

Investing in Community Groups

The Experiences and Impact of Investing in Community
Groups for Group Members in Gloucestershire



Investing in Community Groups

Between 2016 and 2018, researchers from Barnwood Trust met with community groups across Gloucestershire, all of whom had received at least one Small Sparks grant. These grants were launched in 2013 and intended to provide community groups with a small amount of funding (up to £250) to launch a new group, buy materials for an existing group or to expand to include more people. These grants were discontinued in 2021 following a strategic review and this report is intended as a summary of the impact this investment was said to have by some of the people involved in community groups who received a grant.

The research carried out between 2016 and 2018 looked at what happened when

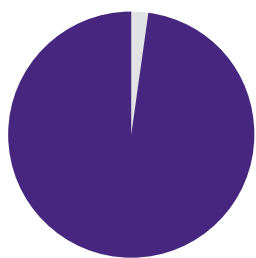
these groups came together and the experiences of those involved. We spoke to 134 people from 64 community groups.

Half of the groups we visited had received a Small Sparks grant to establish their community group and the other half were already meeting and had applied for the grant to expand, buy new equipment or to try new activities.

Participants were asked about their experiences of being involved in groups, their contact with Barnwood Trust and any **impact** from being involved in the community.

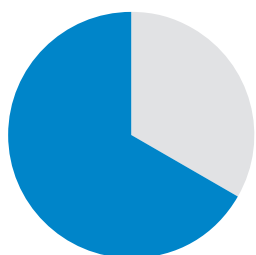
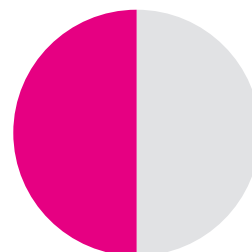
Provided in this summary are the key findings related to the impact of being involved in a community group.

Two-thirds of individuals reported one (or more) impacts of being involved in community groups. Of these:



Almost all individuals (**98%**) reported increased connections with other people and/or the wider community.

Half of the individuals who took part were doing new activities/hobbies, learning new skills and/or joining other groups.



Two-thirds of individuals reported a range of positive feelings linked to their involvement. For example, their confidence had increased, or they felt more positive.

The Experiences of Disabled People and People with Mental Health Challenge

One-third of the people who took part in the research reported being disabled or having a mental health challenge. Within this group of people **88%** were either physically disabled or had a mental health challenge.

The remaining **12%** was made up of those who told us about learning disabilities, sensory disability or who did not specify the nature of their disability.

Everyone who spoke about living with a mental health challenge and **almost three-quarters** of those who told us they had a physical disability reported at least one type of positive impact.

Of those with mental health challenges, **half** told us that their mental health had been positively impacted since attending a community group.

They felt:

- Less depressed or low
- Able to contribute to their local areas in ways they had not been able to do before
- That they had something to look forward to.



Just under a quarter of all the research participants reported having felt isolated or lonely. **For disabled people and people with mental health challenges this was a more common experience.** 84% of disabled people and people with mental health challenges who participated in this research felt isolated.

Almost every participant (97%) who said they had felt isolated or lonely reported at least one type of impact, and **two thirds** of these individuals talked about how community groups helped reduced these feelings.

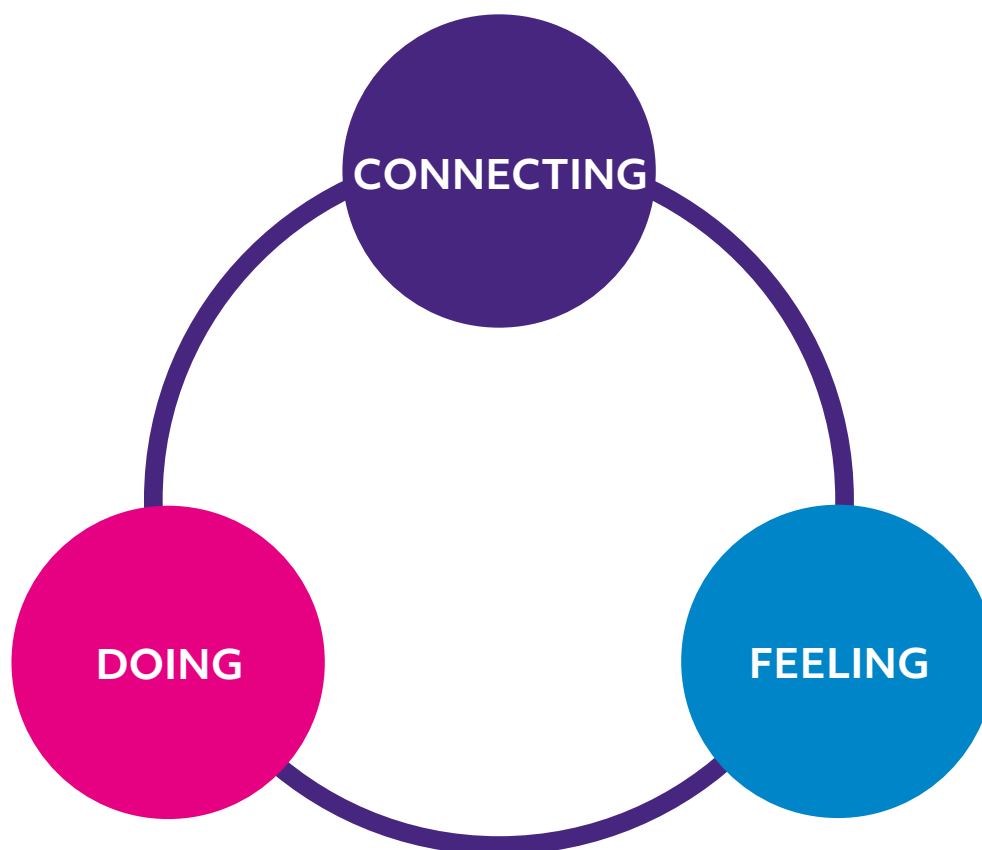
The majority (81%) of isolated individuals who reported groups having this type of impact were disabled people or people with mental health challenges. Again, it was possible to see a **greater impact** for disabled people and people with mental health challenges who were part of community groups compared to those who did not report being disabled or having a mental health challenge.

Participants who reported living with a disability or mental health challenge (80%) were twice as likely to report an impact from being involved in a community group than those who did not (39%).



Doing, Connecting, Feeling

Three key themes describe the impact of the groups about which participants spoke about:



It was often possible to see how these themes inter-related in the stories people shared about their involvement in community groups. To illustrate what is encompassed in each of these themes they are explored individually below. The summary then concludes with Tina's story to show this inter-connection more clearly.

I've got more of a social life, and I've actually got something that I can look forward to. Get up in the mornings, and actually look forward to something rather than just get up and think "well, what am I going to do today?" and say, "Yes, I'm off to the [community centre]. I'm going to open up now, I'm a volunteer.

Keith

Doing

Our conversations with group members identified a broad range of activities that took place within community groups. These ranged from arts and crafts activities such as knitting, card-making and woodwork, to gardening, board games, cooking and organising community events.

Half of the group members who reported a positive impact of being in a community group told us that they, or others, were doing more since joining a community group. Of whom:

- **Over two-thirds** were participating and contributing more to their local communities. **Over a third** of these participants also shared that they had joined more community groups and/or established their own.
- **Two-fifths** told us that they had been able to engage with activities they were passionate about – some, for the first time. New activities tried included: learning to play the ukulele, going on a boat trip for the first time and discovering knitting.

- **Just over a quarter** of these participants shared how they had learned a range of new skills within their community groups. The types of skills learned included:

- Those linked to group activities such as learning to play an instrument, or paint
- Life skills like learning to cook or public speaking
- Formal qualifications including NVQs and food hygiene certificates.

“The last couple of years I’ve kind of discovered...all the different crafts and the most recent one I’ve learned to do is I’ve learned to knit...I was dropping quite a few stitches; I was making a right mess of it really. But then, over time, I’ve got really good so I’m currently making a baby blanket.”

Judith



Membership of a community group provided opportunities for individuals to:

- Participate in different activities
- Pursue their interests and passions
- Learn new skills (or develop existing ones)

They also offered a starting point from which group members could involve themselves in their communities in different ways.

The majority (70%) of the participants who reported that they were doing more since joining a community group were disabled or had a mental health challenge.

Participants spoke of the emotional impacts that came with being involved in these activities, such as the confidence they developed, new-found self-belief, or the space to relax and feel supported.

“...when we talk about cookery classes, basic life skills, but it does build confidence, you know, self-esteem. The guys the next day would show what they’d cooked, you know, they offer it out, they take it into work the next day for their lunch...”

Leanne



Connecting

In their interviews, group members also shared the different ways they had been able to connect with their neighbours and local communities. These connections allowed individuals to:

- Form relationships with people they had seen but not previously spoken to
- Meet people they never would have before
- Discover a whole new community of people they did not know were there

98% of individuals who told us about the impacts of joining a community group spoke about how they, or others, had developed connections with other people and/or their wider communities.

“...we kind of belong to one another and we look out for one another... You miss it if you don't do it. So you just feel as though you belong to a group that you can identify with and no matter who you are, you belong.”

Julie



Of this 98%:

- **42%** spoke of how they were connected to other residents in their local area. A **fifth** of these participants shared that the connections they had made at their community groups had extended into their everyday lives when visiting the local shop or walking the dog, for example.
- Some group members spoke about the nature of the connections they had made with other people. **37%** of those who told us they had connected with other people described these relationships as “friendships” whilst other connections were likened to a family, a team or to people that could be relied upon.
- A small proportion of the participants spoke about the connectedness within their local communities improving since joining their community groups.

- This related to people taking on organisational roles within communities as well as feeling a sense of belonging or identity with their local communities. This included:
 - Volunteering
 - Accessing the local community centre or joining a Residents’ Association
 - Organising community events with neighbours
 - Feeling a sense of belonging to their community

Every person who told us they experienced isolation and loneliness reported feeling more connected since joining a community group.

“...you see people right in, you know, supermarkets and you stop, and you have a chat about what you have done from the group, you know. Whereas I wouldn’t normally, you know, I wouldn’t have seen them before...”

Lorraine



Feeling

Finally, it was possible to see from the data gathered that participation in a community group had a range of benefits to how people felt. The groups offered something that people looked forward to, helped to maintain positive mental health and provided:

A source of excitement

Added interest to someone's week

A purpose for getting out of bed

Something to focus on

Two-thirds of those who chose to discuss the impact of attending a community group spoke of how their own feelings, or those of others had been positively impacted. Of whom:

- **One in three** told us about improvements in their wellbeing. Typical reflections included:
 - How they felt happier now
 - How the group made their week
 - The difference the group had made to their lives
 - That people felt more positive
 - That things are “better now”
- **A quarter** described feeling more confident to:
 - Talk to and meet new people
 - Talk to others about living with a disability or health condition
 - To do more within their communities

This is why it helps me. Opening up a bit, talking about it, is totally different to having it bottled up and bottled up. Now you can see how I felt...I was uptight like a cork, ready to explode. But I come in here, I can open up. Yes, I can have a proper laugh.

Frank

- **One in five** reflected on feeling a sense of achievement, pride, or purpose from their involvement in a community group.
- **One in ten** spoke about the benefits they had felt to their physical health. Factors associated with these benefits included:
 - The activities themselves – for example, playing football or the way reading aided their concentration
 - Greater incentives of exercising with a group of people
 - Finding groups that were accessible to individuals' physical health needs
 - Supportive dynamics encouraging members to seek help for their physical needs
 - Having something to get up and about for

91% of people who reported an impact related to how they were feeling had also told researchers that they were disabled or living with a mental health challenge.

Being part of a community group led to impacts for participants' health and wellbeing, confidence and a sense of achievement, pride, and purpose.

Overall, people who spoke to us about being disabled or having a mental health challenge were three times more likely to report an emotional impact than those who did not talk about a disability but who were still impacted in some way.

Case Study | Tina's Story

The impact of participation in a community group was broad for a number of these participants in terms of what they did, how connected they were, and how they felt. Tina's story is presented below to illustrate how each of the three impact themes we identified inter-related. Although her story may not be typical of the majority of people, it illustrates many of the impacts felt by those we spoke to and the value of having something to do.

Following an illness, Tina acquired a physical disability that had substantial consequences for her day-to-day life. Her once large circle of friends slowly eroded over time until she felt isolated, lonely and was receiving medical treatment for depression. She was in constant pain and often stayed in bed, rather than leaving the house. These experiences led to her seeking somewhere she could share her feelings and find support and advice from people who understood. Since joining this community group, however, Tina has reported multiple impacts.

Tina's routine changed from getting ready, but with nowhere to go, to having something to look forward to and a group of people who she could call on to meet with. The group contributed to her rebuilding her social networks and ultimately led to positive improvements to her wellbeing.

Having the group to look forward to and the connections she had made helped Tina to feel more confident and to have fewer "bad episodes". This is not to say, however, that she felt completely confident or completely free of pain. Tina reported still learning to go out and about alone in her wheelchair and still being in just as much physical pain.

In finding something to do with people who understood her situation and supported her, Tina reported feeling happier, more positive and finding a drive that she did not previously have.

I've had less bad episodes. I think when I am in a lot of pain, I've got something to get up for, whereas before, I was staying in bed because I was in a lot of pain but I'm getting up. Perhaps, because I'm more positive and...just happier. It's given me that, I don't know, that drive maybe.

Tina

“...I used to get up...get dressed, straighten my hair, put some make-up on and then, why I have done that because I’m not doing anything. And now yes, now I am doing something, or I can ring someone and say do you want to do something? Or I come here. So it’s made a difference, you know, all round for me.”

Tina

Summary

This research highlights how community groups have been a great place for participants to try out different activities, connect with new people and promote positive wellbeing:

Two-thirds of individuals who the researchers spoke to, representing 80% of the community groups we visited, reported one (or more) positive impacts of being involved.

Disabled people and people with mental health challenges were twice as likely to report a positive impact of being involved in a community group and three times more likely to have been impacted emotionally than those who were impacted but did not talk about impairment.

Three types of impact were identified: doing, connecting, and feeling.

Group members were able to pursue new activities, learn new skills, and contribute more to their local communities.

Connections were made at groups between people that led to friendships, a sense of belonging, and greater connectedness within communities.

Being part of a community group led to positive impacts to participants' health and wellbeing, confidence, and a feeling of a sense of achievement and purpose.

We would like to say a huge thank you to everyone who took part in the research, we really appreciate it.

If you would like to find out more about the research, or request it in another format please contact:

Dan Jacques | Lead Researcher

dan.jacques@barnwoodtrust.org

07701 281933

Barnwood Trust
Overton House, Overton Road, Cheltenham,
Gloucestershire, GL50 3BN

01242 539935 | www.barnwoodtrust.org

Registered charity number 1162855