



Breaking Boundaries

Learning Paper

Empowering Changemakers

Introduction

As a social cohesion programme, Breaking Boundaries' primary aim was to bring young people, their families, and communities together through regular activities/one-off events based around a 'cricket-themed' approach. This sought to improve community cohesion through projects in Barking and Dagenham, Birmingham, Bradford, Manchester, and Slough between 2018 and 2022.

Originally funded by £1.8 million from [Spirit of 2012](#) through its Connecting Communities through Cricket grant, the programme was led by a partnership between the [Youth Sport Trust](#) and [Sporting Equals](#). It generated key learning on how local people can be empowered to support cohesion in their local community.

This paper provides organisations working in this important arena with insight and ideas on how they might replicate Breaking Boundaries practice and learning to empower changemakers in a local community.

Key characteristics of Breaking Boundaries that enabled changemakers to be empowered were as follows: the workforce (Community Coordinators); volunteers (Community Champions); and participants.

Workforce (Community Coordinators)

Overview

A Community Coordinator, an apprentice aged 18-25 years old, was recruited in each area to support programme delivery. They were managed by a host organisation in the local area. A total of 14 Coordinators were recruited across the whole programme.

Benefits

Coordinators played a valuable role in building trust and relationships at a local level. All the five original Coordinators passed an apprenticeship qualification showing that they had demonstrated improved knowledge and skills around supporting community cohesion. Coordinators were also able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in the pursuit of other similar employment¹ illustrating how their training through Breaking Boundaries and experiences on the programme improved their employability and enabled them to continue to be changemakers beyond the lifetime of the programme.

"Before taking on the role I didn't have aspirations of working in this field of work. I have enjoyed working with different communities and groups. I want to continue working in sports and community areas of work."

(Community Coordinator)

Lessons

- **Retain staff to build trust and relationships:** Originally, there were two rounds of recruitment for Coordinators planned but instead the programme sought to retain the existing Coordinators; community cohesion and development is based around relationships and trust at a local level so retaining the existing Coordinators enabled connections and partnerships to be sustained.
- **Recruit staff with the right skills and experience:** Breaking Boundaries highlighted that despite success in the Coordinators completing an apprenticeship and developing a range of skills and knowledge, the role was much more difficult and complex than initially expected. Key knowledge and attributes that were required included: confidence to meet, engage and influence community organisations; an understanding of local community issues and an ability to support community consultation and co-production of delivery; and an ability to understand and communicate local cohesion issues. Later in the programme, staff members that had more experience of community development were recruited, which resulted in greater programme outcomes. Ongoing workforce development on cohesion and integration is also essential for all partners.
- **Ensure strong line management and support:** The learning also highlighted that given the complexity of the cohesion issues, Coordinators needed strong line management approaches from the host organisation. This supported their personal and professional development but also allowed them to support each other in addressing complex local issues.

¹ This included three Coordinators moving on to manage another physical activity programme, work for the local authority, or in roles associated with community engagement for the NHS.

Volunteers (Community Champions)

Overview

Breaking Boundaries put young people at the heart of its delivery by recruiting Community Champions. Young people aged 14-25 years old were trained and empowered to support the design and delivery of activities and community projects in their local area. Each Community Champion was supported by a local community organisation. Youth Led Change Teams were also established in each area, which supported the distribution of funding locally.

Benefits

Champions played a key role in supporting local activities and encouraging local people to participate. Champions highlighted how the role had developed their skills, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, resilience, empathy, self-belief and confidence. It also brought them progress at school, college or work, greater confidence, and additional skills in leading activities around cohesion. These benefits will support them to be changemakers in their local area in the future.



"I've improved my team working skills, communication, building confidence and leadership skills which I'm using every day talking to my friends and just by being better in social situations now."

(Community Champion, Manchester)

Lessons

- **Consider the demographic profile of Champions:** In some areas, the demographic profile of the Community Champions aligned very closely with the profile of the participants, suggesting that some groups attract similar participants to them. Champions that are representative of their local community can help to support understanding of local issues and tensions, and thus support engagement in activities.
- **Facilitate ongoing development opportunities:** Breaking Boundaries could have achieved more by identifying more ways in which its local community insight could have been used to support the knowledge development of the Champions. Champions also highlighted that they wanted more training and upskilling around greater integration between groups and ways of fostering this. In some cases, Champions were under-utilised² which led to disengagement from the programme; some community partners offered other volunteering opportunities as a way of ensuring continued engagement and development of their Champions.
- **Support local decision-making:** Local control of some funding decisions to support projects in addressing local needs was a key way to build links and trust with targeted communities. It also allowed local communities to identify the best solutions to the challenges in their communities.

² This was exacerbated by activities being put on hold during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Participants

Overview

Breaking Boundaries brought young people, their families, and communities together through regular engagement in activities and one-off events focused on socialisation, play and coaching, participation, spectating, and volunteering based around a 'cricket-themed' approach.

Benefits

Breaking Boundaries enabled different groups to come together and begin conversations about issues in their communities. It helped to create an environment where they could have the confidence to have a voice, often for the first time. Breaking Boundaries also encouraged participants to feel empowered to address local issues and develop new activities in their local community, often with people they had never met before.

Lessons

- **Use local organisations to engage participants:** Reaching out to communities through a mixed partner profile of community organisations was a good way to recruit local participants. Consistency of contact and delivery was key to ensure that trust was built overtime and to encourage regular attendance.
- **Co-produce with participants:** Extending community voice by facilitating co-production work can help build trust and empower communities to drive forward delivery that is relevant to local needs. It can also help to sustain engagement.
- **Encourage 'safe' group environments:** Breaking Boundaries' activities enabled previously reticent participants to share views and experiences with others to enable their participation in programme and other community activities. Creating 'safe spaces' enabled different groups to come together and empowered participants to raise issues they might not otherwise have done.
- **Focus on specific local issues:** By focusing cohesion discussions on specific local issues, e.g. littering or anti-social behaviour, Breaking Boundaries empowered participants to have a greater voice in their local communities and develop their own solutions to these issues when they might have felt unable to before. It also helped groups build a common goal and create commonality between groups.
- **Allow time and facilitate continued contact:** It can take time, along with suitable support, to build confidence for some groups to engage. More intensive and longer engagement with participants focused on specific cohesion outcomes can be beneficial. Facilitating groups to have continued contact in their everyday lives could also help build momentum in extending the influence of the groups created through Breaking Boundaries for joint work on asset development in their local community. This would also help to embed the connections made through the project to benefit the wider community.



"It was seeing a group of children of diverse backgrounds coming out and doing something collectively. It shows if we put our energy and we dedicated ourselves to it, we can make a difference [...]."

(Parent of Participant, Bradford)