.

Active Reach 2 & Storytelling

To evaluate the impact of AR2, OFS collected stories from 6 people involved in different ways in the project. Conversations were recorded, transcribed and then edited into 1-2 page stories. Each story captures the teller's unique experience of AR2– their stories and what changed for them personally through their involvement. The Discussion Session was attended by partners involved in the project, as well as several of the storytellers and collectors themselves. These discussions formed the basis for this impact report.

Section 2: Impact & Learning

Key Themes

While each storyteller brings their own unique perspectives and insights on AR2, there are several key themes which echo across the stories.

Connections – many of the stories mention building relationships, both between individuals and across partner organisations. This was particularly important to people during lockdown. The stories also show how one connection often led onto another, for instance connections with the Mosque community opened up connections to people involved in community food activities.

We got the session running online on Fridays. And, you know, it was so nice. The first week, you just think 'Oh nobody's going to turn up.' And I've had over twelve people joining the session to do some exercise. In terms of their mental health, or recovery and things like that, they really needed that contact.

Mutual benefit – every story mentions the positive impact that being involved in AR2 had on their physical and mental wellbeing, particularly during the pandemic. Staff and volunteers also mention how the experience of helping others in turn helped to give them a sense of purpose and fulfilment.

I'm quite into fitness anyway, and I just thought it would help me and she said that once completed, maybe we could do some lessons for the community. And I thought at the same time, I will get fit, and also, our community of women will benefit.

Passion and belief – staff and volunteers all mention a passion for the work, and a belief in the impact it can have for those involved. This passion was infectious, it inspired people to take part and helped to keep people going through challenging times.

We're on this planet for who knows how long, and I think if you can experience some happiness throughout that, and if physical activity and what I do and the support we give can help and support people with that, then I think it's a job worth doing.

Trust – involving local leaders in the delivery of activities helped to build on the existing relationships and trust within the community. Believing in people to lead activities sometimes meant taking a leap of faith and trusting that, even when things didn't work out as planned, something good would come.

People felt trust. And it was just really lovely. It was about creating a sense of unity, community, talking, sharing, you know, and everybody feeling really vulnerable.

Motivation – participants were motivated by the comradery and support of trainers and fellow participants. Staff found it motivational working alongside others who shared a commitment to the work, and seeing the impact it had.

I think it was also knowing you're doing it with other people. That was the motivation that helped push things along. And I think what made it especially good was the lady who was running it, she's called Emma. She's a really good motivator.

Inclusion – across all of the stories people share a commitment towards making activities accessible to people who would not otherwise engage in physical activity – from self-isolating residents on Zoom to women only sessions for Muslim women at the gym.

To be able to offer the ladies from that community safety and comfort in coming into a gym, that's massive. Just seeing the elation in their eyes that they've got something that allows them to come out of their homes, and they can do safely, and they're allowed to do it – we can't ask for more.

Learning - it wasn't always smooth sailing – there were challenges, and things went wrong. Accepting that things might fail, being transparent about what went wrong, and learning with partners about what we can learn helped to strengthen the project.

You start to fear it less when, actually, you can see positives coming out of addressing that and realise that by recording and sharing those difficult situations we can help our learning and understanding for the future, so that definitely has been a learning experience for me. I think that's what I'll take into future projects, I'll be a bit braver and a bit more challenging, and not be scared to fail.

Outcomes

As part of the Discussion Session we looked at the impact and learning emerging from the stories in relation to 3 key areas of focus.

1. Reduction in the inequalities surrounding physical activities which have widened as a result of Covid-19.

AR2 sought to engage people who were new to participating in physical and mental wellbeing activities, with a focus on faith groups, low-income households, and people of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage.

- People who felt exercise ‘wasn’t for them’ mention feeling supported to give things a go and enjoyed taking part.
- Storytellers mention that many Muslim women who would have been unable to participate in mixed classes felt safe and comfortable joining women-only sessions.
- Supporting the local Mosque in buying the local gym and running classes from it made sessions accessible to women who might otherwise have struggled to make the time to come along.
- Training women from the Mosque as Personal Trainers (PTs) not only made sessions more accessible to local Muslim women, it also helped to build local capacity and diversify the workforce.
- For some that were physically immobile or self-isolating, Zoom helped to make sessions more accessible and to build confidence in attending from the comfort of their own homes.

Previously, I’ve not been a very physically active person. I don’t like exercise and things like that. But I gave it a go. And I liked it, actually it was the only way, I felt, to get me out. I need that extra push. It was having that support and knowing that other people are doing it. And having a target. So it did change my mind and convince me that actually, this is something I need to do.

We also have two other PTs who qualified alongside me, and now deliver classes for the community. We organised a lady’s night at the gym so ladies can exercise independently in a safe, secure environment which is what they wanted.

Ladies who are like in their 40s or possibly a little bit older, I feel like they’re just so busy in their lives. Either they’re working or they’re at home with kids, and they’re just always doing things for their family - I don’t feel like they give that time to themselves.

What enabled this to happen?

- From the beginning actively seeking to work with new groups and partners that didn’t have a history of engaging in physical activities and embedding activities within those local groups (e.g. running some activities through the Mosque and local church groups).
- Building personal relationships with people motivated them to give things a go, overcome inhibitions, and continue attending sessions.
- Tailoring sessions to the needs of specific groups and individuals.
- Training and employing people from within the community and supporting them to shape and drive activity.
- Growing relationships and responding to opportunities as they emerged, e.g. from the initial women’s only classes organising further sessions.
- Adopting a can-do attitude – not entertaining the idea that something ‘isn’t the done thing’ and therefore not something people will be interested in trying.
- Timing – going where there was momentum, seizing opportunities and growing connections.
- Focussing on creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere and making sessions fun and engaging.

- Providing both in-person and online opportunities for people to get involved, both of which were accessible to different people in different ways.

I think it was also knowing you're doing it with other people. That was the motivation that helped push things along. And I think what made it especially good was the lady who was running it, she's called Emma. She's a really good motivator. She created this group, where people chatted and kept in touch. It was more fun than exercise. She made it really interesting, so even on the days you couldn't walk for whatever reason, you felt like you've missed out on something

I would have to make sure the session that was delivered was for anybody – people completely new to exercise, or somebody that was regularly coming along. It was a very diverse group of people. Some people were on some medication. One guy, he's got challenges with balance etc, but they managed to set him up on Zoom. He couldn't do all the activities, but it didn't matter he loved being part of the session. It makes my eyes prickly, just that simple free session on a Friday for people to come along, do some activity and socialise, and you'd get regular committed people every week.

The experience was good. The way it was set up, as a challenge, made it motivating. Given Covid, and everyone putting on so much weight, it was really the time. And the streets were empty, you almost had the outdoors to yourself, so you could go about without feeling like you were putting other people at risk, or yourself. It was definitely beneficial, during lockdown, the walking challenge. Very timely. Something to get us out, given that there wasn't a lot going on.

Challenges and ways in which this didn't happen

- Zoom excluded some people who didn't have access or were less confident working online, particularly older members of the community.

2. Improved physical and mental wellbeing and life chances for those involved.

Almost all of the storytellers mention the toll that Covid had on their physical and mental wellbeing and describe how AR2 had played a part in alleviating this.

For everyone, physical and mental wellbeing were intrinsically linked – being physically active had direct benefits for their mental health.

I feel like I need to continue doing it because it was definitely helpful health-wise, you feel better in yourself. It puts you in a better mood, and it's a distraction. We met up with each other separately too, you cross paths with people. So it's good for your psychology, for your mental health. And definitely good for your physical health too. I found I even slept better. You have these very deep, nice sleeps.

I've made friends as well which is nice! Exercise makes me happy, so it's nice that I can make other people happy through exercise as well. Unless you get into it, you start doing it regularly, you don't realise the impact it can have not just on your physical self, but your mental health as well. I feel like I don't need to sit down and talk to anyone, I just need to go to the gym and workout. I just feel like if I'm physically well, then mentally I end up feeling well as well. So I think that's another reason why the course really, really helped.

AR2 often offered a welcome distraction and gave people a sense of purpose. It helped people to make friends, get back to exercising after lockdown, and built confidence in new skills.

If I don't exercise, I kind of get a bit depressed or feel down; you feel sluggish, you feel tired. Like the whole lockdown, obviously all the gyms were closed, so I struggled a lot with that and then obviously, like most people, I put on weight during Covid. Now everything's started to open up, I think it's given me confidence to go back and continue with it and get back to being fit and healthy again.

I think you also get this inner power when you see something succeed and I believe that drive inspires you to continue.

They've got that sense of a community security; it gives them the confidence to leave their house.

I was affected mentally through lockdown the same as everybody else. So, it's a journey of self-discovery for me, but also about what I can do for others.

Through training local people in new skills, such as PT, it also helped to build capacities and provide employment opportunities.

That was something good that had come out of the lockdown - where you've gone from not knowing anything to becoming a PT. Never in a million years did I think I'd do that! And never in a million years did I think we'd have a gym so close to the Mosque!

PT's definitely brought me out my shell. I've got my own podcast, although I haven't done one for a couple of months. I do videos in my groups, and Instagram and social media and stuff. My face is out there a lot more. Without boxing-for-fitness, I probably wouldn't have got started as a PT. It's like an outlet if you like.

Once I knew it all and I passed my exams, I was very proud. I was happy with doing the course because I wanted to learn, I wanted to do it

What enabled this to happen?

- Physical activity often helped to break the ice – it created a fun, shared experience and make it easier for people then to speak about their mental wellbeing.
- Cultivating a safe space in which people were able to speak openly and share experiences.
- Having motivating trainers that made sessions fun and interactive.
- Building personal relationships with people which made them want to join and keep returning.
- Time and perseverance.

A lot of the sessions, as we were going further into lockdown, we did a lot of talking about mental health, trying to figure out what we could do to support each other, sharing things, understanding things, there was lots of tears at times. It became a really safe space, not just for me, but everybody that was there. People felt trust. And it was just really lovely. It was about creating a sense of unity, community, talking, sharing, you know, and everybody feeling really vulnerable. In that situation, everybody felt supported, I think because we started swapping things, ideas, feelings.

The experience was good. The way it was set up, as a challenge, made it motivating. Given Covid, and everyone putting on so much weight, it was really the time. And the streets were empty, you almost had the outdoors to yourself, so you could go about without feeling like you were putting

other people at risk, or yourself. It was definitely beneficial, during lockdown, the walking challenge. Very timely. Something to get us out, given that there wasn't a lot going on.

Challenges and ways in which this didn't happen

- More support was needed for the PTs in their initial online training to make sessions more accessible and supportive.
- The stories do not capture those who didn't feel physically able to engage in the sessions – the older and more vulnerable, for whom it was too much too soon.
- Some opportunities have not continued that people found really valuable, such as the walking group.

3. Support for community-based collaborative ways of working

The delivery of AR2 was only possible thanks to the willingness of the district council and local organisations to step up and work together amidst the challenges of the pandemic.

We wouldn't have been able to do it in such a short timescale, you know, in a pandemic, virtually, without the support of the District Council, and from the willingness of those organisations to step up and actually work in a really difficult time for everyone. Their enthusiasm to support their communities just, just blew us away really. We're very lucky, because ultimately, we access the funding, coordinate and submit all the funding bids, but really, working with partners to target those who need it most in the right areas – that's such a privilege. It was wonderful to be able to do that in that timescale.

Everything completely changed with the pandemic, it was just very eye opening and freeing to be able to explore a different way of doing things. Being able to make new relationships, in this case, but they're all virtual, which was very strange.

From the outset local partners and residents were central to the design and delivery of activities. Many of the sessions were embedded in existing groups and relationships, and led by local leaders and members of the community.

So there is this sense of belonging. I like that the Church comes up with a lot of programmes to keep people in each other's lives. So you're never lonely. You're never on your own.

This led organisations who would not have otherwise come into contact to start working together in new ways, many of which have been sustained and integrated into wider work.

Tom wanted me to speak to the community and was interested in doing a class for children in the local community. Banbury Mosque had never done anything like this before, so we were nervous, and a lot of work had to be done from both sides to get partners to work together.

The Mosque community was not working closely with the Council and authorities before, but now they're wholly integrated. There were a lot of provisions out there that weren't being used because the Council did not know how to collaborate with the Mosque and did not have a liaison. Now the Council and other organisations know what the community would like. For instance, they understand the desire for segregated classes, and they have provided this for us.

What enabled this to happen?

- Having a shared understanding and commitment across partners that physical wellbeing = mental wellbeing.
- A willingness amongst partners and individuals to be flexible, adapt and be open to new ways of doing things.
- Supporting people on the ground to drive activities and ideas.
- Linking groups and supporting them to offer activities to one another (e.g. health walks and sharing the gym).
- Using Zoom as a neutral space for different groups to come together, which was inclusive and more accessible for those unable to leave their homes.
- Active Oxfordshire being flexible in the support offered to partners, often providing more admin and logistics whilst local partners could drive the shape and direction.
- Supporting local groups to take the work further themselves through helping them with grant applications.

Challenges and ways in which this didn't happen

- Zoom worked less well with church groups and older residents who were unable to access it, excluding some individuals and groups.
- Attempts to constantly adapt became tiring.

Learning going forward

The stories reflect the impacts that the AR2 has had on those involved - it gave people a sense of pride, purpose and motivation; it improved the physical and mental wellbeing of both staff and participants; it helped to foster new connections and relationships both between residents and across partners; it supported groups and communities who had not previously engaged in physical activities to be active; and it enabled community leaders to put provisions and infrastructures in place so that activities could be sustained long-term.

Going forward, what have we learned from the AR2 stories and how can we take this into future collaborative projects?

1. Listening to people on the ground and designing projects together.
2. Supporting and trusting residents and volunteers to lead activities and make decisions.
3. Recruiting people with existing relationships and connections in the community.
4. Involving passionate trainers who were able to inspire and motivate others.
5. Being open to new ideas, how they might grow, and where they might lead.
6. Thinking long-term about how to embed activities and make them sustainable.
7. Focussing on the little things that can make a big difference.
8. Recognising that there is diversity within any group; there is no one size fits all.
9. Being brave, taking risks and being ok when things fail.
10. Being flexible and responding to the needs of different partners and communities.

With thanks to the storytellers, story collectors, transcribers and editors, and staff and partners who attended the Discussion Session.

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