A Year in View:
Bristol Active City Network
Realist Evaluation Report Executive Summary
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BRISTOL ACTIVE CITY

BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL

1. Background

In July 2024 the Bristol Active City Network had hopes that Bristol would be selected as one of the cities to receive funding as part of an expansion of the "Place-based portfolio". To this end, Sport England provided "Transition Funding" in order to developing BACN's submission with the following conditions:

- Clear insight underpinning the intended approach and mapping of the local system undertaken.
- A clear Theory of Change which represents the approach locally.
- A clear local evaluation and learning plan to the work.
- The use of the System Maturity Matrix as a reflective and developmental tool for shaping next steps locally.
- Participation in System Maturity Surveying to make a shared assessment of the progress and change across the systems Bristol City Active Network is a part of in relation to physical activity.
- Producing 6-monthly evaluation and learning reports.
- Evidence of impact of any early test and learn work with recommendations of next steps.

The intention from Sport England was for there to be connectivity and synchronicity between all phases and discreet elements identified above, as opposed to these being isolated pieces of work. With this in mind what follows is a realist evaluation evidencing how the Bristol City Active Network has met these conditions along with details of learning and insight emerging in the process.

2. Realist Evaluation

While all evaluations explore outcomes to some extent, the philosophy underpinning a realist evaluation is to understand causation and attribution – and in particular understand what is working, for whom, why and how. This approach is particularly useful for:

> evaluating complex interventions such as community based public health programmes with wider learning potential. They are particularly useful for evaluating programmes that produce mixed outcomes to better understand how and why differential outcomes occur (Mercer and Lacey, 2021)

Data included

- Field notes and observations at Bristol Active City Network meetings across phase two (July 2024-April 2025)
- One-to-one and group (in person and online) interviews with 32 members of the Bristol Active City Network (including video interviews with 21 members) conducted at different time points in the year
- Insights arising and identified from analysis of workshops and working groups
- Review of documentation and previous reports/research (for example MIOVA report)
- Minutes of Bristol Active City Network and Subgroup meetings
- Conversations with working group completing Systems Maturity Matrix
- Conversations with participants at workshops on 28th, 29th August and 4th & 5th September (44 members participating) and Theory of Change Workshop 16th October

Presentation of findings: Learning and insight emerging from the above can be found in full in the Project Report available on the BACN SharePoint, and are summarised in the numbered sections that follow:

3. A brief overview of composition of network members
4. "A year in view" series of 10 films providing in-depth insights from members of the network
5. Output, feedback and insight relating to participating in the System Maturity Assessment
6. Reflections from developing Bristol's Theory of Change
7. Considerations going forward

3. Exploring the Network

Number of members: At the beginning of phase two 98 contacts were held on the BACN database. Based on this figure the bulk of the 'work' (for example contributing to the Theory of Change and System Maturity Survey) has been carried out by approximately 47% of member organisations.

Composition of types organisation: The largest contributor to the BACN is from organisations with a 'health' focus (see fig 1.). These include Bristol Health Partners, NHS Broadmead, Inner Central and East Locality Partnership (BACN), Jump Start, Knowle West Health Park, Macmillan Champions, Maximus Beezee NHS Broadmead, Inner Central and East Locality Partnership (BACN), Off the record, SIRONA Healthcare.
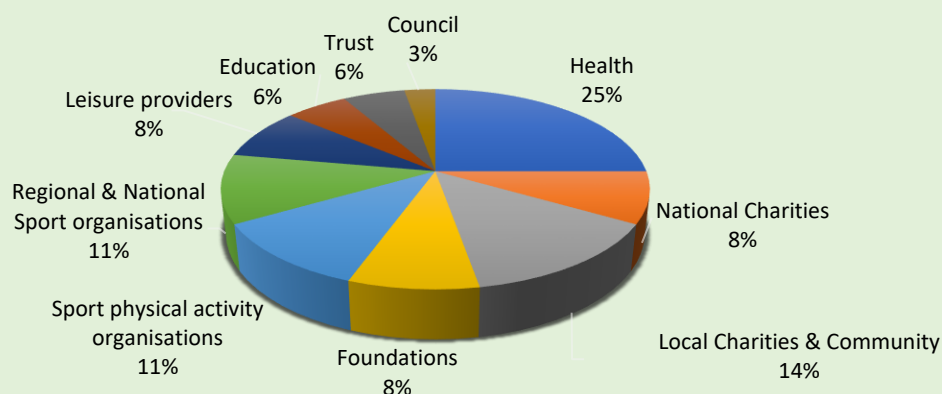

Fig. 1 Professional roles of BACN members

Composition of the network. There are similar numbers within the group of senior managers, directors, officers, lead/head, and CEO's along with similar numbers of other roles suggesting a good mix of roles and levels within organisations exists. Importantly there is also a mix of individuals with strategic responsibility as well as those (see films 6 and 8) with community facing roles.
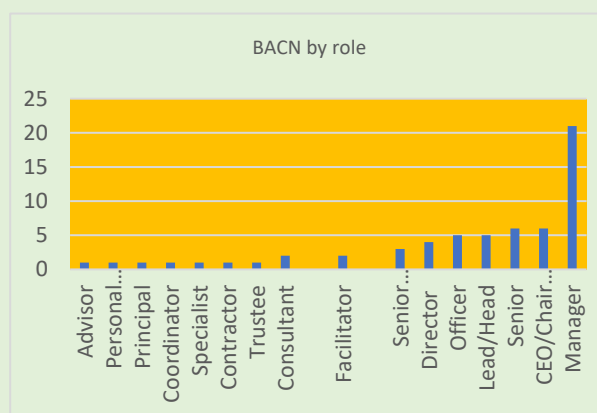

Fig. 2 Professional roles of BACN members

Who is missing? To date there has been little representation from schools, faith groups, or explicit engagement of LGBTQ+ organisations. These types of absence were also highlighted by MIOVA in phase one.

Growing and maintaining the network: In the mid-year review for NELP and Sport England we noted new members to the network were at times struggling to engage with activities due to their lack knowledge about the network and its activities. In response, a SharePoint site has been created. This holds minutes, information, and powerpoint slides from previous meetings, as well as biographies and contacts. Other changes to support "onboarding" of new members includes an introduction and welcome at the beginning of each network meeting, along with visual information reminding delegates of the network's aims and vision. One further suggestion that might be implemented in the future is for new members of be given a "mentor" or "guide" during initial sessions.

4. 'A Year in View' Films

In traditional reporting, whether this be research findings or an evaluation, textual representations have dominated. While the written word is one way of representing findings, this approach obscures the social contexts of the work and the embodied persons with their own voices who interact with and relate to others.

The aim of the films is to bring greater visibility and transparency to the work of the Bristol Active City Network and its members. Equally important, was for this representation to be accessible to all members of the network as well as to their communities and organisations. Film makes it possible to put a humane face to the work, and to hear the voices and experiences of those involved. To this end, the films form an integral part of the realist evaluation, complementing and extending the written report.

Film 1: Nadia Holland introduces the network and the film series https://youtu.be/_L-x8z6IOT8
Film 2: Guy Fishbourne https://youtu.be/CoUySzXRwMg
Film 3: System Maturity Workshops https://youtu.be/sppQ8WsunQo
Film 4: Heidi Blunden and Daniel Palmer https://youtu.be/nUADTs8yEXI
Film 5: Theory of Change Feedback https://youtu.be/dwYsCqe3Des?si=IDngFhK7wVyryfZV
Film 6: Kathy Kingdon, Danny Kite, Ellie Stanley https://youtu.be/0ITinHp0TOQ?si=62-zMgkwhq0yQYl1
Film 7: Sarah Mortiboys and Dan White https://youtu.be/578WQdtQBUI
Film 8: Courtney Young https://youtu.be/GZIZdi9MN24
Film 9: Steve Nelson https://youtu.be/fPgM84QvHFQ
Film 10: Narrative and Storytelling Workshop https://youtu.be/QCn3QWe1Sl8

5. System Maturity Assessment

Work began with initial synthesis of existing materials, documents and processes to generate a plan of action to meet NELP's deadline for submission of the CCA. From here, four workshops and interviews were held in autumn 2024 to incorporate the perspectives of the network and to gather examples of practice. Of the 98 members invited to participate, 42 members contributed to the process either online or in person.

A working group reviewed the insights and feedback in order to agree a final score (on a scale of 1-7) for system maturity for each of the 26 sub-conditions. Examples of practice for each area were also identified for each sub-condition. Through an iterative dialogue final scores and examples were submitted to NELP.

Outputs: Following submission of the CCA to NELP, a 12-minute feedback presentation was recorded and shared with BACN members detailing Bristol Active City Network's responses to the System Maturity Matrix survey. The presentation was screened at the 22nd October network meeting and remains available on YouTube via the following link: https://youtu.be/yM9O3yWwMdE

Feedback: There was initial uncertainty within the network of the value of the SMM and CCA process, however the number of individuals and organisations engaging with and contributing to the process indicate that there was good support and commitment from the network. Conversations around system maturity in Bristol was seen as a worthwhile process supporting self-reflection, learning, and relationship building and was generally considered to be time well spent. Film Three includes an introduction to this component of the network's activities alongside interviews with seven network members who participated in the SMM workshops. It documents the process that members engaged with, introduces members of the network, and provides evidence of the points summarised. It can be accessed via this link: https://youtu.be/sppQ8WsunQo

Reflection 1: Value of workshop process: As evidenced in the films, the nature of the collaborative work (1) made challenging but rewarding intellectual demands on participants; (2) provided an impetus to reflect on one's own practice; (3) offered opportunities to share reflections with other professionals in the network aiding development; and (4) created opportunities to learn about the work of other professionals in the network.

Reflection 2: Conditions for addressing physical activity inequality. The distinctions and differences between the nine conditions for addressing physical activity inequality were sufficiently clear and their importance was apparent to network members. In contrast, the 26 sub-conditions were generally found to be ambiguous and unclear. That is, there seemed to be overlap across the sub-conditions making it difficult to achieve focus. As a result, the large number of sub-conditions was found to be unwieldy and unworkable and risked detracting from discussions rather than enhancing them. On reflection, it would have been better to complete the System Maturity Matrix survey process using solely the 9 cross-cutting conditions with more in-depth accounts of and examples from practice, rather than introducing what sometimes appeared to be arbitrary further divisions into 26 sub-conditions.

Reflection 3: Inequality and intersectionality. There is concern among some network members that removing "inequality and intersectionality" (previously Condition 7) might, as a result, mean issues that relate to diversity and intersectionality (e.g., around race and ethnicity, sexual and gender identity, age, ability and disability) will slip through the net or fall from the radar in some contexts. It was felt that there needed to be some other way to flag or signpost the need for these issues to receive serious attention and to remain high on all organisations' agendas.

Reflection 4: Language and presentation. Communicating complex ideas and concepts in clear and accessible ways is difficult. There were times within this work package that this problem was significant. In particular, documents and slide sets describing the theoretical framework surrounding the SMM and CCA have proved to be confusing to many. Even the two names used to describe this process seem overly complicated: Place-Based System Maturity Matrix Stakeholder Survey and the Configurational Comparative Analysis Impact Evaluation. We too have found it challenging to make sense of the documents and slide sets and found it necessary to translate and distil the essence of this work so that it could be used constructively within the SMM workshops and wider network activities. A significant component of our work has been to simplify, interpret, distil, and translate these materials so that they may be accessible and coherent for diverse participants to engage with in a 3-hour workshop. At the least, as several network members have suggested, language needs to be simplified ('less academic') so that practitioners and community members are less likely to be intimidated or excluded.

Reflection 5: Overly formulaic? There is a view among some network members that theory around the System Maturity Matrix has taken some principles that have been embedded in sport for development for some time and made them overly formulaic and excessively complicated. This is not just about the communication of this theoretical landscape ideas, but the theoretical landscape itself. Network members, from strategy to delivery, report that work on the ground is not formulaic. The general view is that it is difficult (and futile) to try to work in a formulaic way. Network members suggest that (1) although there is a rationale for why these conditions and sub-conditions are important, they need to be distilled and simplified to be useful; (2) there needs to be a move away from 'putting everything into boxes' as real-world delivery does not unfold in this way; (3) these materials have introduced additional complication to what we all recognise to be an already complex system; and (4) a more holistic formulation is needed going forward.

6. Theory of Change

A 'Theory of Change' describes and illustrate how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It is focused on mapping out the "missing middle" between what an initiative does and how this leads to desired goals. Developing a 'theory of change' was an integral part of applying for Transition Funding. For the Bristol Active City Network, it provided an opportunity to reclaim ownership of the terms by which Bristol initiatives are created and evaluated. In practice, while some members rightly questioned the usefulness of a theory, those attending the workshops engaged in the process.

In October 2024, 24 members of the network representing 15 organisations participated in a first workshop. Outputs from this provided a base from which to develop a first draft theory of change for Bristol. Following this, additional drafts were developed, each one following a similar process of gaining input from members of the network before changes and modifications were incorporated. An in-depth discussion of its development is provided in Film 5 https://youtu.be/dwYsCqe3Des?si=IDngFhK7wVyryfZV. Below we present reflections and learning.

Reflection 1: Further refinement. In Film 7, two points are raised by Dan White regarding the current version of our theory of change:

a) While it identifies a range of outputs/outcomes, it does not directly address long-term impact. How might long-term impact be meaningfully incorporated within the model?

b) While it is directed towards equity in physical activity across Bristol, what does equity look like for the city? Is it increase in life expectancy in areas of deprivation? Is it a narrowing of the inequality gap around life expectations? Given that physical activity is a key driver in re-engagement into education, is impact about narrowing of the gap around education? Given that physical activity is a tonic to antisocial behaviour, is it reduction in antisocial behaviour in priority areas?

Further consultation is necessary before decisions can be made on a) whether greater specificity regarding long-term impact is desirable and possible within the theory of change; and, if so, b) what changes can be made to bring this about while retaining a model that remains coherent and usable.

Reflection 2: Top down or bottom up? With hindsight, we can see that the development of the BACN theory of change has been led by a top-down approach. Although it has been shaped and revised according to the experiences and responses of members of the BACN, it initially drew on the nine cross-cutting conditions for change articulated in policy documents and operationalised through the System Maturity Matrix. What may be preferable in the long term is a theory of change derived in a bottom-up fashion: i.e., from grassroots practice, communities and professionals. This would involve revising or recreating our theory of change on the basis of the stories and experiences of the diverse professionals delivering varied initiatives across Bristol. It might also incorporate the experiences of those in the community. Developing this kind of theory of change would, however, be challenging and would require considerable further work. It is unclear at this point whether this level of further investment would constitute a worthwhile use of resource.

Reflection 3: Respecting complexity. We recognise that the work of BACN unfolds within a complex system. Complex systems are generally understood to exhibit four characteristics: they are open-ended, unpredictable, evolving, and self-sustaining. These characteristics parallel systems of citywide physical activity participation. In the past, overly prescriptive approaches to physical activity promotion have led to the same outcomes: sustained inequality. A dead end as old ways of working allow no room for the creative solutions and adaptations that are required in any complex system. The result: those who are inactive remain inactive. Initiatives are too rigid to provide them with the opportunities and support they need.

When working within a complex system creativity is essential to avoid this problem occurring and reoccurring. To be useful in the 'real world' of practice, a theory of change should leave space for a degree of randomness and necessary creative responses. Individuals, organisations, and the network as a whole need room to respond creatively to unpredictable and evolving events. Neither randomness nor creativity are well catered for by models, schematics and flowcharts. The form by which the theory is expressed takes makes it difficult – or impossible – to incorporate unpredictable and evolving events. It may be that the BACN theory of change would therefore be better expressed and actioned through an alternative form.

Reflection 4: An alternative way to express BACN theory of change. One possibility is to stay close to the stories of the professionals – and perhaps community members – through showing (rather than telling) specific instances and experiences grounded in localities and neighbourhoods. A film might better communicate this than a model, schematic or flow-chart. A theory of change expressed in film would be innovative (we are not aware of this kind of approach being utilised elsewhere). It may, though, better support complexity, creativity, accessibility, theory-practice links, and educational possibilities.

7. Considerations Going Forward

Consideration 1: Value of the workshops. Six particular benefits were identified by network members (see Film 3 and Film 10):

(1) made challenging but rewarding intellectual demands - a depth and richness to conversations that generated new understandings and insight
(2) provided an impetus to reflect on one's own practice and offered opportunities to share those reflections with other professionals in the network
(3) created opportunities to learn about the work of other professionals in the network
(4) offered a 'safe space' to reflect on own biases, assumptions and experiences
(5) provided a trusting environment where different viewpoints could be placed alongside each other and issues or cases that don't fit the theory discussed
(6) facilitated new links.

Consideration 2: Focus. Several network members working at strategic level (see e.g., Film 7 and Film 9) share the view that a unified focus on one (or a few) priority area/s needs to be identified to guide short to medium-term development and initiatives. Critical to the network's success going forward may therefore be shared commitment to a more tightly defined focus alongside the maintenance and development of existing relationships and effective collaborations between organisations and individuals within the network.

Consideration 3: Network organisation. An important question going forward is: How can the network arrange itself to work more effectively and efficiently on different work packages? The BACN is a network of professionals working in associated areas. There is a need for participants in network meetings to stay in tune and in touch with developments. Otherwise progress may be inhibited either through reduced awareness of ongoing work or through repetition for catch up. Online materials (e.g. films, presentations) mitigate this, providing an on-boarding resource and opportunity for those unable to participate in a meeting to get up to speed.

At present, there is also a feeling that communities may not be sufficiently represented. A development priority is to find ways of better incorporating community perspectives within the network. One possibility might be a series of smaller, focussed 'special interest groups' which are allowed/encouraged to develop in an organic way that allows professionals committed to a certain issue, locality, or topic to come together in more agile, responsive and efficient working groups. This will potentially reduce the problem of 'everybody for everything' or 'everyone joining everything' (e.g., Film 6, 7 and 9) which can be resource inefficient. It is a way of streamlining which individuals/groups work on particular projects that are relevant to the work that they do.

Consideration 4: Documenting impact. How can the network plan to collectively monitor, document, demonstrate and share evidence of impact? This question is always challenging, but more so when the impact that is created is not amenable to traditional approaches to measurement. In addition, it is difficult (or impossible) to plan for how to document impact forms that may emerge during the course of an initiative rather than being planned in advance. The likelihood of this is increased when initiatives operate within a complex system and programmes that respond to the needs of the target population.

A tension exists regarding what is considered acceptable evidence by organisations and funding bodies. This might include government agencies, Sport England, local authorities, or an individual organisation's board. There was a feeling that, at times, this was too narrowly defined to capture impact communities valued or unanticipated outcomes. What is needed, therefore is a different way of thinking about how impact may be documented and what forms of evidence 'count.' One example of different evidence are the films that form an important part of this evaluation. There is a danger that these are not considered as acceptable evidence by policymakers etc.

Consideration 5: What we have here is good. Self-belief and awareness of our qualities can be eroded by disappointments such as unsuccessful funding applications, administrative overwhelm, or the negative appraisals of powerful others. These occurrences threaten morale and can sap the energy that is required to do good work. Through network events over the past few months, we have observed a collective awareness among network members that *"What we've got here is good. We have something special."*

Collective self-belief belief is important – it is the bedrock from which great work can spring. And collective self-belief seems to have grown, despite some significant challenges. It has been evident, for example, during workshops (such as the narrative and storytelling workshop in March 2025). Feedback from network members (see Film 10) suggests something special took place; something to do with self-reflection and deepening

relationships between network members where the focus on inequality overrides individual organisational interests.

We suggest that engaging in these kinds of events has been and will continue to be a worthwhile and important component of the network's development and success. Doing this 'relational' work is one way to repair damage that can occur to morale, interpersonal relationships, trust, and confidence, building towards a committed and energised collective future.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Further information:

A full report is available from Guy Fishbourne, guy.fishbourne@bristol.gov.uk, Bristol City Council and on the Bristol Active City Network SharePoint.