



BRIGHTLIFE LEGACY REPORT

12. CO-RESEARCHERS'
SELF-EVALUATION OF
FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE
WORKING ON THE
BRIGHTLIFE PROJECT

The University of Chester Evaluation Team

Originally January 2018

Findings,
assessment and
recommendations

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PART 1: Background

1.1 Aim Brightlife project

The aim of this report is to update the Brightlife Partnership Board regarding an evaluation of co-researchers and formally record the experiences during the first year of working in the role.

1.2 Co-researcher recruitment

The University of Chester (UoC) has recruited and trained volunteers to work in a unique volunteering activity, as co-researchers on the Brightlife project to assist with the evaluation. It is envisaged the UoC could recruit up to 25 co-researchers who could assist with the ongoing evaluation.

The first cohort of co-researchers completed a bespoke training programme designed by the UoC in April/May 2016. These nine co-researchers were awarded Honorary Research Associate contracts with the UoC. A second cohort of three co-researchers were recruited and trained in March 2017. Presently, six co-researchers regularly work with the UoC; some co-researchers have suspended their contract due to personal commitments, although may return at a later stage. Almost all co-researchers in the first cohorts are aged over 50; the second cohort had two aged over 50 and one aged under 50. There are a mix of females and males in both cohorts. Co-researchers have come from a range of backgrounds and offer a large skills base.

In the first year, co-researchers were involved in a variety of tasks on the Brightlife Evaluation including:

- interviewing participants
- qualitative data analysis
- report writing
- oral presentations

Four co-researchers have also had opportunity to be involved in other research projects conducted within the Centre for Ageing Studies, and are currently co-authoring research papers with UoC staff.

1.3 Co-researcher self-evaluation (online survey)

As this was the first occurrence of the UoC working with co-researchers in this capacity, and to ensure all aspects of the project are evaluated, it was important to assess the experience of co-researchers in the first 12 months of the role. This was completed using an online survey tool (Bristol Online Survey, BOS), which was distributed on the 8th June 2017. Survey questions were designed by the co-researchers with the purpose of self-evaluation, and considered the training and experience of the first two cohorts of co-researchers. Results of this survey were presented and discussed at a meeting on the 22nd June 2017, attended by co-researchers and UoC staff. The feedback received will be used to inform the UoC when reviewing and developing training for future cohorts of new volunteer co-researchers.

PART 2: Methodology

2.1 Survey design

An online survey (BOS) designed by co-researchers was used to self-evaluate the experiences during the first year working with the UoC. Co-researchers were asked to contribute questions for inclusion on the questionnaire; these were collated and uploaded onto the BOS and distributed to all by email. The survey included questions which asked co-researchers to rank responses on a 5-point scale, and also open-ended descriptive questions to allow participants to provide further details. Key to the survey was the opportunity for co-researchers to suggest recommendations to improve the ongoing involvement in this role, and the experience of future cohorts.

2.2 The BOS questionnaire

The BOS questionnaire consisted of 28 questions, divided into the following four sections:

1. General
2. University Evaluation Team
3. Brightlife
4. The Future

A final open-ended question provided opportunity for additional feedback not addressed in the set questions.

A total of twelve participants consisting of nine active and three in-active¹ co-researchers from the first and second cohorts were invited to take part in the BOS questionnaire via email. All participants had completed the co-researcher training programme. Ten co-researchers (nine active and one who had retired after 4-6 months' activity) responded to the survey. The BOS tool randomly assigned each participant a unique number to ensure anonymity; the final two digits of these 20 digit numbers have been used to reference quotations in this report.

All participants were advised prior to undertaking the survey that results would be shared with both the University and Brightlife.

¹ Inactive co-researchers are those who have temporarily suspended their involvement or who have withdrawn from the role completely due to other commitments.

PART 3: Results

A summary of the key findings in each of the four sections is provided below.

3.1 General

Feedback was extremely positive with regards to overall experience of being a co-researcher, with all ten participants reporting they felt mentally stimulated by the work, and nine agreeing they would recommend being a co-researcher to others.

However, four participants described the co-researcher experience had been difficult at times due to the combination of the sporadic nature of the project work and personal commitments. This had caused frustration at times to some co-researchers ($n=6$) with regard to diary planning.

3.2 University Evaluation Team

Participants were mostly satisfied with the interaction with the UoC, with eight co-researchers reporting feeling an integral part of the team, feeling supported by the team and finding the monthly meetings to be valuable. Nine participants considered the training by the UoC to have been useful and eight participants felt adequately prepared for the work they had undertaken. In terms of work produced by co-researchers in conjunction with the UoC, nine participants felt pleased with the quality of their work and four reported feeling satisfied with the feedback given to them on their work. Individual comments included:

‘The University evaluation team has always been inclusive and encouraging. Being a co-researcher has allowed me to use existing skills and develop new ones, therefore the experience has been extremely rewarding!’ (94).

There was some concern about timescales, with eight participants commenting they would appreciate a clearer time frame for the completion of reports. This was explained further in the open-ended question where a number of comments were made:

'The timescales for production of reports seem slow. This concerns me that the information is out of date when finally reported' (49).

'At times it is frustrating that it takes months for feedback to be given on reports written and different changes made when various staff members look at reports. It also means reports are not fed back to Brightlife in a timely manner' (76).

3.3 Brightlife

Participants reported mixed feelings when asked if they felt part of Brightlife, with four disagreeing, two agreeing and four having no opinion. However, many co-researchers confirmed the co-researcher role, rather than the project, was the main reason for volunteering. For example:

'I haven't particularly felt part of Brightlife but then that isn't why I was interested in being a co-researcher. My interest is in being in the evaluation aspect not necessarily in Brightlife itself' (16).

Three participants disagreed when asked if they felt their work had been useful to BL; three agreed and four had no opinion. In addition, nine participants agreed the UoC reports had been submitted to BL too late to feed into the "Test and Learn" process. As one person commented in question:

'By the time the reports are ready, Brightlife has changed and the reports are outdated by the time they are received' (98).

On a more positive note, eight participants commented the first Brightlife feedback day in April 2017 had been a valuable way to provide feedback to Brightlife.

3.4 The Future

This final section of the survey was completed by the nine active co-researchers only. All nine participants wished to remain active co-researchers. A wider range of opinion was expressed in subsequent questions relating to a greater variety of work, more

autonomy in the work, more hours of work, receiving more training, and more regular hours of work. Comments made in the open-ended question include:

'I value the time flexibility of the role' (49).

'I'm not expecting more autonomy as I understand that the University needs oversight of what we're doing to guard its research status/reputation. At the moment, I'm not looking for more hours as I'm fitting this work around a number of other commitments' (16).

'Personally, I will have much more time during late Autumn and the Winter months. With more regular hours, people do tend to clear their diaries to meet such commitments' (36).

3.5 Other comments

This section of the survey yielded further positive comments. For example:

'I enjoy being part of the evaluation team although, at times, it has seemed to lose its way somewhat. Again, that's in contrast to my other professional contexts which are more focused/client driven' (16).

The results of this survey were presented by a co-researcher to co-researchers and UoC staff at a co-ordination meeting on 22nd June 2017.

PART 4: Discussion and Recommendations

4.1 Discussion

Co-researchers working with the Centre for Ageing Studies at the University of Chester completed an online self-evaluation survey (BOS) in June 2017, to provide feedback on the experiences during the first year working on the Brightlife project. The survey consisted of 28 questions which covered general feedback, feedback about experience working with the UoC, feedback on the experience working on the Brightlife project and with the Brightlife team, and thoughts on future expectations working as a co-researcher.

Co-researchers from two cohorts (April/May 2016 and March 2017) received training by UoC staff prior to being involved in a range of tasks on the Brightlife project including interviewing participants, qualitative data analysis, report writing and presentations. Four co-researchers were also involved in other research projects conducted between April-July 2017 within the Centre for Ageing Studies and have co-authored research papers with UoC staff.

Results from the survey were collated and presented by one co-researcher at a meeting which was attended by University staff and co-researchers. Following the presentation, an open discussion provided opportunity for further explanation of key points to UoC staff. The feedback was important to UoC as part of the test and learn process, and as a means of evaluating the experience of co-researchers in the first year. In addition, the discussion also provided valuable feedback with regard to any changes or improvements, which require consideration for the current cohorts, and for reviewing and developing training for future cohorts of new volunteer co-researchers.

Overall, the co-researcher experience has been positive, with most co-researchers reporting feeling supported and an integral part of the UoC team. All co-researchers felt the training had been useful and adequate and were satisfied with the quality of the work they produced. There were some concerns over the length of time regarding report feedback and style. Discussions between UoC staff and co-researchers have subsequently resolved the small issues that arose over report writing; co-researchers

were initially writing reports for the work in which they were involved, however there was a lengthy turnaround between draft and final reports at times due to various views on editing, and some people were less familiar with the academic style used by the UoC. Following the survey feedback, it was agreed from June 2017 onwards the co-researchers would take the lead on interviewing participants and interview data analysis, whilst report writing would be shared by co-researchers and the University evaluation team. Drafts reports would be distributed to both co-researchers and the university evaluation team for comment prior to forwarding the final version to Brightlife. In addition, a timeline of 12 weeks (post final data collection date) has been agreed for report submission to ensure timely delivery of reports. This approach is now working effectively, and a Gantt chart has been developed to forward plan.

Some frustrations were raised with regard to personal time and diary planning caused by the sporadic nature of the project work. The UoC acknowledged this was an area which required improvement and it was agreed a better system would be developed to inform co-researchers of upcoming work and timelines for completion. It was discussed by UoC and co-researchers the work could likely continue to be sporadic at times due to the data collection during the Brightlife project evaluation process, however it is planned that a Gantt chart or similar will be used to schedule work plans going forward.

The meeting held on 22nd June 2017 was an important opportunity for co-researchers to discuss results in greater detail with UoC staff. This immediate feedback formed part of a UoC internal review and was not required for the Brightlife project evaluation, thus a formal report was not produced at the time. Six months following this evaluation (December 2017), the co-researchers produced this report as a formal record of the evaluation, and concurrently were asked to provide feedback on the co-researcher training material in preparation for recruitment of future cohorts. Feedback about the co-researcher training material, in addition to the self-evaluation data, has provided the UoC team with collective feedback on the co-researchers' experience over an 18-month timescale. Details of the co-researcher training material feedback are provided in an addendum following the conclusion of this report.

4.2 Recommendations

The following section offers suggestions by co-researchers for future practice on the Brightlife project. With the aim of fostering a successful project, there follows some suggested modifications to the work experience of future volunteer co-researchers in the University's Brightlife evaluation team. These recommendations are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Recommendations

Co-researchers to be given access to BL Partnership meeting minutes and consider sending a representative to Partnership meetings
UoC to distribute timeline information to co-researchers to enable better forward planning
UoC to provide feedback on report drafts written by co-researchers as quickly as possible
Co-researchers to forward research results to UoC for report writing if preferred
Increased range of work opportunities to be available to co-researchers

4.2.1 Brightlife Partnership Meetings

Co-researchers suggested additional information about Brightlife would be beneficial to an overall understanding of the project. During the feedback meeting on 22nd June 2017, UoC staff and co-researchers agreed the minutes from Brightlife Partnership meetings would be forwarded to all co-researchers. It was also proposed co-researchers should have opportunity to attend future Partnership meetings as an observer.

4.2.2 Distribution of timeline information

Concerns raised about planning workload were discussed in the feedback meeting on 22nd June 2017. It was agreed the UoC staff would distribute timeline information to co-researchers in advance to enable better diary planning. Co-researchers emphasised this was particularly important when engaged in fieldwork such as interviewing Brightlife participants.

4.2.3 Timely feedback for draft reports

Co-researchers raised concerns regarding the length of time between submitting a first draft of a report and the production of a final report. Initially, co-researchers were actively involved in writing draft reports, with UoC staff providing feedback. As part of the test and learn process, it was acknowledged the process of draft report reviewing between co-researchers, UoC and Brightlife had resulted in lengthy delays between the final data collection point and production of a formal report. Despite ongoing communication between UoC and Brightlife ensuring the major report findings were conveyed verbally in a timely manner (and prior to final report delivery at times), it was agreed final reports should be forwarded to Brightlife within 12 weeks of the final data collection point.

4.2.4 Report writing roles

Following on from discussions about feedback in section 4.2.3, further dialogues regarding report writing raised by some co-researchers included some confusion over the style and formatting required by the UoC, and a low confidence in word processing skills. Co-researcher involvement in data analysis was recognised as an important component of satisfaction and enjoyment of work, however formal report writing was a task that some preferred be completed by UoC staff. It was agreed that co-researchers would retain data collection and analysis roles, and UoC staff would write the majority of formal reports. During the feedback meeting, co-researchers were advised of training opportunities available at the University for those interested in increasing their typing or report writing skills.

4.2.5 Increased range of co-researcher work opportunities

At the time of the self-evaluation survey, a number of co-researchers had taken opportunities of involvement with short-term research projects unrelated to the Brightlife project. These experiences were very positive for both UoC staff and the co-researchers involved and provided a rewarding challenge to co-researchers during periods of reduced fieldwork on the Brightlife project. Whenever possible, the UoC will continue to offer co-researchers a range of new work opportunities within the Centre for Ageing Studies.

PART 5: Conclusions

The findings from a self-evaluation survey which reviewed the experiences during the first year of co-researchers working with the Centre for Ageing Studies team at the University of Chester has been very encouraging. Co-researchers feel they have successfully integrated and developed into a cohesive group to work effectively as part of the Centre for Ageing Studies, and state they feel comfortable to share in the successes, but also challenge the University team when they feel practice could be improved. In the first year working at the UoC, co-researchers have assisted with the evaluation of the Brightlife project by conducting interviews with various stakeholders, performing qualitative data analysis, contributing to report writing, constructing online surveys, giving presentations at meetings, feedback events and workshops, and attending a range of meetings. Co-researchers have enjoyed the experience, however raised some concerns in the feedback survey; these were constructively discussed with the UoC at the meeting on 22nd June 2017 to enable full understanding and provide opportunity to resolve before moving forward.

Co-researchers reported they value the training and support received from each other and the UoC. They are enthusiastic about future training and work opportunities in the co-researcher role, and remain committed to evaluating the Brightlife project:

'This voluntary co-researcher position is a rare opportunity and I am grateful for being included in it. I am thoroughly enjoying the range of activities' (94).

References

- Office for National Statistics. (2015). *Population Estimates Analysis Tool*. Retrieved from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesanalysisistool>
- Whiteley, K., Mead, R., & Taylor, L. (2016). *Social Prescribing - Pen Portraits*. Retrieved from Centre for Ageing Studies:

Addendum

The Centre for Ageing Studies at the University of Chester designed and delivered training to volunteers who had applied to work as co-researchers. In April/May 2016, the first cohort of co-researchers completed the training, and in March 2017 a second cohort was inducted using a condensed training session. In November and December 2017, the UoC requested co-researchers to review the co-researcher training manual with a view to updating the manual for potential future cohorts in 2018. It was also opportunity for co-researchers to provide valuable feedback on the training experience and propose suggestions for improvement. As this feedback closely relates to the contents of this report, the feedback on the training has been included as an addendum in this report.

Co-researchers met on 23rd November 2017 for a group discussion and compiled a detailed list of feedback on the training material. Those who could not attend the meeting provided feedback via email. The feedback was collated and returned to UoC staff as tracked changes in the training manual. A list of recommendations for training of future cohorts was also provided. Some suggestions made to the training manual have been incorporated immediately, such as a glossary, however UoC staff are currently thoroughly reviewing further suggestions. The list of recommendations has been reviewed; Table 2 below details the list of recommendations and also includes the UoC response to each.

Table 2: Recommendations and responses for future training of co-researchers

Co-researcher Recommendation	UoC Response
New co-researchers be given Brightlife induction prior to UoC training to familiarise with aims and structure of Brightlife and an overview of projects to date.	UoC have discussed this with the Brightlife team and have agreed the Brightlife induction should be completed prior to UoC co-researcher training.
UoC Induction session to issue contracts, ID cards, logins, pen drives, university portal, x: drive and Onedrive access etc.	Whenever possible, the UoC will endeavour to provide all of these items requested, at the completion of co-researcher training, dependent on UoC HR.

<p>Reduce number of training sessions from five to three, and increase the length of the three sessions if needed to compensate. Suggested 3 sessions are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Relationship between Brightlife and UoC, introduction of Brightlife evaluation process and stakeholders. 2. Ethics, CMF completion, participant interviews. 3. Worked example to include step by step guide on how to analyse qualitative data and identify themes in an interview transcript, an overview of NVivo (demonstration of programme to be done at later stage), report writing (style guide and template to be given), a brief mention of quantitative data use describing the role of CMF and SPSS (but not in detail). 	<p>In line with current optimal pedagogic methodologies, it is not envisaged the co-researcher training could be reduced to three sessions. During a review of the training material, it is likely the sessions can be condensed into four sessions.</p> <p>UoC staff with relevant expertise will lead the training, and co-researcher involvement will be encouraged.</p> <p>Timely in-depth training of relevant software will be delivered to enable application to task. Not all co-researchers will need training in every software.</p>
<p>Each training session to be led by a different member of UoC staff, with 1-2 current co-researchers actively participating in each training session.</p>	<p>Training delivery will be led by UoC staff who are experts in each subject area. Assistance from co-researchers will be welcomed.</p>
<p>Each session to include details of 'the journey' for this piece of work, for example a Brightlife participant interview would include details of their referral, interview, transcript analysis and production of final report.</p>	<p>Flowcharts of the process of data collection for each work area are being drafted by UoC staff to include in the co-researcher training manual.</p>
<p>Details of variety and flexibility of work, including opportunity for working alone or in pairs/groups, at home/in the field. Possibility of co-researchers sharing their experience to demonstrate time management.</p>	<p>Discussion of the variety of work will be included in co-researcher training sessions. A Gantt chart has been developed to record completed work and plan upcoming work - this will be shared with co-researchers.</p>
<p>Sessions to include a significant level of active participation whenever possible, using role play and case studies.</p>	<p>Co-researcher training will include appropriate demonstrations and participation.</p>