A Year in View

Bristol Active City Network Realist Evaluation Report

May 2025

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Evaluation and Learning Report Governance

This report was prepared and written by Kitrina Douglas and David Carless. The information reported here was generated on the basis of what was shared by network members during interviews, dialogues, workshop discussions, and responses to feedback presentations (July 2024 and May 2025). In all these exchanges, those involved were encouraged to express their views and experiences openly and granted agency to include issues that were important to them. What was included in these exchanges directed and informed the content of the report. Drafts of each work package were shared with representative groups and revised as necessary (see the appropriate section of this report for details on these). A summary of the content of the final report and films was presented to network members at BACN Meeting on 14 May 2025. A draft written report was shared with Bristol City Council prior to submission to Sport England. Feedback and responses were responded to as appropriate throughout.

Section 1
Background

Like many cities across the UK, Bristol was hoping to be selected to receive funding as part of an expansion of the Place-based portfolio. In support of this aim, and to fulfil criteria set by Sport England to receive funding to support their submission, Bristol Active City Network have been developing a 'place based' 'whole systems' approach to their intended work guided by local discussion.

From October 2023 to April 2024 Phase 1 of this work took place and which included a series of interviews and workshops with the network and recommendations for next steps. This was led by Miova and has been reported elsewhere (See Miova/Bristol Active City, 2024, *The journey so far*[1]).

To further develop this work funding was provided by Sport England and the following elements were required:

- Development of clear insight underpinning the intended approach with mapping of the local system
- An evaluation and learning plan for the work
- The use of the system maturity matrix (SMM) as a tool for critical reflection and network development
- Participation in configurational comparative analysis (CCA) for National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP)
- Development of a theory of change
- A 6-month interim evaluation and learning report
- Evidence of impact of any early test and learn work with recommendations

Realist Evaluation

This report provides an in-depth exploration of the work undertaken by Bristol Active City Network over the past year (July 2024-April 2025) in what has been termed Phase Two of funding.

We were commissioned in mid-July 2024 to carry out four interrelated pieces of work. Importantly, the intention from Sport England was for there to be connectivity and synchronicity between these work packages as opposed to them being discreet, isolated and disconnected pieces of work.

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[1] Miova/Bristol Active City (2024) Bristol Active City Network Partnership Group, Bristol BACN – The developing story of this work. Unpublished.

In practice this meant we were simultaneously supporting the Bristol Active City Network develop a Theory of Change, while also supporting and facilitating completion of the System Maturity Survey and its submission. In tandem, we conducted a realist evaluation of these projects and ongoing discussions and learning within the network. Lastly, we were asked to provide some insights into the make-up of the network, the types of roles of members, and areas of work across the city. To achieve these aims we documented events, reflections, insight and learning, through working alongside the BACN and its members to understand local challenges and opportunities. The following activities and events were the main tasks undertaken by the network in phase two:

From phase one (Miova, 2024, p. 27) there were already agreed 8 "action points" agreed with members of the network, these were

1. Develop a WhatsApp group for the network for informal communication and connection
2. Organise a series of virtual get togethers
3. Host in person coffee mornings
4. Meeting Design and Admin including finding a venue, organising invites, arranging discussion topics and activities, identifying facilitator Think about data insight and lived experience input and coordination
5. Develop a "SharePoint Space"
6. Explore bringing in learning from other areas and places
7. Look into and map other local networks and explore integration/overlap

In addition to tasks agreed above, the following activities took place

- Bristol Active City Network Meetings (4)
- Internal presentations and meetings with Bristol City Council (BCC) teams on integrating a Whole Systems Approach to Physical Activity
- System maturity matrix workshops (4) with BACN members (August 28 and 29th; September 5 and 6th 2024)
- Working group completion of configurational comparative analysis (CCA) survey and submission to the National Learning and Evaluation Partnership
- Seasonal process learning report submitted
- Co-creation of a BACN Theory of Change
- Strengths Training BCC Senior Leadership Team
- Strengths Training follow up Mentor Sessions with BACN group
- System Leadership Workshops with BCC One City Partners 22nd & 23rd January 2025
- Narrative & Storytelling workshop 24th March 2025

A summary of Phase Two is illustrated below (Fig. 1.1)

Project Timeline Infographic
Whole System Approach To Physical Activity Summary

Phase 2 Development Award May-December 2024

1st BACN Meeting Ashton Gate 01/05/24

Phase 2 Sport England Proposal Accepted £99k.

Phase 2 Consultation Ashton Gate 23/05/24

BCC Data Health Profile Data & Mapping Begins

KD & DC Commissioned for Phase 2

WSA & PBA Presentation to ICE Locality Partnership 11/06/24

WSA & PBA Presentation to Public Health DMT 02/07/24

BCC Health Profile Data Distributed to BACN

WSA & PBA Presentation to BCC Sport Team 16/07/24

2nd BACN Meeting Indoor Bowls Club 18/07/24.

CCA Survey Planning

Theory of Change Workshop planning

CCA & Mat Matrix Workshops 3 & 4/9/2024 Vassal Centre 4 & 5/9/2024 Online

WSA & PBA Presentation to BCC Public Health Improvement Team 11/09/24

2nd Theory of Change Workshop Rose Green 16/10/24

CCA Survey Completion

Sport England Process Learning Report Submitted

3rd BACN Meeting Ashton Gate 22/10/24

CCA Survey Submitted to NELP 15/10/24

MIOVA Strengths Workshops Senior team

MIOVA System Leadership Workshops Date and Venue TBC

| May 24 | June 24 | July 24 | Aug 24 | Sept 24 | Oct 24 | Nov 24 | Dec 24 |

Project Timeline Infographic
Whole System Approach To Physical Activity Summary

Phase 2 Development Award January- April 2025 (and Beyond)

3rd BACN Network Meeting Hengrove Park Leisure Centre

MIOVA System Leadership Workshops 2nd & 23rd Jan 2025 Triodos Bank, Bristol

BACN Narrative & Storytelling Workshop

Phase 2 Submission of Realist Evaluation Report & Films

4th BACN Network Meeting 14th May Bristol Indoor Bowls Club

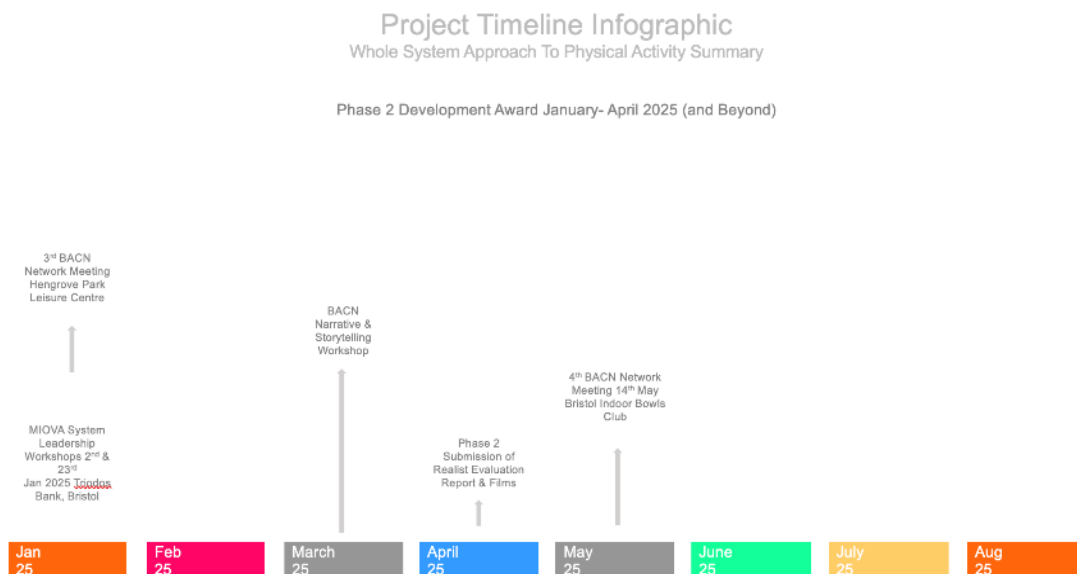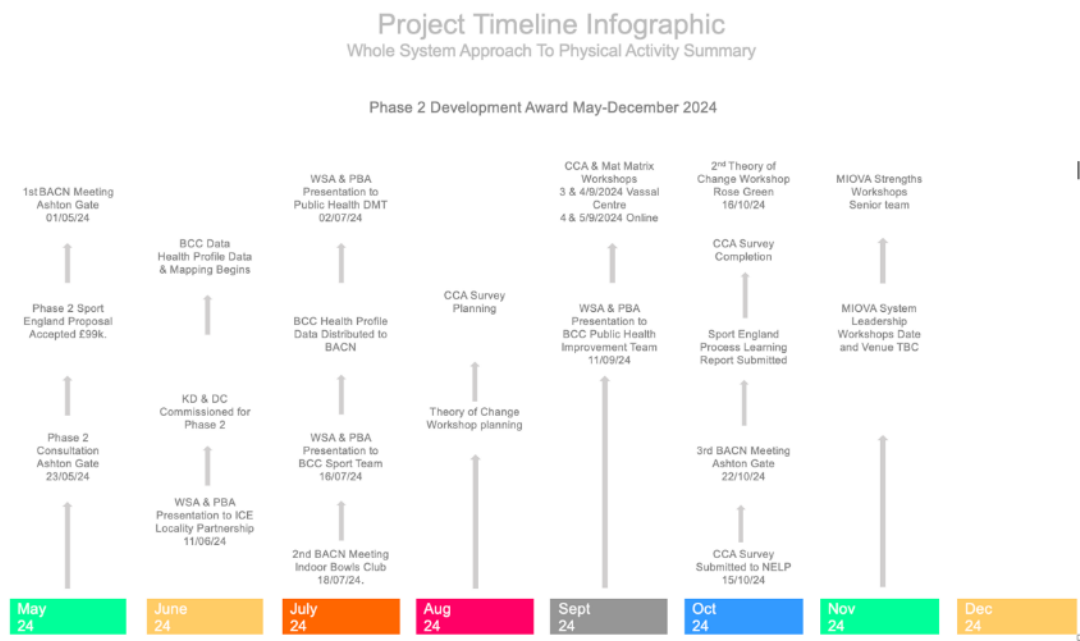| Jan 25 | Feb 25 | March 25 | April 25 | May 25 | June 25 | July 25 | Aug 25 |

Fig. 1.1: Project Timeline Infographic (created by Claire Nichols, Bristol City Council)

Realist Evaluation Methodology

A realist evaluation is based on the underlying belief that similar interventions have dissimilar outcomes when contexts, conditions and communities change – in other words, what works in Liverpool may not work in Bristol and what works in Hartcliffe may not work in Knowle West. Along with these recognitions a realist evaluation resists assuming that, for example, 'women', 'children, or 'older people' are homogeneous groups. Rather, intersecting experiences influence behaviour, interests, and motivation of physical activity and exercise behaviour.

While all evaluations explore outcomes to some extent, the philosophy underpinning realist evaluations 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[2], 2021)

With this in mind at our first meeting with BACN members we described a little about our own biographical connections to Bristol and the research and work we had carried out to date in Bristol. We then outlined the work we had now been commissioned to carry out.

Important in all our research is developing trust with participants and likewise this first session provided an opportunity to engage with a large number of the network members through a short workshop format. From this initial meeting, we engaged in consultations, conversations, interviews, participation, observation and workshop leadership over the ensuing nine months. The following activities and strategies provided the empirical and reflective materials that underpin our realist evaluation these include:

- Interviews with 32 members of the network (including video interviews with 21 members) conducted at different time points in the year
- Observations and reflective field notes based on Bristol Active City Network meetings
- Review of existing documentation and previous reports/research (for example MIOVA report)
- Group and individual conversations and discussion with working groups completing systems maturity matrix (28 & 29 August and 4 & 5 September 2024)

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[2] Tony Mercer and Patricia Lacey (2021). A brief introduction to realist evaluation https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60f7fdf7d3bf7f56824cc634/Brief_introduction_to_realist_evaluation.pdf

- Conversations with 44 members of the BACN participating at one of the theory of change workshops and subsequent feedback at network meetings (16 October 2024; 15 & 29 January 2025)
- Data from these activities were documented as voice memos, video interviews, audio interviews, flip-chart paper records from workshop groups, minutes of BACN meetings; written feedback from workshop participants, personal fieldnotes from both researchers, emails, other miscellaneous documents.

Following data collection, voice and recorded content was transcribed and entered into a word document for file retrieval and further analysis. All additional material was coded and linked with particular topics, themes and issues leading to data synthesis, the identification of refined themes, learning points and issues/queries to follow-up in future interviews.

We also carried out an initial narrative analysis on all data exploring typologies as well as identifying what might be missing or taboo and therefore difficult to document and incorporate. These are important steps in a narrative analysis. From these we begun to create 'story', in narrative form, regarding the project.

Presenting and Communicating Findings

It has been our aim since being brought onto the project to create outputs that are accessible and transparent to the network as a whole, as well as wider communities. That said, there is an expectation that the realist evaluation should be written report. While written reports are commonly accepted, they can be difficult to access and understand. This can be the case for those communities we seek to serve as well as for some members of the network for whom professional demands and busy schedules can make in-depth engagement with long documents unrealistic.

Moving forward, most researchers and professionals now recognise the ethical imperative we have to make learning processes and knowledge sharing transparent and understandable, to reduce exclusive language and be more accessible. Being 'inclusive' includes the way we carry out research, as well as how we share findings and report insights. This means doing research *with* people, not *on* people. It means creating outputs that are accessible and understandable across the "place" from grassroots community members to strategic policymakers. We have tried to prepare this report with this aim in mind, although there is inevitably a certain amount of technical terminology and academic language. To further our commitment to this aim, we have included as an integral part of the realist evaluation a series of films which document, illuminate, and critically investigate the activities of the Bristol Active City Network over the course of the previous year. The films can be viewed by anyone, anywhere with a device that can access the internet.

Taken together the films provide insights about how data was generated to complete the configurational comparative analysis survey and how the theory of change was co-created. They also illuminate some of the issues and challenges these provoked.

Perhaps most importantly, the films provide an in-depth look at a selection of organisations involved in BACN, the people, the places, and the work that BACN members and organisations engage with on a day-to-day basis. The films bring to our attention important insights and reflections about the work of the network and the challenges it faces, as voiced by those involved.

Section 2
'A Year in View' Realist Evaluation Films

A word on films as evaluation and research

In traditional reporting, whether this be research findings or evaluation work, textual representations have dominated. While the written word certainly is one way of representing findings, there are numerous problems with exclusively representing life and experience in ways that fail to acknowledge that social research takes place across diverse contexts in which embodied persons with their own voices interact with and relate to others.

Our aim here, similar to all research we engage with, is to create an evaluation that is transparent, accessible, humane, embodied, and allows the voices of those involved to be heard. To this end, these films are an integral part of the realist evaluation we have been commissioned to carry out. The films complement and extend the written report by shinning the spotlight visually and orally on the Bristol Active City Network through a series of conversations and reflections.

In July 2024, during our first presentation to the network, we requested that anyone who would like to contribute to the films we were intending to make across the year to contact us. We responded to these to arrange times for the filmed interviews to take place. Additionally, at various network events we approached and invited others to participate in a filmed interview to provide diverse examples of different individuals, organisations, experiences, and perspectives.

Each film features particular members of the BACN, 21 in total. The films offer insights into these individuals' professional lives, the organisations they represent, their role/s or remit, and their experiences regarding physical activity and/or sport. Importantly, the films explore how they work as members of the network, responding to and shaping its collective vision and aims. The film form allows us to feature this knowledge without appropriating it as our own, which often happens through written form. It is a democratic and accessible way of communicating diverse experiences and understandings.

The 10-film series is titled "A year in View." Some films are short reflective pieces, others offer longer in-depth conversations. As a collection, all ten films contribute to enlarging and sharing understanding how various pieces of the jigsaw that is the BACN come together. The series documents the work of the network throughout July 2024 - April 25 offering candid insights, learning and reflections about future work. The series films provide network members with opportunities to learn about and learn from other network members. The network thereby becomes self-informing and self-educating through sharing many collective years of experience, insight and wisdom.

Film One: https://youtu.be/_L-x8z6IOT8

The first film is hosted by Nadia Holland who introduces the Bristol Active City Network and sets the scene for the ten-film series. Film One gives a flavour of what viewers can expect from the upcoming films and features extracts including Guy Fishbourne (film two), the Systems Maturity Workshops (film three), Heidi Blunden and Daniel Palmer (film four), Theory of Change update (film five), Kathy Kingdon, Danny Kite Ellie Stanley (film six), Sarah Mortiboys and Dan White (film seven), Courtney Young (film eight), Steve Nelson (film nine) and the Narrative and Storytelling Workshop (film 10).

Film Two:

In this film, Guy Fishbourne describes some of the most fruitful aspects of the BACN over the past year and talks about what he sees as the main possibilities and challenges the network faces as it moves forwards in reducing entrenched physical activity inequalities across the city.

Film Three: https://youtu.be/sppQ8WsunQo
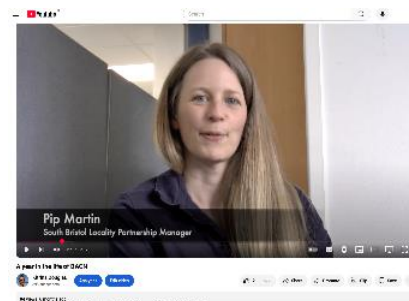
This film documents the first of four workshops (held in August-September 2024) for Bristol's submission of the System Maturity Matrix. It features contributions and reflections on the process from Pip Martin, Ruth Glanvill, Zoe Banks Gross, Sarah Mortiboys, Darron Hamilton, Dan White and Lorraine Harris.
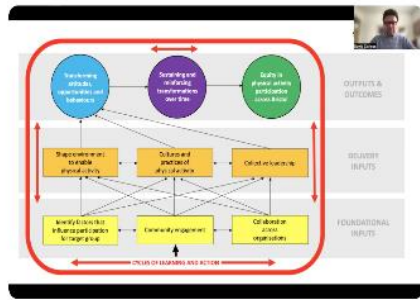
Film Four: https://youtu.be/nUADTs8yEXI

This film provides insights from Heidi Blunden and Daniel Palmer about their work and how this has linked with the BACN across the previous year.

Film Five:
https://youtu.be/dwYsCqe3Des?si=IDngFhK7wVyryfZV

Theory of Change 2nd iteration

Developing a BACN Theory of Change has been a significant piece of work over the past 12 months. Network member have invested a great deal of time in reflecting, discussing and trialling various iterations of the theory. This film revisits development of the current version.

Film Six: https://youtu.be/0ITinHp0TOQ?si=62-zMgkwhq0yQYI1

Film Six Kathy Kingdon, Danny Kite & Ellie Stanley

Here Kathy Kingdon, Danny Kite and Ellie Stanley talk about their work in different activity forms within communities across Bristol. Kathy describes some of the challenges supporting people into physical activity, for whom even getting out of their home can be a huge step. Danny reflects on how a private members club can find a place within the BACN. Ellie introduces us to her work with mum's and young people who access the Gymnastics Centre. She reflects on her participation in the BACN and some challenges moving forward.

Film Seven: https://youtu.be/578WQdtQBUI

Film Seven provides a rare opportunity to eavesdrop on a conversation between Dan White and Sarah Mortiboys at Ashton Gate Stadium. Their discussion covers a number of important strategic issues including how and why "deep rooted inequalities require long term investment" and what BACN can do to respond effectively to this understanding.

Film Eight: https://youtu.be/GZIZdi9MN24

In this film Courtney Young talks about Empire Fighting Chance and their work with young people facing difficulties around school, mental health, and socio-economic inequalities. He discusses how sport and physical activity (in this case non-contact boxing) can be a "hook" that leads to wider positive changes in young people's lives.

Film Nine: https://youtu.be/fPgM84QvHFQ

In Film Nine Steve Nelson offers in-depth reflections on the development of BACN over the past 12 months and discusses the strategic priorities and challenges he anticipates moving forward. He offers candid thoughts on issues such as collaborative working, community engagement, and funding as the network continues to evolve.

Film Ten: https://youtu.be/QCn3QWe1Sl8

The final film of the series focuses on the Narrative & Storytelling Workshop held in March 2025. It offers an introduction to how and why taking stories and narrative seriously can be a beneficial strategy for individuals, organisations and networks. It features contributions from Mark Lee, Subitha Baghirathan, Joey Murphy, Andy Trott, Harry Betts, Daniel Palmer and Nadia Holland.
Joey Murphy

Section 3
Exploring the Network

An extensive mapping exercise was carried out by Karen Startup (Bristol City Council GIS Analyst) and Tracy Mathews (Bristol City Council Public Health Analyst) and supported by various members of the network. This provided GIS Mapping of Physical activity with health profiles as agreed in phase one. This was made accessible to the network in October 2024 fulfilling one objective set in phase one of the project.

In what follows our focus is to shed light on the make-up of Bristol City Active Network. Particularly, the types of organisations involved, their focus, the roles of individual's within these organisations and the areas of the city where different organisations work.

A Brief History – Then and Now

The Bristol Active City Network has existed since well before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first iteration of the network, as a number of members explained, the network carried out important and impactful projects. Yet, what most members of the network also believed was this work was often siloed. That is, it was not well connected with other organisations and broader social issues, and projects were often not part of a systemic and coordinated approach to inequality. As a result, there was a feeling previously the network did not capitalise on its potential.

In contrast, now members of the network believe there has been a sea-change or, at least, the beginnings of a sea-change. For those who were members of the network before COVID-19 there is a strong belief that the network now has a more galvanised approach to its work and is more committed. This is evidenced by a willingness to collaborate on focussed efforts to tackle various forms of inequality across the city through increasing physical activity. Added to that, those new to the network also appear to be positive about the progress the network has made over the previous year and optimistic about its potential.

BACN Membership

Given the network's aim to be inclusive and not enforce a particular criteria for membership, there tends to be a large 'contacts'[3] pool and a much smaller 'active' group who have been involved with developing the CCA survey and Theory of Change. While there has been no expectation that everyone on the list should attend all events, there is an expectation that people will attend meetings that are relevant and of interest to their organisation and work. That said, for the network to carry out its aims this year it has been vital that organisations commit to participating in completing the configurational comparative analysis (CCA) survey and its submission,

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[3] This has changed across the year 29th Jan 98 invitations to network meeting, another list had 110

and contribute to creating Bristol's "Theory of Change"[4]. Below in Fig. 3.1 we compare numbers attending these. Colum one is the total number (across four workshops) contributing to Bristol's submission of the CCA survey, Colum's two and three illustrate similar numbers contributed to the first and second iterations of Bristol's Theory of Change (ToC).
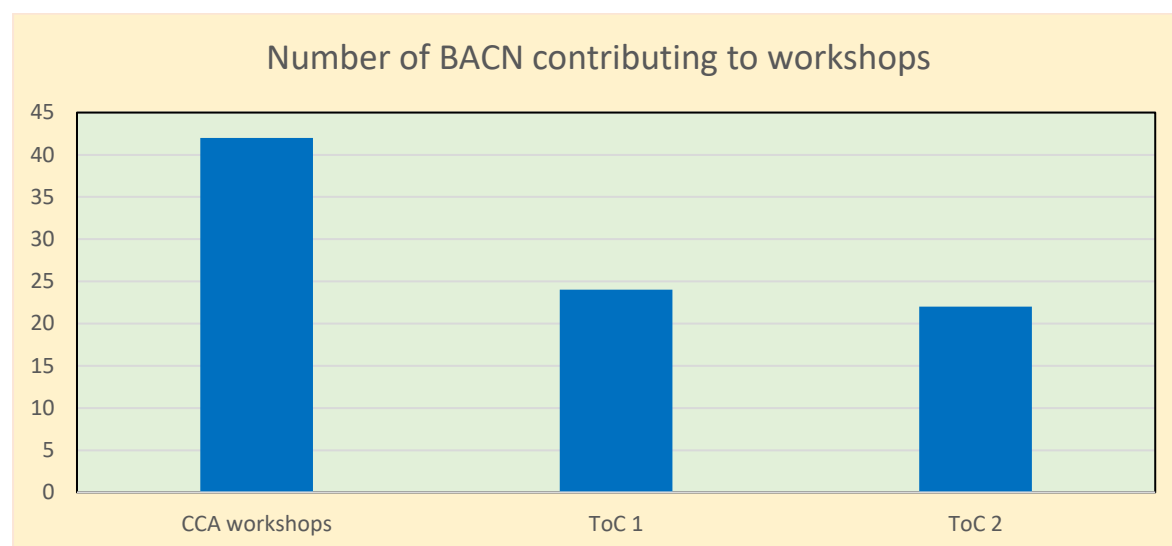

Fig. 3.1: Attendance figures for key work in phase two

With the data we have been provided regarding the number of members of the total network (98) and those investing time in the two major project, it seems the bulk of the 'work' and engagement during phase two has been with approximately 47% of member organisations. For this reason we focus our analysis on organisations and members who have contributed to these pieces of work.

Roles of members

The chart below (Fig. 3.2) provides an illustration of the roles of individuals who participated in the CCA survey/system maturity and Theory of Change workshops[5]. Of the 16 different levels of role 'manager' is the most frequent. There are similar numbers within the group of senior managers, directors, officers, lead/head, and CEO's along with similar numbers of other roles (lower than 5). This suggests a good mix of roles and levels within organisations exists between members of the network and importantly a mix of individuals with strategic responsibility and those with

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[4] This data does not include participation in network meetings for three reasons i) attendance is less accurate as not all delegates sign in, or attend network meetings without affirming their attendance beforehand ii) often there is a restriction on numbers, iii) members are encouraged to only attend meetings that are relevant to their work.

[5] Given this is a professional network aimed particularly at organisations working around physical activity, it was not expected to include members of community organisations such as volunteers.

community facing roles. With regard to the latter, film 6 and 8 provides examples of individuals who belief that their role within the network brings the views and experiences of their community to the fore of conversations.
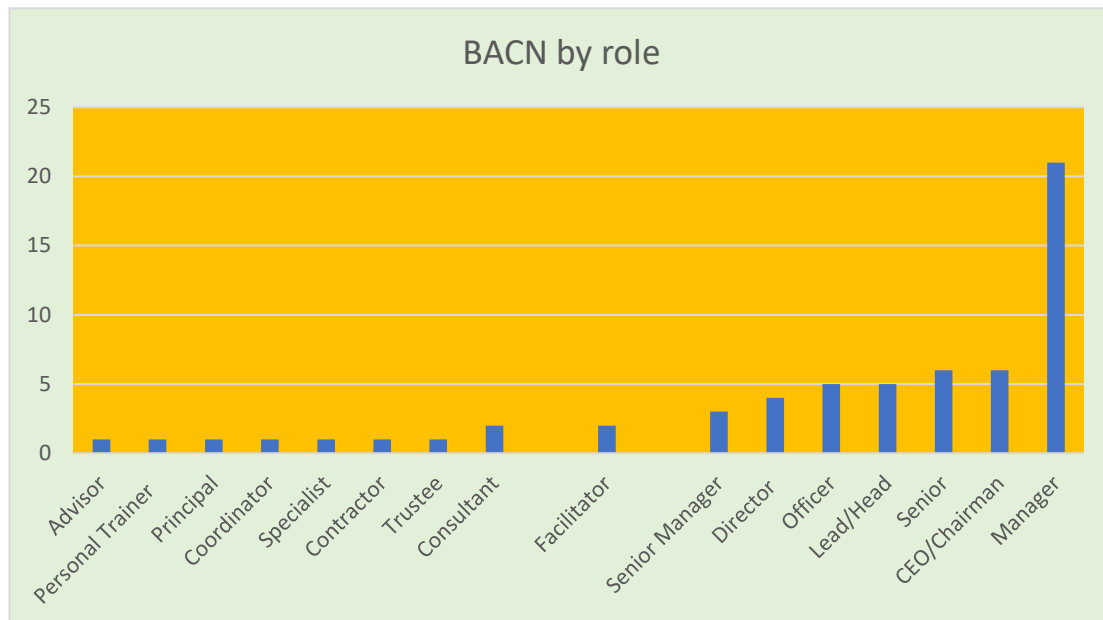
Fig. 3.2: Professional roles of BACN members

Types of Organisations

As illustrated below in Fig. 3.3, the largest contributor to the BACN is from organisations with a 'health' focus. 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.
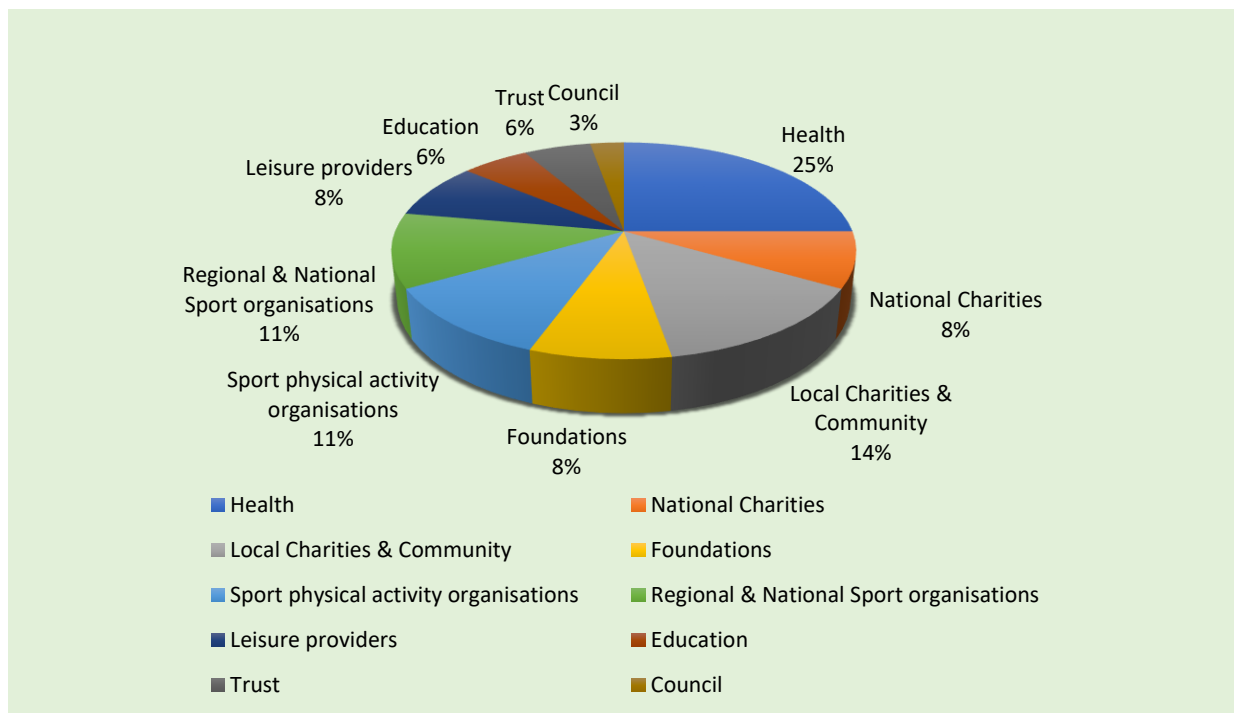
Fig. 3.3: Professional roles of BACN members

Where are organisations based?

With the exception of health, and national organisations/charities, perhaps the most interesting aspect of where organisations are based are those organisations who lead face to face interaction with their communities. The chart below (Fig. 3.4) illustrations gives an indication of which specific communities are being represented in the workshops this year.
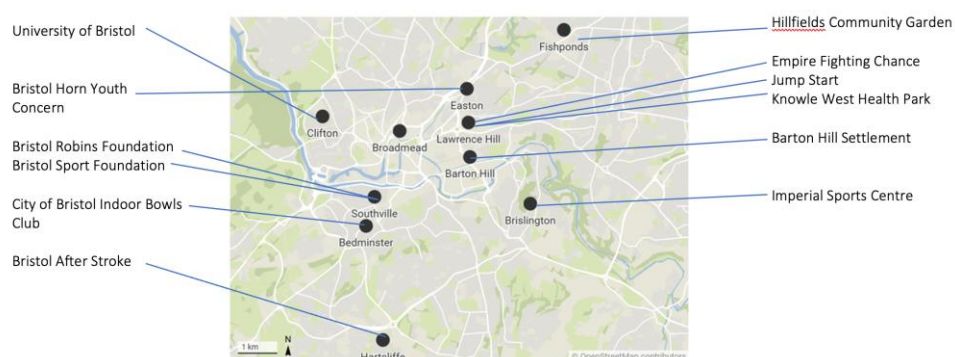
Fig. 3.4: Areas of Bristol where sport and physical activity is represented by members of BACN

How and Why do Organisations become interested in this Network?

As mentioned above, there has been some type of physical activity focussed network in Bristol for several years, but its aims and commitment have fluctuated while its shape and purpose have changed. As the current iteration has taken shape, its reputation has grown and new members have been drawn in to be part of a group of people wanting to be proactive in the city through physical activity. The following excerpts provide two examples of how and why organisations are drawn to this particular network:

> I was talking to someone else about physiotherapy stuff we are doing and the walking football and she said *what about taking part in the active network?* because I wasn't in it, and I've no idea where it will go but I am also interested in how we can make partnerships like with REACT, having more personal relationships, you're talking about what the network might bring. It may open up conversations, you improve community because you know people. And you are personally inspired by what someone else is doing (Bristol After Stroke)

> We didn't have a lot of impact within Bristol. I always worked with 'Ignite Bristol', very operational level work, and had massive impact in clubs but no capacity to do the strategic part, and there was no shared ownership. So I wanted to be able to have input and work in partnership. Then I looked at BACN at the same time as the Sport England input was bubbling, so they seemed to be more receptive to bringing people in, so for us, this was a great opportunity for us to be part of something (Activity Alliance)

While some members were unable to remember how they came to be part of the network, responses from other individuals reveal it has been a strategic choice driven by a desire to be part of something that might make a real difference to people within the most disadvantaged areas of the city.

It was clear from responses from members of the network that the workshops, activities and network meetings all contributed to creating a foundation that can now make a bigger impact on inequality through collaboration and system leadership, and that this process has been a positive investment of time. At the same time, there seems to also now to be readiness for action and next steps.

Who is missing?

Based on the above, a question some members of the network may ask is *who are we missing*? To date there has been little representation from schools, faith groups, or explicit engagement of LGBTQ+ organisations. Given the expectations and workload of teachers it is perhaps unsurprising this group isn't represented. However, most times when given an opportunity Muslim, Hindu and Christian leaders invest in work that positively impacts the lives of people with their communities. These types of absence were also highlighted by MIOVA in phase one.

Growing the network

In a mid-year review for NELP and Sport England we noted that at most meetings and workshops we attended there were people new to the network. In casual conversations it wasn't uncommon for some delegates to suggest they had struggled to engage with some activities due to their lack knowledge about the network, its activities, vision, aim and scope.

> I felt a little bit out of context because I hadn't been part of that before, I was going straight into it

> Maybe something about the story so far, to read before you go, or a recap quite often, the nature of these things is you are catching up. I've got this date in the diary and you haven't done a lot of thinking about it before hand and you don't know what you or anyone is trying to get out of it,

To this end we suggested that more time be given to 'onboarding' and several discussions were directed to how to help new organisations integrate more easily. One of the action points identified from in phase one (Miova, 2024, p.27) was the creation of a SharePoint site. This has been created.

The network now has a SharePoint (fulfilling this action point from phase one). This holds information about all the past meetings, power point slides, and member information and despite a few 'teething' issues has been accessed by members. Other changes taken include;

- an introduction to those new to the network at the beginning of network meetings, with a power point slide reminding delegates of the networks aim and vision, and meeting schedule.
- This information is also now sent as an attachment with invites to the next event/meeting.
- All members have been asked to complete a questionnaire about their work and provide short biographies for the share point
- All contact information will be available on the share point

In phase one eight "action points" were agreed with members, (see Miova, 2024, p. 27) two of these, as described above, have been completed. The remaining six show no evidence of being met. Moving forward, creating a feedback system for agreed action points may be useful.

- Develop a WhatsApp group for the network for informal communication and connection
- Organise a series of virtual get togethers
- Host in person coffee mornings
- Meeting Design and Admin including finding a venue, organising invites, arranging discussion topics and activities, identifying facilitator. Think about data insight and lived experience input and coordination
- Explore bringing in learning from other areas and places

Section 4
System Maturity Assessment

Background

While the project required at this point the development of a Theory of Change through consultation and workshops, when we were commissioned to carry out this work it was already close to the date set for submitting Bristol's Place-Based System Maturity Matrix Stakeholder Survey (SMM) to NELP using the Configurational Comparative Analysis Impact Evaluation (CCA) method. Given members of the network would be needed to contribute to both of these it seemed unreasonable to have both tasks happening simultaneously. Therefore, it was decided to move forward with the Systems Maturity Matrix and Configurational Comparative Analysis Survey component and, only once this had been submitted, to reengage with the demands of the Theory of Change process.

The flowchart in Fig. 1 details the work process in consulting, workshopping, compiling and submitting the Configurational Comparative Analysis Survey.

Work began with initial synthesis (Synthesis 1) of existing materials, documents and processes to generate a plan of action to meet NELP's deadline for submission of the CCA.

From here, workshops and interviews were held in autumn 2024 to consult with as many network members as possible on our system maturity and to gather examples of practice. All network members were invited to participate in a workshop. Four workshops were scheduled, and two ways of engagement were offered: in person and online.

At each workshop, an introduction was given to the theoretical backdrop for the work, NELP's conceptual model, and the nine conditions for addressing physical activity inequality. It was decided at this point not to detail the 26 sub-conditions on the basis that this would over-complicate the workshop, diminishing potential benefits. Each condition was introduced by the facilitators to aid understanding and discussion in line with recommendations from the National Education and Learning Partnership. Questions were then posed to guide discussion which took place in small groups. A summary of this information was provided in a handout given to each attendee.

Fig. 4.1: Flowchart of Work for Systems Maturity Matrix and Configurational Comparative Analysis Survey

Initial Data Gathering July-August 2024
Review and sense-making of SMM and CCA materials from NELP
Interviews with six members of the Bristol Active City Network
Review of minutes of BACN Meetings 1 and 23 May 2024
Introductory workshop at BACN Meeting 24 July 2024

Synthesis 1
Initial workshop data transcribed, analysed, reviewed and synthesised
SMM and CCA materials from NELP reviewed and simplified for workshop use
Preparation for Workshop 1 & 2

Workshop 1 & 2 – 28 & 29 August 2024
In-person workshop at Vassall Centre
Online workshop
Total workshop participants = 13 BACN members

Synthesis 2
Data from Workshop 1 & 2 transcribed, analysed, reviewed and synthesised
Synthesis with SMM and CCA materials from NELP
Gaps in data identified
Preparation for Workshop 3 & 4

Workshop 3 & 4 – 4 & 5 September 2024
In-person workshop at Vassall Centre
Online workshop
Total workshop participants = 29 BACN members

Synthesis 3
Data from Workshop 3 & 4 transcribed, analysed, reviewed and synthesised
Synthesis with SMM and CCA materials from NELP
Meetings with representatives of BCC and Wesport to agree submission

**SMM Stakeholder Survey submitted to NELP
by Bristol City Council**
15 October 2024

Moderation Meeting with NELP
20 November 2024

Workshop One

28th August 2024, Wesport Board Room, Vassall Centre, Bristol, in person.

In this first workshop, the workshop guidance issued by NELP was followed, as detailed in the handout (see Fig. 4.2).

BACN Workshops
Autumn 2024

Purpose of the workshop: To collectively assess and understand how Bristol enables or inhibits physical activity and to consider the conditions that may be needed for change

Conceptual Model:

Conditions for Change:

1. **Processes for identifying the barriers** and **enablers** of physical activity
2. **Organisational policies, processes and structures** that enable place-based working
3. **Capacity and capability** across the workforce, volunteers and in communities
4. **Collaboration** across organisations
5. Distributed and collective **leadership**
6. **Community led action** (co-production, local people-led initiatives, community power)
7. **Cultures and practices** for physical activity
8. **Physical environments** that enable physical activity
9. Cycles of **learning and action**

Questions for Discussion

1. Generally, what is *[insert Condition for Change]* like in our Place? What makes you say that (please give examples)? What do you believe affects this?

2. What, if anything, is happening (by you, or others in the Place) to change *[insert Condition for Change]*? Is this contributing to change? How do you know?

3. Is change happening in some circumstances and not others? For some people/groups and not others? In some settings and not others?

> *Please document your discussion on flip chart paper provided. Do include stories of specific instances/examples to illustrate your responses. Please note these on the flipchart paper too!*
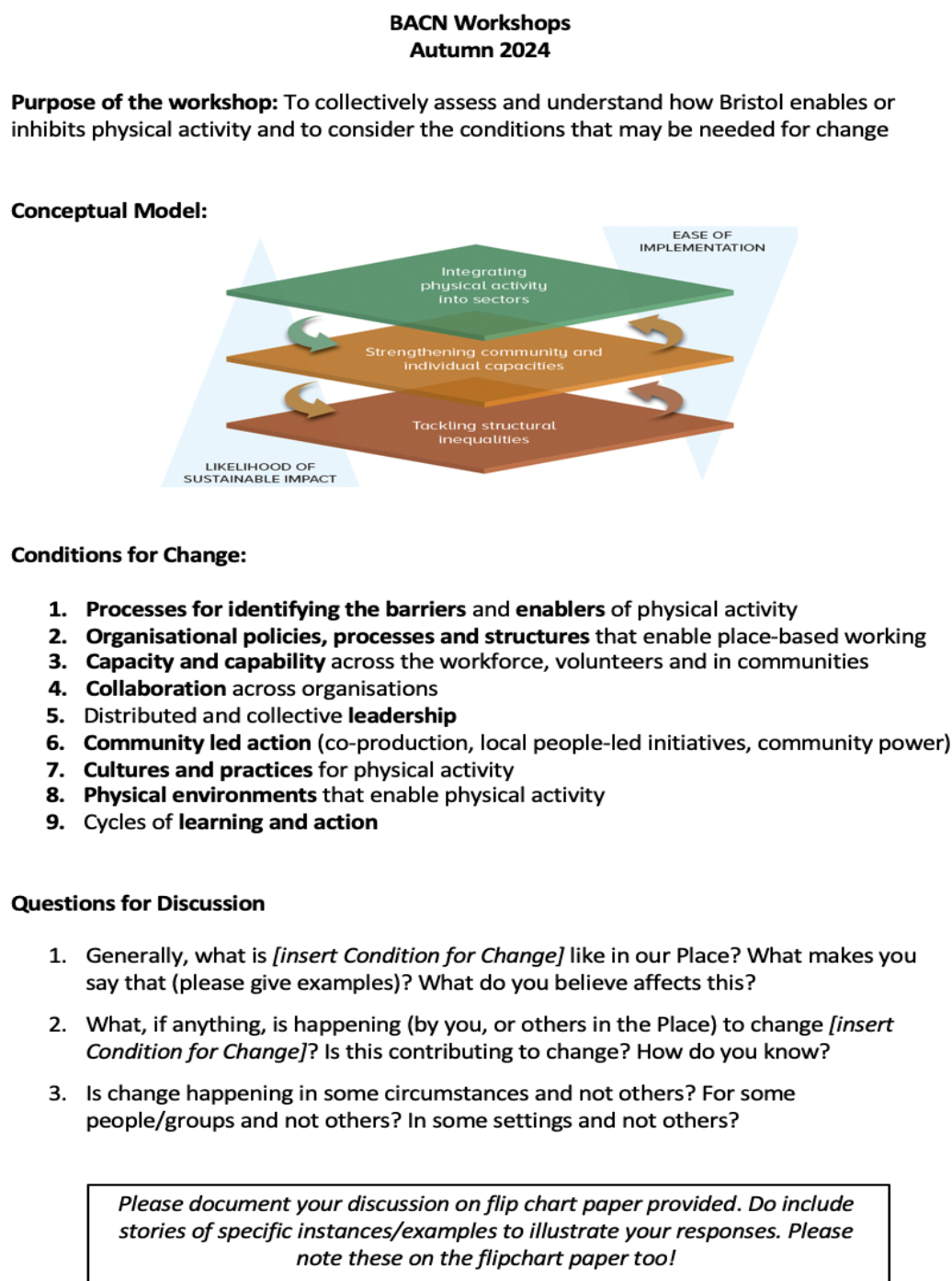
Fig. 4.2: Handout for workshops 1 and 2

Agency was given to the delegates to decide in their groups which conditions they would like to focus on. The two discussion groups both chose to spend the full workshop engaging in an in-depth exploration of Condition Six, Community Led Action.

Workshop participants:

1. BCC Senior Sport and P.A. Development Officer
2. Bristol South Locality Partnership Manager
3. Strategic Partnership Advisor, Activity Alliance
4. Social Prescriber, Knowle West Health Park Lead
5. NHS Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire, Integrated Care Board Representative
6. Inner Central and East Locality Partnership Manager
7. West of England Sport Trust (Wesport) Project Manager
8. Bristol Contract Manager, Everyone Active
9. SUSTRANS Head of Partnerships and Public Affairs for South of England

Workshop Two

29th August 2024, first online workshop

In this first online workshop, NELP's workshop guidelines were again followed and agency was again given to the four delegates to choose which conditions they would like to focus on. Discussion focussed on Condition Three (Capacity and capability across the workforce, volunteers and in communities) and Condition Four (Collaboration).

Workshop participants:

1. Consultant in Public Health
2. Director Active Leisure Management, ALM Sport
3. Senior Project Manager at Bristol Health Partners, AHSC
4. City of Bristol Bowls Club Director and Coach

Synthesis Two

Following workshop 2, we conducted an analysis, review and synthesis of each group's flip chart paper, personal notes shared by each attendee, voice memos/recordings, and our own notes on the workshop. Through this process it emerged that, while discussion was rich and insightful, it was not generating the level of detail required for a truly consultative completion of the CCA survey. In workshops 3 and 4, we therefore adjusted the process suggested by NELP to instead invite participants to collectively formulate a judgment on system maturity within each condition and then to document examples of practice within each of these.

BACN Workshops
Autumn 2024

Purpose of the workshop: To collectively assess and understand how Bristol enables or inhibits physical activity and to consider the conditions that may be needed for change

Conceptual Model:

EASE OF IMPLEMENTATION

Integrating physical activity into sectors

Strengthening community and individual capacities

Tackling structural inequalities

LIKELIHOOD OF SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

Conditions for Change:

1. **Processes for identifying the barriers** and **enablers** of physical activity
2. **Organisational policies, processes and structures** that enable place-based working
3. **Capacity and capability** across the workforce, volunteers and in communities
4. **Collaboration** across organisations
5. Distributed and collective **leadership**
6. **Community led action** (co-production, local people-led initiatives, community power)
7. **Cultures and practices** for physical activity
8. **Physical environments** that enable physical activity
9. Cycles of **learning and action**

Please document your discussion on flip chart paper provided. Do include specific instances/examples to illustrate your responses.

| NO CHANGE | EMERGING IN PRACTICE | ESTABLISHING IN PRACTICE | EMBEDDED IN PRACTICE |

Fig. 4.3: Handout for workshops 3 and 4

Workshop Three

4th September 2024, Wesport Board Room, Vassall Centre, Bristol, in person

Ten delegates participated and engaged with all conditions:

1. CEO Bristol Robins Foundation

2. Programme Lead, Access Sport
3. BCC Senior Active Travel Officer
4. CEO Bristol Sport
5. Specialist Falls Lead, Sirona Healthcare
6. Wellbeing Lead and Occupational Therapist, Sirona Healthcare
7. BCC Public Health Specialist, Children and Young People
8. BCC Physical Activity Officer
9. Personal Trainer, Jump Start
10. Sport & Wellbeing Manager, Parkwood Leisure

Workshop Four

5th September 2024, online workshop

Nineteen delegates participated and engaged with all conditions:

1. South West Regional Manager, Sported
2. Bristol Project Manager, Age UK
3. Football Development Manager, Somerset FA
4. Development Manager, England Hockey Club
5. Director of Tennis, University of Bristol
6. CEO, Your Park Foundation Charity
7. Empire Fighting Chance, Community Outreach Manager
8. BCC, Physical Activity and Sport Officer
9. Relationship Manager, Sport England
10. BCC, Senior Sport and Physical Activity Officer
11. Hillfields Community Garden, Co – Founder and Director
12. City of Bristol Bowls Club Representative
13. BCC, Sport and Physical Activity Officer
14. Senior Manager (Health & Activity), West of England Sport Trust (Wesport)
15. Project Manager, Macmillan Champions
16. BCC, Inclusive Community Facilitator for South Bristol
17. Gloucestershire FA Representative
18. BCC Commissioning Manger, Strategic Commissioning (Children, Families & Education)
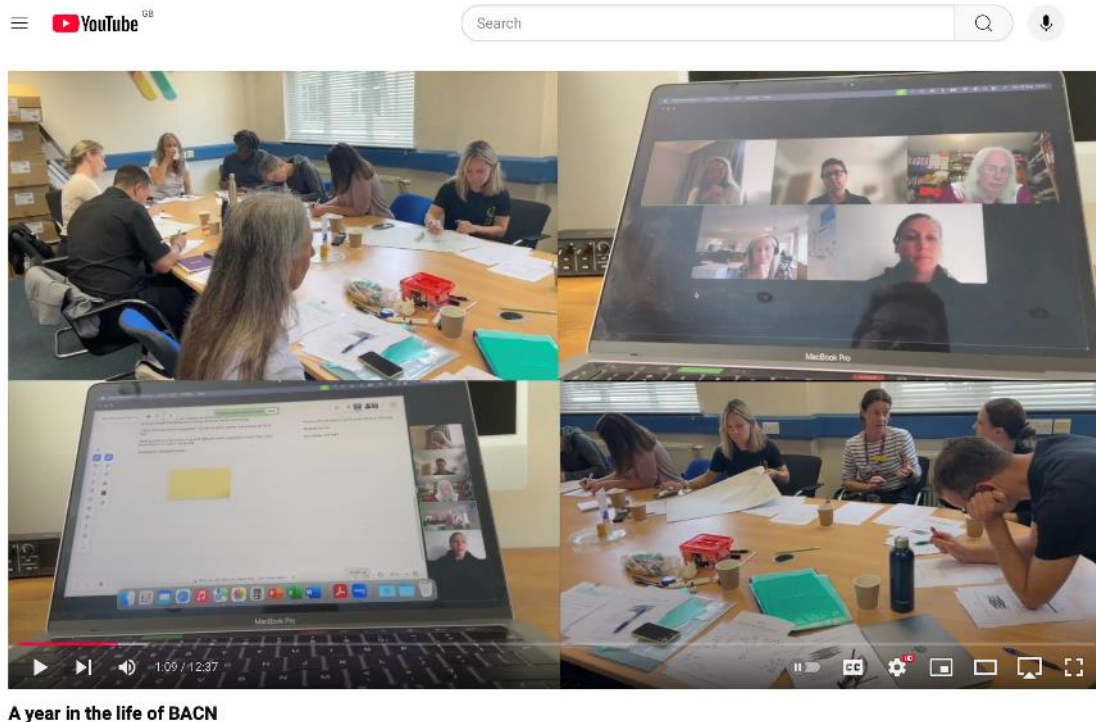19. BCC, Inclusive Communities Facilitator (Race Equality)

Fig. 4.4: Images from SMM Workshops, Autumn 2024

Synthesis Three

Following each pair of workshops, as detailed above, all notes were transcribed and analysed before being compared and contrasted. The resulting material was synthesised with the SMM and CCA survey materials provided by NELP. From this, a draft survey was prepared, citing examples of practice and points raised in all four workshops.

A working group was then assembled to review the insights and feedback contained within this long document 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 over the course of two days of meetings, final scores and examples were agreed. From this, BCC representatives (Claire Nichols and Guy Fishbourne) completed and submitted the Place Based System Maturity Matrix Stakeholder Survey as required by NELP and Sport England. The working group included the two evaluators, Guy Fishbourne (BCC), Claire Nichols (BCC), with additional information and contributions from Ruth Glanvill (Wesport) and Sarah McLeod (Wesport).

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 to be viewed by all current and new network members. The presentation included a reminder of the background, theory, and purposes of the SMM assessment along with discussion of our maturity assessment (no change; emerging in practice; establishing in practice; embedded in practice) for all 26 sub-conditions.

The feedback presentation can be viewed via the following link: https://youtu.be/yM9O3yWwMdE

Bristol Active City Network
22 October 2024

Feedback on
'System Maturity Assessment'
for National Evaluation & Leadership Partnership

Although there was uncertainty within the network of the value of the SMM and CCA process, the number of individuals and organisations engaging with and contributing to the process indicate that there was good support and commitment from the network. It was also apparent that there was diversity in terms of organisations represented, career stage, and the specialisms of those who attended (e.g., strategy, delivery, activity modes, approach, geography, and experience).

From the outset, alongside a desire to support NELP with their national level work, there was awareness that engagement with workshops and conversations around system maturity in Bristol would itself be a worthwhile process supporting self-reflection, learning, and relationship building. Feedback from network members suggest that, for many, this was the case. Commitment to the workshops was generally considered to be time well spent.

This qualitative information concerning the lessons learnt and relationships built through the network is likely more important to the network than the data fed back to NELP. Snapshots of feedback on the 'process' of collaborating on this assessment, learning and insight, and the benefit to organisations taking part, has been made into a short film titled 'A Year in the Life of BACN.' It 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 BACN members engaged with, introduces members of the network, and provides evidence of the points summarised here.

The film *A Year in the Life of BACN* can be accessed via the following link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sppQ8WsunQo&t=159s

The 12-minute film was screened during the network meeting 22 October 2024 and remains available on YouTube for all current and new network members to view. Following initial screening at the network meeting, the film has to date been watched by a further 90 network members.

The film forms an integral part of this evaluation, not least because it provides an engaging and accessible output which can be viewed to all network members through being hosted on YouTube. As a communication media, film offers a multisensory experience to the viewer (comprising moving image, a voice over summary of this component of the work, and filmed interviews with seven members of the BACN) and provides a welcome break from written documents and PowerPoint slides. In addition to being viewed by network members who contributed to the SMM and CCA process, it can also be viewed by those unable to attend, as well as future BACN members. It offers a legacy of the work done to date, helping to build and cement shared understanding, relationships, and onboarding new members.

Reflections on the System Maturity Matrix Process

Reflection 1: Value of workshop process

While one purpose of the workshops was to consult on the completion of the System Maturity Matrix survey for NELP, a parallel purpose was to create opportunities for network members to come together to meet, interact, learn, and discuss our shared work towards reducing physical activity inequalities in Bristol. Feedback and engagement information provided in Film Three (https://youtu.be/sppQ8WsunQo) and the film "A Year in the Life of BACN" (above) indicates that network members found this aspect of the work to be valuable and meaningful. Importantly, the nature of the collaborative work (1) made challenging but rewarding intellectual demands; (2)

provided an impetus to reflect on one's own practice; (3) offered opportunities to share those reflections with other professionals in the network; 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. These conditions were effective in provoking reflection, discussion, new ideas, and greater self-awareness among network members They also led to the identification of two priority conditions for further development and attention within BACN: community led action and leadership. The 26 sub-conditions were generally found to be less helpful. The distinctions and differences between each of these sub-conditions appeared to be ambiguous and unclear – when considering practice, 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, when applied to practice, to sometimes be unworkable. Resulting confusion and ambiguity risked detracting from discussion during the workshops rather than enhancing it. 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 the 26 sub-conditions.

Reflection 3: Inequality and intersectionality

While we appreciate there is a rational for removing Focus on inequality and intersectionality (previously Condition 7) from the conditions for addressing physical activity inequality, there is concern among some network members that this very important component might, as a result, 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 serious attention to issues around diversity and intersectionality (e.g., around race and ethnicity, sexual and gender identity, age, ability and disability) to ensure it remains high on all organisations' agendas and is seriously considered across all initiatives.

Reflection 4: Language and presentation

As academic researchers, we are aware of the difficulty of communicating complex ideas and concepts in clear and accessible ways. We recognise that we have not always achieved this goal. 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 as evaluators therefore 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') throughout so that practitioners and community members may be less intimidated.

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.

Section 5
Theory of Change

Background

Developing a 'theory of change' is a component part of a realist evaluation. For the Bristol Active City Network, it provides an opportunity to reclaim ownership of the terms by which Bristol initiatives are evaluated.

A theory of change describes and illustrates 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.

To following steps are generally recommended:

1. Identifying long-term goals – What do we value? How does this connect to the bigger picture?
2. Backwards mapping – connecting the preconditions necessary to achieve our goal
3. Identifying our basic assumptions about the context
4. Identifying the interventions that our initiative will perform to create our desired change
5. Developing outcome indicators to assess the performance of our initiative
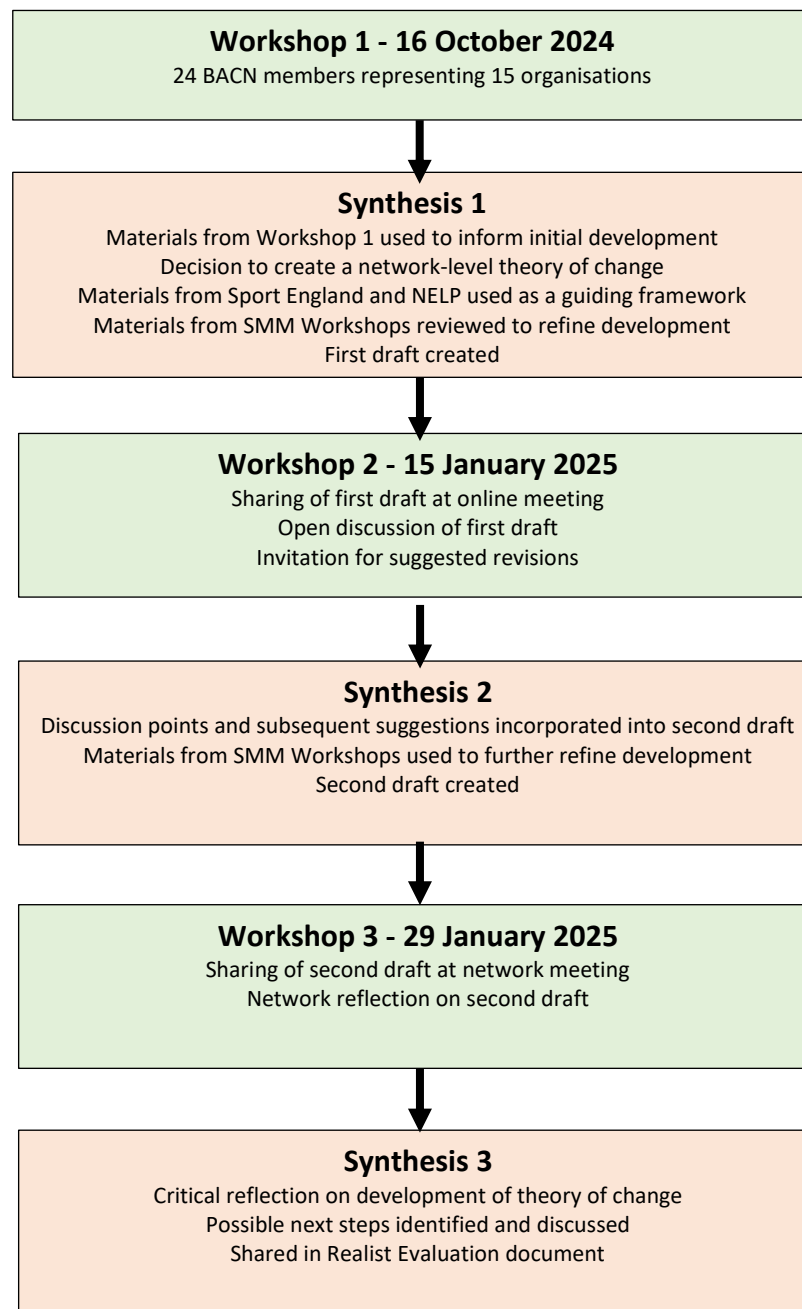6. Writing a narrative to explain the logic of our initiative

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│         Workshop 1 - 16 October 2024            │
│   24 BACN members representing 15 organisations  │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        │
                        ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                   Synthesis 1                    │
│  Materials from Workshop 1 used to inform initial development │
│  Decision to create a network-level theory of change │
│  Materials from Sport England and NELP used as a guiding framework │
│  Materials from SMM Workshops reviewed to refine development │
│                First draft created               │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│         Workshop 2 - 15 January 2025            │
│     Sharing of first draft at online meeting     │
│          Open discussion of first draft          │
│          Invitation for suggested revisions      │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        │
                        ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                   Synthesis 2                    │
│ Discussion points and subsequent suggestions incorporated into second draft │
│ Materials from SMM Workshops used to further refine development │
│                Second draft created              │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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                        ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│         Workshop 3 - 29 January 2025            │
│     Sharing of second draft at network meeting   │
│          Network reflection on second draft      │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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                        ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                   Synthesis 3                    │
│  Critical reflection on development of theory of change │
│    Possible next steps identified and discussed  │
│        Shared in Realist Evaluation document     │
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Fig. 5.1: Flowchart of Theory of Change Development Process

Theory of Change Workshop 1

Following submission of the Configurational Comparative Analysis Survey a first theory of change workshop was held on 16 October 2024 to generate a plan for the six steps that compose the Theory of Change model. It is fair to say there has been a lot of confusion about what the Theory of Change is, and why and what it will achieve. There also seems to have been a lot of misunderstanding and fear about its use.

As a tool to provoke reflection and conversation therefore at the July 24th Meeting of the Bristol Active City Network participants were invited to identify what is unique about Bristol. And to provide some insight into what their organisational challenges are. These provided a 'talking point' at the start of the workshop though are not strictly required within the Theory of Change model.

There were 24 delegates participating in the workshop on 16 October at the Rose Green Centre in Bristol, including representatives of 15 organisations:

1. Bristol Sport Foundation,
2. BCC Commissioning Manger, Strategic Commissioning (Children, Families & Education)
3. BCC Public Health Consultant,
4. Knowle West Health Park, Social Prescriber Lead,
5. BCC Everyone Active,
6. Access Sport Programme Lead,
7. Active Leisure Management,
8. BCC Physical Activity and Sport Manger,
9. SIMSPA, Sport and Physical Activity Skills Hub Manager,
10. BCC Sport and Physical Activity Officer,
11. Bristol City Council Public Health, Physical Activity Officer,
12. Chief Executive, Bristol After Stroke,
13. Bristol Health Partners Academic Health Science, Senior Project Manager,
14. BBC, Communities and inclusion,
15. Sported, South West Regional Manager,
16. University of Bristol, Director of Tennis,
17. Sirona, (Community interest company) Specialist Falls Lead,
18. Lawn Tennis Association, Lawn Tennis Association,
19. Barton Hill Settlement,
20. This Girl Can, Terre Baptist
21. Public Health, Bristol City Council, Sport and Physical Activity Development Manager,
22. West of England Sport Partnership Trust, CEO,
23. Parkwood Leisure, Health and Wellbeing,
24. Empire Fighting Chance, Community Outreach Manager

Some members of the group described their positive experience when previously using the Theory of Change framework (for example, Falls prevention). Time was therefore devoted at the beginning of the workshop to invite those with experience of its use to talk about the benefits and challenges.

Following this in smaller groups delegates were invited to identify conditions they believed have to unfold for BACN long-term goals to be met. They also, in groups, provided reflections on their assumptions underpinning delivery. This provided a valuable opportunity, as network, to hear and explore different organisations understanding. A considerable amount of time was then given to group discussion of these challenges, and what must hold true for any initiative to succeed.

Given this is to be an ongoing iterative process that will be reviewed regularly this workshop provided a starting point, rather than being a fixed destination. It is a way to introduce its relevance to those who attended and a way of getting the journey started. While the group have made a start on the process a great deal of further work is required in order to collaboratively create a meaningful plan.

However, it was not possible to generating specific projects that might fulfil the aims given the groups believed input from community partners and groups would be needed to do so.

Insights from Workshop 1

A quick glance through the organisations participating shows there is good diversity and coverage in terms of roles and level of expertise among participants. However, noticeable by their absence is the representation of community groups. In addition to community groups, there was an absence of representation from schools, roads, transport, for example. These types of absence have also been highlighted by MIOVA.

This 'omission' was something discussed by delegates, especially at the point of the Theory of Change, Step 4, "Identifying the interventions that our initiative will perform to create our desired change". Previous interventions and programmes (for example, This Girl Can) have embraced community co-creation and collaboration to identify what interventions might work and are needed, as well providing input to a co-created evaluation framework. An absence of community groups, or individuals from communities which are likely to be at the heart of any future work, resulted in delegates not being prepared to bring ideas to the table, but rather, to ask: How can we take these questions (what is needed, why, what is wanted, by whom) back to those living in areas with high health inequalities? With one delegate suggesting that "these types of workshops" should be delivered across communities.

There remains some dissatisfaction between network members of what the vision of the network should convey, and while there is a "vision" there is little consensus that it adequately captures BACN aspirations.

Reflections from Delegates

Despite the above challenges, there was a general consensus that the day had been beneficial. The following are comments offered at the end of the workshop:

> "Is there is a way we can empower people in our personal networks and individual networks, can we bring in these types of questions into the conversation – can we make that happen?"

> "Its been really useful to surface and simplify what is 'in scope' and what is 'out of scope', one of the bits I would ask us to hold, Sport England funding is a carrot, and opportunity, lets utilise it for our benefit, but can we use this time

and benefit us in Bristol effectively while addressing things that Sport England want?"

"From this meeting and ideas today, I'm going to be linked into Chinese and Polish groups, there is a lot of strength in having these conversations we have been having today, it's been really helpful"

"I've been really encouraged by the spirit of collaboration that people do actively want to work together, that is something you don't always see when you are in the mist of it, [you think] get on get head down, but actually people coming together and having these conversations, people within the group saying actually, we don't have to see each other as competitions, we are collaborators and we are already fighting towards the same goals, that is really refreshing, to see that and to remember we are "one" and it's great that it's not just certain groups and clicks here but everyone wanting to do the same thing"

"I'm not sure how it happened, I volunteer for a Cub Scout group, and we need volunteers after speaking with [nr] we are going to have a conversation about how potentially the University of Bristol students might become volunteers, that is a quite a quick win I suppose."

Synthesis One

Following this workshop, we spent several weeks working towards a first draft BACN theory of change. To do so, we synthesised the following materials and data:

- Materials from Workshop 1 - used to inform initial development
- Materials from Sport England and NELP - used as a guiding framework
- Materials from SMM Workshops – used to refine according to local context/s

Early in this process, we observed that differences exist in the form and function of theories of change, depending on the particular context in which they will be used. For example:

- 'Meta' theory of change – generic archetypal theory intended to be applied in different contexts
- Specific or local-level theory of change – implemented by a particular agency or organisation in order to support management decision-making, delivery, evaluation and/or performance management frameworks

After reflection and discussion of the wide range of initiatives and working practices within the network, we realised that it was necessary to work towards a general or 'meta' network-level theory of change (i.e., for the work of BACN in a holistic sense). This general theory could then, if necessary, be tailored by organisations/partnerships to more closely align with a particular initiative.

Following a review of best practice guidelines for theory of change, we identified the following criteria as an appropriate basis for the long-term development of a BACN Theory of Change. Priority considerations at this stage of the work are in bold font:

1. Coherence and utility
    a) Is the theory of change clear and understandable to those who will work with it?
    b) Is it presented in such a way to be usable, useful, and helpful to practitioners?

2. Analysis of the context
    a) Does the theory of change make sense as a response to the context, the problem and the changes needed?
    b) Is there a coherent narrative that sums up the theory of change?

3. Hypotheses of change
    a) Are causal pathways mapped?
    b) Are assumptions explicit?

4. Assessment of the evidence
    a) Is there an assessment of the evidence for each hypothesis?
    b) Does the assessment make sense given the evidence referred to?

The first draft theory of change was oriented towards achieving the BACN Vision which had previously been expressed as:

> To ensure that all Bristol citizens have the encouragement, opportunity and environment they need to lead active, healthy and fulfilling lives. By working collaboratively and cooperatively, as a whole system, we will seek to transform attitudes and behaviours and make it easier for residents to move more, enjoy sport and physical activity and embed it into their everyday lives.

To bring specificity, we drafted an initial BACN collective aim:

> Through collaborative cross-organisation working, we aim to develop and implement initiatives to reduce physical activity inequality in Bristol.
> To achieve this, we focus on supporting those who are currently disproportionately inactive as a result of structural, cultural, socioeconomic, geographic, and/or political factors.

With this vision and these aims in mind, we created a model for the first draft BACN Theory of Change (see Fig. 5.2).
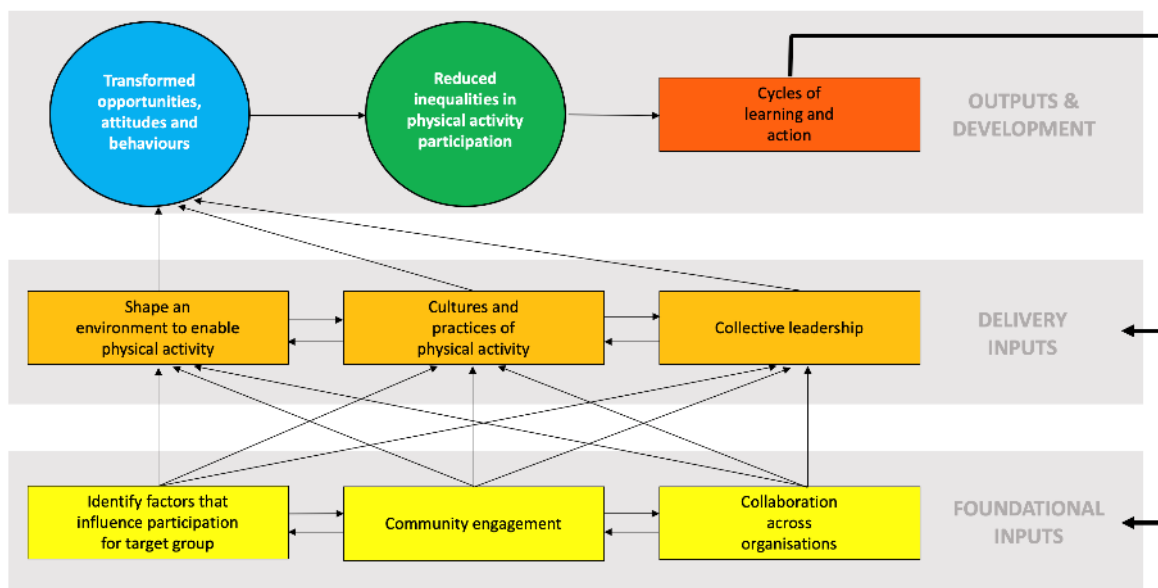
Fig. 5.2: Model for the first draft BACN Theory of Change

Our primary goal was to satisfy the first criteria of coherence and utility (Is the theory of change clear and understandable to those who will work with it? And Is it presented in such a way to be usable, useful, and helpful to practitioners?). Given the widespread uncertainty and confusion regarding Theory of Change (within BACN but more widely too), we felt it was essential to distil a model that, with appropriate explanation, would make sense and be applicable across the contexts BACN members work. To us, this seems particularly important when dealing with a complex system: any theory or model for use in this context needs to retain a degree of simplicity or elegance to avoid introducing further complications. As a result, we aspired to achieve a balance between complexity (i.e., specificity and inclusion of the many varied contexts within which network members work) and intelligibility (i.e., simplifying in the service of coherence and utility).

This version draws from the nine cross-cutting conditions for change advocated by Sport England and NELP. During our synthesis process, two conditions were determined to not be essential for inclusion in the model on the basis that they were pre-foundational: organisational policies, processes and structures that enable place-based working; capacity and capability across the workforce, volunteers and in communities.

Three conditions were deemed to be foundational elements of the theory of change:

- Community engagement (derived from Community led action)
- Identify factors that influence participation for target group (derived from Processes for identifying the barriers and enablers of physical activity)
- Collaboration across organisations (derived from Collaboration)

We theorised that a BACN initiative might start with any of these three foundational processes (or tasks) and the causal pathway might move freely and iteratively between the three processes. The precise movement between and within would depend on the nature of the particular initiative and the people it would serve.

From any of the foundational inputs, the causal pathway would move to the delivery inputs phase which contained a further three processes (or tasks):

- Shape an environment to enable physical activity (derived from Physical environments that enable physical activity)
- Cultures and practices of physical activity (derived from Cultures and practices for physical activity)
- Collective leadership (derived from Leadership)

Once again, the causal pathway might move freely and iteratively between the three processes and the precise movement would depend on the nature of the particular initiative and the people it would serve. From any of these processes, movement could progress towards Transformed opportunities, attitudes and behaviours (from BACN Vision statement) which serves as the vehicle for the ultimate vision of Reduced inequalities in physical activity participation. From here, the causal pathway would move through Cycles of learning and action which would feed back into foundational and/or delivery inputs.

Theory of Change Workshop 2

A second consultation workshop was held online on 15 January 2025. Twenty-two BACN members, representing 16 organisations, participated:

1. Access Sport
2. Bristol City Council Public Health
3. Bristol Robins Foundation
4. ALM
5. Sport England
6. Everyone Active
7. Bristol Health Partners
8. English & Welsh Cricket Board
9. Bristol Sport Foundation
10. West of England Sport Partnership Trust
11. Bristol City Council North and West Locality Partnership
12. Bristol City Council Public Health
13. Bristol City Council Public Health
14. Sport England
15. Knowle West Health Park
16. Bristol City Council Inner Central and East Locality Partnership
17. Bristol Indoor Bowls Club
18. South West Activity Alliance

19. Bristol City Council Holiday and Activity Fund (HAF) Education and Skills
20. Bristol City Council Public Health
21. Maximus (Weight Management contractor)
22. Bristol City Council Public Health

Tasks undertaken at this workshop:

- Presenting a background, context and rationale for the BACN theory of change
- Sharing our approach and processes undertaken to date
- Presenting the first draft theory of change
- Open discussion, responses and critique of first draft
- Invitation for further revision suggestions

The slides used for this presentation are available on the BACN website for network members to revisit as required.

<u>BACN Member Responses:</u>

Three key suggestions were voiced and discussed:

- Community engagement is paramount. Therefore, the BACN theory of change process should always begin with community engagement. It is from here that causal pathways can progress to the other foundational inputs.
- It is a big leap from 'transformed opportunities, attitudes and behaviours' to 'reduced inequalities in physical activity participation.' An interim process or stage seemed to be necessary here, to do with sustaining transformations over time.
- Cycles of learning and action causal pathway not correct. Rather, cycles of learning and action can and should occur at any stage, rather than at the end of the process. Similarly, lessons learnt can and should (potentially) inform any of the processes at foundational or delivery level.

Synthesis Two

Following this workshop, we had 14 days to reflect on how best to incorporate BACN members responses into a revise theory or change. To create the second draft, we drew on:

- Discussion points shared during the workshop
- Further suggestions received following the workshop
- Details shared during the 4 SMM workshops (to further refine, develop and nuance)

From these we created a revised theory of change model which incorporates the key suggestions voiced by BACN members (see Fig. 5.3).
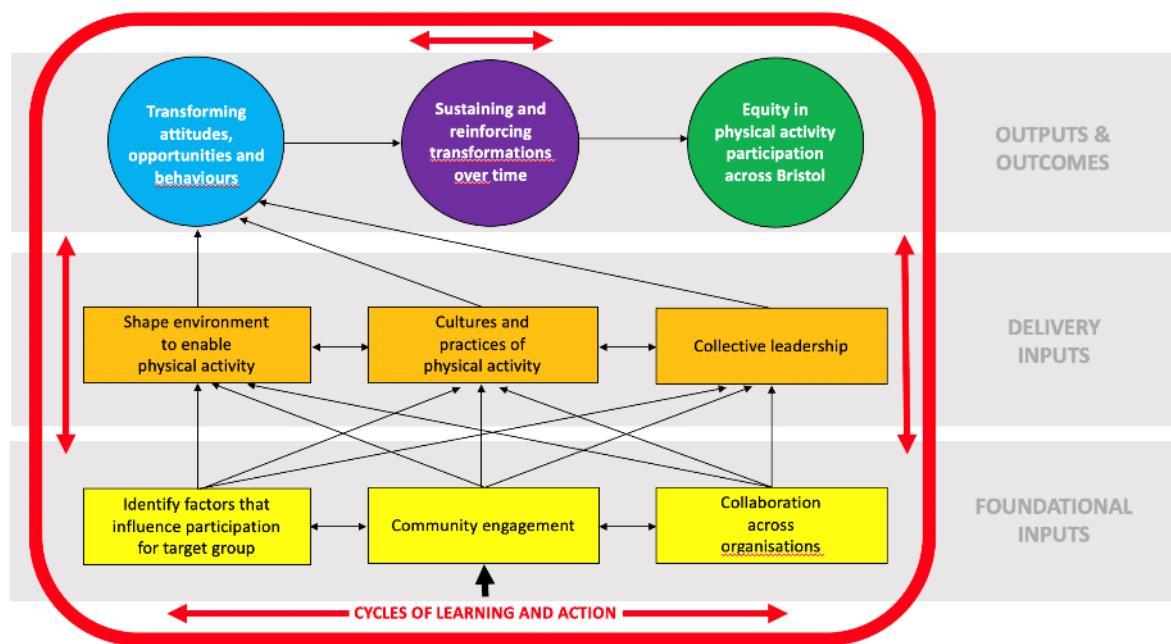
Fig. 5.3: Revised theory of change model

During this synthesis, we also developed revised Considerations in Applying Theory of Change as a way to begin to bridge the theory-practice divide. While the model, and our articulation of its processes and causal pathways, works at a theoretical level, it is necessary to use and apply these insights in practice. Drawing on the collective BACN expertise and experience voiced during the 4 SMM workshops (September and October 2024) we created a check list of questions to consider and address when working through each of the seven processes posited in the model. The aim of these points is the move from the general and theoretical level of each process 'box' to examples and prompts of more specific practice-based tasks to be addressed at each stage. These comprise:

(a) Community engagement:

1. What does lived experience within the community say about the community's needs?
2. How might this inform and direct the initiative?
3. Which community members need to be engaged?
4. How will you engage them to co-produce a people-led initiative?
5. What local power exists within the community?
6. How might this be mobilised in productive ways?
7. What local evidence exists to inform the initiative?
8. How will competing perspectives be integrated?
9. How will negative or critical voices be responded to/managed?

(b) Identify factors that influence participation for target group:

1. Who do you aim to engage? Who is the priority audience?
2. Why this target group?
3. What is already known about this population? (e.g., from international research, national evaluations, local evidence, and practice)
4. What are the characteristics of the target group that have led to lower levels of physical activity?
5. What barriers to physical activity affect this specific target group? Consider: (a) structural, (b) sociocultural, and (c) psychological/personal factors.
6. What are enablers of physical activity for the target group?

(c) Collaboration across organisations:

1. Which partners will be involved? (within and outside BACN)
2. Are partners aware of BACN focus on inequality and how they might contribute?
3. How will collaboration be achieved?
4. What needs to be done to establish or improve channels of communication and action between partners?
5. How can collaborative practice be tailored to promote effective decision making?
6. Which partners might contribute to 'sense checking' of new ideas?
7. Who will be responsible for what within the partnership?
8. How will resources be allocated and administered?
9. How will signposting and information sharing be enacted so the initiative reaches those who are less active?

(d) Shape environment to enable physical activity:

1. What kind of environment does the target community need and want?
2. Where will the initiative take place? When?
3. Why this environment? Why this time?
4. Who might this environment exclude? Think intersectionality here: age, gender, race and ethnicities, disabilities, sexualities, socioeconomics.
5. Are there any 'quick fixes' that can be operationalised to make the environment more inclusive?
6. Is further investment necessary to achieve environment equity? How might this investment be stimulated?

(e) Cultures and practices of physical activity:

1. What kind of initiative does the community need/want?
2. Is there guiding story of the initiative? What are its values or ethos?
3. What choices, actions and/or emphases will support these values?
4. How will the practical aspects of the delivery of the initiative be nuanced to best suit the target group? (e.g., time of day, clothing requirements, group size, cost, equipment, etc…)

(f) Collective leadership:

1. hat community power exists within or around the target group?
2. How might this be mobilised in productive ways?
3. Who are the people within this community who have social capital? (i.e., bonding, linking, bridging)
4. How might the community be supported to take/sustain ownership of the initiative?
5. Can the community effectively publicise the initiative? Is further advertising necessary?
6. How might the community steer the initiative going forward?
7. What processes need to be put in place to support this?

(g) Cycles of learning and action (woven through all phases of project):

1. Has engagement with those who are inactive been sustained?
2. Has the initiative created unintended consequences that need to be addressed?
3. Learning loops: What are you learning through the process? How might this inform ongoing refinement of the initiative? Who might benefit from these new insights? How might lessons learnt inform 'onboarding' of new personnel?
4. How will you know if the initiative is worthy of continuation?
5. Are there new processes that need to be put in place to ensure realisation of long-term aims?
6. What avenues exist to generate ongoing funding?
7. How might progress be celebrated and disseminated?

At this stage network members also suggested revisions to the BACN's Collective Aims:

1. To address known barriers to physical activity access for disadvantaged groups
2. To meet the physical activity needs of those who are currently disproportionately inactive
3. To work towards physical activity equity across Bristol

Theory of Change Workshop 3

On 29 January 2025 a third workshop (in-person) was held during a BACN meeting. At this workshop, we:

- Shared the revision process
- Shared second draft theory of change
- Offered a rationale for the changes made
- Discussed responses to the revised draft
- Invited further reflections

A recorded version of our presentation was made available for BACN members unable to be present on the day and those who wished to revisit the content at a later date. It can be viewed here: https://youtu.be/dwYsCqe3Des

Network members did not make further suggestions for revisions at this stage and were satisfied with this version of the theory of change as a working draft. Collectively, we recognise the need for further refinement and development as the work of BACN continues to evolve and develop.

Narrative of BACN Theory of Change

Community engagement is paramount to the work of BACN. Therefore, the theory of change begins with community engagement. It is from here that the causal pathway can progress to the other two foundational inputs. There can and should be free and iterative movement between these three stages, the precise nature of which will depend on the particular initiative and the people it serves.

The causal pathway may move onwards from any of the three foundational inputs into any of the three delivery inputs. Again, free and iterative movement should be expected between these three processes in response to arising needs of the initiative and the people it serves.

From any of these processes, movement could progress towards Transformed opportunities, attitudes and behaviours which serves as the vehicle through which the vision is realised. From here, work focuses on maintaining, sustaining and reinforcing positive transformations over time. If this process is successful, reduced inequalities in physical activity participation become achievable.

Cycles of learning and action can and should occur at any stage, rather than at the end of the process. Similarly, lessons learnt can and should (potentially) inform any of the processes at foundational or delivery level.

Reflections on BACN Theory of Change

Reflection 1:

Responses from BACN members suggest that further refinement of the theory of change will be required for the model to be most effective. In Film 7, two points for consideration 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?

These are challenging questions, more so within the context of a complex system. Further consultation within BACN 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 was initially based on the nine cross-cutting conditions for change articulated in policy documents and operationalised through the System Maturity Matrix.

There is a danger that the theory of change is overly mechanistic and removed from day-to-day practice. In Film 9, Steve Nelson observed: "We have to simplify it. We have to simplify the language and get away from boxing everything into segments … Any theory is just that. Any conditions you work out in a lab about how you're going to frame it, that's all well and good but it's down to the relationships you build on the ground and how you interpret that formal academic language so it makes sense to the people on the ground trying to engage and work with communities."

What may be preferable in the long term, then, 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 (Theise, 2023). On this basis, Theise observes that:

> There is always a little bit of randomness in every complex system. This is where the creativity and aliveness of a complex system comes in. Too much randomness in a complex system and you don't get any self-organisation. Too little and the system will always self-organise in precisely the same way. If the environment changes, it's not going to be able to change its self-organisation to adapt. So that's a dead end. So you need a little bit of randomness in the system and that's what allows for creative solutions and adaptations.[6]

We see several parallels with the current context 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 within 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

What form could this kind of theory of change take? 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. Storytelling through film might better communicate this kind of theory of change than of 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.

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[6] Neil Theise, Everything only looks like a thing. Interview with *Science and Nonduality*. Available at: https://www.neiltheiseofficial.com/media

Section 6
Considerations Going Forward

Consideration 1: Value of the workshops

There was a general consensus that the varied workshop and development activities that have been run have been beneficial and valued. Six particular benefits of the events 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

Given the current funding situation, it is apparent that it may no longer be realistic for BACN to tackle multiple areas of physical activity inequality across the city. Several network members (see e.g., Film 7 and Film 9) working at strategic level 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. They suggest alternative may be "spreading ourselves too thin" and thereby failing to achieve the desired impact in any area. 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 participation 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.

Professionals come together and feed community perspectives into the network to inform collective action. At present, there is 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. The following are two illustrations of these points raised during workshops and interviews:

> No matter what organisation you are from, leisure, industry, at the end of the day we've all got targets and KPIs. It might be around revenue, it might be around turnover, getting people through the door. For me, it's always about where's the impact? How can you show your impact? Some of the work I do, it may be with a partner who's not been that engaged for the past few years. All of a sudden you've got a nugget of something that's happened but it's through the development of a relationship. It's hard to say this is the impact. But when we do our quarterly evidencing – what's the impact, what's the impact – it's not sufficiently long term. So despite all the changes, the basics and fundamentals about how I do my job is around what is the impact. That's how we are being assessed.

> If I'm talking about the social value of sport, and me investing my time into a strategic network, I have to go back and then report to my board, and they ask, "what is your impact?" And I say, "I did a presentation on social value", and they ask "what happened?" And its kindof like that. So I ask myself, how did that have an impact on the group? how did the group then share the impact about what they've learned back? And how does all that fit together? I thought

what you did with the video of all the people and that group meeting (film 3) was fantastic, and then people could see that purpose. (Activity Alliance)

A tension also exists (and this was discussed among groups participating in the workshops) 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.

The issue, of the type of data that is used to evidence a project is working (and how it will be used), was also raised in workshop discussions. For example:

> Condition one for us was processes of identifying barriers and enablers to physical activity. And we had to discuss three areas and the first one was effective capture and use of data and insight. And we had quite a big conversation about the appropriateness of capturing data, and the main thing we talked about was the level of appropriateness of capturing data that we are collecting, in a sense of just doing it as a knee jerk reaction to everything that we do, so looking instead at things we could do that is different, like taking pictures or capturing stories, we would like to see more qualitative, rather than just pure data capture. We also had a big conversation about who are we serving by recording this data? Is it self-serving? Is it for our managers, trustees or funders, national bodies and what is it we are going to be "doing" with that data? If we are capturing data that we are not going to be using or benchmarking in some way, then we should not be capturing it. Just because we can ask a question it doesn't mean that we should.

> They have to keep intricate details re. participation for BCC. He distils lessons from the data to a 20p report each quarter. Our question: What happens to these reports? How are they used across levels of the BCC? Including case studies of activities that fall outside the historic norm. Social value indicators now laced through every contract.

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.

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 that damage that can occur to morale, interpersonal relationships, trust, and confidence, building towards a committed and energised collective future.