



Building Better Opportunities Evaluation:

Participant experiences of taking part in the programme



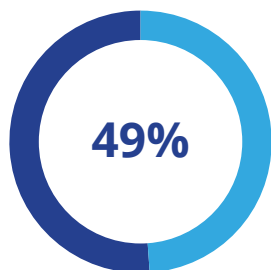
The Building Better Opportunities Programme (BBO) funds local projects tackling the root causes of poverty, promoting social inclusion and driving local jobs and growth, particularly for groups facing multiple barriers to work. BBO allocates funds from The National Lottery Community Fund and the European Social Fund, with 132 projects receiving grants to deliver activities to address local priorities since the programme launched in 2016.

The projects aim to improve the employability of the most disadvantaged, including helping those with multiple and complex needs with through a variety of activities including confidence building, skills development and help with financial literacy. BBO was designed to make the most of the expertise and knowledge of a wide range of organisations by encouraging partnership delivery; over 1,600 organisations have delivered BBO support, the majority of which are voluntary and community sector organisations.

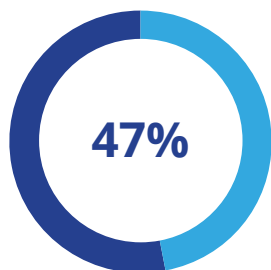
Ecorys has been working with The National Lottery Community Fund since 2016, evaluating the BBO programme through a range of methods including research with projects and people who have been supported. The evaluation has found that so far, BBO projects have been successful in improving outcomes for people who are supported, helping them to feel more confident and improving their wellbeing, as well as improving their employability. The programme is designed to be flexible, allowing projects to provide bespoke support for their participants, and this has been a key factor in the success.

This paper gives the chance to meet some of the people who have taken part in BBO projects and learn how the support has helped them to change their lives. Names and some minor details have been changed to give anonymity to the people who told us their stories during a survey and follow-up interviews which were conducted in Spring 2021. The quotes throughout the paper were given by other survey respondents.

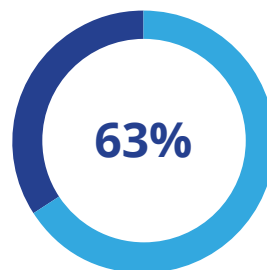
Between the programme launch ~and June 2020, more than **117,000 people** had joined a BBO project. Monitoring data from BBO projects shows that they are supporting people who face complex difficulties in their lives.



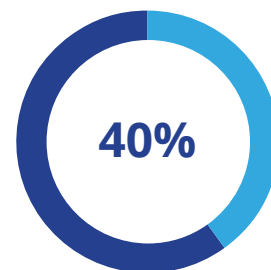
of the people who have been involved in the programme have a disability.



were economically inactive when they joined the programme*.

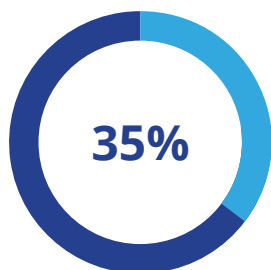


of people taking part in the programme came from jobless households.

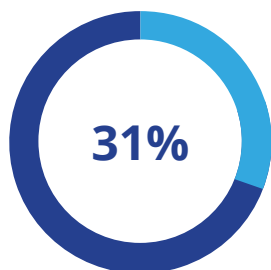


described themselves as not having basic skills (in literacy and maths for example).

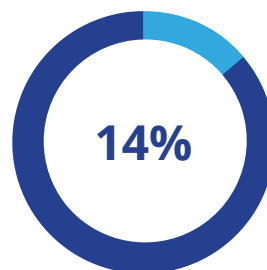
When leaving BBO projects:



of people moved into employment.

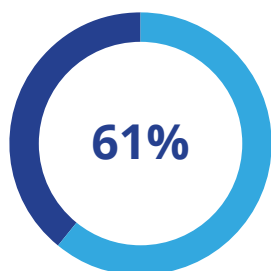


of people moved into education or training.

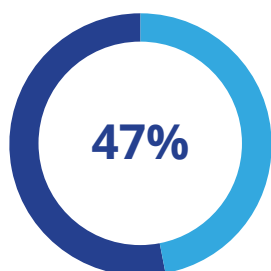


of people moved from economic inactivity to actively looking for a job.

In our survey of people who have received support from BBO:



of those going into work felt they would not have found their jobs without help from BBO.



of those not working felt the support would help them to find a job in the future.

*This means that they were not looking for work or were not available for work, due to disability or caring responsibilities for example

Georgina's story

The Positive People project

Positive People is delivered by a partnership of organisations managed by Pluss. With projects running in Devon and Cornwall, the projects have supported thousands of people back into or closer to work using person-centred approaches. The projects' Change Coaches coordinate support provided by a range of local partners to address individual needs. People can also engage in a range of group activities which reduce social isolation and encourage peer support. Ultimately, the project aims to help people move into meaningful and sustainable employment.

For more information, visit
<https://www.positive-people.org.uk/>

Georgina is severely disabled and has been a long-term claimant of disability benefits. She is over 55, and has found that her age and disability have made it difficult for her to find paid work. However, she has been running a community group for some years, and really wanted to scale up the group into a not-for-profit organisation. She had never heard of the Positive People project before coming across them at a local event; they invited her to have a chat with an adviser to see if they could offer her any support.

Georgina's first impressions of the project were "not great"; she didn't know what it was trying to achieve. However, she soon found that she was starting to get something from the support from the advisers at the project.

"I could see the benefits very quickly – not material things but rather the support network. That can be extremely important to some people."

Georgina's experience showed the importance of the bespoke support offered by the project. Although she had a couple of advisers during her time with the project, she found she really clicked with one who gave her full support; Georgina described it as being tailored to her and her needs, rather than slotting her into something that was pre-defined. The adviser also worked with Georgina to adapt her plans when she became more severely disabled and were very aware of addressing the needs that her disability created.

"She [the adviser] was very available to me. It felt like I was being listened to, and the project was running for me rather than being a generic programme for anyone."

Georgina knew she wanted to scale up her community group, but didn't know how. She described how the project gave her an "in", by giving her motivation and know-how – importantly, the project was able to give her coaching from professionals who knew how to set up organisations. Her charity has now received external funding and is well linked-in with other community groups, giving support to people who need it most locally.

"They turned my idea into a reality and it became exactly what I had wanted in a much quicker time span than I could have ever expected. If it wasn't for the project, I would have been very scared to take the plunge...Without the project I wouldn't be where I am now in terms of the charity."

Not only did Positive People help Georgina set up the charity, it also helped to improve her confidence to a point where she is doing things she would never have done before. She says she is now much more willing to try new things and has even become involved in local politics.

"I have done what I set out to do, and that has made me a lot more confident."

Julie's story

The New Leaf project

Led by the Torus Foundation in Cheshire and Warrington, the New Leaf project describes itself as offering a helping hand for those who need it most. People who join the programme face significant challenges including mental health conditions, histories of substance misuse, physical disabilities, learning disabilities and difficulties, are at risk of offending, are survivors of domestic abuse or are ex-offenders. Through a network of specialist partners, the project delivers a wide range of interventions including mental health support, confidence building, volunteering and support to become self-employed. Participants have one to one support from a dedicated mentor, with no time limit to the support. Participants can also access a personal budget to help overcome specific barriers.

For more information, visit
<https://newleafcheshire.co.uk/>

Julie has a degree in business studies and had previously had a professional career as a business analyst. However, after a series of personal crises she was left homeless and suffering from a mental breakdown. As she was living in supported housing, she was not able to work as she would not be able to afford the increase in rent if she stopped claiming benefits. As a result, she was volunteering but suffering from low confidence. Contacts in the organisation she was volunteering with suggested that she got in touch with the New Leaf project to work out what her next steps could be.

"I wanted to sort my life out after all the difficulties I'd faced."

There were a number of things Julie wanted to work through with her adviser; having previously worked in London, she

wanted to know how she could apply her skills and experience in her new local area. She also wanted to explore the idea of re-training. She knew she wanted to return to the workplace, but felt she needed to improve her confidence and perhaps do some work experience placements before starting to job-search.

Her first impressions of the project were good; she found the advisers to be knowledgeable, but importantly they listened to what she wanted to achieve. In her time with the project, Julie took a number of different courses aimed at improving confidence, but also her attitudes and outlook on life. There was a strong focus on mental wellbeing. This, paired with her volunteering work, all contributed to helping her feel ready to progress.

"The staff were absolutely brilliant – they really listen to you. They gave great advice and helped me work through all the options. They were really encouraging."

Taking into account Julie's desire to find a new direction but also the challenges she faced with rent affordability, New Leaf's advisers suggested that Julie might want to consider training in accountancy and achieving AAT accreditation. With their support, Julie enrolled in a course and for the past eight months, she has been studying for the AAT exams. She is making excellent progress, having passed Level Two and now working towards Level Three. She expects to be fully qualified in a year and then will start looking for a job in accounting.

Julie is sure that without the project she would not be in the position that she is in today.

"They encouraged me to think outside the box and that's why I got onto the course – I looked at things from a different angle. I wouldn't have considered it without their help."

Julie says that she is now on the right path and feels that the changes she has made so far will be sustained in the future. She is confident that after her exams, she will find a job in accounting.

John's story

The Motiv8 project

Motiv8 supports people aged over 25 across Greater Manchester who need support to get their lives back on track, particularly those who are under-represented in the labour market such as ex-offenders, migrant communities and the over 50s. Through a range of support and interventions, the project aims to address issues around self-confidence, self-esteem, health and wellbeing, finances and employability skills. Participants are supported by a key worker who will help people to develop their own action plans and progress through it.

Motiv8 is led by Manchester Athena, a partnership of housing providers.

For more information, visit
<https://www.motiv8mcr.org/>

"It was just good to speak to someone. They gave me real advice and didn't just tell me to cheer up. All the advice just made sense."

John's course will give him two qualifications in cyber security, and he has really enjoyed studying. He would never have found the course without the project's help, and would never have considered studying without their support. He feels the project really helped his overall mental wellbeing – when he joined he felt he had no hope. Without the support from the project, he is sure he would still be unemployed and depressed.

"The project helped with so many aspects of my life... living, mental health, work and studying. [Without the project] I think I would have killed myself, it sounds daft but I had no hope."

When John joined the Motiv8 project, he had been unemployed for three months after working in a "toxic" warehouse job. His mental health had suffered and he was also having a hard time at home in an unhappy living situation. He wanted to make a complete change and move into IT, but was finding it hard to change fields.

John found the project through an internet search and straight away thought that what the project was offering would be useful. The adviser he worked with gave him support to look for work and update his CV, but it became clear that his lack of experience and qualifications in IT would be a barrier. At this point, the adviser helped him to find and enroll in a course in cyber security.

Importantly, the support John received helped him to look at all aspects of his life and address some of the other issues that were holding him back. The adviser helped him to find and register with a GP, and also helped him to change his living situation.

"I am a much more confident person with the help from my mentor at the course I attended, and more financially stable. I hope to stay in the workplace and support my family."

(Participant from the Motiv8 project)

Cheryl's story

The Exploring Opportunities Project

The Exploring Opportunities Project partnership consists of 14 organisations from across the Humber area, led by the Humber Learning Consortium. The projects' aim is to improve the lives of 1564 unemployed and economically inactive people aged 25 or older living in the area. Participants have one to one support from a key worker, and can access interventions such as mentoring (including specific support for ex-offenders, the homeless and lone parents), employability skills, specialised support for people with disabilities, and teacher assistant training.

For more information, visit
<https://www.hlc-vol.org/our-programmes/bbo/>

Cheryl was widowed and a full-time parent, but when her children left college she needed to claim Universal Credit and find work. She had been out of the labour market for many years, and had spent around a year looking for work. Crucially, she did not have access to the internet which had been a significant barrier to finding vacancies; she was relying on her daughter to help her look for work.

"I had not been able to find anything and my confidence was low."

Cheryl was referred to the Exploring Opportunities project by one of the delivery partners, an employment support team at Ongo Recruitment. When she joined, she wanted to find a job, improve her confidence and get help with money matters and budgeting. She attended courses at the project which helped to improve her confidence in speaking to other people, as well as help to find work. She found all the support was helpful to her and wouldn't have changed any of it.

Cheryl now has a part time job cleaning in a school which she loves. It's a secure job and she is sure she will stay there for the long term.

"I like it [my job] a lot and I'm really enjoying it... The project boosted my confidence a lot, so I had the confidence to go out and meet people and get more involved in things."

Cheryl is sure that without the project she wouldn't have found work and would still be looking for a job. Most importantly, she is now feeling optimistic about the future.

"I was looking to start some training to find myself a job in an office... at the moment I'm doing an Open University course for book-keeping, which has given me a lot more confidence."

(Participant from the Exploring Opportunities project)

“I was unemployed and I wanted to sort my financial problems out. Now I am back in employment and on the right track.”

(Participant from the Money Sorted in D2N2 project)

“I’m working as an IT tutor. I feel more independent in myself, and I am enjoying the work that I do.. I don’t think I would have found this position without the help from the mentor on my course.”

(Participant from the Bridge project)

“I was out of work for seven months... now I have a job that I enjoy so much. I can pay my bills now and I am off benefits, which is what I wanted.”

(Participant from the Better Opportunities for East Berkshire project)

“Without the project I would have been struggling. They have really helped me.”

(Participant from the Strive in Herts project)

“My confidence would not have been so improved without the help from my mentor at the course.”

(Participant from the Building Futures project)

“I feel like I’ve got what it takes to get another job now, before I was a bit clueless... without the project I would still have been trying to get a job. It’s made my family proud of me and kept me out of trouble.”

(Participant from the Money Sorted in D2N2 project)



