



Learning Round Up - BBO Grant holder Learning and Networking Events

A series of six learning and networking events were held across the country in June and July 2018, providing the opportunity for BBO grant holders to come together. Through presentations and discussions experiences and learning was shared between participants. The main ideas and learning that arose from the events are summarised below:

1. Engagement needs to remain a priority

There continues to be varied levels of engagement across projects. Groups proving more difficult to engage differ by project and area and that it is likely that each project will need to take a slightly different approach.

- For some projects, there was often a problem in engaging and promoting the projects to the *economically inactive* because there was no one place to find them. Some projects have had success by creating hubs to act as a focal point; in one project they had some success in creating peer-support networks through pubs.
- Several projects flagged that engaging *men* is the key challenge for them currently. One project had made some good progress with this target group by linking with Probation Service, with plans to maximise employment opportunities for BBO participants soon to be available through the rebuild of a local prison.
- Equally, engaging women was identified as a key challenge by other projects, with representatives reflecting that local labour market conditions, combined with priorities set by LEPs, contribute to variations in which groups are proving more challenging to engage.

More widely, there was consensus that projects have benefitted from spending time and resource on building strong referral paths, which help engage harder to reach groups. Some success was also reported by several projects in using paid promotions to target participants in general as well as those from specific groups. For one project, using advertisements in the local newspapers was useful for specifically targeting an older population. Another project has had success with an advertising campaign on the local transport system, while others confirmed that merchandise was an important element. As an example, several projects have produced branded reusable cups as one way to promote the project and support the sustainability cross cutting theme.

2. BBO participants' lives are complex, and many have higher needs than anticipated

A common message from the events was that projects are working with people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and circumstances, beyond the aspirations within the original application or the expectations of staff in many cases. This is affecting project delivery at several stages:



Building Better Opportunities Evaluation

- More front end support for participants is needed.
- Average length of time on the project is above the expected number of weeks.
- The role of delivery staff has in some projects been more like coaches rather than advisers.
- More 1-2-1 support is being used in some projects where group sessions was the predominant delivery model.

There were plenty of interesting discussions at the events on the challenge of achieving a balance between providing extensive close support when working with participants, on the one hand, while not encouraging dependency on the part of those supported, on the other. This was seen as a particularly delicate balance when adopting a key worker model, including for delivery staff in terms of when to progress or move participants on. Several projects highlighted strategies to address this including setting expectations from the beginning with participants, partners and delivery staff; reviewing key worker caseloads to identify where dependency is potentially developing; and providing training for staff to recognise and handle this.

3. Partnership management is intensive

Across the board, projects confirmed that partnership management continues to be resource intensive. The level of inputs vary depending on the specific delivery structures in place and the nature of project partners, but there was consensus that this is seen as an important role for the lead grant holder. Equally, there were positive stories of this resulting in capacity building for some smaller organisations. Related to partnerships, there were some good examples of working with other BBO projects in a LEP area or more locally to share experiences and build a support network beyond the immediate project.

4. Staff retention/turnover is a challenge

Some projects have experienced relatively high levels of turnover amongst staff - often frontline staff. This is reported to be negatively affecting delivery due the time it takes to get a new staff member up to speed. The challenge reported was that the staff recruited with the right skills for doing the participant facing work did not necessarily always also have the skills for the paperwork and administrative aspects of the role. The broad skill sets required of delivery staff was thus a key discussion point, with this also making recruitment challenging; some representatives also raised a need to consider pay in the sector for this type of role from this perspective.

There were also discussions around the fact that, for some projects, with just over one year remaining staff retention issues may increase as staff look for other opportunities as projects near their end date. Other projects reported that they are already looking to manage staff fears about the programme end before decisions are announced by Big Lottery Fund about any extension or new programme.

5. Employer engagement needs careful management

There were some good discussions on various approaches to employer engagement and/or progressing participants once they are closer to being job ready. It was recognised that



Building Better Opportunities Evaluation

participant confidence has typically been seen to curve (increasing at the beginning but then dropping off again when the challenge of finding and entering work comes into greater focus). One project has begun to involve a specialist/new staff member to work with participants on job search/CV work at this late stage rather than mentors doing this work. This person not only has the right skills but the involvement of a new/different person with the participant can serve to boost confidence again and act as a prompt to progress. Other projects have created similar roles such as job brokers or progression officers.

Projects have various ways to share job opportunities including a job portal on the main website which can be accessed by all partners, while others projects send job bulletins round to all. One project reported success in linking with the local authority economic development team as a good route to be aware of forthcoming developments/employment opportunities and to help facilitate early employer engagement.

Beyond this, it was recognised that employer engagement is an important step that needs careful management as there is really only one chance for the participant/employer contact to lead to a successful outcome. Projects discussed 'selling' participants as job ready rather than focusing on where they have come from, as this is what employers want. Equally, it was discussed that current employer recruitment practices were often the biggest barrier to successful job outcomes so work with employers on this was a focus for some projects. The 'on boarding' process (time period where employer checks are done etc.) for some job opportunities can also be lengthy and a barrier for BBO participants.

6. A lot has been achieved by BBO projects

There was clear consensus that the programme was important despite the difficulties and frustrations around administration. BBO has facilitated delivery models that are flexible and fit for purpose and this has led to impact with those for whom mainstream services are not 'patient' or 'empathetic' enough. It was noted that without BBO some of these participants would have nowhere to go, so the projects do make a positive difference.

There is much still to learn from BBO delivery, but these events made an important contribution to ensuring knowledge is shared and developed – thank you to all who attended.

There was a clear message in the feedback forms that more of this type of event, which brings together grant holders, would be welcomed. Look out for more of the same later in the year and into 2019.

The specific presentations delivered at the individual events are available on the [BBO evaluation website](#).

For further information on the evaluation please contact: BBO@ecorys.com