

# BEARWOOD BONDS 2021

PROJECT REPORT



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# Acknowledgements:

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Report by Macey Ball, supported by Renata Salazar Lasocki on behalf of the Bearwood Community Hub CIC

**A special thank you to Warley Woods Community Trust and Dorothy Parkes Centre for partnering with us on this project**

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**Thank you to our funder SCVO for supporting the delivery of this pilot project.**

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# Introduction:

The project engaged with a total of 19 people across nine streets. The project was able to reach people that had felt isolated, to get an idea of who had already or may in the future engage with Bearwood Community Hub, and to continue to build relationships with established partners.

Through the engagement with local residents, street litter picks in were organised, there was engagement with fitness and wellbeing instructors who showed interest in being involved in future projects.

People in crisis were sign-posted to frontline services and benefits support. Current projects were promoted and gained new participants, including: the Online Art workshops, Coffee Mornings and phone performances by Black Country Touring.



## Aim:

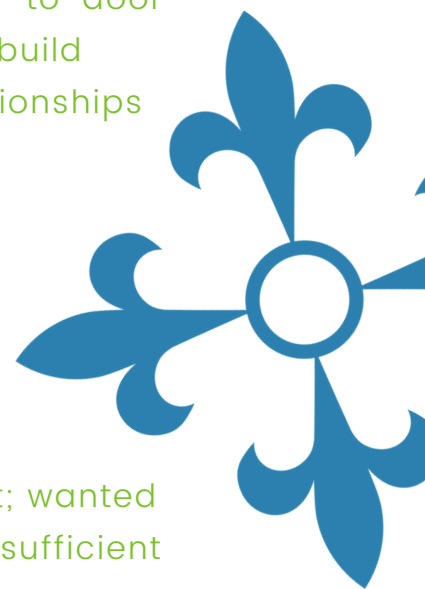
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The main aim of the project was to experiment with ways to connect with local people without depending on social media, which had become the norm during the pandemic. We wanted to find out how best to find our most isolated neighbours. We wondered what resources (especially time) might be necessary to do door-to-door work. Would people be happy to speak to us? How can we build rapport quickly but also stay true to our mission to let relationships build over time?

## Objectives:

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- Connect with people who are: isolated; needed support; wanted to be more involved; have ideas for social action but insufficient resources/ confidence/ capabilities to act.
- Enable a reduction in isolation, increased involvement and action.
- To develop our partnership with the Dorothy Parkes Centre and Warley Woods Community Trust.
- Promote the Hub and ongoing/current projects.
- Gain information on new projects that the community would like and their current involvement in projects.
- To research the Community Hub's 'catchment area'.



# Project Scope:

From January 2021 to June 2021 approximately 126 hours were spent on this project. This time went into planning, making the personalised leaflets and letters for each street, delivering the leaflets to each address, conversing with the residents, walking down the streets, finding people to engage with, responding to what residents had talked about and local concerns they had reflecting on findings and setting up new projects.

## Map:

Approximately 9 streets were visited. The circle in the image represents what we thought the Bearwood Hub catchment area would be. Streets to be visited were chosen by vicinity to the Hub and extra streets were added as nominated by local people on social media.

For information, the map also shows how far local street-based local WhatsApp groups have been set up. These were started and supported through a separate collective of local people, Covid 19 Mutual Aid Bearwood Sandwell group and promoted through our website and other individuals.



# Methodology:

This is a qualitative, self reflective evaluation in which we seek to learn for improvement and to monitor positive or negative impacts. It is based on feedback collected from participants and contacts, from partner organisations, from our staff and from the reflections of Julie O'Neill, who led the street contacts for part of this trial.



# Impact:

The project reached nine streets with some engagement on each. These streets included Arden Road (B67 6EN), Herbert Road (B67 5DD), Wheatley Road (B68 9HW), Ethel Street (B67 5AJ), Merrivale Road (B66 4EJ), Sydney Road (B67 5QQ), Milton Court (B66 4AD), Lightwoods Road (B67 5AY) and Poplar Road.

Across these streets, people wished to discuss many different themes leading to a wide variety of conversations:

## Connections

One of these themes was about residents wanting more local connections and how to better help their neighbours, as well as wanting to reconnect with any road associations that were established prior to the pandemic.

## Wellbeing

Another theme was mental wellbeing during lockdown and the effects of isolation and loneliness especially in lone-person households.

## Local initiatives

A key concern was also related to projects that had happened both inside and outside of the Hub and at what stage of restrictions they may be able to run again. These included: community run events, the craft community, craft fayres, walking clubs and the Bearwood street festival. Some of the conversations also involved residents raising concerns of local issues including littering and graffiti, and problems with individual neighbours.

Other conversations also involved topics including pets, jobs, local schooling and education, and politics.



There were lots of positive short-term impacts with this project:

### **New Connections, volunteers and participants**

The most important of these impacts was the connection made with individuals, including two new volunteers who helped to deliver leaflets, three possible future volunteers who had a variety of interests and expertise including baking, marketing strategy, business networking, promotion events and arts projects as well as three new Hub advocates to help promote local change.

### **Reduced isolation and crisis support**

Another important impact that this project was able to make is that it was able to reach people who had been feeling isolated and gave them something to be involved in. We also signposted residents to other organisations for support.

### **Extending our reach**

This project also helped to promote the Hub's lockdown virtual projects such as the coffee mornings, sew and chat and the lockdown art exhibition, the renovation of St. Mary's and the Hub in general. We extended our reach through word of mouth resulting from conversations during this project and by adding interested people to our mailing list.

There were important impacts with long term potential too. These included the litter picking on Arden Road on the 5th March 2021 with two new volunteers. Being able to maintain contact with the 'connectors' we'd met to help with future activities, supporting the expansion of the local WhatsApp groups and increasing their connection by setting up the Bearwood Street Network. The Network is an umbrella group which ensures information/requests/campaigns are cascaded to individual street Whatsapp group representatives, helping to build connections across a wider geography and enable greater involvement in initiatives such as Food Bank Collections. We have numerous examples (blog coming soon for this related project) of new connections, people supporting each other, swaps and equipment lending, that is contributing to the local sharing economy.



## Our learning

Whilst this project had a fairly low engagement rate per street, the conversations that took place were insightful and invaluable to us. We also received feedback that they had been valuable to individuals.

Low engagement rates could be explained due to lockdown restrictions being stricter during the first half of the project, colder weather and/or language barriers. We have not yet conducted a follow-up survey, but have reflected on the engagement rates:

- The engagement in the first half of the project was a little higher, possibly due to stricter lockdown restrictions leading to people feeling more isolated and therefore wanting to talk more.
- During strict lockdown, more volunteers offered their time as a way to get involved in the community and more people being furloughed so having the time to speak and respond to messages. A difficulty was less volunteering opportunities, due to restrictions.
- Residents also helped to provide reasons why the engagement may have been low and stated that there may have been some confusion on what community their street belonged to, which relates to perceived differences between Bearwood and Smethwick. Another resident identified language being a barrier as all leaflets and personnel used only English due to the size and resources available for this project.

We have also reflected that the methodology of the project was not quite right. Because Covid-19 concerns were high when we started we decided that cold calling would not be a good way to proceed. The Hub opted to post flyers through each door to allow for participants to indicate if they wanted to chat. This did reduce the amount of people the project was able to engage with, either because they did not see the leaflet in time or did not understand the purpose of the project. We received feedback that they would have been happy to get involved if spoken to in person from a cold calling door knock or if there was more assurance on leaflets of Covid safety procedures, such as face masks and shields.

If the leaflets could have been handed out at the same time as knocking/talking, we may have been more successful in reaching greater numbers. This may have also reduced time taken to complete this project per street as leaflets and talks would happen at the same time, although this will always depend on the length of chats and numbers of people wanting to talk.

The Hub had started this project with a very clear idea of working with people to start up new activity but due to funding challenges we had to retract the offer, the “hook”, of helping to organise activities and events on the Bearwood Bonds streets because we did not know if we would be able to fulfil our promises.

We had also initially planned to lead the project by personnel who have worked on the Hub full time. The offer of short term support for this project was exceptionally helpful to us, but it has shown us that continuity is possibly the most important thing - particularly when in the middle of a pandemic. During the pandemic when we could deliver very little, it seemed a challenge for new personnel to promote and advocate strongly for the Hub, when we were still very much 'in development' and unable set up properly due to lockdowns.

## **Future improvements**

During the project there was a change in the methodology of sending a letter as well as the leaflet and we had a number of email replies to our letter, so giving this option was clearly important - whether in a letter or on flyers distributed locally.

Furthermore, to increase people involved, Hub staff could have asked individuals to nominate another neighbour that they think would have liked to get involved in the project.

This project did enabled some positive outcomes, however this may have been disproportionate compared to the input required to make it work. This is due to it being difficult to keep in contact with people after the initial meeting as communication online involved the people actively reaching out. Some people who had agreed to keep in touch found that they could not after their furlough was ended and they had an increase in work duties. If there was an easier way to get back in touch through a short questionnaire then it may have encouraged more people to stay in contact.

# Recommendations:

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## **Completing the project in the colder months-**

Complete door-to-door projects when people are more likely to be at home such as Autumn/Winter months.

## **Covid-safe assurance on leaflets-**

Assuring people that mask/face shield would be worn and social distance would be maintained on the leaflet.

## **Language barrier-**

The area should be analysed to understand the different languages spoken and translators hired to communicate with those residents.

## **Promoting online engagement when in person was not an option-**

A virtual option should be available, joining the WhatsApp groups promoted and invitation to email the Hub on the leaflets for more people to get involved.

## **Combination of talking and handing out leaflets-**

When concerns about transmission of Covid are not as high in the future, leaflets should be handed out when talking to people, to promote more conversation and reduce time taken to deliver leaflets and return.

## **Projects outside of lockdown-**

When not in lockdown the options for which projects local people will want to see will not have as many restrictions.

## **Questionnaire follow-up emails -**

More closed questions sent in follow up email to make it easier for residents to reply.

## **General flyering in the community-**

Flyers should be posted generally around the community for people to get involved to increase participation in the project when their whole street cannot be reached.

## **Nomination of a neighbour-**

Asking a neighbour that has been involved in the project if they believe any of their other neighbours would likely want to be involved in the project



# Conclusion:

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Overall, the project had a fairly low engagement per street and was not as successful as hoped in terms of its coverage. In terms of the impact on individuals, we received much positive feedback about the difference made.

Not many residents placed the leaflets in the window making it difficult to engage with people and not all people were available in the allotted time. The project also required lots of hours as leaflets had to be delivered and then conversation had to happen another day to allow people time to prepare for a visit from the Hub. This project is not likely to be repeated in the short-term until the Community Hub is able to grow and is possibly more recognisable within the community.

The project was able to achieve most of its aims when interactions did happen. People either left the leaflets in the window, asked to speak usually after seeing a neighbour do so or engaging through emails after receiving the leaflet.

The Hub was able to engage with, and get practical help for, people who had felt lonely and isolated in the community. We gained new volunteers to help with future projects and many people who were not aware of, or as involved as before with this project, were reached.

Furthermore, new projects such as litter picking were set-up after the feedback received through this project and online communication was promoted such as the creation and/or expansion of the local WhatsApp groups.

### **A note of thanks from Hub Director Sally Taylor:**

We are so grateful to Viv Cole at Warley Woods Community Trust for thinking about how the Trust could support the Hub when funding received from SCVO could not be used by the Trust due to pandemic restrictions. This enabled us to put much more time into testing and learning about how to extend our reach to people who are not online or who have not yet heard from us. We have some really important reflections to take forward for the future.

,The main reflection for us is to try door knocking again but keep it super simple - when you reach someone who has had no other form of help it is all worth it. Knock doors when there is time, and just get talking. Do it when we are up and running from September onwards and we have a space for people to come and visit when they are ready.

We're excited about the next year and grateful to SCVO for supporting this project and our future.