



People's Health Trust: Active Communities Case Study

Borderlands: Drop-in project

People's Health Trust believes in a world without health inequalities. The Trust funds small and local projects in neighbourhoods that are most affected by health inequalities with funding generated through The Health Lottery. Active Communities is one of its funding programmes and grants aim to support people to create or shape local projects that will help their community or neighbourhood to become even better, and require local people to design and run these projects. Typically lasting up to two years, the grants are between £5,000 and £50,000 for each project. The programme's main intended outcomes are:

- **Collective Control:** Ideas designed and led by local people. Regular participation of residents, who are empowered to lead and take ownership of the project design, delivery and development.
- **Social links and ties:** Stronger connections between people. Decreased social isolation and loneliness, and improved connection, friendships and collective support networks among participants.

This case study draws on face-to-face interviews with project leads and staff, a telephone interview with a partner and focus groups with participant volunteers and participants across two visits, which took place in spring and summer 2019. It explains how people came together to shape and lead the Borderlands Drop-in project and shares what they have learnt and achieved as part of the 2018-19 Active Communities evaluation.

Key facts

Borderlands Drop-in project

Bristol

£43,777 of People's Health Trust funding through Health Lottery South West

Main activities

- Access to food and warmth; English classes; information and signposting to other refugees and asylum seekers

Key outcomes

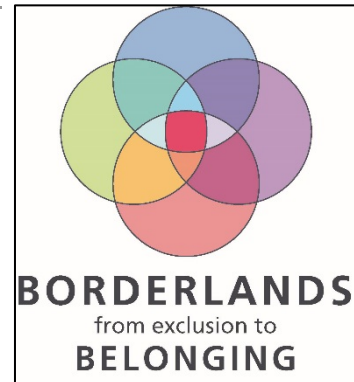
- Improved social links and ties
- Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets
- Individual and collective action

About the project

Borderlands is a charity working with refugees, asylum seekers, and other people with immigration issues in inner city Bristol. The charity is based in a Catholic church and is based on humanitarian principles. The Drop-in project ran on two mornings each week, including one lunchtime. It was an existing project that had been growing since 2011, and the People's Health Trust funding was provided in support of this work, to extend the number of project participants and volunteers.

The drop-in centre offered refugees and asylum seekers access to food, warmth, English classes, information and signposting to other services. It brought together participants from over 50 countries, many of whom shared similar life experiences. Participants could make social contact, access services, and improve their English.

The project encouraged participants to become 'members', who could then help to run and develop activities e.g. by running the welcome desk, supervising an art table, planning and cooking meals, serving in the café, and/or signposting peers to local services. This informal mentoring included signposting to specialist advice agencies and providing light-touch advocacy support, such as contacting a utility company on a member's behalf. A parallel peer mentoring project was also provided, and participants can be referred to this to receive one-to-one support.



How did local people shape and lead the project?

Task-based volunteering was one of the several ways for people to get involved in shaping and leading the project. 'Members' could access food at the café, and this sharing of food was a central component of the project. Volunteers helped prepare, serve and clean up after meals: collaborative processes which helped to build self-esteem, confidence, and to foster social contact and friendships through purposeful activity.

There were also volunteers helping to run the welcome desk, registering new participants and explaining the project services available. An art table was staffed by volunteers who encouraged their peers to try different arts and crafts to help express themselves. Some volunteers provided signposting support, helping new arrivals to Bristol to orientate to the local area and raising their awareness of specialist services: this essential support was said to be oftentimes the first point of call for new arrivals to Bristol. Signposting to regulated health, housing and legal advice enabled participants to begin to rebuild their lives following trauma and displacement. The signposting support also helped bring about outcomes as considered below.

"The signposting team do trouble-shooting, [and] sometimes do new member registrations. So they help people with queries: their water bill, someone who needs to understand... a housing problem." (Project lead)

The 'drop-in' approach enabled participants to attend when they could, which was important as new refugees and asylum seekers may not know how long they will be in Bristol for, or may be required to attend appointments during session times.

A members' forum normally provided more structured opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to input to the development of the project and the charity's wider services, but this work was on hold at the time of both visits.

"There has been a real change in their roles and management styles within the two years, with people becoming a lot more involved in the organising.... which feels a lot more sustainable."

(Project lead)

What has the project achieved?

Over a two-year period, the project experienced rapid growth. Outcomes include reduced social isolation and increased social connectedness among volunteers and participants. The project also achieved collective action and control, providing participants with a voice and the opportunity to influence small-scale change. By reflecting participants' interests, the project and its activities were able to meet their needs. Staff and members were confident that the project model would effect change over the longer-term, as the community became more empowered to take action.

Improved social links and ties

Participants and participant volunteers felt more connected with their community over time, forming new friendships with other volunteers and participants, and extending their social networks. This began from the first moment a new participant attended the drop-in, because the welcome desk was run by members with lived experience of being a refugee or asylum seeker, to help put new arrivals at ease.

"We sit in the cafe and chat to other people and we are happy, we chat we are like a family." (Participant)

By providing a friendly and welcoming relaxed atmosphere, the Drop-in café' provided an important forum for bonding. This was developed by the structured activities offered. For example, English classes promoted a sense of belonging and camaraderie, emphasising the development of communication skills and using relevant examples to help orientate new arrivals to British society. Refugees and asylum seekers particularly valued this, as they often had very limited knowledge of Britain or the local community.

"This is why people like to come to this sort of English, it is not only grammar they are learning, but some things they may use to manage." (Member / participant volunteer)

The project encouraged participants to become 'members', instilling a sense of community belonging. For example, a members' day trip took place in the summer months, with a bus trip and a barbeque and games on the beach. This helped members feel valued and part of a community. Sharing experiences and supporting each other's development enhanced personal wellbeing, as well as social links and ties.

"A friend in the same accommodation told me about it. He brought me here when I first came [to] Bristol. He recommended Borderlands for socialising, meet new people, if you have a problem, they could help you to find a solicitor, or GP, help you to get energy access. Borderlands can introduce you to the GP or other healthcare." (Participant)

Individual and collective action and control

Participants engaged initially through shared food, language classes and signposting. Many were daunted by the level of change and uncertainty at that time in their lives. Once they had become a Borderlands member, participants were then encouraged to support their peers by volunteering, e.g. in a signposting role. Signposters draw on their lived experience to offer practical ideas and suggestions. Over time, these volunteers increased Borderlands' capacity to engage new participants.

"It has been successful in reducing social isolation and making sure people get to places and have someone they can talk to, so it has made a huge difference to how people access social support in the City." (Partner)

"[It's] like a family... at the welcome centre you feel like there is always someone to look after you, and you find it very comfortable... Asylum seekers feel pressure and stress, at least here they can socialise with nice people."

(Participant)



Over time and through informal conversation, participants recognised shared interests and developed support networks. Some people felt empowered to take responsibility for planning or delivering activities or specific tasks, as part of a volunteer team. This promoted ownership and commitment. More participants had taken on volunteering roles by the time of the second visit, demonstrating increased outcomes over time. In particular, an increase in kitchen help had given staff more time for safeguarding work.

"We are able to run things more safely, rather than increasing what we do or the number of people [members] we accommodate... [Staff can] do management [duties] and keep an eye on more vulnerable members." (Project lead)

Whilst many project participants remained engaged for several years, there was also a high turnover of people engaged much more briefly, often owing to their immigration status. This turnover, along with so many different languages being spoken (participants originated from more than 50 countries) created challenges for structured consultation with participants. The original project design of a steering group evolved into a members' forum and an additional women's forum. These influenced the project to some extent, e.g. on culturally appropriate food suppliers, but was on hold at the time of both visits. However, the project achieved more success with task-based consultation, empowering small groups of participants to design and lead e.g. arts or culinary activities. By the time of the second visit, these volunteer teams were flourishing as a mechanism for collaborative development.

"We try to recruit as much as possible from our member pool, which means we have a relatively high turnover of volunteers as ... people have very complex lives and so they are moving a lot. We have tried to build that into our strategy." (Project staff)

Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets

The development of participants' communication skills and cultural understanding helped to rebuild people's confidence and self-belief that they had assets to share.

"It makes me more confident, I was scared of many things, but it makes you more confident. You can do things you couldn't do that you would have done before, you go to the English, so you can say it. That is very important to us." (Participant)

Over time, participants channelled their skills into volunteering for Borderlands and some became increasingly empowered and confident to take the lead for activities. This was very evident at the second visit; some members' English skills and confidence had increased so much that they now advocated and signposted for others.

Some members had progressed from volunteer kitchen assistants, helping to prepare and serve food, to become a chef. Each Tuesday the project hosts a hot meal for around 100 participants, which is organised and led by a chef with support from a team of kitchen assistants. As participants have developed the skills and confidence to organise tasks effectively, they also reported increased happiness and life satisfaction, further strengthening personal wellbeing and supporting their personal development.

"The kitchen is a really great example of success, it's almost entirely member led. ... Being able to take part in training and running training, there's lots of opportunities for further development." (Project staff)

"They might do a shared registration in a language that's not English... . So [a participant volunteer] can do the registrations in [e.g.] French, which means those new members feel more heard, because they can communicate more freely, and their first communication with volunteers from Borderlands is in their own language."

(Project lead)



"I think I'm doing something good. I get help from the people and I have to help people as well. If you get something, you have to pay something back."

(Participant volunteer)

Participant case study

Abshir [alias] was a new arrival to Bristol from Somali who wanted to improve his English and get to know his local community. Abshir attended Borderlands Drop-in and joined the English classes. He was assigned a mentor who helped him practice his English. Developing his English language and communication skills empowered Abshir with the knowledge and confidence to start volunteering at the centre, to help his peers. Abshir undertook administrative tasks in the office and helped register new arrivals on the welcome desk. Over time, Abshir also took on greater responsibility by becoming a peer mentor at Borderlands.

"He was approached to be a peer mentor....his work experience was mainly in the drop-in, he shadowed [staff]...and was responsive....He is a good facilitator...He is able to contribute and suggest different ways of doing things in meetings...he's not timid." (Project lead)

By the time of the second visit, Abshir was progressing well with studying for his A levels at a further education college, and in his role as a peer mentor. Borderlands was keen to harness Abshir's leadership qualities further and had invited him to apply to join the Borderlands staff team, as a Drop-in assistant.

"He is shining, he is so happy...He was given a lot of support as a volunteer. He learnt skills... He is such a good example, he has come from this community and now he is able to give back, but from a different point of view from someone who has not been a refugee, he knows how it feels." (Volunteer and Trustee)

"Learning English, when you have communication outside the centre, it gives you confidence if you have to do things outside the centre and if you work here as a volunteer it gives you confidence if you go to work somewhere else, that's important."

(Participant)

Longer-term outcomes

Some members, once they had gained their right to remain status, utilised their skills and experience to progress into education and employment, or used their leadership skills in the wider community. The progression of utilised confidence and skills in this way both promoted increased individual outcomes over time, and project sustainability – leading to longer term outcomes. Members developed a sense of belonging through Borderlands, which could be maintained as they progressed on their personal journey in the wider community.

"Member volunteering has become a strategic priority, quite informally... and tracking progress on some level. That is indicative of a new way of working, we are not just delivering a service... We are trying to be smarter and have goals and a strategy, that's something that we want... That feels like a success." (Project lead)

More broadly, over time Borderlands developed its partnership working arrangements with other agencies such as the Red Cross and Bristol Refugee Rights, and demonstrated an influence over neighbourhood services including access to the courts system. This approach supported enhancing the reach of local resources. Borderlands also developed an effective partnership with the local mosque, strengthening community ownership and a sense of belonging.

"A trained solicitor...did a workshop on preparing cases on immigration detention, and...another workshop on preparing for your asylum tribunal, your appeal... They discussed questions [members] might be worried about, all of whom were asylum seekers, refugees, or undocumented migrants." (Project lead)



What has worked well?

Project leads, staff, participants and partners engaged in Borderlands Drop-in agreed that the project was a success. People's Health Trust funding enabled this established project to continue and grow. Aspects of the project that worked well included:

- **Flexibility.** The Drop-in approach enables participants to gradually develop their skills and confidence by attending when they can, recognising that refugees and asylum seekers are often living in chaotic situations, which are likely to change at short notice.
- **Devolving responsibility and encouraging leadership and autonomy.** Members who have already demonstrated commitment and reliability through volunteering, are gradually encouraged to take on more responsibility for the planning and coordination of actions.
- **Building skills, knowledge and confidence, leading to improvements in longer-term social determinants of health and wellbeing.** The structure of the project enabled members to improve their English in a supportive environment, foster social connections, and orientate themselves to the local area and services. This, alongside practical task-oriented volunteering opportunities, enabled some participants to progress into education or work, and continue to volunteer at the Drop-in, strengthening their social ties and commitment to 'giving back' to their community through collective control.

"...they help people with queries; their water bill, someone who needs to understand... a housing problem."

(Project lead)

What are the lessons?

- **Establishing meaningful member consultations to plan developments.** Structured consultation was challenging. The original project design included a steering group, which evolved into a members' forum that was then on hold at the time of both evaluation visits. Tangible task-orientated consultations or consultation for smaller groups proved much more successful, and may work best for projects with a high turnover of participants.
- **Creating and maintaining a representative volunteering base.** People's Health Trust funding provided the scope and capacity for staff to support a diverse range of participants to progress to volunteering roles. This approach has enabled the charity to develop a larger and more representative volunteering base.

"He didn't really speak English. He attended the English lessons and felt he needed to give something back, being a mentor he knows what it is like to be new."

(Partner)

The Future

The project has achieved a legacy and will continue. People's Health Trust funding was used alongside match funding from other sources including the local authority. This integrated approach ensures the Drop-in project is a core pillar of the organisation's delivery. Funding had been secured until 2021

"The drop-in is our core project, we do have the mentoring project and the housing project and they will continue, but the way our services are set up, a lot of members access services through the drop-in, ... so that will continue." (Project lead)

The project also achieved a legacy in terms of informing the organisation's approach to developing a volunteering strategy. Capacity for sustaining the delivery of the Drop-in services was greatly strengthened by the participant volunteer base built up through the People's Health Trust project. One former participant volunteer is now employed at Borderlands. In addition to the financial sustainability of the project, some of the social ties and friendships developed through the project are likely to continue.