

Active Reach Phase One – Storytelling Impact Report, March 2021

Written by Sarah Cassidy, Arts at the Old Fire Station

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Section 1: Introduction	
Active Reach Phase One	2
Storytelling Evaluation Methodology	3
Storytelling Active Reach Phase One	3
Section 2: Impact & Learning	
Themes	4
Impact & Learning	6
1. Improved physical and mental wellbeing and life chances	6
2. Reduction in the inequalities surrounding physical activities which have widened as a result of Covid-19	8
3. Increased support for community-led, hyper local approaches	9
4. Increased collaboration and strengthening of relationships	11
Learning going forward	13

Executive Summary

Phase One of Active Reach aimed to support residents in Blackbird Leys and Greater Leys to keep physically active during Covid-19. The project was funded by Sports England’s Tackling Inequalities Fund, and was led by Active Oxfordshire, who distributed grants to local partners, including Access Sport, Age UK Oxfordshire, Aspire Oxford, KEEN, Oxford Hub, Oxfordshire Mind, OXSRAD and Oxfordshire Youth. Partners worked in collaboration to provide online classes, local volunteer networks, bike libraries, sports holiday schemes, young leaders' training programmes and specialist physical activity resources.

To evaluate the impact of Phase One of Active Reach we have used the storytelling evaluation methodology. This involved collecting the stories of 6 people who participated in different ways in Active Reach – what was their experience of Active Reach? What did it mean to them? How has it

impacted them personally? We 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 process brought to the fore the impacts of Phase One of Active Reach – it increased collaboration and strengthened relationships – with funders, across partners and between residents; it helped to reduce some of the inequalities surrounding physical activity, which had widened as a result of the pandemic; it supported hyper-local ways of working; and it improved the physical and mental wellbeing and life chances of those involved.

The stories also showed what enabled these things to happen, and what we can do in order to take this learning forward into the next phases of Active Reach and future projects. This includes the following key things:

1. Recruit local staff and volunteers
2. Support collaboration between different partners
3. Invest time and energy in relationship building
4. Remember everyone is reachable
5. Focus on the small things that matter
6. Consistency and follow-through are key
7. Be flexible and adaptable
8. Focus on quality, not just KPIs
9. Keep the long view and think about sustainability
10. Have fun

Alongside this report we urge you to read the stories, which reflect the impact of Phase One of Active Reach through the voices and words of the people involved.

Introduction

Active Reach Phase One

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 aims to target low socio-economic groups, people with long-term health conditions or disabilities, and Black, Asian Minority Ethnic groups. The project is funded by the Sports England Tackling Inequalities Fund, and is led by Active Oxfordshire, who are responsible for distributing grants to local partners.

There are three phases to the project, each of which focuses on a different target group or area in Oxfordshire. The first phase of Active Reach took place from November 2020 to March 2021 and focused on Blackbird Leys and Greater Leys in Oxford city. Active Oxfordshire were responsible for distributing funding to local partners, and Oxford Hub played a key role in coordinating delivery on the ground. Partners included Access Sport, Age UK Oxfordshire, Aspire Oxford, KEEN, Oxford Hub, Oxfordshire Mind, OXSRAD and Oxfordshire Youth, who used a wide range of innovative approaches to reach people and help them get active. Activities included online classes, local volunteer networks, bike libraries, sports holiday schemes, young leaders' training programmes and specialist physical activity resources.

Storytelling Evaluation Methodology

The Old Fire Station is a centre for creativity in Oxford housing two organisations: the homelessness charity Crisis and Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS). AOFS encourages people from all backgrounds to understand and shape the world in which we live through stories, creativity and the arts, and by connecting with others. Since 2017, AOFS has been using the storytelling methodology to evaluate the impact of its work and has recently begun training and supporting external organisations to do the same.

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 – the storytellers decide what is the most significant impact 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** – these are people who have been involved in different ways in the project. This might include staff, volunteers and participants.
2. **Collecting stories** – each storyteller meets with a trained AOFS story collector. They have a conversation – in person, on Zoom or over the phone – about their experience, what had changed for them as a result of 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 Active Reach
 - 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 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. The outcomes of this discussion form the basis of an evaluation report.

Active Reach Storytelling

To evaluate Phase One of Active Reach, stories were collected from 6 people involved in the project, including both staff and activity participants. Conversations with these individuals were recorded, transcribed and then edited into 1-2 page stories. Each story captures the teller's unique experience of Active Reach – their lives, their stories and what changed for them personally as a result. The Discussion Session, held on 25 February 2021, was attended by people who brought different

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

perspectives on the project – from project partners of both Phase One and Two of Active Reach, to people with little or no involvement. Participants included individuals from Active Oxfordshire, Age UK, Arts at the Old Fire Station, Aspire, DAMACUS, KEEN, Oxford City Council, Oxford Hub, Oxfordshire Mind, South Oxfordshire and Vale of the White Horse District Councils. These discussions formed the basis for this impact report.

The stories provided rich qualitative learning that was contextualised within people's lives. The images they conjure, and the language used are evocative and memorable. The stories do not just speak about big changes, but many focus on smaller, subtle impacts – details, which are often brushed aside by more conventional evaluation methodologies. By its very nature, the methodology was also collaborative and embodied many of the things at the centre of Active Reach – listening, relationships, and collaboration. However, it is also important to remember when engaging with this learning that these are the experiences of just 6 individuals, all of whom were willing to tell their story. Alongside this learning it's important to ask whose voices isn't heard as part of this process and what this might tell us.

Section 2: Impact & Learning

Key Themes

While each story brings its own unique perspective and insights, there are several key themes which echo across the stories.

1. **Perseverance** – whether constantly adapting activities to meet lockdown restrictions, or taking to the streets every day to recruit participants – people persevered in finding ways to overcome challenges, make things happen, and keep reaching people. On a personal level, people also showed perseverance in overcoming personal challenges and finding ways to move forward with their lives.

...we had ups and downs, like the Gym Bus was part of Active Reach, and that burned down. People had put a lot of work into it. We lost a lot of equipment but we persevered, even though we didn't have a bus, we went up there in our cars, we sat there with the hand gel, all through these difficult times we kept persevering. And people turned up through that, and they're still coming to the Zoom meetings. We've had a lot of obstacles, but we've got over them, we're still doing it. Even if it's from our own homes, we're still running the classes.

2. **Consistency** – activities were consistent and reliable. The regularity of sessions provided routine for both staff and participants, which was especially valued in amidst the uncertainty of the pandemic. Partners could also be depended upon to consistently follow-through with commitments, which helped to build trust.

They have the resources, and they stick at it. They said that they were going to get everyone a bike and they didn't let us down. It wasn't just a case of saying, 'okay, we're gonna get you all bikes,' and then suddenly, they could only get one for my daughter. And then they're like, 'actually, we're just gonna leave it now, 'cause we've tried, and we can't do it.' They kept on it until they kept their promise.

3. **People were helped by helping others** – participating in Active Reach made people want to help others, often in ways that they themselves had been helped. Both staff and participants also got a lot of enjoyment and fulfilment from supporting others through the project.

I've just got so much from Aspire, including my job with Active Reach. We do a boxercise class on a Thursday, and I'm like a Project Assistant with Aspire for that. I've sort of been doing it from the beginning. I get involved with clients - talking, building up that rapport with them. Helping them with keeping fit – and wellbeing. I like helping people as well, I get that gratification if I help someone.

When it's just you being helped, sometimes you're ignorant to it. But when someone tells you that what you've gone through could help guide others through it, I do believe that it makes a big difference. When you're believed in to help someone, it helps you help yourself just as much.

- 4. The small things matter** – often it was the small things – like being given a tennis rackets, or sending someone a card – that mattered to people, made a difference, and helped to build relationships.

They've checked up on me, they gave me a Christmas card, and then yesterday one of them messaged me to see how we're getting on with the bikes. I mentioned about the flat tire, and straightaway she said, 'we'll get a mechanic round when we can and he'll try and fix it for you.'

- 5. Trust** – there was trust in the way funding was administered by Sports England and distributed by Active Oxfordshire; in the relationships between partners both big and small; and amongst staff, volunteers and participants. This trust allowed people to responsive, flexible and adaptive to local interests and opportunities, and helped to build relationships.

Sports England recognised that we, as one of the third sector partners, can provide that enabler role to ultimately facilitate a very agile, very reactive, quick response to get to those communities in need, rather than waiting for a typical bureaucratic approach.

- 6. Joy and fun** – whether it was cycling with your kids in the rain, sharing recipes and connecting with others online, or feeling the benefits of physical exercise, people enjoyed themselves and had fun.

That was our favourite day, when it poured down. There was massive puddles and we just spent, I think it was like forty-five minutes, just racing through them. Just this one puddle, because it went up to, my youngest is quite short, and it went up to his knees. Just speeding through. We got bloody soaked but it was just fun.

- 7. Blurring of boundaries and roles** – there was fluidity in roles across different aspects of the project. Several of the storytellers started as beneficiaries and went on to become staff. Similarly, staff mention being able to participate and benefit from activities both as staff and as individuals. The collaborative nature of the project also meant there was often a coming together of different organisations as part of one activity session.

It's brilliant that Aspire, Achieve and Oxfordshire Mind all run this session together, and that's quite unusual to have three partner organisations all running one session together. And the fact that it's partnership working, the fact that we're from three different organisations, all coming together to run one session, has been hugely beneficial as we all bring something different to the session. It's also had added benefits, because I have benefitted from the sessions so much myself, which wasn't something I really anticipated. If it was just Oxfordshire Mind running the session, I would be running both the physical activities session and the wellbeing session. I don't think I would have benefited from it then, because then you're very much the facilitator and it's a lot of work. Whereas because we're all doing a little bit each, it allows all of us to benefit from the session too. So that partnership working, I think has allowed us all to support each other as workers and as individuals.

Impact & Learning

As part of the Discussion Session we discussed the impact and learning emerging from the stories in relation to 4 key outcomes.

1. Improved physical and mental wellbeing and life chances

Participating in Active Reach impacted people in a multitude of different ways – it improved mental health, supported people to develop confidence and new skills, made people feel a part of something, and motivated them to want to help others.

It's changed my health, my fitness, both physically and mentally. Just my outlook in life is totally different – I see it in a different way, totally. I must have been programmed a different way, I think – my behaviours, all the ways I used to act, communicate with people. I'm more positive, more open-minded about stuff. I've built a support network up as well. And now I'm growing, the more I deal with stuff I'm growing. Like I couldn't use a laptop when I first took this role on, and now I'm typing with two hands. And I'm using Zoom! Just connecting with people better. Thinking more before I talk to someone. My family, my kids, my partner. I done it because I wanted to do it. I done it because I needed to do it, there was loads of things what I decided to change. I always knew there was that other person there, if you know what I mean. And I love it, I'm passionate about it.

- **Improved physical and mental wellbeing** – people mention that being physically active and getting outdoors directly impacted on their mental health and wellbeing. Indeed, improvements in mental health and wellbeing were more pronounced in the stories than improvements in physical health.
- **Social connection** – participating gave people the opportunity to connect, socialise and meet other people.
- **Purpose and enjoyment** – those involved in the delivery of the project felt a sense of purpose and enjoyment in helping others, often in ways that they themselves had been helped.
- **Belonging** – people felt a part of the Active Reach team, and felt a sense of belonging through their involvement.
- **Skills** – through participating in Active Reach people developed transferrable skills such as IT, communication and team work skills.
- **Opportunities for development** – several people began as participants and went on to find employment, both within the project itself and beyond.

it's massively helped the kids, which then in turn helped me. It wasn't like the first three or four months, where they were kind of getting confused. You could see them again. It was just nice to see my son and my daughter be back to how they were. I can't say they were calmer because obviously they came back all hyper and wanting to talk about stuff, but they were calmer as in, you could clearly see their mental health took a massive dive with the Covid and it just kind of edged them back up a little bit.

It's changed my health, my fitness, both physically and mentally. Just my outlook in life is totally different – I see it in a different way, totally. I must have been programmed a different way, I think – my behaviours, all the ways I used to act, communicate with people. I'm more positive, more open-

mindful about stuff. I've built a support network up as well. And now I'm growing, the more I deal with stuff I'm growing.

I was suffering from low mood from being inside during the first lockdown. I was classed as vulnerable so I had to stay inside. The funny thing about this role is I'm one of the people who they were helping, now the roles are reversed and I'm on the other side helping the people who I was. My mood has changed. I'm happier, because I'm passionate about helping people. My confidence has changed and grown. Everybody I work with, they're very kind and gentle so that makes me feel very comfortable. I'm allowed to use my ideas to do what I like. Because of my injuries, I've been out of work for about a few years. I always used to have anxiety and wonder, 'oh, gosh, what am I gonna put on my CV? How am I gonna get back into work?'. So the fact that I'm in this role, even when I started out voluntary, that the team are wonderful, that I'm very passionate about what I'm doing – that means the world to me.

What enabled this to happen?

- **Focus on on-going, sustainable engagement** – once people had the resources, a lot of the activities were low-cost, and there was support to help people integrate them into their lives and engage with them on an on-going basis. Making the focus 'going cycling every week', rather than simply 'having a bike' helped to motivate this.
- **Physical activity was the gateway to engaging with mental wellbeing** – physical activity acted as an icebreaker – it created a fun, shared experience and helped to break down social barriers. It was also a leveller – it was something both staff and participants were able to engage in.
- **People could engage for different reasons** – some people came to sessions for the social elements, others to discuss their mental health, and others for the physical activity.
- **Personal relationships** – sessions provided peer support – for both staff and beneficiaries. Often people's engagement in activities built on existing relationships with partners and complimented wider programmes and support available.
- **Sessions were consistent whilst being flexible** – sessions happened at the same time every week, providing consistency and motivation, whilst also being adaptable each week to the needs and interests of the group.

Just for me, regardless of the fact that I'm a staff member, facilitating the session for other people, it's actually been really important for my wellbeing. It's kept me motivated to keep exercising every week, because even if I do nothing else, I do that Friday class. And by doing that, it means the rest of the week, I have stayed motivated to do other exercise too. These classes have helped me consistently exercise all winter, which isn't always easy – especially in lockdown.

it's just been brilliant. I've found it's benefited my mental health hugely. And I think it is that wonderful combination of having the exercise and then having a chat about mental health afterwards that does it. The exercise is a bit of an icebreaker. Because we're all on camera kind of sweating and jumping around the room, it, it breaks down the barriers. If we just had a wellbeing session to chat each week, it wouldn't do quite the same thing. The combination of exercise and wellbeing together go so well, and really allow people to open up about how they're feeling.

Even though I've been in recovery for two years now, doing all everything I've done, I still feel I need stuff like this. Because of the stuff I did in my past, I want to give a little back and show people you can change and you can overcome your fears, simple fears. That was my world then, this is a totally different world now. I've been made to feel like I belong. I'm part of Active Reach, part of Aspire, do you know what I mean? I've grown, part of the team. I like all that sort of stuff.

Challenges

The length of the project means it's hard to be authoritative about the role of Active Reach in some of the personal impacts mentioned, as there were often other contributing relationships and factors at play.

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

Active Reach was an opportunity to utilise specific funding to support communities to overcome some of the inequalities and barriers surrounding physical activity.

- **Financial barriers** – people had access to materials, resources, classes and training – from free bikes for the whole family to online boxercise.
- **Body shame** – exercising with others helped people to overcome initial inhibitions about their appearance and seeing themselves on camera.
- **Guilt** – the non-judgemental way in which support was offered made people feel more able to accept and participate.
- **Knowledge and confidence** – through attending classes people felt like they had the knowledge and confidence to start using the gym and exercise independently, something they wouldn't have felt able to do before.
- **Technical barriers** – in order to participate in online sessions, some people overcame computer literacy and technological barriers.

My youngest, he's now five, and he hadn't had a bike, and he's really wanted one. So I was saving up for his birthday, or for Christmas, and then next minute they said that he could have one as well. And they offered me one so we could go on family bike rides. And helmets, locks and lights.

I'm enjoying the exercise. I would never have dreamt to do five days a week. And now I'm eager, like, come on gyms, open, because I would actually go and not feel uncomfortable. Even on Zoom, at the end when you sit down, my hair's all over the place, my face is glowing like a lobster, and it's like, do you know what, I don't care what I look like, sound like. I'm working out.

They know how to ride bikes, they know road safety, but I've never taught them to ride with one hand and indicate. But at the summer school, the last two weeks, they took them out and taught them how to cross roads safely, how to indicate with their arms and everything like that. So they now have a bike license. Just to get a little bit of confidence.

What enabled this to happen?

- **Holistic, wrap-around approach** – Active Reach didn't just give someone a bike, but provided equipment, mechanical support, cycling skills training and bikes for the whole

family. This helped to reduce any additional financial barriers, build confidence and as a result make being active a sustainable part of people's lives. Staff were also often able to signpost people onto support in other areas of their life, often related to things which might have been indirectly preventing them from being active.

- **Inclusive, friendly, fun sessions** – the warm and welcoming atmosphere of sessions helped people to overcome inhibitions and want to take part.
- **Trust and relationships** – having a personal connection with someone in the group made people more inclined to take part and to make the leap from in-person to online.
- **It was easy to accept support** – support was offered lightly and generously and partners followed through on their promises.

They weren't patronising and they didn't make me feel like a bad parent that I couldn't provide these things. They didn't make me feel condescended to when they were talking to me or anything. It just felt more like a case of 'we've got them spare,' even though they didn't, they had to go and get them.

I used to always want to join the gym. But it's nerve wracking to walk into a gym by yourself and I never had the confidence to do anything like that. There are people out there that want to keep fit and healthy. But it's just getting them through that door. And Sue, who's running it, she's amazing. Like, she makes you feel comfortable, and she shows you what to do. I personally think that's even better because I wouldn't know what to do when I walked into a gym. And this, obviously, where it is free, it's really good, because some people can't afford gyms. They're so expensive.

Reducing the friction, reducing the barriers, getting it to those people in need is the critical element of the Tackling Inequalities Fund. It had to be able to reach those in most need, who'd had significant impact as a result of Covid. And the only way we could do that was by working through these third sector partners who were already there, well embedded with their communities, knowing their communities. So yes, that for us, was huge.

Challenges

- The stories don't include the voice of an older person, many of whom the project didn't find a way to reach. IT and technological barriers were a barrier for some, and the project would have benefited from having more training and IT support available to help overcome this.
- Child support – the closure of creches was a significant barrier to people participating and keeping active.
- Lack of engagement with some activities was attributed in part to 'Zoom fatigue' – people were less interested in participating in activities if they were only offered online.
- Handing out flyers wasn't enough to get people along – people were motivated by personal connections.

3. Increased support for community-led, hyper local approaches

From the outset Active Reach aimed for activities to be community-led and responsive to local needs and interests.

- **Activities were embedded in existing partners and community relationships** – for instance people heard about summer school and bikes through their local primary school.
- **Local partners and residents were central to the delivery** – the project involved local partners, recruited local residents and was led by their experience and relationships.

- **Group-led exercise classes** – sessions were guided and responsive to the interests of the group and peer support.

The third sector partners, they're the ones that are skilled and they know their communities, they work with them in terms of the community engagement. So it's not just us saying, 'We think this is a great idea, you take the money and deliver it.' They're telling us what's important. It's not a top down approach. It really is that community organic development there in terms of what the need is and what can be supported through this. But we have to make something sustainable out of this create a legacy from this to learn for the future.

It started through me going to Turning Point, in recovery. A few of the ladies that would come to women's group would talk about the gym session with Aspire. When I first started Turning Point, I kind of had to go to try and prove to the social services I could take care of my children. I was one of them that was being forced through the door. After a while, when you actually start recovering and understanding what you're doing is wrong, that's when you start wanting to go. Eventually, I was going through that door by my own choice. I wanted to go in there. I wanted to get clean. I wanted to work with these people. So if there was anything that I could see was going on, if it took my fancy, then I'd be like, right, okay, how do I get on to this then?

What enabled to happen

- **Working with local partners** – this enabled Active Reach to build on local knowledge, networks and existing relationships with residents.
- **Multiple pathways to getting involved** – through the school someone learnt about summer activities, which led to them receiving free bikes; through their involvement with Aspire people heard about boxercise classes. There were many ways to hear about activities and get involved, many of which built on collaboration and cross-referrals from partners.
- **Flexibility** – partners had a degree of freedom and flexibility to adapt and be responsive to local engagement. This was supported by Sports England who remained flexible and open to change, particularly in response to Covid-19. This meant that when things didn't work or weren't possible, partners could adapt and try new approaches.
- **Focus on relationships** – time, energy and focus went into building on existing relationships with people and fostering new ones.
- **Involving local people in delivery** – involving local staff with relevant lived experience and local knowledge significantly shaped the way activities were run and who engaged with them.

The most important thing is talking to people. One of the things here is a lot of people don't realise there's so much diversity. So, like, when you work with communities, you have to remember, there's people who've come from elsewhere, you know, you've got refugees and things. Not everybody can speak English. You take this for granted. Not everybody can read. You take this for granted. Remember not everybody can see. And not everybody can hear. So when they say, for example, where I live, we're a deprived area, we're hard to reach, it's actually about finding a way to reach the people. Everybody's reachable. It's just you have to think how you're going to reach them.

Because I'm living in this area, I know a bit more about how things go and the areas we need to reach. I find a lot of times when you do things in Blackbird Leys, people forget about the people in

Greater Leys, you need to engage more inside the pocket. It's all about just having conversations with people so they know who you are. And it's not always about activities.

The ability to get the money to the communities, via these third sector partners and to land it immediately is very satisfying. Sport England has been very flexible.

The sessions are very informal. People can dip in and out, you know, some people come just for the exercise, and most people stay around for both. The sessions are really group led which I think is important. So if the group just wants to chat that week, then we'll just chat. If they want to do a mindfulness activity, where we have some kind of relaxation and meditation, then we do that. We do quite a lot of peer support at Oxfordshire Mind where we bring people together to talk about what's going on in their lives. And we really emphasise that it's not just staff supporting service users, it's service users supporting each other - and people supporting people.

Challenges

The shift to online sessions made it harder to have a local presence and to engage people in-person.

4. Increased collaboration and strengthening of relationships

Relationships were critical at every stage of Active Reach – whether with funders, across partners or between participants.

- **Personal relationships** – people were able to spend quality time with their kids, meet new people, and communicate better with their family and friends outside of activities.
- **Relationships with staff and other participants** – people really valued the relationships they built with staff and peers, and this was often what motivated them to continue taking part.
- **Individual relationships deepened** – several people started as beneficiaries and went on to become volunteers and staff.
- **Collaboration across partners** – the emphasis on collaboration meant organisations and individuals worked closely together at every stage in the process.

Even my daughter used to come along with me, before the lockdown. She's 16. She goes through a tough time herself with her mental health, and 2020 wiped out her GCSEs, so she's been struggling. She loved it.

How I got involved, actually, is I applied for a sports pack. And then I was talking to Emma, who's now my manager, and we met up and we was talking about things. I'm very passionate, because I've done something like this before, which was called Active Women. I basically worked with women in Oxford, to focus on sporting activities. So when this come about I said, 'yes, I'm very interested, I'll volunteer some time.' And then I went from volunteering to working eight hours, and now I do 15 hours.

We know that there's a lot of good work that goes on in Oxfordshire, but we are so disconnected. The collaborative working with our partners has been really productive and had a very positive outcome; the agility, the flexibility, the collaboration, the positivity around it all, to work cohesively together, knowing that there's no 'I' in this team. We all worked very collectively to be able to support and deliver this to our communities in need.

What enabled this to happen?

- **Passion and collective desire** – individuals, partners and funders shared a commitment and belief in Active Reach and its goals, and people were prepared to work together and go the extra mile to make things happen.
- **Commitment towards collaboration** – the funding and design of the project focussed on collaboration and the pooling of expertise. This led to a more joined-up, connected approach across partners.
- **Open, honest facilitators** – Active Oxfordshire were skilled at bringing people together, diffusing competition for funding, and acting as an open, honest and trusted facilitator.
- **Involvement of local people and organisations** – working with local partners enabled the project to build on existing knowledge and relationships and there was a focus on building the project with people and not for them. Recruiting local people with relevant lived experience was critical in building relationships and enabling the project to reach people from across different communities.
- **Time and energy** – perseverance, energy and resource went into building relationships with individuals and reaching new people.
- **Small things mattered** – listening and delivering on the details that mattered to people, and making time to connect over the small things – like sharing recipes – helped to build relationships and trust.
- **Person-centred approach** – several people describe how they initially engaged with the project in one way, and then went on to play a different role. Partners were responsive to individual interests, skills and expertise, and were able to see the potential to grow and evolve relationships with people in different ways.
- **Personal connections** – personal connections and face to face contact were often important in instigating and sustaining relationships with people.
- **Quality rather than metrics** – the flexibility and trust between Sports England and partners, along with the lack of hard objectives and KPIs, was freeing, and meant people could be responsive and flexible to needs as they emerged and focus on relationships and quality, rather than reporting and counting.

I think it's Sue that made me want to keep going after it went online. She makes everyone feels so comfortable. When I first turned up it was like I was coming into a little family already made. I'm quite a shy person and nervous around new people. But Aspire workers, they all make you feel comfortable. They've got open arms, they're welcoming and they make you feel like you can approach them if you need anything. If I get on with someone, they can drive me into good things.

We all realised very quickly that we didn't want this to be delivered through separate pathways. We wanted it to be connected -to make sure that we had a bit of a wraparound approach within that community, to really understand their needs. And it wasn't single, segregated activity opportunities that went in the bid, but each of them brought their own expertise. This was coordinated through the Hub and some of the funding supported this coordination role. It was more of a joined up, connected approach.

I've always had a really close relationship with Active Oxfordshire. They've always been really amazing at bringing different partners together. You know, working with leisure partners, charity partners, local authority, they're great at getting everyone together to work towards the same goal. That's something that can be tricky sometimes, because charity partners are often in competition for the same pots of funding. So they've been incredibly important, I think, in this. They bring everyone together. We're all being funded to run this on a Friday, every week. And without that funding, it's probably not something that we would have set up.

Challenges

There was a tension between wanting to get things done quickly, and building meaningful relationships. Some pieces of work didn't happen, or didn't happen in the way that people were hoping they would, because there wasn't enough time to build relationships with people in the community.

Learning going forward

As one of the storytellers mentions, 'out of adversity springs opportunity'. Covid-19 led to Active Reach – a project which helped enable residents to overcome some of the barriers to engaging with physical activity, improve mental and physical wellbeing, and develop new skills and opportunities. It did this in a way which was rooted in collaborative, relationships and community led-approaches.

Going forward, what have we learned from Phase One of Active Reach and how can we take this learning into future projects?

- 1. Recruit local staff and volunteers** – let the project be led by people with local expertise and connections.
- 2. Support collaboration between different partners** – build on the expertise and relationships of local organisations, and involve partners that can bring different skills and expertise, including pragmatic skills such as IT training for online sessions.
- 3. Invest time and energy into relationships** – relationships were what enabled deeper collaboration between partners, and instigated and sustained people's involvement.
- 4. Remember everyone is reachable** – it often starts with a conversation, face-to-face meetings help, and things need to be tailored towards people's needs and context.
- 5. Focus on the small things that matter** – paying attention to the small things can make a big difference, and can play an important role in building relationships and trust.
- 6. Consistency and following through are key** – they provide routine and help build trust.
- 7. Be flexible and adaptable** – it's important for partners to have freedom to change, adapt and be responsive to local people, relationships and needs.
- 8. Focus on quality, not just KPIs** – when there is a relationship of trust between funders and partners, and people aren't distracted by KPIs, people can focus on quality, relationships and what impact looks like.
- 9. Keep the long view and think about sustainability** – we need to find ways to sustain and hold onto the relationships and inroads made through projects, and continue beyond the lifespan of the project.
- 10. Have fun** – fun is what makes people want to take part and gives them something to look forward to – it should be a key outcome of the work.

With thanks to:

The storytellers for sharing their stories.

The story collectors: Simon Garrood, Andrew Jones, and Justine Malone.

The transcribers: Beth Robertson and Katherine Tomlinson.

The story editors: Sofia Smith-Laing and Renata Allen.

The Discussion Session attendees: Emma Anderson (Oxford Hub), Rita Atkinson (DAMACUS), Nathan Beven (South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils), Ellie Clark-Jaques (Oxford Hub), Emma Collins (Oxford City Council), Sara Fernandez (Oxford Hub), Simon Garrood (Arts at the Old Fire Station), Richard Claydon (Active Oxfordshire), Katie Forsyth (KEEN), Claire Gray (Oxfordshire County Council), Molly Gillett (Aspire), Eliza Harry (Oxford Hub), Annie Holden (Active Oxfordshire), Peter Johnson (Age UK), AJ (Arts at the Old Fire Station), Josh Lenthall (Active Oxfordshire), Ross Munro (Aspire), Jo Paterson (Vale and South District Council), Annie Silence (Oxfordshire Mind), Natasha Summers (Oxford Hub), Lucy Tappin (Active Oxfordshire),

Facilitated by colleagues from Arts at the Old Fire Station.

Active Reach partners: Access Sport, Active Oxfordshire, Age UK Oxfordshire, Aspire Oxford, KEEN, Oxford Hub, Oxfordshire Mind, OXSRAD and Oxfordshire Youth.

Funders: Sports England, who made this work possible.

Written by Sarah Cassidy, Arts at the Old Fire Station, March 2021.

